

Bow down to the Academy

The Top 50 Nonbasic Lands

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Wow, has it been two weeks already since my [last article](#)? Now we've gone from Card Drawing to Nonbasic Land Week here at MagicTheGathering.com, and let me tell you I couldn't be happier about it! After all, one of my favorite card types in **Magic** is land, along with sorcery, instant, creature, artifact, interrupt, and enchantment.

But seriously, you couldn't have the game of **Magic** without the lands, could you? They give you mana every turn... or they don't. They tap for cool effects... except some tap only for mana. You can only play one a turn... ok, that one sticks give or take Fastbond and its ilk.

For this top fifty list, we're going to do things a little differently. So listen up, as I lay out the golden rules of Ben's Top 50 Nonbasic Lands of All Time!

1. This is my list. Even though I considered polling a gaggle of geese about their favorite Magical cards, I thought the better of it and went with my own uncommon knowledge of the game. Not that I don't value feedback (directed to either the message boards here, or to Bleiweiss1@cox.net)
2. Cards are ranked based on their importance and power in tournaments. However, most of the cards on this list basically apply to all formats — nonbasic lands are the building blocks of decks in general, aside from basic lands.
3. Rule number three used to concern something, but I have no clue what that is at this point. So we'll use rule number three to point out that this is nonbasic land week — so Forest, Island, Mountain, Plains and Swamp are not to be included.
4. Everyone who has read my column here knows how much I love [talking about cycles of cards](#). There are many nonbasic lands that are parts of cycles. When these cards all have identical effects (such as with the *Odyssey* filter lands), they were grouped together. When they have disparate effects (such as with the *Odyssey* threshold lands), they were separated. Who wants to have to include Nomad Stadium on a best-of list?
5. There are no multi-colored cards on this list. However, there ARE cards which produce multiple colors of mana. And remember kids, the lands themselves are colorless, even if they produce all five colors of mana.

In addition, you may notice that Bazaar of Baghdad finished higher than Cephalid Coliseum, when they had reversed positions during Card Drawing Week. Well, that's because I've had a minor change of opinion about the two, thanks to all the wonderful feedback I've gotten from people.

Special bonus section! Here are the lands which were in contention for the top fifty, but just missed making the cut: Not on list, but in consideration: *Planeshift* Dragon Lairs (Rith's Grove, etc.), *Urza's Saga* original cycling lands (Slippery Karst, etc.), Kor Haven, Krosan Verge, *Torment* Tainted lands (Tainted Field, etc.), Tarnished Citadel, *Mercadian Masques* counter lands (Peat Bog, etc.), Thran Quarry, *Fallen Empires* sac lands (Svyelunite Temple, etc.), Elephant Graveyard, Island of Wak-Wak, Safe Haven, City of Traitors, Crystal Vein, Ice Floe, Land Cap, Winding Canyons, and Lotus Vale. I know I'm going to get a lot of mail about Lotus Vale, so let me preempt those letters: Lotus Vale would have been playable if it wasn't in the same environment as Wasteland, Capsize, and massive amounts of land destruction. The end.

Anyhow, on to the list!

Key:

"50.": This card finished in 50th place.

"25.": This card finished in 25th place.

"2.": This card finished in 2nd place.

Wait, we don't need no stinkin' key this week. Never mind, and carry on, troops.

50. Rath's Edge

InQuest magazine (I write their monthly **Magic** puzzle, by the way, so pick it up and check it out!) rated Rath's Edge as the worst card in *Nemesis*. Then, everyone and their brother showed up to Masques Block Constructed Pro Tour and played Rath's Edge in an effort to deal with many Rebels, Waterfront Bouncer, and other offensive one toughness creatures. Then people began playing it in standard as a slow way to mop up Elves and Birds. Not bad for the "worst card" of a one hundred and forty-three card set.

49. Arena

For years, people have played Arena at their local **Magic** stores. Pretty much nobody plays Arena now, because they are playing Friday Night **Magic** instead. It's been rumored that if you played Arena, you won an oversized Library of Alexandria and an oversized Necropotence. Also, the ability to tap your opponent's creatures after declaring an attack, possibly kill that creature, all for the low cost of three mana seems like a good buy from a promotional card offered via a mail-in coupon from the first **Magic** novel.

