

Stunning Ruins Around the World

Fantastic finds from the past never lose their power to
fascinate

by Penny Musco, **AARP**, December 19, 2016



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What is it about old heaps that captivate us? The architecture? The mystery of long-ago civilizations? In *Lives in Ruins*, Marilyn Johnson alludes to their appeal to the field's professionals in her book's subtitle—*Archaeologists and the Seductive Lure of Human Rubble*—but really, the same could be said of us ordinary folks as well. Here are some enthralling relics to consider.



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Machu Picchu, Peru

“You don’t have to know a thing [about the Incas] to have your breath taken away,” says Johnson, of the “spectacular jewel of a city, carved out of a mountain and brushed by clouds” (getting to the site at nearly 8,000 feet above sea level is, she relates, both harrowing and scenic). About 200 religious, ceremonial, astronomical and agricultural buildings—with more yet to be uncovered—dot the 15th-century site, divided into terraced farming and residential areas, with a swath of green space between. Exactly what role it played in Inca society is still uncertain—apparently of little importance to swarms of tourists.



EYEEM/Getty Images

Borobudur, Indonesia

Get a workout scaling the world's largest Buddhist temple, built in the 8th and 9th centuries to graphically illustrate the steps to enlightenment. First walk the pyramidal base to get a feel for its size (hint: there are 2,672 bas-relief panels and 504 Buddha statues). Then begin your ascent, examining the walls chock full of ornate friezes rich in Buddhist imagery and symbols. Eventually you'll reach the summit—Nirvana, if you will—to find sizeable perforated stupas (bell-shaped forms) and blissfully meditating Buddha figures. Two smaller temples complete the compound, laid out in the shape of a lotus, Buddhism's sacred flower.



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Tulum, Mexico

This remnant of Mayan civilization on the Yucatan Peninsula overlooks a dazzlingly turquoise Caribbean Sea and white sand beach. Three main structures endure from the thriving trading post dating from 1200-1450: El Castillo, the Temple of the Frescoes and the Temple of the Descending God, whose upside down figure can be spotted around Tulum. Yucatan is known for its cenotes (pronounced say-NO-tays), or natural sinkholes, and you'll find some here. Mayans believed they were portals to the underworld, but no worries for today's travelers: those who take a plunge or meander the caves' paths encounter only pristine waters and exhilarating formations.



Jan Wlodarczyk/ALAMY

Angkor Archaeological Park, Cambodia

Angkor Wat may get all the attention—and indeed the lavishly decorated funerary temple topped by five soaring cone-shaped turrets is mighty impressive—but don't stop there. This 154-square mile complex, center of the Khmer Empire during the 9th to 15th centuries, has other attention-grabbing spots, including the eerie, mystical Ta Prohm. Nature continues to have her way at the abandoned temple, sending out fingers of fig, banyan and kapok tree roots to snake over the remains (where Angelina Jolie plucked a flower in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*). The extravagantly detailed entry gates to Angkor Thom, the kingdom's last capital, are exquisite.



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Abu Simbel, Egypt

This site's two temples, constructed under Ramses II in the 13th century BC, have a history almost as remarkable as their architecture. When construction of the Aswan High Dam in 1960 threatened to flood these and other Nubian monuments, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) led a worldwide effort to dismantle and relocate them. Abu Simbel's temples—the larger one dedicated to its creator and fronted by four colossal statues of him, the lesser devoted to favored wife Nefertari—were moved higher above Lake Nasser. Great care was taken to preserve the former's unique orientation: twice annually, the morning sun casts its rays the length of the interior to illumine four gods seated at the end.



Getty Images

Petra, Jordan

This prehistoric trading center, half shaped out of and half built into dramatic dusky rose-colored sandstone cliffs, remains strikingly beautiful despite the ravages of weather, earthquakes and tourism. First occupied by the Nabataeans, Petra also hosted Edomites, Romans and even Crusaders. Enter the city through the Siq, a narrow gorge hemmed in by towering bluffs, and come face to face with the elaborately hewn Treasury, one of hundreds of tombs heavy with intricate etchings. Go on to explore obelisks, temples and a 3,000-seat amphitheater, then gird your loins to scale 800 rock-cut steps to the monastery for a sweeping view of the Araba valley.



Glenn Oakley/Getty Images

Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado

In 1888 two cowboys stood at canyon's edge in awe of what looked like "a magnificent city" set beneath an overhang on the other side. A later explorer called it "wonderful to behold, appearing like an immense ruined castle." Now, visitors clamber up ladders on ranger-led tours of Cliff Palace, with its labyrinth of rooms and belowground chambers, and roam some of the other 500+ Ancestral Pueblo cliff dwellings constructed around 800 years ago by seemingly superhuman effort. Tumbling rocks make the park's best-preserved abode, Spruce Tree House, currently inaccessible, but numerous hikes offer inspections of other sites, overlooks and petroglyphs.



Niko Guido/Getty Images

Cappadocia, Turkey

Drift over this wonderland of pink-tinged peaks and valleys in a hot air balloon, and marvel at a landscape speckled with “fairy chimneys”, aka hoodoos, tall conical spires formed by volcanic activity. Back on land, scramble through one of those hollowed out stacks, then walk in the footsteps of early Christians who dug out multi-layer underground cities to escape persecution. Wend your way through a maze of narrow passageways to glimpse the things they left behind, including chapels still adorned with colorful Byzantine frescoes. Want to experience more of the troglodyte lifestyle? Spend the night in a cave.



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Longmen Grottoes, China

An “outstanding manifestation of human artistic creativity” is how UNESCO describes this staggering collection of carvings devoted to Buddhism. Over 2,300 caves and niches cleaved out of limestone crags contain nearly 110,000 stone statues, more than 60 stupas and 2,800 engraved inscriptions. Equally astonishing is their well-preserved condition, considering they date from 316 to 907. The Royal Cave Temple, closed to the public in 1953 in order to preserve its artifacts, then heavily damaged during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the '60s and '70s, reopened in March 2016.



Getty Images

Pompey and Herculaneum, Italy

The bad news: at least 2,000 citizens of these two towns were buried in volcanic ash, lava and mud when nearby Mount Vesuvius blew its top in 79 AD. The good news is that we get to walk their streets to see how they lived—and died. Both locales offer peeks into villas, shops and bathhouses, many decorated with splendid paintings and mosaics. In Pompeii, plaster casts of ill-fated residents capture their dress and facial expressions in excruciating detail. The smaller and less visited Herculaneum has seen more restoration lately, and now includes a grim yet riveting tableau of 300 fabricated skeletons frozen at their moment of death.