

Gettysburg, Pa.

TRAVELER panelists rated this hallowed place poorly. Is it getting worse-or better?

By Jonathan B. Tourtellot

With a score of 51, Gettysburg rated substandard on our 2005 Destination Scorecard survey, in which a panel of experts on stewardship used six criteria (see box) to evaluate 55 North American national park destinations. The full survey is at www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

EVEN THOUGH OUR Scorecard panelists assigned Gettysburg a low score, a few went on to add, "nevertheless, it's getting better."

"No, it's getting worse," says Kathi Schue, president of the Gettysburg Battlefield Preservation Association. Tens of thousands of houses, she says, are planned to engulf the rolling landscape of big barns and striking stone farmhouses. She's right. On weekdays at 6:30 a.m., U.S. 15 is already a river of commuter headlights bound for the Baltimore-Washington area.

"But it is getting better," insists Dr. Walter Powell, a town historian. "Journalists don't realize the changes from 30 years ago." He's right, too. The best change was the demolition in 2000 of the 307-foot steel lookout tower that presided over the battlefield with all the appropriateness of a rocket gantry.

The condition of Gettysburg as a destination depends on whether you are in the town, in the surrounding 6,000-acre Gettysburg National Military Park, or in the mutating landscape of Adams County, just beyond.

Tasteful signage and architectural controls make the lively historic downtown attractive. Take a guided

walking tour (www.mainstreetgettysburg.org/guidedtout.htm). You can't appreciate the full battle story without seeing the bullet-scarred brick walls and learning how untrained townswomen nursed the flash flood of injured soldiers.

The town's old tackiness does linger next to the evocative park. Outsize McDonald's and KFC signs still rise amid mockeries like the Irish Brigade Gift Shop and General Pickett's Buffet.

Within its borders, the national military park is slowly rehabilitating the memorial-studded woods and fields to resemble 1863 conditions-growing new orchards to replace those cut down, felling latter-day second growth-so you can better understand the flow of battle. The park wants to buy and raze intrusive modern structures. It is doing so with one car dealership but will do no more under the Bush Administration. "We've got zero dollars for new land purchases," says park spokeswoman Katie Lawhon. "Park Service people who buy land have been offered early retirement."

Things look worse beyond the park. Adams County's patchwork of erratically governed townships hasn't done much about subdivisions popping up all over, even in the lovely orchard-clad hills northwest of town. And now debate rages over a 3,000-slot casino proposed for a site on the bypass, a couple of miles from town. Consecrated Jumbo Jackpot, anyone?

The casino would lure more tourists, but at 1,800,000 visitors a year, Gettysburg, pop. 7,500, hardly needs them. The area needs instead to protect its historic appeal for visitors who will stay longer, sending an economic message that this storied landscape should not, in Abraham Lincoln's words, "perish from the Earth."

My Take on Gettysburg

* *Environment Improving in the battlefield park, with stream restoration last year.*

* *Culture A new arts center opened in 2005, adding more life to the bustling town.*

* *Historic Structures Many survive; the town retains a sense of the past, despite a scattering of ugly, anachronistic buildings.*

* *Aesthetics Charming town center, except for heavy truck traffic. Tacky signage abuts the park. Measures to address billboard blight and rural preservation are inadequate.*

* *Tourism Management Boosters seek more tourists, not a better travel experience. Need to focus on quality, not quantity.*

* *General Outlook For the town, good; for the park, fair; for the countryside, poor, with no coherent land use policy in sight. -J.B.T.*