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# The Joy Index

Introducing our definitive ranking of the happiest travel destinations for 2017.

**f** BY CASSIE SHORTSLEEVE

Travel makes us happy. It's something that *Condé Nast Traveler* knows from researching, writing about, and most importantly, traveling to destinations around the globe. And psychologists agree: Studies show that anticipating travel, the experiences we have away from home, and even the return trip can improve our moods (sometimes drastically).

But what primes a destination for moments of joy? Until now, we'd never attempted to quantify it. With the help of happiness experts Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project*, and Shawn Achor, happiness researcher and author of *The Happiness Advantage*, we set out to uncover the 10 most joyful destinations of 2017.

Happy places make for happy stays. So we started with countries ranked highly for happiness and well-being. People in these places tend to score highly on factors like physical health, financial welfare, and social connectedness.

But what makes a *trav*itor happy isn't this same as what makes a happy home. When we travel, we're not looking for public universities or a strong G.D.P. We're looking for utter relaxation, family memories, an unforgettable meal. That's where Rubin and Achor came in. They explained the science behind what makes travel joyful—the psychology of awe, the physiology of adventure. Happy experiences, they told us, are just as important as happy places; and with that in mind, they helped us make a list of destinations that are uniquely poised to generate moments of travel bliss.

With virtually endless ways to experience happiness in travel, we had a long list, so we added a layer of intuition to the science. What corners of the world are we drawn to right now? Each of these 10 locations is home to a once-in-a-lifetime experience — call it an X-factor — that makes it unlike any other place in the world. Because, for us, that's part of what makes travel so joyful: the discovery of something completely unique.

Explore the methodology key to the left to learn more about the science that shaped our list, and scope out a destination that matches your interests.

EXPLORE THE TOP 10 DESTINATIONS

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## 09. Matera, Italy

**✂** There are few things more joyful than a comeback story like Matera's. An ancient city of natural caves in Southern Italy, Matera was known as the "shame of Italy" for decades. In the 1950s, the poverty-stricken city was evacuated over public health concerns. But thanks to dedicated locals, Matera has been thoughtfully redeveloped as a tourist destination over the last 20 years. In 2019, the city will be Europe's Capital of Culture.

Today, exploring the city center is like walking back in time. Planning appears haphazard, until you realize that behind each limestone facade is a complex network of cave "rooms." Many of Matera's caves have been equipped with electricity and wifi, transforming into restaurants, museums and clubs. But others—including secret churches containing Byzantine frescoes—remain privately owned. Befriend locals to score an invitation.

To Rubin, a rich and readily available history like Matera's makes travel more intellectually stimulating. The feeling of discovering it on our own gives us the context and personal investment to remember the history and inspires us to learn more.

### The X Factor

Don't leave without spending a night in a cave yourself. Swedish-Italian entrepreneur and philanthropist Daniele Kihlgren has made it luxurious and romantic by restoring part of the ancient cave network into a design-lover's hotel, [Sextantio Le Grotte Belle Caves](#).

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## 09. Matera, Italy

**✂** Don't miss: making your own picnic.

**👁** Matera is best known for its ancient cave dwellings, but the locals are most proud of their signature bread: a high, round loaf that uses a sourdough-style dough made with fermented grapes and figs. If you wake up early enough, [the Sextantio hotel can arrange for you to learn how it's made](#), followed by a lesson in making caciocavallo, the region's provolone-style cheese. You'll be done by lunchtime.

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