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**TRAVEL**

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JON ARNOLD/ALAMY

A house is seen in Dominica, an island country in the Caribbean that's situated between Guadeloupe and Martinique. The "Nature Island" boasts waterfalls, black sand, hot springs and more.

# Where to go in 2026, without crowds

12 underrated destinations around the world

BY NATALIE B. COMPTON, HANNAH SAMPSON  
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More than 1.5 billion people traveled internationally last year, according to a United Nations estimate. Depending on where you went in 2025, it may have felt as if they were all right there with you. ¶ Paris, Tokyo, Mexico City, Barcelona? Amazing places — and all bursting with tourists. Perhaps this is the year to expand your horizons. ¶ John Montgomery, co-founder of Landed, a luxury travel company that plans custom trips in South and Central America and Antarctica, said his company is working with more customers who are seeking solitude this year. ¶ They're "looking for a place where they can think, where they can reconnect with nature," he said. They desire destinations where they can feel "the concept of awe." ¶ Maybe that's a quiet place to stargaze and ponder the universe. Maybe it's a boiling lake at the end of a rigorous hike or a world-renowned wine region on the other side of the globe. We asked industry experts for their favorite less-traveled destinations (and mined our own recent travels) to bring you inspiration for 2026.

SEE WHERE TO GO ON F3

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The Coast Guard assisted a vessel stuck in Antarctica. **F2**

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Good plane food does exist — even in economy. **F2**

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Traveling with a feline? Prepare for the anti-cat bias. **F6**

## 12 places to add to your travel wish list

### WHERE TO GO FROM F1

#### Flagstaff, Arizona

Often part of a Grand Canyon game plan, this high-altitude city is worth its own pin. Especially this year, when Flagstaff celebrates 25 years as the first International Dark Sky City and the 100th anniversary of Route 66.

A 14-mile section of the Mother Road runs through the city. A few vintage buildings are still standing, such as Motel Du Beau, which opened in 1929 and has retained such vintage features as motor court parking and “mountain air cooling,” a fancy name for window fans.

For nonmotorized activities, consider the world’s largest ponderosa pine forest and the Flagstaff Urban Trails System, which will boast 130 miles of recreational pathways when completed. Several national monuments are within an hour’s drive, including Sunset Crater Volcano, which last erupted less than 1,000 years ago, and the ancient pueblo of Wupatki.

#### José Ignacio, Uruguay

Tucked in a coastal pocket between Argentina and Brazil, Uruguay has long been a favorite vacation destination for wealthy neighbors — and an escape for Europeans with harsh Northern Hemisphere winters. But it’s not as popular with Americans, despite the obvious appeal.

For Montgomery, of Landed, the appeal wasn’t just the “coastline that goes on forever” and the “barefoot-toes-in-the-sand restaurants,” or the kite-surfing and boating excursions to see penguins and whales. It was also the proximity to the country’s stunning interior. With short day trips, he could canoe or walk in pine forests or head to the rolling grassland to visit wineries and boutique cheese makers.

Uruguay has become a hub for art galleries while preserving its gaucho (cowboy) culture. That explains why it has been characterized as “Wyoming meets St. Tropez,” said Maximiliano Broquen, who helped open Vik Retreats in José Ignacio, a resort town on the coast that’s a few hours away from Montevideo by bus.

Broquen recommends that you avoid a visit during the holiday rush (mid-December through January), when the country is packed and prices skyrocket. Instead, try November, or February through April.

#### Dominica

The “Nature Island” isn’t all beaches — though Dominica has its share. Situated in the Eastern Caribbean between Guadeloupe and Martinique, it boasts waterfalls, black sand, hot springs, nine potentially active volcanic centers and a Champagne Reef with bubbling

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**FROM TOP:** The historic train station in Flagstaff, Arizona, is located on Route 66, whose 100th anniversary is celebrated this year. The Skyspace Ta Khut, created by James Turrell, is in José Ignacio, Uruguay, a South American country tucked between Argentina and Brazil. Boats sit on the Mississippi River by Pepin, Wisconsin, which is part of the Driftless Area, a region that spans parts of southeast Minnesota, southwest Wisconsin, northeast Iowa and northwest Illinois.



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**FROM TOP:** Sperm whales swim in the Caribbean Sea near Dominica. The Greek island of Kea. The Ark of Bukhara is a fortress in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, a country that no longer requires visas from Americans for stays of up to 30 days.

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water.

Travelers come to observe the sperm whales. Or to take an hours-long hike to Boiling Lake, a vaporous cauldron within Morne Trois Pitons National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Hikers can explore the Waitukubuli National Trail, which stretches for 115 miles. In the northern region, the Indigenous Kalinago community showcases a model village and guesthouses.

"We're really rugged, and we're not your typical Caribbean island," said Michael Eugene, owner of the Experiences Caribbean tour company. He said visitors "feel like they're disconnected and can disappear from everything else."

Hurricane Maria devastated the island in 2017; rebuilding has come with an emphasis on resilience to extreme weather.

"The nature was never lost," Eugene said.

