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5 destinations to watch in 2009

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A destination in the midst of inventing itself. Another preparing for its year in the world spotlight. Cities and regions gearing up for year-long parties. Our top picks for destinations to watch in 2009 are bursting with up-and-coming, you've-gotta-see-this attitude. Not only are these destinations on the rise, but each offers good value to travelers looking to vacation affordably in the coming year.

Plus, find out what cities and countries are celebrating big milestones and hosting major festivals. From Alaska's 50th birthday to the major party in London surrounding the 500th anniversary of Henry VIII's ascension to the throne, 2009 is ready to party. And festivals such as Homecoming Scotland 2009, which welcomes back people of Scottish heritage and "Heart Scots" who just really like the country, offer even more reasons to hit the road.

With this much excitement to come, 2009 just got a whole lot more interesting.

Riviera Nayarit

Riviera What? If you haven't heard of the [Riviera Nayarit](#) yet, that might be because it's just that new. The 200 miles of Pacific Coast and mountains north of Puerto Vallarta launched itself as a brand new destination just last year. Since then, it has been busy putting itself on the map, investing major time and funds into building new tourism infrastructures.

The region extends as far north as the colonial beach town of San Blas. Between Puerto Vallarta and San Blas, you'll find just about every vacation experience possible. From the bohemian surf town vibe of Sayulita to the luxury resorts and Jack Nicklaus golf course of Punta de Mita, the towns along the coast cater to all budgets and interests. Colonial towns and traditional Huichol villages in the nearby Sierra Madre Mountains offer a whole other dimension to the traditional beach vacation.

There's plenty to do, too. Endless beaches, six major golf courses, cultural experiences, archeological sites, and adventure activities like snorkeling, whale watching, surfing, and even swimming with dolphins and sea lions will likely start drawing bigger crowds as more people catch on to the appeal of Mexico's newest Riviera.

Since the Riviera Nayarit is so close to the major airport in Puerto Vallarta, it's easy to get to and airfares are competitive from departure points around the U.S. Southwest just announced a partnership with Volaris, which will extend Southwest's reach from points around the U.S. to Puerto Vallarta, though not until 2010.

There is also a wide variety of accommodations options offering something for every budget. For instance, at the Four Seasons Punta Mita, rates start at \$535 a night. But at B&Bs in the smaller towns, rates start at around \$60 a night. Vacation rentals can be even more affordable for groups traveling together. Plus, because it's not yet a major tourist destination like neighboring Puerto Vallarta, and because the region is spread out, it's easier to find affordable activities and food in the

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towns of the Riviera Nayarit.

Vancouver

With the 2010 Winter Olympics just around the corner, Vancouver is going all out with preparations for its time in the spotlight. By visiting in 2009, you can reap the benefits of all the new infrastructure developments while enjoying the city and everything it has to offer. And as a place voted Best City in the Americas by *Conde Nast Traveler* three years running, the expansions and improvements are really just icing on the cake.

New hotels—including The Loden Vancouver, Shangri-La Hotel, and the Fairmont Pacific Rim—are opening around the city in anticipation of the flood of Olympians and fans. Nearby Cypress Mountain ski resort has added nine new runs, new ski and snowboarding features, and a new lodge. And the rail extension connecting Vancouver's airport and downtown will open in late 2009.

Even though the Games don't begin until February 2010, you can catch some pre-Olympic action in 2009 at events such as the ISU Four Continents Figure Skating Championships, the FIS Freestyle World Cup, and the World Junior Curling Championships. Yes, that's right, there are junior curlers out there and they're gearing up to compete. In February and March there's also a Cultural Olympiad featuring more than 400 art, dance, music, and other events, many of which are free.

Vancouver provides solid vacation value as well. The exchange rate isn't as good as it used to be, but after hovering close to equal for a stretch, the U.S. dollar seems to be gaining the advantage again, meaning U.S. travelers' money goes farther. The city is served by a range of carriers, including Alaska Airlines, and Southwest has announced it will team up with Canadian carrier WestJet to fly to destinations in Canada. WestJet already serves Vancouver, so it seems more than possible that sometime next year passengers will be able to book a flight to Vancouver through Southwest.

