



FROM SMALL BUILDINGS
TO WHOLE CITIES AND THE
NATURE THAT SURROUNDS
THEM, UNESCO WORLD
HERITAGE PROTECTS OUR
SHARED CULTURAL LEGACY.

P R E S E R V I N G O U R

H E R I T A G E

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Onlookers watch as fire spreads at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris on April 15, 2019.

When word spread of a fire at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris on the evening of April 15, 2019, all the world tuned in with bated breath as plumes of smoke filled the air alchemizing from grayish-white to soot black. It was Holy Week, just days before Easter and "Our Lady of Paris" was burning. Crowds on the streets teared up in disbelief, yet still with the hope that she would be saved. When flames began shooting up through the world's most beloved spire, rapidly becoming a fiery orange blaze and engulfing one of the historic symbols of the City of Light, tears became screams of shock, and the world collectively sobbed.

"There is no word strong enough to express my sorrow," Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo wrote on Twitter.

"This is the place where we have lived all of our great moments, the epicenter of our lives," French president Emmanuel Macron said in a speech that night. "It is the cathedral of all the French."

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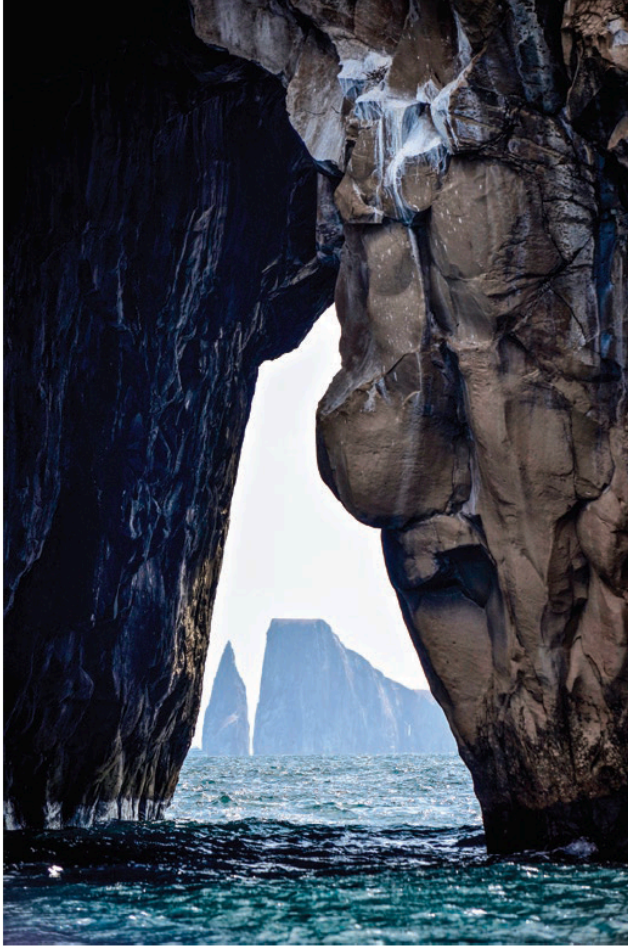
THIS PAGE: DAVID A. LEE, COURTESY OF MODERNISM WEEK
PREVIOUS SPREAD: COURTESY OF PALM SPRINGS BUREAU OF TOURISM

The *New York Times* reported, "[t]ourists and residents alike came to a standstill, pulling out their phones to call their loved ones. Older Parisians began to cry, lamenting how their national treasure was quickly being lost."

Saved from the flames were the crown of thorns relic, a piece of the holy cross, a tunic believed to have been worn by St. Louis, the famed rose windows, and legendary gargoyles. But the inferno ravaged the roof, which had often been called a masterpiece by master carpenters. Built over a century starting in 1160 AD, the cathedral is one of the most iconic on earth, welcoming more than 12 million guests each year. In 1991, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee bestowed its greatest honor upon it: the inscription of World Heritage Site. It was named under the umbrella of Paris, Banks of the Seine, which includes Paris' most recognizable landmarks along the river.

The Cathedral's iconic stained glass windows.





Above: Galápagos Islands; Above right: Quito, Ecuador. Both were inscribed on the inaugural list of World Heritage Sites in 1978.



