

[World's Most Dangerous Travel Destinations](#)

By Mia Taylor

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NEW YORK ([TheStreet](#)) — Nigeria and Colombia have earned the unfortunate distinction of being named the two least safe countries to visit, in a recent report from the World Economic Forum.

Nigeria, says the report, which ranks 141 economies around the world, is plagued by violence and terrorism -- not much of a surprise to anyone associated with the travel industry.

Colombia's ranking, however, triggered much disagreement among travel industry professionals who say the country has made great strides in recent years and disputed its dismal safety score.

"I think Colombia is getting a bit of a bad rap here," says Jim Hutton, chief security officer for the travel security company [On Call International](#) and a former employee of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, where his primary focus was Latin America. "When you look at the travel advisory that the State Department just put out [for Colombia], it talks about some insurgencies that are still active and organized criminal gangs, so there are certainly still some exposures there, but not nearly to the same degree as in Nigeria."

Other travel industry professionals echoed Hutton's comments, pointing out that there are countries in Africa that are probably less safe than Colombia.

The full run-down of safety and security rankings are part of the World Economic Forum's "Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2015." Published every two years, the core of the report is a "Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index" (TTCI), which measures factors and policies enabling sustainable development of a country's travel and tourism industry.

Safety and security are just part of the various sets of criteria the report uses to develop an overall measurement of a country's "enabling environment" with regard to tourism. Some of the other factors measured include business environment, health and hygiene, human resources and labor market.

When it comes to overall travel and tourism competitiveness based on all of the report's criteria combined, the top ranked countries for 2015 are Spain (1st), France (2nd), Germany (3rd), the United States (4th), the United Kingdom (5th), Switzerland (6th), Australia (7th), Italy (8th), Japan (9th) and Canada (10th).

With six economies in the top ten, Europe continues to dominate the rankings thanks to its world-class tourism infrastructure, and excellent health and hygiene conditions.

In Sub-Saharan Africa meanwhile, the highest ranked destinations were South Africa (48th), the Seychelles (54th), Mauritius (56th), Namibia (70th) and Kenya (78th).

Infrastructure gaps, safety and security and business environment issues plague Central and South America when it comes to further travel and tourism development, states the report.

The goal of the report is to provide information that can be used by a country and its policy makers to improve competitiveness. First issued in 2007, the report also allows countries to track their progress over time in the various areas measured.

"The index looks at factors and drivers that enable development of the tourism sector," says Roberto Crotti, an economist and one of the report's editors. "You want to have an environment that enables businesses to grow. If there is a perception of crime and violence, that doesn't allow for businesses to start and as a result there is much less opportunity for tourists."

The theme of this year's report, "Growing through Shocks", describes a global tourism market with many complexities that must be tackled to ensure strong future growth. The global issues it identifies include geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, Ukraine and Asia, along with growing terrorism threats around the world and fear of the spread of global pandemics.

With all that said, travel and tourism worldwide has continued to grow since the last report was issued two years ago.

International tourist arrivals reached a record 1.14 billion in 2014, 51 million more than in 2013, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates that travel and tourism now accounts for 9.5% of global GDP, a total of \$7 trillion.

To be clear, Colombia's dismal safety ranking is just one of many criteria in the report. When its rankings from the various other categories were considered, the country earned a much higher overall travel and tourism competitiveness score of 68 out of 141.

The report describes the country as being on an upward trajectory and ranks it quite well in other categories including noting that Colombia is very open internationally (ranked 8th out of 141), with one of the most liberal visa policies (ranked 20th on this front).

Colombia also received high marks for having a highly biodiverse ecosystem, home to almost 3,000 species (earning it a stellar 2nd place ranking out of 141).

"Colombia is deliciously green and lush -- it's a fabulous place to go to see a real variety of natural habitat," says Will Weber, cofounder of [Journeys International](#), an Ann Arbor-based adventure tour operator established in 1978.

Weber, whose company has been sending travelers to the country for about the past four years and who recently visited there himself, rattles off numerous highlights that would be attractive to tourists.

"Cartagena is a beautiful city with lots of great restaurants and a colonial feeling," he says. "Bogota is a really nice city with many museums and restaurants. There are a substantial number of wealthy people in Colombia, so there's a great deal of support for the arts and museums. And there's a lot of places for hiking and many nature sanctuaries."