Interested in visiting during the [Olympics](#)? Then you should know that more than 100,000 tickets will cost just \$25, and that half of all the Olympic Winter Games tickets are priced at \$100 or less.

Kansas City

Never considered Kansas City as a vacation destination before? Over the past few years, the city has been working hard to make itself a destination worth the trip. And the effort is paying off big time during 2009 when more than \$9 billion in major improvements will be reinvigorating its downtown area and lending major credibility to its arts and dining scenes.

Recent developments include the new nine-block Power & Light District, downtown's newest mixed-use neighborhood packed with restaurants, shops, and entertainment and performance venues. There's also an outdoor stage featuring live entertainment more than 150 days a year. The Crossroads Arts District hosts one of the largest art walks in the nation from 7 to 9 p.m. on the first Friday of every month. Downtown, there's also the new Sprint Center, which hosts large concerts and special events, and the College Basketball Experience, a giant entertainment facility with interactive exhibits and the National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame.

Beyond downtown, revitalized and expanded attractions draw crowds as well. The well-known Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art just finished an expansion last year. Already ranked among the top art museums in the country, the new expansion increases the museum's exhibition space by one third, and makes more room for the museum's collections of modern and contemporary art, African art, and photography. And just in time for its 100th anniversary, the Kansas City Zoo has also undergone a major renovation.

As if that isn't enough, Kansas City is expanding its culinary reputation. Long known as a mecca for barbecue, a number of Kansas City chefs and their fine dining establishments—including Bluestem, American Restaurant, and Michael Smith—have recently received national recognition as well.

Even better (especially this year), Kansas City is one of the country's most affordable major cities to visit. It's well-served by airlines including American, Continental, Delta, Frontier, Southwest, and United. So much service means prices tend to stay competitive. Hotels, dining, and attraction costs tend to be less expensive than in many other cities around the country as well. In fact, Hotwire.com recently ranked Kansas City as one of the top value-priced destinations in the U.S. based on airfare, accommodations, and entertainment prices in 50 U.S. cities. Plus, there are dozens of [free museums and attractions](#) to visit.

The reasons to come will just keep expanding. 2010 will bring the opening of the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, and the unveiling of a newly renovated Truman Sports Complex (home of the Kansas City Chiefs).

Peru

More people are visiting Peru every year. In fact, the country has the second highest tourism growth estimate in Latin America, and online travel provider Opodo reports that bookings to Lima, Peru, are up 98% over last year. Peru is supporting that growth with major funding of tourism infrastructures and projects.

But because Peru is home to Machu Picchu—a destination already feeling the ill-effects of overtourism—the country as a whole is invested in building a sustainable tourism program focused on creating and fostering destinations around Peru so that as visitor numbers increase, tourism doesn't endanger the very sites and cultures people come to see. And, capital city Lima is expanding and solidifying a place as a destination in itself, not just a portal to the rest of the country. New hotels are opening, and the government is investing heavily on tourism infrastructure developments in Lima and its environs.

Lima concentrates the appeal of Peru into an urban center. Rich in museums celebrating the heritage, culture, and natural beauty of the country, it also has colonial architecture, archeological ruins, scenic landscapes, and even beaches. Beyond Lima (and Machu Picchu), Peru offers unforgettable destinations like Caral, the archeological ruins of what is widely recognized as the oldest city in the Americas. Older than Machu Picchu, Caral is within driving distance from Lima and can be a day trip from the capital.

There's also Lake Titicaca, the world's highest navigable body of water, known for its floating islands housing entire communities of people; Colca Canyon, a canyon twice as deep as the Grand Canyon; and hundreds of other destinations worth exploring.

Compared to its neighboring countries, Peru can be a more affordable destination to fly to from the U.S. Why? Well, in addition to being served by American, Continental, Delta, and other large airlines such as TACA, Lima's airport is also served by low-cost-carrier Spirit Airlines, with service from Ft. Lauderdale.