48. Urza's Lands

Affectionately referred to as the "Urzatron," these three lands combine to form a mighty seven mana engine. While they are individually horrible, the threat of playing a third turn Phyrexian Colossus sans Tinker is one that should not be trifled with.

47. Centaur Garden

The first of the *Odyssey* threshold lands to make the list, Centaur Garden fits very well into blue-green madness and threshold decks. Quiet Speculation, Wild Mongrel, and Mental Note all fuel the graveyard towards a quick seven cards, allowing this non-counterable Giant Growth to take full root.

46. Odyssey Filter Lands

The worst of the dual lands on this list, the filter lands nonetheless give you painless access to two different colors of mana. However, try drawing 2-3 of these in your opening hand, and see how much fun you have sitting there without being able to produce a single mana! They are also not good for activating abilities which require only one color (such as pumping a Dragon Whelp with a Mossfire Valley).

45. Grand Coliseum

Take City of Brass, and trade the mandatory pain for a comes-into-play delay, and you've got Grand Coliseum. The first five-color land to make this list, Grand Coliseum doesn't shine as much as the aforementioned City due to its delay in use. Sometimes you need that off-color mana *now*, and with the Coliseum, you just stare at a tapped land on the board.

44. Reflecting Pool

The value of Reflecting Pool is directly proportional to the number of other nonbasic lands you are playing. If you are only playing Islands and Mountains, then Reflecting Pool becomes Volcanic Island. If you're playing Gemstone Mine, the Pool becomes a painless City of Brass. The Pool also interacts well with weird cards such as Abandoned Outpost, since the second sacrifice ability of the Outpost allows the Pool to tap for all five colors of mana!

43. Soldevi Excavations

Alliances introduced a cycle of lands that allowed the player to do effects related to the land's color in exchange for a land sacrifice. Soldevi Excavations gives the player the ability to peek into the future and shape his fate for a small cost. Nothing like having a pseudo-Sleight of Hand every turn for the rest of the game!

42. Keldon Necropolis

The big brother of Rath's Edge, the Necropolis takes the principle of Skull Catapult and adds it to the mega-land Legends cycle. Five Legendary lands were produced over a five year period, one per cycle of cards. Two of these cards make the list, Teferi's Isle does not. Poor blue!

41. Glacial Chasm

Want to live forever? Well, I can't promise you that with Glacial Chasm, which has one of the heftiest upkeep costs in all of **Magic**. After just three turns, you'd have to pay 12 life to keep the Chasm in play — *plus* you need to sacrifice a land when it hits, *and* you can't attack any longer. Wow, sounds

pretty harsh, right? In exchange, you gain near-invulnerability. "Prevent all damage that would be dealt to you" as a global effect has only attempted a handful of times in **Magic** (Energy Field, Spirit of Resistance, Solitary Confinement). Glacial Chasm turns symmetrical damage-dealers such as Pestilence and Earthquake into one-way tickets towards victory!

40. Heart of Yavimaya

The second of the *Alliances* cycle on the list, the Heart found a home in many green beatdown decks over the years. While the bonus is significantly less than with Centaur Garden, the activation cost (simply a tap) and the ability to use the land as early as turn two both give this Vitality Charm a boost.

39. Cephalid Coliseum

While Centaur Garden found a home in mainly aggressive decks, Cephalid Coliseum made a name for itself in both blue-green threshold and Psychatog decks. Activating a Coliseum gives a Psychatog a hefty +2/+2 bonus (three cards + the Coliseum itself go to the graveyard), plus allows you to filter three cards deeper into your deck. There are even rare instances where you can activate this land to deck your opponent! Remember kids, lands with activated abilities are good because they cannot be counterspelled!

38. Barbarian Ring

No more *Odyssey* lands on this list after this one, I promise! Barbarian Ring might well be the most valuable of the threshold lands, since it gives the red deck a way around countermagic, Circles of Protection, and other prevention effects in the late game. What's a blue player to do when he is at four life and you've got two Rings on the board? Pray that you never hit threshold, that's what.

37. Serra's Sanctum

A piece of the Argothian Enchantress and Replenish combo decks, Serra's Sanctum turns all those helpful enchantments (such as Opalescence, Rancor, and Parallax Wave) into a massive burst of white mana.

