

29 Places to Go in 2009 Spotlight

Make the new year one to remember at one of these travel hotspots

Excerpts by Laurel Angrist:

5. GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

The most visited national park in the U.S., the Great Smoky Mountains (a western segment of the high Appalachians) boast over 500,000 acres of pristine forest and diverse wildlife that includes foxes, deer, elk, and some 1,500 resident black bears. Nestled between North Carolina and Tennessee, park visitors have access to 800 miles of hiking, biking, and horseback riding trails; scenic campsites; historic cabin museums that serve to recount pioneer history; and popular auto-tour loops, like those along Cades Cove – all of which are shrouded in the misty-blue haze that gave name to “The Smokies.”

Why Go In 2009: With American travelers forecasted to plan more trips to national parks this year, the Great Smoky Mountains offer one of the country's most cost-efficient vacations in the great outdoors. Admission to the park is always completely free, and as this year marks the 75th anniversary of its founding (www.greatsmokies75th.org), many additional complimentary activities are planned, including musical performances and special ranger-led programs.

9. WHISTLER

Skiers and boarders searching for heavenly pistes needn't look further than the coastal mountains of British Columbia. Canada's top winter resort boasts truly tremendous powder, which is why Whistler is hosting most of the ski events during 2010's Winter Olympic Games. With 33.5 feet of average snowfall per year, this winter-sports mecca offers conditions tailor-made for snowshoeing, tubing, and backcountry adventures, along with an extended ski season lasting from November through June. Come in the warmer months, and you'll discover a top destination for mountain biking, zip-trek eco tours, whitewater rafting, and more.

Why Go In 2009: Although the event is still one year away, Whistler visitors in 2009 will have the chance to preview some Olympic glory before the games. Construction on all main Olympic venues is now complete (some facilities are open for touring), a handful of new lodge and hotels have opened their doors (we like the Evolution Whistler; www.evolutionwhistler.ca), and a high-tech gondola debuts in December. More exciting still will be the chance to ski like a champion down real Olympic runs or to witness winter sports excitement at F.I.S. World Cup events. Best of all, Whistler vacations offer terrific value over comparative

experiences at Western U.S. ski resorts, with cheaper lodging options and a strong U.S.-to-Canadian-dollar conversion.

24. SOUTH KOREA

In just two decades, South Korea has emerged as a stable democratic country with big ambitions. The bustling megacity of Seoul embodies the nation's new spirit, where towering skyscrapers and posh department stores are interspersed with venerable imperial palaces, traditional teahouses, and centuries-old Buddhist temples. Ancient Gyeongju, meanwhile, offers a glimpse into Korea's 5,000 years of history, and was ranked in 1995 by UNESCO as one of the world's ten most historically significant places. Nearby, a sunrise climb to the temple-topped peak of Mt. Tohamsan reveals the origin of the country's moniker, "Land of the Morning Calm."

Why Go In 2009: The South Korean won has lost more than 30% of its value against the dollar since just one year ago, giving the American traveler plenty of purchasing power – of particular interest for shoppers looking to pick up brand-name consumer electronics and designer fashions in Seoul. What's more, the number of international tourists boomed some 12 percent between 2007 and 2008, a trend that's inspired hotel chains like Wyndham and InterContinental to expand their presence in the country in 2009.