



AMERICA'S 30 MOST VISITED CITIES

Rob Baedeker Fri Jul 27 13:30:00 EDT 2007, Forbestraveler.com

You may notice some patterns in the Forbes Traveler list of 30 Most Visited U.S. Cities: sunny climates, Texas, and Disney play a prominent role.

And the usual suspects are here—the major urban centers like New York, L.A. and Chicago attract tens of millions of non-residents annually. But a few surprises pop up, too. Who knew, for example, that Charlotte, N.C., is the second largest financial center in the U.S. and, with more than 16 million yearly visitors, outranks the likes of Fort Lauderdale?

Dan Erkkila, former Chairman of the Board of the Travel and Tourism Research Association and current Extension Professor at the University of Minnesota Tourism Center, explains that “being a member of the top-tier U.S. destination elite generally involves a complex blend of tangible ingredients (like travel cost) and intangible ones, like destination image.”

That image, Erkkila argues, is becoming more and more important to a city’s appeal. “Natural features like the Grand Canyon or cultural icons like the Statue of Liberty will always draw the crowds,” he says. “But more and more, the marketing of destinations is now more about how a destination will make you ‘feel’ when you visit. It is about the whole experience. It’s about how it changes you—momentarily or forever. So rather than, for example, Las Vegas being about coming to gamble or see entertaining shows, it’s about how being there makes you feel. You get to be naughty and let your hair down, because whatever you do there, stays there!”

Christopher Pike, a senior consultant with Global Insight, a market analysis firm, agrees that image plays a substantial role in U.S. cities’ tourist appeal. The most visited cities, he says, are “constantly reinventing their destination, whether it’s the new hotels in Vegas, the international flavor in New York City—there is always something new going on.”

Pike adds that a major tourist attraction within a city has a kind of double power: it draws tourists, and it increases a city’s exposure in the media. “New York is on every night in the evening news,” he says, adding to the city’s presence in potential visitors’ minds.

Vacationing tourists are only part of what give a city notable visitor numbers, says Dan Erkkila: “You don’t get to be a tier-one destination solely from the leisure travel market; business and event travel are critical to attaining the kinds of numbers we see in the top ten.” Brad Garner, Vice President of Operations and Client Services at Smith Travel Research, a lodging industry information and data provider, agrees: “Group bookings are what’s driven the recovery” in the domestic travel industry since a slump in 2002 through 2004.

Given the importance of business and group travel, it's hardly surprising that a city like Phoenix, number 12 on our list with 12 million annual overnight visitors, is investing in a \$600 million expansion of its Convention Center.

Garner points out another common denominator among the nation's most visited locales: they're almost all near major airports. "It's very cheap to hop on a plane and fly to the major markets," he says.

So where how do perennial visitor favorites New York, Las Vegas, and San Francisco stack up? And how high did Mickey Mouse catapult Disney destinations like Orlando and Anaheim?



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20. Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.

18.3 million visitors; 8.3 million rooms sold; score: 1.34

The Twin Cities' arts, sports, dining and outdoor attractions offer consistent visitor appeal, but the real northern super-magnet may be the Mall of America, with 4.2 million square feet and 12,550 parking spaces—it's drawn half a billion people since it opened in 1992.