A cable car is expected to start operating late this year, bringing more visitors to Boiling Lake.

#### Tepoztlán, Mexico

After traveling more than 20,000 miles across Mexico, cookbook author Rick Martínez had a lot of time to think about his favorite places in the country. His recommendation for a 2026 escape: Tepoztlán.

Just 50 miles south of Mexico City, the small mountain town is nestled in a lush valley surrounded by rugged cliffs. Its "incredible food" and music scene reminds Martínez of New Orleans, but with a distinctly Mexican spirituality.

"There's a deeply restorative side to it that comes from the landscape and from the presence of ancient, pre-Hispanic cleansing and healing traditions that are still practiced today," Martínez said.

On the weekends, you'll find groups of people hiking up to El Tepozteco, a pyramid built to honor the god of pulque, a fermented agave drink. Once you take in the view and hike back down, Martínez recommends stopping by a vendor selling tlacoyos, tacos and tostadas.

"It's a place that feels alive, communal, grounding and joyful," he said, "and it's why I keep going back."

#### The Driftless Area

It's a playground for the outdoor enthusiast — home to some of the country's best fly-fishing and beautiful terrain for hiking, boating and birding. You'll find charming towns, organic farms, crafts and Midwestern cheese.

And yet, the Driftless Area is a mystery to much of America.

"We are a forgotten pocket of the Upper Midwest," said Luke Zahm, the chef and owner of the Driftless Café in Viroqua, Wisconsin.

That pocket spans parts of southeast Minnesota, southwest Wisconsin, northeast Iowa and northwest Illinois — all tied together by a geological oddity. The region wasn't covered by continental glaciers during the last ice age and is thus free of "drift" (materials carried by glaciers or ice sheets). That history makes for a wilder landscape full of hills and valleys, compared with its glacier-flattened neighbors.

Zahm recommends making the Hotel Fortney in Viroqua your home base for your trip, or staying at the Charmant Hotel in La Crosse, Wisconsin, right on the Mississippi River. From there, take day trips to hike, or head to Frank Lloyd Wright's Wisconsin estate, Taliesin.

Don't forget to "stop at a local farmers market or six," Zahm said, and get to know the people behind the goods.

#### Kea, Greece

When the Mediterranean heats up, many Athenians flee to Kea, also known as Tzia. Though only about an hour-long ferry ride from Athens, the roughly 50-square-mile island has resisted the mass tourism of Santorini and Mykonos.

"It is a popular island for Greek tourists but has very few foreign tourists," said Tony Wheeler, co-founder of Lonely Planet Publications. "A lot of Athenians have holiday homes there."

Visitors can explore a smattering of villages and settlements, including the car-free capital of Ioulida and Stavroudaki, a starting point for the trek to Karthea, a city-state that thrived from the Archaic period to late antiquity and that is

accessible only by foot, boat or donkey. Ancient walking paths lead to other pots of gold, such as the temple ruins of Athena and Apollo; the monastery of Panagia Kastriani, the island's patron saint; and Gialiskari Beach, a popular spot among the locals.

The Kea Underwater Historic Site, a marine preserve, attracts shipwreck divers who wish to swim with maritime history. The island's waters are the final resting place for several ill-fated vessels, including the HMHS Britannic, the sister ship of the Titanic that was hit by a German mine during World War I.

#### Alentejo, Portugal

A "slow living" philosophy guides the Alentejo region in south-central Portugal. The regional capital, Évora, is about an hour and a half from Lisbon. Visitors to the region can take their time exploring the vineyards, olive groves and cork forests; the medieval villages, castles and Roman ruins; and the more than 85 miles of coast, which tour guide Paulo Conceição describes as "still very pristine."

Évora boasts some of the region's top sites: a Roman temple dating back to the 1st century; the Chapel of Bones, which is filled with about 5,000 skulls; the Cadaval Palace; and the country's largest medieval cathedral.

Driving just minutes outside the city leads to peace and quiet in "the middle of nowhere in the countryside," said João Matos, who, like Conceição, is a tour guide with Évora Cultural Experience. "I think that the best way of describing the region is that it's as preserved as you can have in the 21st century."

Virginia Irurita, founder of Made for Spain & Portugal, recommends visiting Almedres Cromlech, a megalithic monument outside Évora that is older than Stonehenge: "You leave your car, you walk a little bit, and all of a sudden you're surrounded by old stones."

#### Uzbekistan

Many countries have introduced new entry fees for U.S. citizens, but not Uzbekistan. As of Jan. 1, the country no longer requires visas from Americans for stays of up to 30 days.

"It was largely isolated and less accessible to tourism until about 10 years ago," said Hunter Ansoorge, Asia regional specialist at Wilderness Travel, a California-based tour operator. "Western travelers are only just starting to see it as a tourist destination."

Ansoorge said the government has been investing in infrastructure and tourism projects, such as high-speed trains and higher-quality hotels. Uzbekistan is also planning to build the largest airport in Central Asia, though it won't be ready for some years.