Peru is an affordable country on the ground as well. The [Peru Tourism Board](#) estimates that a basic lunch costs \$3 U.S., while a more elaborate meal is about \$12. Accommodations range from \$5 per night for super-budget to \$90 for luxury properties. Not bad if you're trying to stretch those vacation dollars.

Vilnius, Lithuania

Each year, the E.U. bestows the title Capital of Culture to one or more European destinations. The cities celebrate the designation with a year of major arts and culture events and by hosting exhibitions. This year, [Vilnius](#), the capital of Lithuania, has the honor along with Linz in Austria.

Vilnius is putting on quite a show in 2009 with 120 art and culture projects and 900 events. The city will also be part of a countrywide celebration of Lithuania's millennial year, as 2009 marks 1,000 years since the first known mention of the country in written records.

Two of the biggest events for the year take place in spring. On May 2 during Street Musician Day, amateur and professional musicians will flood into the city's streets, alleyways, and parks to play music ranging from rock to classical and folk to jazz. June 20 is Culture Night: Let There Be Night, when the city erupts into an all-night culture fest. The 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. event features night dance lessons, open-air movies, church concerts, fashion shows, museum exhibitions, and more. Other events and exhibitions will be on at different points throughout the year.

Though it's a member of the EU, Lithuania doesn't use the euro as its currency, which makes travel expenses such as accommodations, food, and activities more affordable. Add to the calculation that two-thirds of the events during the year-long celebration will be free, and Vilnius starts to look pretty affordable. Plus, the Old Town of Vilnius is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and recognized as one of the most beautiful cities in Eastern Europe, so walking around and soaking up the scenery is one of the best, and cheapest, things to do.

Anniversaries and festivals

Big anniversaries and festivals offer yet another reason to travel in 2009. And, since many such celebrations include free events, it's a great way to get more for your money. Just remember to book accommodations early, since the events are likely to draw crowds.

Major anniversaries in 2009 include:

- 500th anniversary of Henry VIII's ascension to the throne. Expect major festivities at Hampton Court Palace and beyond.
- 250th anniversary of Kew Gardens. Special exhibitions will commemorate the event.
- 20th anniversary of fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany. There will be special exhibitions, memorials, tours, and walks. The Czech Republic and other Eastern European countries will also celebrate the 20th anniversary of the fall of communism in 2009.
- Alaska's 50th anniversary of Statehood. The Alaska Railroad is offering a free one-day pass anywhere the train travels to anyone who will turn 50 in 2009.
- Missouri Botanical Garden's 150th anniversary. One of the top botanical gardens in the world, it's also the oldest public garden in the U.S.
- 400th anniversary of Bermuda. The island will celebrate with special events.
- 200th anniversary of Edgar Allen Poe's birth. Baltimore is celebrating with Nevermore 2009, a year-long citywide festival.

Major festivals in 2009 include:

- Manchester International Festival 2009: The second biannual festival features original and new works of performing, music, and visual art.
- Homecoming Scotland 2009: Scotland is celebrating the 250th anniversary of Robert Burns' birth and Scotland's contributions to the world, including golf, whiskey, and Scottish heritage. Events take place all year.
- July 2009 XXV Song Celebration in Tallinn, Estonia: Estonia has a proud heritage of massive singing festivals, the next of which takes place from July 2 to 5.
- Holland Art Cities: Boasting more art and culture per square mile than anywhere else on earth, the two-year Holland Art Cities is an event hosted by ten of the top museums in four of Holland's largest cities. Two museums (including the Hermitage Amsterdam) will open as well.
- Around the world, demand is down and destinations are pushing hard for more visitors, so unusually good deals should be easy to find, at least through the first half of 2009. These and other emerging destinations provide added value since they tend to be even more affordable than more popular, established destinations. If you're looking for an affordable vacation in the coming year, an up-and-comer could be just the ticket.

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