

THE NEXT BIG THING

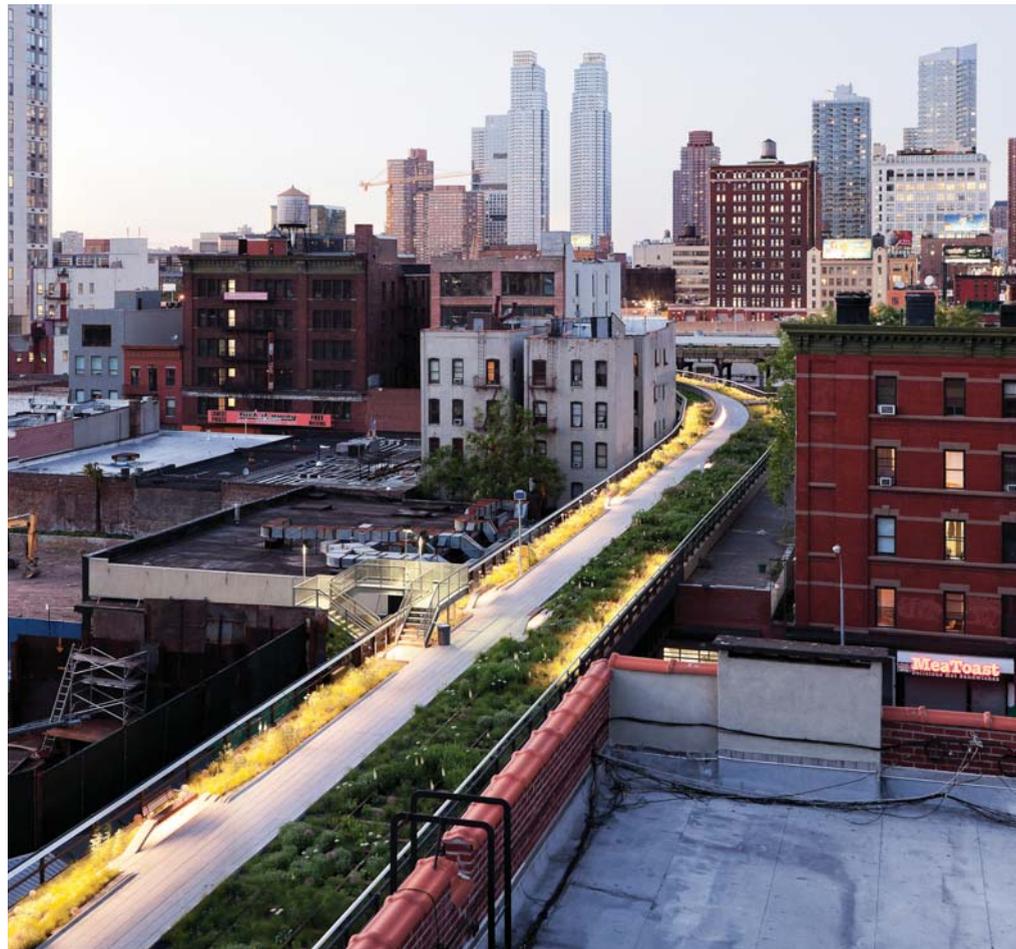
2014 is a year of openings and re-openings of large-scale tourism projects. We look at what's here and what's coming.

IF YOU'RE THE KIND OF PERSON WHO SCOURS publications looking for the newest, tallest and best to add to your travel bucket-list, 2014 is shaping up well. At the end of last year, renowned architect Sir Norman Foster released plans for the SkyCycle, a 220-kilometre elevated cycle pathway three storeys above street level set to wind through London's iconic architecture. This certainly fired imaginations, but there's no need to wait until the anticipated completion year of 2030 for big sky tourism ventures – numerous ambitious projects are being written into guidebooks at this very moment.

In America there is a roller-coaster boom. Coney Island was resurrecting the 1920s *Thunderbolt* as a metal-track thrill ride last month. Six Flags Chicago is launching the record-breaking *Goliath* (featuring an 85-degree drop from 180 feet, top speeds of 72 miles per hour and the obligatory loops). The Wizarding World of Harry Potter opens towards the end of the year at Universal Studios in Osaka, Japan (complete with Hogwarts Castle and a Triwizard Tournament-themed coaster). There's plenty to add to the must-do list.

Naturally, it's all bigger, better, higher, faster. How else does an attraction compete in the 21st century? "Great tourist attractions provide visitors with a unique and truly memorable experience," says Jon Gray, vice president and general manager of The LINQ, Las Vegas' first and only open-air shopping, dining and entertainment district, anchored by the High Roller, the tallest observation wheel in the world at 550-feet.

"In the case of the High Roller, we wanted it to be the tallest in the world, but [we] also took into consideration how it would change the skyline and affect its surroundings. In addition to being the tallest, the High Roller wheel offers a completely



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The enormous LINQ in Las Vegas, Nevada; a forest bungalow on the upcoming Funtasy Island near Singapore; looking North toward West 29th Street, where the High Line begins a long, gentle curve toward the Hudson River.

different experience for riders from the moment you step into our wheel house. The High Roller has a party vibe," Gray explains, although that's only to be expected in a city like Vegas, renowned for its devil-may-care attitude.

"Projects of this scale must be easily accessible and highly visible to attract people, but they also need to exceed expectations. We expect our guests to be amazed. Providing this level of experience for guests is what will ensure long-term appeal for the High Roller," Grey continues. So far it's working – the reception to both The LINQ and the High Roller has been exceptional, with thousands of riders queuing for hours to be among the first to ride the world's tallest observation wheel on the initial day of the High Roller's operations on 31 March.