"We are filled with emotion and our hearts are broken. Notre Dame represents an architectural, cultural, and religious heritage, a unique literary heritage that speaks to the whole world," said UNESCO director general Audrey Azoulay. "The cathedral is widely regarded as the most beautiful example of French Gothic architecture, which includes innovative use of the rib vault and buttresses, colored stained glass rosettes, and sculptural decorations." She added that the tragedy, "reminds us of the power of heritage that connects us to one another. We are receiving messages of support from all over the world."

In November 1972, UNESCO—the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—formed an international treaty whose mission would be to identify, protect, and preserve locales around the world of cultural and natural significance. The organization defines these sites as our legacy from the past to pass on to future generations. "Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration... World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located," it states.

Though the World Heritage Committee formed in 1972, the first 12 sites were not inscribed until 1978. The inaugural list included such gems as the Galápagos Islands, the city of Quito, Ecuador, the Historic Centre of Kraków, Mesa Verde National Park, Simien National Park in Ethiopia, Aachen Cathedral in Denmark, and Yellowstone National Park, among others.

Known as the World Heritage Convention and currently signed by 167 participating nations, the selection committee meets annually at destinations across the globe to determine which sites are of, "outstanding value to humanity." Designation is a distinction that countries campaign fervently to win each year. Sites proposed by treaty participants are awarded inscription if they meet one out of 10 criteria, which include things like being a, "masterpiece of human creative genius," or containing



Right: Old Havana, Cuba;
Below: Australia's Great Barrier Reef.



“superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.” Think India’s Taj Mahal, Cuba’s Old Havana, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.

As of 2019, there were 1,121 properties on the World Heritage list: 869 cultural, 213 natural, and 39 mixed. And at the 43rd session of the World Heritage Committee in Baku, Azerbaijan, last July, 29 new properties were inscribed, including the 20th-Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

More than just an accolade for the tourism bureaus to promote, the honor of winning a place on “The List” brings with it great responsibility. It binds the home country to safeguard the site, and commits that if the unexpected should occur, be it natural disaster, war, lack of funds, or anything causing the site to lose value, participating treaty states will assist in preservation via aid campaigns.

Moreover, the World Heritage as an organization carries quite the international influence. Its protection and preservation efforts have resulted in successes such as stopping a major river diversion project that threatened a rhino refuge in Nepal’s Royal Chitwan National Park. And in 1987, when plans to construct an aluminum plant close to Delphi in Greece jeopardized the nomination of the archaeological site, they were relocated by the Greek government.

But oft these success stories start out on the danger list, officially named The List of World Heritage in Danger, created to recognize properties threatened by serious and specific dangers, such as large-scale development, catastrophes, changes in water levels, or armed conflict.



Dubrovnik's Old City was inscribed in 1979, then placed on The Danger List in 1991, and became a World Heritage success story by 1998.

Such was the case with the Old City of Dubrovnik in Croatia, inscribed to The List in 1979. As described by WHC:

The pearl of the Adriatic, dotted with beautiful Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque buildings had withstood the passage of centuries and survived several earthquakes. In November and December 1991, when seriously damaged by artillery fire, the city was immediately included on the List of World Heritage in Danger. With UNESCO providing technical advice and financial assistance, the Croatian Government restored the facades of the Franciscan and Dominican cloisters, repaired roofs and rebuilt palaces. As a result, in December 1998, it became possible to remove the city from the List of World Heritage in Danger.

As of fall 2019, 53 sites were on the danger list including Everglades National Park (the only US appearance), Liverpool—Maritime Mercantile City, the Historic Centre of Vienna, four national parks and a wildlife reserve in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and an array of ancient archaeological sites and tropical rainforests.

Don't expect to see the grand Parisian cathedral of Notre Dame show up on the danger list. The top minds and officials the world over are tending to her wounds. UNESCO representatives met with President Macron at the Élysée Palace on the Friday following the fire, offering technical expertise for the rebuilding. UNESCO officially stated it, "would accompany and support the authorities in the recovery, rehabilitation, and rebuilding of the damaged heritage site based on accurate documentation based on archival material, photos, films, historic documentation, plans, and drawings."

And a month after the inferno, the French Senate passed a bill stipulating that Our Lady of Paris must be rebuilt exactly as before. Following that in July, the French legislative assembly approved a five-year timeline to rebuild, which would see the World Heritage Site back to its former glory by the 2024 Summer Olympics. ✕