"I can think of so many countries in Africa where you would be at more risk," Weber adds. "In the big cities in Colombia, I don't think you have any more risk than in other big cities around the world. "

Yet, despite such positive reviews, safety concerns drive Colombia into the World Economic Forum report's lowest ranks for safety and security, including ranking among the worst for terrorism and also with regard to general crime and violence.

Reasons for the low rankings include the high business costs of crime and violence in Colombia, the business costs of terrorism, and the index of terrorism incidents and homicide rates.

The report also notes the country needs to improve its ground infrastructure, in particular creating more paved roads. The Colombian government also ranks poorly for dedicating so little of its budget to the travel and tourism industry.

"We see that the situation in Colombia has improved with respect to the past, however as compared to other countries Colombia is still not performing greatly," explains Crotti, noting that the crime and terrorism indicators take into account incidents that are taking place both in cities and in the countryside.

"When you consider the country as a whole, there is still more episodes of terrorism, (than many other countries)," he continues. "This is an indicator that mainly speaks to policy makers and says that with respect to security there is still a concern and they still need to tackle it. It doesn't go away in one day. Columbia is still one of the countries that appears to be dangerous as a whole. But when it comes to tourist destinations specifically, it might not be the case."

Nigeria's overall tourism and travel competitiveness ranking, when all of the report's factors are combined, is 131st out of 141. Tourism does not play a very important role in the Nigerian economy, accounting for only about 1.5% of GDP and employment. Tourism is not high on the government agenda, the report states.

The country's limited development of the tourism industry appears to be a missed opportunity for diversifying the economy and creating employment opportunities, states the report.

However, significant challenges constrain the potential development of Nigerian tourism. First, improving the safety and security situation remains arguably the highest priority. What's more, Nigeria ranks only 127th on ground transport, 111th on air transport and 114th on tourism services infrastructure.

"In Nigeria the situation is not improving," Crotti said. "The situation is not particularly rosy."

One only needs to think of infamous jihadist terrorist organization Boko Haram, which is based in Nigeria, to understand the country's poor safety ranking. The terrorist group is linked to the killing of thousands of civilians in the country, particularly in Northeast Nigeria. Among the group's most recent and notorious acts of violence was kidnapping 276 schoolgirls in April of last year.

Surprisingly, even the world's least safe destination has some redeeming factors, according to Crotti and the forum report.

"There are areas of strength there as well," says Crotti. "Some of the country's natural resources are doing quite well. For example when you look at the total number of species or biodiversity of the fauna, they still have a lot of species. Of course that needs to be protected, but for time being it's still there."

Few dispute the report's findings with regard to Nigeria. In fact, many travel professionals with expertise in Nigeria paint a far bleaker picture than even Crotti did.

Michael Clyne, of [Drum Cassac](#), a business risk-consulting firm with operations in Nigeria and Colombia, says terrorism, militant movements and the pure criminal environment of the country make it a treacherous place to visit, especially without proper security precautions.

The typical traveler to Nigeria is going there on business. For obvious reasons, it is not a place that attracts families or tourists, he says.

"Nigeria does have this unique intersection of militancy, terrorism and crime, including kidnapping, that I think justifies its ranking," says Clyne.

Further echoing Crotti's comments, Clyne points out that developing a tourist infrastructure has historically not been a big focus for the Nigerian government. Instead the government is occupied with what it deems to be more lucrative industries.

"Nigeria is really focused on the oil and gas industry," says Clyne, who last visited the country in April. "Because there is so much wealth in oil and gas, the government has neglected developing its other resources such as tourism."

If someone were to visit the country, Clyne recommends hiring a trusted driver, (not a taxicab) and carefully planning an itinerary from a security perspective, with numerous safeguards in place.

Hutton, the former employee of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, paints an even more bleak and vivid picture of the country.

"It's like the movie *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*," Hutton says. "There is terrible infrastructure, lots of shady characters, broken down vehicles and dead animals along the road."

The other countries scoring poorly in the report with regard to safety and security include Yemen, Pakistan and Venezuela.