36. Diamond Valley

Can one even mention Diamond Valley without mentioning Rukh Egg in the same breath? Back in the days of yore (he said yore!), players would gain three life while getting a 4/4 flying creature for only four mana + a Diamond Valley. Later, players enjoyed doubling their life totals each turn with a steady stream of Serra Avatars.

35. Ancient Tomb

Lands which tap for more than one mana have acceleration value, even if this acceleration comes at a high cost. Taking two damage for two mana might seem steep, but consider that the Tomb allows a

player to effectively jump his mana development one turn ahead of the opponent. The Tomb first shined at the *Tempest* Constructed Pro Tour, where players used it to fuel second turn Stone Rains and the like.

34. Pendelhaven

Imagine Heart of Yavimaya, but without the drawback of having to sacrifice a land. While Pendelhaven won't pump your larger creatures, it definitely turns otherwise light-hitting guys such as Llanowar Elves into respectable Hurloon Minotaurs. And the drawback to Pendelhaven? There is none! It's basically a souped-up Forest — play with one today! Here's a dirty trick: turn one Mountain, Kird Ape. Turn two Pendelhaven, pump Kird Ape. Turn three, pump Kird Ape, play Forest, attack for three.

33. Invasion Dual Lands

Dual lands are lands which can produce two colors of mana. There have been many variations on the theme over the years, including this group of five from *Invasion*. These allied lands (meaning they sit next to each other on the color wheel: blue-white, white-green, green-red, red-black and black-blue) share a similar drawback with Grand Coliseum — except that they don't ever have a drawback past the first turn. Once you get past the initial burp of non-production, these five guys are really good mana fixers for your two-color needs.

32. Karakas

Karakas might as well be a Plains which reads: “: Unsummon target Legend.” Oh wait, it *is* a Plains which reads “: Unsummon target Legend.” If you're a casual player, you should be playing with this card in your white decks just because you can. If you're a serious player, consider that Karakas can deal with Sol'Kanar the Swamp King; Rith the Awakener; and Silvus, Rogue Elemental all with the same ease.

31. Contested Cliffs

Arena came back years later with a vengeance. This time, you chose which creature of your opponent's you hit, and the mana cost ended up being RG instead of 3. Beast decks came out in force at Pro Tour - Venice, and are poised to make a splash at Regionals this year.

30. Mirage Fetch Lands

A staple for years, these lands might delay you a turn, but they afford painless mana fixing and an opportunity to shuffle your deck. Combine these with Brainstorm and Sylvan Library for some deck-shuffling fun times. Of course, these were overshadowed down the road... but let's talk about that later, shall we?

29. Gemstone Mine

What would you do if you found out you only had three mana left before you went away? Gemstone Mine poses this question in an ingenious way, trading a limited lifespan for access to all five colors of mana. Combo decks loved this card, as it gave decks with a quick game plan the ability to splash *Abeyance* and *Vampiric Tutor* without having to worry about long-term consequences.

28. *Onslaught* Cycling Lands

I've mentioned what a drag it is to lose a turn worth of mana production to play a comes-into-play tapped land. What if this drawback was negated by the ability to trade extra lands late in the game for a new card? The *Onslaught* cycling lands give the player this option, while also fuelling the graveyard for threshold. These lands first shined in *Astral Slide*/*Lightning Rift* decks due to their super-low one mana cycling cost, and have found their way into many decks since.

27. Faerie Conclave

When is a land not a land? When it's a man-land! I talked about these lands which become creatures way back in [May of 2002](#), and cannot stress enough how powerful these are as a whole. These are creatures that cannot be counterspelled or killed by sorceries, which makes them perfect foils for blue decks, *Wrath of God*, *Innocent Blood*, and other such popular cards. In addition, you can play board sweepers such as *Nevinyrral's Disk* to kill all your opponent's nonland permanents while keeping your man-lands safely in tow. Such was the case with many mono-blue decks which could afford such board sweepers while building up a steady force of *Faerie Conclaves* and *Stalking Stones* for the final push.

26. Quicksand

As a rule, creature kill belongs to black and red. So when Wizards introduced this land in *Visions*, Randy Buehler rejoiced. He rode these to a top Worlds finish a few years ago, by allowing his mono-blue deck to cope with threats such as *River Boa* and *Ball Lightning*.