Also on track – literally – is The High Line, a public park built on an historic freight rail line elevated above the streets on Manhattan's West Side in New York. Originally built between 1929 and 1934 as part of a massive infrastructure initiative called the West Side Improvement Project, the High Line eliminated street traffic as well as providing freight trains efficient access to the upper-floor loading docks of warehouses, factories, and the like. At the time of its construction, the High Line was viewed as a futuristic system that would modernise food transportation, but instead industrial production declined as manufacturing moved to the suburbs. The last train chugged along the High Line in 1980, carrying three carloads of turkeys

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for Thanksgiving. While the nation celebrated, the elevated railway began its gradual slide into disrepair.

Grass and wildflowers sprang up between the rusting rail tracks, prompting discussions of demolition at the end of the century, halted by neighbourhood residents Joshua David and Robert Hammond. The pair formed a non-profit group called Friends of the High Line, to advocate its transformation into the public open space it has now become, luring dog-walkers, families and tourists alike into its mid-city oasis. The urban park has also spurred real estate development in the neighbourhoods along the line, turning a High Line stroll into a walk of architectural discovery.

The track meanders through the landscape, providing a bird's eye view of the traffic below as it weaves from side to side, sections still holding the old tracks and the self-seeded wildflowers that took over, providing a reminder of the good old days. Portions of track have been adaptively re-crafted into rolling lounges positioned for lazy river views. Benches are dotted amongst the greenery, with over 200 species represented in a kind of urban meadow – completely incongruous with the bustle of New York. The final phase – officially known as High Line at the Rail Yards – will complete the project in the third quarter of this year.

Due around the same time, Funtasy Island resort, sitting in Indonesian waters just off the coast of Singapore, will be luring green-luxury guests from the region and giving Singapore's adventure park, Sentosa Island – a mere 16 kilometres away – some stiff competition. The development's drawcard – apart from the aviary trail, nature walks, boat trips through the mangroves, a Water World Park, beach club, restaurants, and spa, plus 413 suites and villas – is that it will be the largest eco-themed park in the world, spread over 328 hectares of pristine tropical island with 70 percent of the archipelago designated as a nature sanctuary. In a cheesily romantic twist, the island's wedding venue, Love Island, will be planted with hundreds of plant species with heart-shaped leaves. And if being surrounded by nature all becomes too much, a ferry service will whisk guests to Singapore's HarbourFront, where shopping and theme parks await.

Eco-tourism is also on tap in Canada at Jasper National Park's new Glacier Skywalk, which opened last month. Jutting 35 metres out of the side of a cliff, the glass-floored observation walkway hangs 280 metres above Sunwapta Canyon. The vertigo-inducing thrill of edging out onto a piece of glass over forests and glacier-fed waterfalls is putting Glacier Skywalk on everyone's lists. It required a feat of engineering to build the environmentally conscious curved walkway, with the project winning a design award before it was even constructed.

"The Glacier Skywalk arose from a conversation with our partners at Parks Canada about how we could bring some new life to the route and inspire visitors to stop, get out of their cars, explore and really connect with the incredible surroundings. We wanted this experience to be accessible to absolutely everyone – regardless of age or mobility," explains David McKenna, interim president of Brewster Travel Canada. The idea for the Glacier Skywalk itself was suggested by one



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of the Brewster driver guides, and after an extensive design process Glacier Skywalk has materialised as an extension of the landscape, built with materials that mirror the natural environment. It's free of paint and other toxins to ensure minimal environmental impact and balances breathtaking views with interpretive storytelling.

"The feeling of stepping on a walkway made entirely of glass, which is all that separates you from the valley nearly 1,000 feet below, takes your breath away. Standing at that point between land and sky is an experience that simply can't be described," says McKenna. "Attractions should provide visitors with a link to new places, new feelings, new knowledge. This was our goal with the Glacier Skywalk – to offer a new interpretive experience unlike any other that would allow [guests] to connect with the elements of this glacial region and have a great time doing it. Experiences like this should leave you with a memory you will take away and never forget."

McKenna is keen on the idea of linking attractions with learning. "There are some powerful new museum projects opening up that will connect visitors to areas near and far, in the past and in the future," he points out, citing the re-opening of the Musée Picasso in Paris and the beachfront Museum of Image and Sound in Rio de Janeiro, scheduled to open this month. These are just two of myriad museums soon to throw open their doors to an eager audience of history and learning devotees. London's Imperial War Museum reopens in July following a US\$66 million renovation, marking the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, and billionaire art collectors Eli and Edythe Broad's \$140 million art museum, with its white honeycomb-like shell, launches at the end of the year in East Lansing, Michigan to house the Broad's collection of close to 2,000 artworks.

Renowned architect Frank Gehry's been busy this year, too, working on the BioMuseo in Panama. At least five of the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A close-up look at the Glacier Skywalk's glass-floor platform extending out over the cliff edge and hovering 280 metres above Sunwapta Valley in Jasper National Park; the stunning BioMuseo in Panama designed by architect Frank Gehry; an artist's impression of the forthcoming Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, another of Frank Gehry's impressive projects.

BioMuseo's eight permanent exhibition galleries covering a massive 4,000 square metres are scheduled to open this year. The colourfully crumpled BioMuseo tells the story of how the Isthmus of Panama rose from the sea, uniting two continents, splitting a vast ocean in two, and changing the planet's biodiversity forever. A walkway loops through the galleries featuring exhibits such as Worlds Collide, taking visitors for a walk with mastodons, sabre-toothed tigers, and an eight-foot giant sloth.

There's nothing sloth-like about the slew of attractions leaping into action at the present. Whether looking at the past or the future, 2014's developments are shaking the construction dust out of their hair, slipping into their party dresses and preparing to wow the world. From dizzying heights to theme parks, museums and natural attractions, the stage is set. All that remains to be seen is what will be headlining next year. ♻️

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