



## America's most visited tourist attractions



By Rob Baedeker, ForbesTraveler.com

Call it a coincidence, but in the historic election year of 2008, the home of the Liberty Bell cracked the Forbes Traveler list of America's Most Visited Tourist Attractions.

Independence National Historic Park, the Philadelphia site that includes the famous bell (as well as the hall where the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were signed), welcomed more than 4 million visitors in 2008, up about 10% from the previous year.

But it could be that another factor drew tourists to National Park Service sites like Independence Hall: free admission. In a year when structural cracks also started to appear in the economy, low-cost attractions may have seen their stock rise. At the Smithsonian Institute's 19 free museums in Washington, D.C., overall visitation increased by approximately one million from 2007. The museums are part of the National Mall, which retains its number-three ranking on our list.

Mike Weingart, a travel specialist with Carlson Wagonlit Travel, explains, "Washington always presents a good value with the numerous museums that are free of charge. So, should people feel the economy might be a little weaker, Washington is a good choice."

Among the National Mall's other no-cost attractions are the Lincoln, Washington and Jefferson Memorials, and the World War II and Korean War Veterans and Vietnam Veterans memorials.

Despite the recession, tourists were still spending in select locations last year: New York City reported 47 million visitors and \$30 billion in total visitor spending in 2008, according to NYC & Company, the official marketing, tourism and partnership organization for the City of New York. Those numbers—both increases from 2007—are reflected in our visitation figures for Times Square, the city's top tourist attraction.

Other U.S. tourist sites also kept their numbers steady in 2008, despite the economic challenges. San Antonio River Walk, the self-proclaimed "#1 entertainment destination in Texas," had increased attendance at its numerous events, which included festivities such as a floating Mardi Gras Parade and a Mariachi Festival. The Walk's overall annual attendance held steady at 5.1 million, said Greg Gallaspy, Executive Director of the Paseo del Rio. "We have also seen more regional traffic to our destination," he explained, as more visitors from Dallas, Austin, Houston and South Texas were driving to the River Walk, a pattern he said he last noticed in the months following 9/11, when air travel slowed.

While the overall order of our list doesn't reveal seismic shifts in attendance, some attractions experienced significant downturns. Our estimate for Waikiki Beach bumps the famous Hawaii hot spot down several notches from last year's ranking, based largely on an 11% decline in overall visitation to the island of Oahu for the year 2008.

Before we get to the rankings a word about methodology:

Defining a tourist attraction involves navigating some categorical gray areas, but we stuck with discrete sites of historical or cultural interest; natural phenomena and landmarks; and delimited (or officially designated) spaces of entertainment and recreation.

While we've included some destinations that have strong commercial components, such as Times Square or San Antonio's River Walk, we've excluded stand-alone shopping malls and casinos. (If we hadn't, the Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut, which claims 40,000 visitors per day, and Minneapolis's Mall of America, with 40 million annual visitors, would have topped our list.)

Finally, while we've included a few of the shorter roads and walks as tourist destinations, we left out long stretches of road like the Blue Ridge Parkway, which tops the Park Service's visit report with 16.3 million in 2008, because its 469 miles stretched our definition of a tourist attraction.

We've used the most up-to-date available numbers from the tourist attractions themselves along with data from reputable media sources, government agencies and tourism industry reports. Where available, we've used 2008 numbers; in some cases we've used the most recent one-year data available (in the case of theme parks, that's 2007); where a single-year figure wasn't available, we've used averages.

So which National Seashore leapfrogged the Grand Canyon in visitation last year? And how many Disney parks made our Top 10? We have the answers.

**[1. Times Square, New York City, N.Y.](#)**

**[2. The Las Vegas Strip, Nev.](#)**

**[3. National Mall and Memorial Parks, Washington, D.C.](#)**

**[4. Faneuil Hall Marketplace, Boston, Mass.](#)**

**[5. Disney World's Magic Kingdom, Lake Buena Vista, Fla.](#)**

**Complete list at**

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