

Lonely Planet picks Panama #4 in the world

Written by T. Rob Brown (aka Roberto Chocolate)

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The Lonely Planet guidebook picks top the 10 Countries in the world for 2011.

1) Albania

Not so long ago, when the Balkans were considered an 'only for the brave' travel destination, only the bravest of the brave trickled into Albania. Since backpackers started coming to elusive Albania in the 1990s, tales have been told in 'keep it to yourself' whispers of azure beaches, confrontingly good cuisine, heritage sites, nightlife, affordable adventures and the possibility of old-style unplanned journeys complete with open-armed locals for whom travellers are still a novelty. Sick to death of being dismissed with blinged-up crime-boss clichés, Albania has announced 'A New Mediterranean Love' via its tourist board. The jig is almost up – Albania won't be off the beaten track for much longer.

2) Brazil

Famous for samba, football and cinematic scenery, Brazil has always been known for celebration (Carnaval being the most obvious manifestation of this national joie de vivre). Yet, Brazil rings in 2011 with even more cause for jubilation. Winning the bids to host both the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is undertaking a flurry of new projects, with billions of dollars earmarked for infrastructure (there's even discussion of building a high-speed rail line between Rio and São Paulo). Despite the strong Brazilian real, travellers should benefit from the addition of thousands of new hotel rooms, while increased competition from low-cost airline carriers (including Azul, established by the Brazilian-born founder of JetBlue) should make travel across this vast country more affordable.

3) Cape Verde

Cape Verdeans might have known about the wider world forever, but it seems that the wider world is only just opening its eyes to Cape Verde. On the surface this is hardly a surprise; the country appears to be nothing but a blink-and-you'll-miss-it dot of dust floating off the coast of Africa, but the islands have recently started catching sideways glances from European winter-sun tourists. This growing international interest is bringing enormous changes to an archipelago that looks and feels as if it were born from a Caribbean mother and an African father. But what is it that these tourists come for? When someone first mentioned trying to attract foreign visitors to their 'dot of dust' most Cape Verdeans must have laughingly thought 'What can we offer a tourist here?'. The answer turned out to be quite a lot. Soaring mountains terraced in greens, a volcano with its head in the clouds, world-class watersports and sizzling, saucy festivals – but it was the sun that clinched the deal. With almost more days of sunshine than there are days in the year and with soft sandy beaches to boot, someone only had to say the words 'winter sun' and the islands were being marketed as the 'New Canary Islands'.

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4) Panama

For Panama, the world economic crisis offered a perfect excuse to hit the reset button. After an unchecked growth spurt created a clutter of casinos, gated communities and glass towers in the name of Trump, the investment slump has forced a return to basics. For travellers, there's a return to the authentic – local heartland festivals, jungle treks and lodgings in sand-floor huts in the independent Comarca de Kuna Yala. With plenty of the country still pristine, true adventure is only a boat or bus fare away. In 2011 Panama City gets greener, with the anticipated unveiling of the BíoMuseo, an innovative Frank Gehry-designed space celebrating ecological diversity. Panama City's new Cinta Costera (Coastal Belt) creates a green stripe of waterfront paths that finishes in Casco Viejo, a stunning historic neighbourhood remade after decades of neglect. Like elsewhere, climate change and habitat destruction are taking their toll here. Panama's inch-long golden frogs, victims of a worldwide epidemic, are fast disappearing. But the Darién Gap, considered one of the world's wildest places, still remains roadless. Countless Panamanian islands persist without name or a sole inhabitant. Costa Rica eat your heart out.

For the complete list: <http://bit.ly/aovjdw>