25. Stalking Stones

A fixture of mono-blue control decks known as "Draw, Go" (named after their game strategy — draw a card and then say go), *Stalking Stones* allows the blue player to develop his mana base while playing out potential 3/3 ground-pounders along the way. Unlike other man-lands, the *Stones* becomes a creature permanently once activated. By that point, it doesn't much matter; the blue player has filled his hand with countermagic and will soon be winning the game.

24. Bazaar of Baghdad

Type 1 players have loved this card for years. First, they loved it with *Nether Shadow* and *Ashen Ghoul*. Then, they loved it with *Squee*, *Goblin Nabob* and *Krovikan Horror*. Finally, they love it with *Basking Rootwalla* and *Circular Logic* and *Reanimate*. The best friend of recursion creatures, the *Bazaar* gives players access to easy hand-discard while rewarding them with free cards. Eventually

you'll be discarding three Squees a turn to draw two cards. A land which reads ": Draw two cards" doesn't seem like a bad deal to me at all.

23. Volrath's Stronghold

Able to recur tall creatures with a single bound, the Stronghold allows you to take your baddest, biggest beastie and put it back for a second round of rock-'em sock-'em. Black players also found that the Stronghold kept them from being decked in the long game, since they could constantly refresh the top of their deck with creatures from their graveyard. Best when used with Thrull Surgeon or other sacrificing baddies.

22. Cabal Coffers

A staple in Standard for over a year now, Cabal Coffers just grows more and more powerful as the game wears on. While you don't see a return on your investment on the Coffers until turn five (before then, you don't get extra mana from the Coffers versus playing only swamps), the true power of the Coffers shines late in the game, when you'll be tapping three lands (two swamps plus the Coffers) to produce 9+ mana!

21. Dust Bowl

Lands which destroy lands are traitors which must be dealt with seriously. Dust Bowl allows any of your lands to take one for the team to destroy an enemy nonbasic. While it's slower than some other land-killing lands, it gives the late-game player a more versatile way to destroy multiple lands over the course of several turns.

20. The Tabernacle at Pendrell Vale

When played with Winter Orb, The Tabernacle of Pendrell Vale might as well be a Wrath of God which hits every turn. However, only evil, evil **Magic** editors would ever play that combo. And he got it in a draft to boot! Who does that? Who gets constructed-quality combos in draft? WHO DECKS HIS WRITER BY COMBINING THE TABERNACLE AT PENDRELL VALE WITH WINTER ORB? I hate you, Aaron Forsythe. You have scarred me forever.

19. Undiscovered Paradise

Enterprising **Magic** players have always found ways to turn drawbacks into advantages. A land which returns to your hand after each use might seem unusable, even if it does contribute all five colors of mana — after all, Gemstone Mine and City of Brass do the same thing without stanching your mana development. However, when played with cards like Maro, Firestorm, and the above-mentioned Winter Orb, one finally sees the power of this land. It also allows you to get a land off the board if you smell Armageddon coming from a turn away.

18. Treetop Village

Blue might have gotten a 2/1 flying man-land out of *Urza's Legacy*, but Treetop Village truly puts the Hulk into "Hulk Smash!" The green mage gets an uncounterable 3/3 trampling creature as soon as turn three. Many a control player has had his games quickly ended by this behemoth of a land.

17. Rishadan Port

Mana denial is the name of the game, and no land in **Magic** has frustrated as many people as Rishadan Port. Capable of shutting down an opponent entirely with multiples, the Port has been best used to deny a player's second color of mana, to deny a second mana of a first color for an important spell (such as the second white to cast *Wrath of God*), to deny man-lands from attacking, and to repeatedly tap *City of Brass* (Ow, quit it. Ow, quit it.). Best of all, it's colorless so everyone and their mother was running four of these. These were so harmful to the *Masques* Block Constructed environment (which didn't feature nearly enough mana fixing cards) that it was quickly banned.

