Flip side of World Heritage status

Janet Jarman for The New York Times

Tourists at the Kukulcán pyramid at the ancient Maya city of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatan. Tourists are flocking to the World Heritage site at a rate of more than 5,000 a day.

Below, the colonial town of Izamal, Mexico, in the Yucatan Peninsula, whose officials are seeking status as a World Heritage site.

Photographs by Seth Kugel

By Seth Kugel

IZAMAL, Mexico

Off a lazy plaza in the historic center of Izamal, Mexico, across the street from a Franciscan monastery built in 1561 on top of a Maya pyramid, a small market putters along. Behind open arches painted golden yellow like every other colonial building in town, poor quality T-shirts cover the walls, their silly English slogans clearly targeted at local residents, as are the avocados and chirimoyas sold by an older woman nearby.

But squint a little, and it's easy to imagine a different future for this small Yucatan town. The bargain "No Problem" and "Sport Attitude" jerseys morph into crisp, overpriced Izamal T-shirts; the woman is still there, but selling knickknacks to tourists who've just toured the pyramids or the monastery, El Convento de San Antonio de Padua, with its nearly 1-hectare, or 2-acre, atrium. Then they will head off to picturesque hotels that do not yet exist.

If municipal officials have their way, Izamal, or at least the convent, will be designated the eight-hundred-and-somethingth Unesco World Heritage site, and that new tableau will be all but ensured.

The phrase Unesco World Heritage site has been crossing from the lips of travel agents and popping up more and more on travel Web sites. That's no coincidence: The list has grown steadily from the first 12 in 1978 to 812 today, and includes everything from the Statue of Liberty, the Taj Mahal and Angkor Wat to the Wooden Churches of Southern Little Poland and the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape in Mongolia.

But as the list expands each year, many, including Unesco staff members, are left wondering: is this rapid growth watering down the list's meaning? And by drawing both tourism and development that's often left unchecked, can the honor do as much harm as good to those places so appointed?

Although Mexico devotes more resources to the World Heritage efforts than many countries, the Yucatan provides lessons in what can happen after a site makes the list. Mexico's most emblematic site is probably the ancient Maya city of Chichén Itzá, which by the time it was inscribed was already overrun with tourists on day trips from Cancun, three hours to the east. The numbers grew after nomination, with peak months bringing more than 5,000 visitors a day, according to Yucatan government statistics.

Standing before Chichén Itzá's iconic Kukulcán pyramid is still stunning, to be sure, but watching the line of tour buses spewing forth American tourists outside is just as remarkable. Visitors emerge with stickers on their shirts identifying their bus numbers. Cheery guides with set scripts shepherd them through the gate, where they are given official admission wristbands.

Beyond the gates, souvenir hawkers are well trained. One regular, Ermenegildo Kahum Kem, knows how to say, "Nothing for your mother-in-law?" in five languages.

Unesco's manifesto sounded simple enough: It set up a World Heritage Convention in 1972 to protect cultural and natural sites of "outstanding universal value." The convention established a World Heritage Committee, a rotating group of 15 (now 21) nations, and a World Heritage Fund to provide oversight, technical assistance and loans. The World Heritage Center in Paris oversees the program, and the committee annually decides on new designations.

It has become clear, though, that for many sites, getting on the list might be more an end goal than the beginning of conservation efforts. Once the four- to five-year nomination process is over, Unesco generally doesn't provide funds or technical assistance from its 35-person staff (plus consultants), nor regular monitoring to ensure that the ambitious plans come to fruition.

Liu Jin/AFP

Visitors on a trail in the Jiuzhaigou Valley in Sichuan Province, China.

"Countries found out that while they didn't get money from Unesco, they did get recognition, and recognition results in tourism," said Bonnie Burnham, the president of the New York-based World Monuments Fund, a nonprofit group that assists in preserving and protecting historic sites. "It's not a secret that this is one of the primary benefits of World Heritage listing."

"The minute it goes on the list, it goes into Lonely Planet, Fodor's, Frommers," said Jeff Morgan, executive director of the Global Heritage Fund, a California-based group that maintains its own, smaller list, and runs preservation and restoration projects in developing countries. "The list means nothing in terms of protection."

He added, "What Unesco has not done well is get a system in place" to have a sustained presence at most sites.

In Lijiang, China, where his group has been working to preserve the ancient houses and culture of the Naxi people, he said that soon after its nomination to the list in 1997, Lijiang was beleaguered by development.

"They had no zoning, no planning," Morgan said. "Suddenly the first tourist hotels went in." Soon, he said, there was so much building, "it's not interesting anymore."

The official mission statement of the World Heritage Center does not mention tourism or economic development.

"We don't see the World Heritage list as aimed to enhance tourism," said Alessandro Balsamo, the Unesco official who oversees the inscription process. "It means to preserve a specific site for the next generation, to give the concerned state party the means, through international cooperation, to conserve the sites."

Balsamo questions how effectively the World Heritage Center can monitor the ever-growing list, let alone provide technical assistance, with an annual operating budget of around $4 million. The organization does not even have an up-to-date list of contacts for all 812 sites, he said.