Uzbekistan, a major artery on the Silk Road, is no stranger to travelers. Michael Pullman, head of marketing at Wild Frontiers, a London-based tour operator, said the trading centers of Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand continue to flourish centuries later, drawing modern-day visitors with their turquoise-domed mosques, grand forts, opulent palaces and lively bazaars.

Sporting types can ski at Amirsoy, which some call the "St. Moritz of Central Asia," or hike from village to village in the Nuratau Mountains, breaking for the national drink at teahouses.

#### Shikoku, Japan

A whopping 42.7 million foreign tourists visited Japan last year, prompting government officials to sound the alarm on overtourism. One approach to dispersing the crowds is to steer people away from the Golden Route of Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka.

To dodge the masses, Don George, a Geographic Expeditions trip leader and editor in chief of its Wanderlust blog, heads to the smallest and most remote of Japan's four major islands — a sacred site for a variety of seekers.

"All travelers on the island are welcomed as pilgrims," said George, whose wife hails from Shikoku.

Spiritual adventurers can embark on Shikoku Henro, an 88-temple journey that can take anywhere from about 10 days (by car) to six weeks (by foot). Kagawa prefecture is noodle central, with hundreds of udon restaurants. But you can also

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slurp pork-based Tokushima ramen, Kochi prefecture's nabeyaki ramen — thin noodles in a chicken broth, served piping-hot — or Yawatahama champon, which tastes of the sea with bonito and kelp, from Ehime.

The latter prefecture is also steamy with hot springs. Dating back to 1894, Dogo Onsen Honkan is recognized as Japan's oldest public bathhouse. George is especially fond of the mountainous and magical Iya Valley, which has open-air baths reached only by cable car.

#### Adelaide, Australia

The state capital of South Australia is known as a "20-minute city" because beaches or hills are a 20-minute drive away, and in-town attractions — a botanic garden, art museum and the National Wine Center — are within walking distance. In December, the city landed its first direct flight route from the United States, on United Airlines from San Francisco.

Travel adviser Lora Greene said she was impressed by the "charming" city, highlighting the Adelaide Central Market and the Adelaide Oval venue, where fans can watch cricket, football and concerts, and also climb the roof.

A self-described "varietal playground," South Australia is a wine powerhouse, with 18 regions. McLaren Vale, about 45 minutes from Adelaide, and the Barossa Valley, about an hour away, both offer art alongside pours. The d'Arenberg Cube in McLaren Vale showcases the Alternate Realities Museum and a Salvador Dalí exhibition, among other collections.

Greene said Adelaide is a perfect launching point to explore nearby marvels such as Kangaroo Island and the Eyre Peninsula.

"Especially if someone has already been to the country or if you have a lot of time, I've found it's a really great place to start," she said.

#### Brda, Slovenia

In the terraced valley of Slovenia's premier wine region, Brda, you can rent e-bikes to visit natural wineries, and pick up some burek (a flaky, stuffed Balkan pastry) along the way for a picnic lunch.

Or you can hike through trenches preserved from World War I, learning about the region's wartime past while taking in its natural beauty between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea. After a golden-hour dip in the hotel pool, you can take a nap before walking to a walled city for dinner beneath a vine-covered trellis.

Whatever you choose, it'll make you glad you picked Slovenia over a European hot spot.

After a few days in wine country, don't miss a side quest to Hisa Franko, a three-Michelin-star restaurant (and a hotel) that lives up to the hype. The menu is a celebration of ingredients from Slovenia's Soca Valley, such as marble trout, foraged mountain plants and cheese aged in a cellar on-site. The drive to the property — through misty mountains and bright green farmland — is worth the time.

#### Algeria

Africa's largest country by area is the definition of undertourism, said Wheeler, of Lonely Planet, which included Algeria in its "Best in Travel 2026" book.

"The hotels were really good. It was easy to get around," Wheeler said. "There was a lot to see, and there were no tourists."

Algiers, the seaport capital, harmonizes multiple architectural styles and cultures, including French colonial, Byzantine and Moorish designs, Ottoman influences, and Islamic landmarks such as the 17th-century Ketchaoua Mosque.

George, of Geographic Expeditions, encourages visitors to explore the whitewashed Casbah and to take a moment at Martyrs' Memorial in Victory Park, which commemorates the country's hard-won independence from France.

Though most of Algeria is uninhabited and blanketed by the Sahara, visitors can do more than play in the dunes. They can eat bowls of seafood couscous in beach towns along the Mediterranean Sea and poke around Roman ruins, such as the impeccably preserved Timgad, known as the Pompeii of Africa and one of the Algeria's seven UNESCO World Heritage sites.



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FRANK BIENEWALD/GETTY IMAGES

**FROM TOP:** People visit a windmill in Olive Park on Shodoshima, in Japan's Kagawa prefecture. The city center of Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia. The Goriska Brda wine region in Slovenia, which makes for a good alternative to a vacation hot spot. Places such as Paris, Tokyo, Mexico City and Barcelona are great destinations, yes — but they're also bursting with tourists. Last year, 42.7 million foreign tourists visited Japan, so you may want to head off the beaten path.