16. Gaea's Cradle

Green is known for playing a fast-mana game and no card of that color says fast mana as much as Gaea's Cradle. The best friend of *Deranged Hermit*, the Cradle gives green the potential to zoom ahead to ridiculous mana counts as quickly as the second turn — try playing turn one *Forest*, *Llanowar Elves*, then play turn-two double creature (from the *Elves + Forest*), Gaea's Cradle, tap Cradle for three, *Silt Crawler*. Next turn bust out *Deranged Hermit*. The turn after that, pay the upkeep on the *Hermit*, activate your *Treetop Village*, and have mana spare to burn on (assuming you don't feel like activating your *Village* multiple times, which you certainly can do.)

15. Ice Age Painlands

First introduced in *Ice Age*, these replacements for the original Alpha dual lands have appeared in every core set since *Fifth Edition*. While they don't count as a basic land in addition to their other land type, they do allow the player unrestricted access to two colors of allied mana, and/or painless colorless mana. They are closely related to...

14. Apocalypse Painlands

The *Apocalypse* Painlands are identical to the *Ice Age* Painlands except that they were designed for enemy color combinations! Players all over the world rejoiced as these lands single-handedly gave them the ability to build good, solid mana-based enemy color lands for the first time in years. This in turn fuelled the biggest spurt of creative deck building seen in constructed play for quite some time.

13. Kjeldoran Outpost

Squirrel Nest with an activation cost. In a time when there weren't many good token-creating cards (*The Hive*, anyone?), *Kjeldoran Outpost* quickly became a staple card in blue-white control decks known as "Counterpost." These decks waited behind a wall of countermagic (surprise!) while steadily producing a stream of *Soldier* tokens turn after turn. Since these soldiers were easily replaceable, a well placed *Wrath of God* here or there didn't hurt matters much either.

12. Lake of the Dead

Cabal Coffers without the wait. Lake of the Dead reflects black's prior attitude of "present gain at the expense of future development" by allowing you to fuel up your mana count to extreme amounts while losing swamp after swamp. (It looks like the "short-term gain" strategy of mana production has shifted to red now, though.) Hatred would never have been so good post-Dark Ritual without Lake of the Dead to fuel third turn kills — and Necropotence decks loved gaining the extra four life via a Lake-enhanced Drain Life.

11. Maze of Ith

The Maze caused games to go so long that it quickly landed on the Restricted List (but has since been removed). With four Mazes in your deck, it becomes virtually impossible to be killed via creature combat, since you can repel attacker after attacker for no mana cost. Maze of Ith also saves your guys from surprise combat tricks (Waylay, Giant Growth).

10. City of Brass

The best of the five-color mana producers, City of Brass comes out a-blazing on turn one, allowing you to cast any one-mana spell in the game be it blue, red, green, white or black. The drawback? Whenever the City becomes tapped, you take a point of damage. Unlike other painlands (which require a conscious activation to incur pain), the City triggers damage when being tapped by outside sources. This includes Icy Manipulator and Rishadan Port. It also allowed players to use Mirror Universe to kill their opponents back before *Sixth Edition* rules, since you could tap your City of Brass during your upkeep to take a point of damage, and then switch your life totals (yours being at zero or below) before the end of the phase.

9. Wasteland

Now we're getting juicy. Wasteland kills any other land on this list, period. While it is somewhat ineffective against mono-colored decks (but even those often run utility lands on this list), one cannot underestimate the power of a land-destruction spell which cannot be countered.

8. Onslaught Fetch Lands

Take the *Mirage* fetch lands and make them faster — now you've got the *Onslaught* versions, the amazing mana-fixers which thin and shuffle your deck all for the low, low cost of one life. See, decks such as "red burn" don't like drawing too many lands each game. They also need to develop their mana curve turn after turn, so they can't afford cards like Rocky Tar Pit — the tempo cost would make them lose. However, Wooded Foothills allows them to trade a valueless resource (early-game life) for a supremely valuable one (thinning out lands from the deck). It's not unusual to see mono-colored weenie decks running only 6-8 basic lands and eight fetch lands these days. The *Onslaught* fetch lands also work well with Sylvan Library and Brainstorm (just like the *Mirage* ones), can't be killed by targeted land destruction spells (you simply sacrifice them in response), and are generally a godsend to players looking for two (or more!) colors of mana for their decks.