Of course, an obvious first step would be to stop naming new sites (24 were added this summer, including the Ottoman town in Gjirokastra, Albania, and the Shiretoko Peninsula in Japan). But diplomats on the World Heritage Committee seeking to add their own countries' entrants simply won't have it, according to Francisco Javier López Morales, who until recently ran the Mexican government's World Heritage program.

Izamal is smack in the middle of a World Heritage hotbed, the Yucatan Peninsula, where five sites have been inscribed: the Sian Ka'an Biospheric Reserve (1987); the pre-Columbian cities of Chichén Itzá (1988) and Uxmal (1996); the colonial city of Campeche (1999); and the ruins of Calakmul (2002), still under excavation.

"By becoming World Heritage, we'll have more investors," Izamal's assistant director of tourism, Edgar Díaz, said. "Upon having more investors, we'll have more tourist infrastructure. That way, there would be greater tourism promotion, and you could have an economic influx that is what the people need to support their families."

In Mexico, sites like Chichén Itzá seem under control and decently

> ***Countries found that 'recognition results in tourism.'***

staffed, which can't be said of Unesco sites across much of the world.

Tito Dupret, a Belgian who with his wife has photographed about 120 World Heritage sites for his Web site, *www.world-heritage-tour.org*, has been dismayed in his treks through Asia.

"I've seen so many sites that use World Heritage as a tourism logo," he said. "One day, they get the logo, so they double the entry fee and build an airport next to it."

He recalled being horrified at what had become of the Jiuzhaigou Valley, a natural reserve in Sichuan Province, China. "The entire valley is spoiled by mass tourism."

In 2001, the World Heritage Center established its first sustainable tourism program and hired an American, Art Pedersen, to run it; it has since received $5.5 million from the United Nations Foundation to support its work. (That's $6,773 per site.) Pedersen produced a tourism management manual for the sites and assists the center's regional officers.

He also oversees several on-the-ground projects to mitigate threats, and is pushing for a comprehensive tourism plan to be required before inscription.

The World Heritage Center has actively been seeking more private partners; the UN Foundation, founded by Ted Turner in 1998, has become its greatest outside source of funds. In August, Expedia announced an effort to raise money for and awareness of World Heritage sites.

But it seems the primary problem facing the World Heritage Center is that its oversight mechanisms are nearly all carrot and hardly any stick. The monitoring process largely is done by local governments, which report every six years.

No site has ever been removed from the list, although threats have been issued to some, including the Galapagos Islands. The center does maintain a World Heritage in Danger list, though generally the country itself must agree to putting the site on it.

One place where the process seems to have gone well is Campeche, a lovely colonial city a few hours southwest of Izamal. Campeche was a shabby economic backwater for years before state and local officials — working with a booster committee of prominent private citizens — began a nomination effort that including everything from attracting conservation conferences to networking with Unesco officials to fixing and painting historic facades.

In December 1999, at the World Heritage Center's annual conference, the Historic Fortified Town of Campeche was inscribed.

Although those behind the drive clearly understood the World Heritage mission, the main force was still economic.

According to state statistics, visits to Campeche have increased every year since it was nominated, rising 39 percent from 1999 to 2004; receipts from tourism almost doubled in those years; and the number of available hotel rooms increased 45 percent.

Campeche has done everything it can to milk its status. "World Heritage" is plastered all over tourism literature; a kiosk in the central plaza proclaims "Campeche: Patrimonio de la Humanidad" (Campeche: World Heritage Site), as do all 44 wrought-iron benches in the square.

So far, Campeche still feels authentic; even what seem like touristy shops selling T-shirts, guayaberas and jewelry attract local customers. And residents like 31-year-old Gloria Polanco, who works for a local cosmetics company, are pleased that the honor seems to have generated jobs and provided opportunities for the city's youth.

"Just the mere fact that people ask us 'Where is such-and-such park or hotel?' allows us to interact," she said.

Pedersen, the Unesco tourism official, said there was no solid evidence that World Heritage nomination leads to an increase of tourism. The circumstantial evidence, however, is strong. The nomination of Calakmul in 2002 literally put it on the map.

In the 2000 edition of Lonely Planet's Yucatan guide, the introductory map shows 14 highlights of the peninsula, and Calakmul is not one. But in the August 2003 edition, Edzna and Tulum, two non-World Heritage ruins, were removed, and Calakmul was in. The text on Calakmul was expanded from a half-page to a page and a half.

Calakmul is a delightful place, at least for now. It is hours away from the nearest city, and the winding, one-lane 60-kilometer, or 37-mile, road from the highway to the ruins is so empty that fauna have taken it over. The view from atop the largest structures, where spiders spin webs across doorways without fear of destruction, is stunning; the endless surrounding jungle is unspoiled by the panorama of radio towers you see from the Kukulcán pyramid in Chichén Itzá.

But it's already getting attention. Lori Markson, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, was the only American tourist visiting Calakmul one day last August. "I know it's going to be the next big thing," she said.

She may be right: from January through November of 2005, 15,643 visitors entered, compared with just 8,002 in the same period in 2001, the year before it was inscribed.

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An audio slide show on Mexico's World Heritage sites.