

Travel: The Big Trip: Wonders or blunders?: How far will we go to attract tourists?

Architecture correspondent Jonathan Glancey chooses the best and worst additions to the world's landscapes JONATHAN GLANCEY

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Once, it was enough for romantics, explorers and other travellers setting out from these shores to walk, or ride, agog through sublime scenery, from the Lake District to the Alps and beyond, or to stroll, eyes wide-open through exotic cities. Such experiences, though, are not enough for today's insatiable tourists. We are demanding, or are being served with, increasingly rich and complex visitor attractions to keep us happy, camera-snappy, spending promiscuously, and, it has to be said, more than a little gormless.

Some of the latest visitor attractions designed to lure and entertain tourists are happy intrusions in old landscapes, yet many more are kitsch curios and even vainglorious monstrosities. Only last week news broke of a proposed "heritage and conservation centre" on the site of a former tomato nursery at Horkesley Park near Colchester. In effect, this would be a Constable theme park - the site is in the heart of the famous painter's Stour Valley - aimed, so its backers say, as a "celebration of the English countryside". It could, though, by the very nature of such centres, be in danger of undermining the qualities of the picturesque landscape visitors wish to see. Surely, say campaigners against the scheme, true country lovers are opposed to the idea of the English countryside being packaged up and sold back to them.

You will have your own favourite human-made additions to popular landscapes, but here is a list of some of the latest tourist wonders and travesties alike. Whatever you think, tourist-driven designs on our landscapes are on their way to a place you care about, adorned or unadorned by human hand, and, it seems, whether you want them or not.

Travesties

1 Buddha Pavilions, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka

The three magnificent statues of the Buddha carved a thousand years ago from a wall of granite at Polonnaruwa, the Sinhalese city rebuilt in the grandest of fashions from 1056 by King Vijayabahu, have long been one of the most moving sights on this Indian Ocean island. Recently, it was decided to build three grey steel pavilions over the Buddhas to shelter them from the sun and monsoons. These modern parasols, or umbrellas, look, though, as if they have been shipped over as a job lot from the stadium of some lower division English football club facing relegation. To make things worse, the Buddhas have been roped off from visitors by a set of those clumsy barriers that feature in all too many museums and galleries worldwide, detracting from both artworks and architecture alike. Despite this desecration, the Buddha maintains his expressions of nirvanic serenity. Granite will outlast steel; the spirit will outlast granite.

2 Petra Gateway, Jordan

Petra needs no introduction other than the "Siq", the narrow fissure that leads from the new town into the wondrous rose-red city hidden among rocks. Now, it has been decided to tell tourists more about what they can see for themselves, or study in books, by constructing an elaborate new visitor centre. While there has been nothing wrong in the choice of designer - Edward Cullinan Architects from London, an intelligent and sensitive practice - why does Petra need such an attraction? The argument in favour is that the complex will allow tourists to bypass the tat that has sprouted in their name all too close to this world heritage site. It will also control the flow of visitors to the Nabatean city. Yet, no matter how sensitive the design, it makes Petra, like Stonehenge, all too like the proverbial dog wagged by its tail.

3 El Valle de los Caidos, Cuelgamuros, Spain

The Valley of the Fallen is a kind of fascist theme park, a vast and hideous monument disfiguring a magnificent tract of the Sierra de Guadarrama, 30 miles north-west of Madrid. The tombs of those

who died serving General Franco in the Spanish Civil War, as well as those who fought them, are shrouded in an eerie cavern, 850ft long, that serves as an ultra-Catholic basilica: perpetual, round-the-clock masses are said here. The basilica is crowned with the tallest (492ft) and crassest cross in Christendom. Work began in spring 1940. Franco set off the first explosion, blasting the rockface. The architects Pedro Muguruza and Diego Mendez designed it. Spanish Republican prisoners-of-war toiled alongside skilled masons to build it. Such was Franco's passion for the 20-year project, which includes a gigantic monastery that looks much like a Nazi ministry building, that it was often said that the Valle de los Caidos was the nearest thing in his life to a "another woman". Today it is a religious and nationalist shrine, and a popular and rather creepy tourist attraction.

4 Skywalk, Grand Canyon, Arizona, US

No one can deny the awe-inspiring majesty of the Grand Canyon. It is every bit as breathtaking a landscape as you could possibly hope to find short of clambering into climbing gear, donning oxygen masks or hacking your way through snake-infested jungles. Yet it is clearly not enough for us tourists. No, sirree! Now a glass bridge is to be set 4,000ft up the one of the canyon's walls to give us a thrill that, somehow, Nature at its most daunting, is unable to provide. Set to open at the end of the year, the Skywalk is just the most media-catching part of an ambitious new Grand Canyon restaurant, museum and shopping complex dug into the rockface at Eagle Point. There will also be "facilities for meetings, special events and weddings". Commissioned by David Jin, a Las Vegas entrepreneur, the Skywalk will be visited most by those who want to scare themselves walking out across the Canyon on the German-made glass floor of the bridge. This will be 10ft wide and project 70ft out from the rockface. Actually, the Blackpool Tower got here first, as it were, with its vertigo-inducing glass floor set high above the Lancashire resort's whelk stalls and illuminations. So there.