7. Mishra's Workshop

Once upon a time this card was restricted. Then, the DCI decided that people should be able to build decks around four of a card which effectively is a reusable Black Lotus for artifacts. Suddenly, the people were casting first and second turn Juggernauts, Su-Chi, and/or Phyrexian Processors. The end.

6. Thawing Glaciers

Thawing Glaciers slowly develops your mana base over time. This mana base, however, can now include all five colors. Thawing Glaciers can also be untapped several times in the same turn to fetch land after land — in this way, it became an abusable card in High Tide decks, since you could keep untapping your Thaw using Frantic Search, Turnabout, and Time Spiral to increase your mana base over and over. It wasn't unusual to see these decks winning as soon as turn three thanks to the Glaciers putting 5-10 lands on the board in a single flurry of land-searching activations. Even without the abuse, there are few other cards which can steadily gain you card and mana advantage as much as this one from *Alliances*.

5. Mishra's Factory

The original and best man-land. Colorless to play, colorless to use, tribal in theme (they work to pump one another), and favorites of players everywhere. Strip Mine (it's coming, don't worry!) and Mishra's Factory usually show up hand in hand, and it's like the evil and good sisters: everyone loves Mishra, nobody loves Strip. Mishra's Factory is a dichotomy; while many "normal" means of dealing with creatures (such as Wrath of God) won't touch it, it is at the same time one of the most vulnerable cards in **Magic**. It can be killed by artifact, creature, and land destruction spells. Few other cards in **Magic** can be handled by Dark Banishing, Shatter and Rain of Tears at the same time.

4. Library of Alexandria

": Draw a card." While you can only use this ability when you have seven cards in your hand, this effect cannot be counterspelled. Notice that so many lands on this list are powerful because simply put, the opponent cannot stop you from playing them! With so many ways to refill your hand in type one (Timetwister, Time Spiral, Ancestral Recall, etc), the Library rarely sits unused, often garnering multiple cards of the course of multiple turns... assuming it isn't molested by...

3. Strip Mine

Strip Mine is the Swords to Plowshares of land kill. It's simply the single best land destruction spell ever printed, hands down. What gives it this distinction? It's uncounterable. It costs zero mana to activate. It can kill any other land in the game. What's not to love?

2. Alpha Dual Lands

You are looking at the ten best deck-building tools in all of **Magic**, finishing in the number two slot of this list. There have been no other cards ever printed which have so universally allowed people to play

the decks they wanted than these ten Alpha Dual Lands. (Author's note: Volcanic Island was accidentally [left off](#) the printer's sheet and was not printed until Beta. I know there is no such thing as an Alpha Volcanic Island. There was supposed to be, so live with me calling it part of this cycle. Thanks!) They are painless. They can be fetched with *Mirage* and *Onslaught* fetch lands, Land Grant, and Tithe. They allow you to basically play any combination of colors without having to much worry about mana problems. They are strictly better than basic lands — they can produce two colors of mana at no drawback! These were granted a special exception to the first Extended rotation, which is a testament to how popular and essential they were felt to be.

1. Tolarian Academy

However, being a great deckbuilding tool does not measure up to being a land which can tap to win the game on the first turn. People ask, "What's the biggest mistake card that Wizards ever printed?" and I'd probably put this land at #1 on that list as well. Tolarian Academy allows the player to add a blue mana to his mana pool for each artifact he controls. This includes Mana Vault, Voltaic Key, Grim Monolith, Lion's Eye Diamond, Lotus Petal, the five Moxes, Black Lotus, Mana Crypt, and other mana developing cards. See a problem here? In all formats, Tolarian Academy decks have been abused to produce first and second turn kills, usually based around Stroke of Genius, Mind Over Matter, Windfall, and Time Spiral. No card has been more responsible for people quitting the game of Magic than Tolarian Academy, which fuelled an entire combo winter filled with decks that were no fun to play against (unless you call being decked on turn two 'fun') and not much fun to play with. Thankfully, it did end up getting banned in the following formats: *Urza's Block* Constructed, Standard, Extended, and Type 1.5, and has been restricted in Type 1 — a restriction which comes precariously close to a banning. And any card which can come close to being banned in a format which allows Balance, Mind Twist, and Ancestral Recall definitely deserves the number one spot on the list of the best nonbasic lands of all time.

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