

I7 NEW

Finland

*As neighbouring Russia rattles its sabre, Finland is punching above its weight as a diplomatic force.*

The tumultuous twin challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine have left Finland in a stronger position. Under the steady leadership of its young, female prime minister, Sanna Marin, who has quickly established herself as a soft power icon in her own right since assuming power in 2019, the country adopted a business-friendly lockdown policy that focused on keeping society open and businesses running, while managing to achieve one of the lowest infection and fatality rates in the West.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the country resolutely abandoned its long-standing policy of neutrality and moved towards Nato membership. At the same time, its skilful diplomats negotiated defence pacts with the UK and US, sending a clear signal to Russia. For a small Nordic nation, Finland's network of embassies and consulates is surprisingly vast, with recent openings in Dakar in Senegal and Doha in Qatar.

Despite often topping international rankings in terms of education, happiness and foreign aid, Finland doesn't shout about its successes. Indeed, Finns still seem convinced that diligently getting on with things is all that it takes to win over hearts and minds around the world. The country could learn a thing or two about bricks-and-mortar soft power along the lines of the Goethe-Institut or Institut Français.

That said, Finland is not without its global icons. Brands such as design company Iittala and Marimekko, which specialises in textiles, clothing and home furnishings, are expanding in North America and Asia, while Santa Claus and pop-cultural characters such as the Moomins are attracting an increasing number of tourists to the country. Still, Finland needs to do more to promote its creative sector abroad, as all too often talented young Finnish designers are overshadowed by heritage names such as Alvar Aalto. — PBU

**In numbers:**

**Years until pledged carbon neutrality:** 13

**Visa-free travel:** to 191 countries

**Good:** Finland's outsized diplomatic prowess and the goodwill that it enjoys overseas have allowed it to navigate the Ukraine crisis with skill and speed.

**Bad:** Despite a fertile and distinctive creative scene, the country has so far proved less effective than its Nordic neighbours at selling its culture abroad.

I8 NEW

Mexico

*Soaring tourism numbers have helped the nation overcome its poor record on crime and coronavirus.*

Mexico's reputation soured in the 1980s and 1990s when its economy buckled and its capital became notorious for sprawl, air pollution and crime – but the country has since enjoyed a renaissance. Chefs such as Pati Jinich and film directors including Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu have helped the country to restore the prestige that it once enjoyed through cultural luminaries Diego Rivera, Luis Barragán, Frida Kahlo, Octavio Paz and others. In 2021 the country welcomed 31.9 million foreign tourists, up from 22.7 million in 2011. Mexico has had great success in promoting its cuisine abroad; tequila exports more than doubled from 164 million litres in 2011 to 339 million litres in 2021.

That this success has come at a time when violent crime has been at historic highs and the country has suffered one of the world's highest coronavirus death rates is a testament to the appeal of Mexico's good-time image. Its president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador ("Amlo"), made the decision to keep businesses open and place no restrictions on foreign tourism during the pandemic, helping his country become a haven for digital nomads and sun-seekers. His laissez-faire "prohibiting is prohibited" policymaking helped to burnish Mexico's credentials abroad but came at a high cost for the country's residents – officially, Mexico City tallied more than 43,000 coronavirus deaths but the true toll is likely to be as many as three times higher.

Amlo has embraced huge infrastructure projects, such as a \$20bn (€19.3bn) train service in southern Mexico. He has struggled, however, to deal with violent crime or catalyse economic growth and job creation. For now, Mexico's celebrities and chefs are helping to preserve the respect and interest that the country has earned over the past decade. But if it wants to maintain this reputation, it will need to direct tourist revenue into solving its endemic problems. — NPF

**In numbers:**

**World Heritage Sites:** 33

**Embassies abroad:** 67

**Good:** Mexico's vibrant culture and raucous hospitality have made it one of the fastest-growing tourist destinations of the past 10 years.

**Bad:** The country still suffers from endemic violent crime on a scale that makes many of its regions resemble warzones. Action is needed.



Raising the stakes

*How Romania's tourism authorities turned from Dracula's henchmen into vampire slayers.*

In the 1970s the Romanian tourism authorities noticed that devotees of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* were travelling to Transylvania – but when they arrived, many were disappointed to find nothing at all related to the novel. While Dracula's fictional castle is located in the Carpathian Mountains, there is little connection between the book and the real Transylvania. Stoker never visited it and had a sketchy grasp of its history.

The country's government wasn't going to let this get in the way of lucrative tourism. It began to promote a *Dracula* visitor experience centred on two castles. The first was the magnificent Bran Castle, on a site whose fortification dates back to 1212. It was once believed that a Wallachian leader best known as Vlad the Impaler (but also as Dracula) spent time there, perhaps as a prisoner. There is now a consensus among historians that he never set foot in it.

The second castle, Castel Hotel Dracula, is on a site whose fortification dates back to 1983. It was built by the tourist board after communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu ordered its construction

during a hunting trip in the region. Ceausescu, who had been taunted with chants of "Dracula!" on a visit to the US in 1978, apparently didn't realise what he was signing off on. The hotel attempted to recreate the vampire's castle precisely as Stoker's novel describes it but the result is underwhelming.

The relationship between Romania and its biggest, fakes cultural export has long been fraught. As one research paper put it, the country has been forced to choose between "the historical truth" and "the economic benefits derived from the capitalisation of a foreign myth". Romania's current tourism strategy seeks to drive a stake through the heart of the *Dracula* question. A proposed theme park devoted to the vampire was torpedoed in 2005 and there is a moratorium on the development of further related facilities. But the rationale for this isn't a concern over the inauthenticity of Stoker's *Dracula*. Instead, a national report expresses anxiety that such gauche attractions could alienate the "superior categories" of tourists that the country seeks to court. — HRS

I9

Australia

*After the lost years of pandemic-related isolation, a change in leadership is reversing its fortunes.*

The past couple of years have not been a golden age of Australian soft power. During the coronavirus pandemic, the country walled itself off from the world, even to the extent of locking out thousands of its own citizens. Its government of this period was led by Scott Morrison, a prime minister who seemed to be exactly the sort of provincial dullard who would have been much happier in, say, the 1950s, when neither Australia nor the international community gave each other much thought.

Both of those things have changed. Australia is once again open for business, though tourists are not yet stampeding back. Arrivals for the year that ended in August 2022 were still down 81 per cent on the last pre-pandemic year. And the country has a new government that does not appear to regard the rest of the planet as a baffling nuisance. Its current prime minister, Anthony Albanese, and new foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, are representative of how Australia prefers to see itself in its more liberal phases. Albanese is an Italian-Irish-Australian from working-class inner Sydney, while Wong is a gay woman who was born in Malaysia. While no politician should be judged on their biography, both project a more open-minded attitude abroad.

The country's most potent soft-power assets, however, have always been its top-flight sportspeople. Members of the current generation have been notably more willing than their predecessors to speak up about social issues from their lofty platform. Prior to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, Australia's national team, the Socceroos, caused a commendable fuss with a video criticising the host's record on labour relations and LGBT rights. Most of the world has positive notions of Australia and few hold grudges. There is work to do to make up lost ground but that seems easily achievable. — AM

**In numbers:**

**Olympic medals at Tokyo 2020:** 46

**Top-100 companies based on market capitalisation:** 2

**Good:** Australia has wisely decided to significantly increase foreign aid in the Pacific. It should be a regional leader, especially as China takes a closer interest.

**Bad:** Qantas, Australia's best-known global brand and flag carrier, has conspicuously struggled to recover from the disruptions of the pandemic.