5 City of Arts and Sciences, Valencia, Spain

Rising from the long dried-up river bed of the river Turia midway between the city centre and the beach at Nazaret, Valencia's City of Arts and Sciences resembles some vast array of bleached dinosaur skeletons - dinosaurs on a scale even more epic than the Brontosaurus. Beginning with a Planetarium opened in 1998, this wildly ambitious tourist attraction has been designed almost exclusively by Santiago Calatrava, a famous architect, engineer and son of this handsome coastal city. It now boasts a science museum, palace of arts and concert hall, each cartoon-like structure vying to outdo its fellow architectural behemoths. Although spectacular, the overall experience is one of overweening design, and a numbing sense of hollowness. Walkways between buildings are unprotected from the fierce Mediterranean sun. It is a relief to get back to the city centre where a building like the thriving art nouveau food market is worth at least a dozen cities of arts and sciences.

Wonders

1

It is hard not to be thrilled by a great bridge, and the Grand Viaduc de Millau spanning the Tarn gorge in southern France, is one of the most thrilling of all. Designed by Norman Foster with the celebrated French engineer, Michel Virlogeux, it carries the GBP75 autoroute high into the clouds on its grand-vitesse way from Clermont Ferrand to Beziers, offering a much quicker, and dramatic, route by road between Paris and Barcelona than before. The 2.46km-long bridge is supported by seven slender concrete piers rising at one point well above the height of the Eiffel Tower, and by 154 steel stays. Its design life is, nominally, 120 years; will it age as well as the Pont du Gard at Nimes? Only the passing years can tell. The Roman aqueduct, though, has never had to cope with the weight and vibration of tens of thousands of cars carrying holidaymakers, desperate for summer sun, across it to sand and sea.

2 Welsh Highland Railway, Snowdonia, Wales

The first section of this magnificent, partly new, partly revived, narrow-gauge mountain railway, skirting the foot of Mt Snowdon, opened in 1997, steaming from Caernarfon to Rhyd Ddu; it is due to arrive at Porthmadog, 25 muscular miles south, in 2009. Supported by the EU and Welsh

government, the Welsh Highland is a poetic work of engineering, bringing trains of handsomely upholstered miniature Pullman cars headed by articulated steam locomotives originally built for service in South Africa up dauntingly steep gradients, around eye-boggling curves, through lakes, forests and rocky gorges from one part of the north Wales coast to another via stirring mountain passes. Stations serving villages, as well as tourists, with regular trains are being designed to fit snugly into the hillscape. All Snowdonia will need to complete the scene in 2009 will be wolves.

3 Falkirk Wheel, Scotland

This mesmerising 35m-high structure lifts boats and barges up from the Forth and Clyde canal and lowers them gently into the Union canal, allowing them to navigate Scotland coast-to-coast. It is the world's first rotating boat lift. A cross between a fairground attraction and a functional engineering wonder, it replaces what had once been a sequence of 11 canal locks. Boats are raised, at up to eight at a time, in water-filled gondolas; these airborne locks give the impression that boats can fly. As they rise, glorious views of the Ochil Hills wax and wane. The wheel is a popular tourist attraction in its own right, but it is also the centrepiece of a pounds 78m programme of civil engineering works that have improved these Caledonian canals beyond all recognition. British Waterways turned down early proposals for a heritage-style wheel, insisting on a striking new design.

4 Osborne Bulls, Spain

I know these are not new, but they are in the sense that these famous black metal roadside signs were given a new lease of life in the 1990s after they had very nearly been banished by law. The Spanish government had been rightly concerned with the proliferation of roadside hoardings the length and breadth of the country. But the much-loved silhouettes have, since last year, been declared a national symbol. All one hundred or so have been retained, although they are no longer allowed to advertise Toro sherry, produced by Osborne, a company founded in 1772 by a British immigrant, Thomas Osborne Mann. Osborne's bulls will continue to delight generations of locals and holidaymakers driving over the crests of Iberian hills.

5 Forest Learning Centre, Visegrad, Hungary

Like some ancient burial mound, or barrow, this earth-covered visitors' learning centre, designed by Imre Makovecz, feels as if it has been here for very many centuries. It serves school groups and other visitors who come here from towns and cities to get close to Nature. The structure is a double sphere supported by 12 columns and covered with bronze-coloured scales, earth, grass and, in spring, meadow flowers. Like Stonehenge, the building is also a sundial of sorts, its entrance lying along an axis that points to the rising sun on the spring equinox. When the doors are closed, the building seems almost entirely at one with the landscape it quietly adorns. The stuff of fairy tales.