

# WHAT NEXT FOR ATTRACTIONS?



In his most recent appearance on Radio 4's *Shop Talk*, **James Alexander**, Managing Director of Locum Destination Consulting, talked to Heather Payton about the future for visitor attractions in the UK.

**HP:** Attractions are needing to spend more and more money just to survive. If we look at Flambard's in Cornwall as an example, we see a visitor attraction which started life as an aviation museum – after its founder, Douglas Hale, retired as a navy pilot in 1976 – but which has since added a Victorian village, a Falklands War exhibition, a 'Britain in the Blitz' section, Spacequest, Pets Paradise, lots of rides and a go-kart track. Flambard's currently pulls in 500,000 visitors each year. James, Flambard's seems to be putting an awful lot of money into ever new attractions just to keep the numbers of visitors from falling. Is that typical?

**JA:** I think that's really the key, and if they weren't to do that they would die the death. The interesting thing about the South-West tourist market is that whilst 16.6 million domestic tourists go there every year, almost 50% more to London, they tend to go back year after year. Flambard's needs to keep its product alive and encourage those people to repeat visit, coming back with more money in their pockets. I think Flambard's

is commendable – reinvestment is the key. There are lots of products and attractions on the market where we know that reinvestment doesn't happen. They do wither.

**HP:** Figures suggest that the average stay in Cornwall has halved over the past 25 years from two weeks to one week. Presumably that's because people are now taking their main holidays abroad. If you holiday in Britain the chances are it will be your second or third holiday.

**JA:** That has certainly got something to do with it. It is a trend across the UK as a whole. We have got more money to spend and access to overseas destinations is much easier than it was. But there has also been a major expansion of the short break market. Short breaks are often taken out of season, and that is a great boon to the likes of the South-West destinations, which are trying to extend into the off-peak. I think the key for the next few years is trying to make the short break market even more popular.

**HP:** These days everyone seems to want to hop on the attractions bandwagon, and with so many vying for our attention and competing with the joys of just sitting on the beach, walking in the countryside, watching a game of cricket, and shopping too, it's hardly surprising if some come to the end of their useful life rather early. Cricket-St-Thomas, for instance, formerly a wildlife park aimed at families and home for two years to Noel Edmonds' Crinkley Bottom attraction, has now been sold to Rank Warner and transformed into an upmarket hotel aimed specifically at the affluent end of the grey market. John Taylor, former owner of Cricket-St-Thomas, has said that he was not prepared to go down the route of reinvestment because of the competition to traditional tourist attractions coming from sources such as the retail sector, as well as the current downward trend in day visits to attractions. James, do you think John Taylor did the right thing by seeing how the tide was turning and acting the way he did?

**JA:** Certainly, I think if an attraction can't afford to make the investment that is required and demanded by the visitor, then back out nobly and see what other avenues there are. It's not really a case

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*The Eden Project, Cornwall*  
Picture courtesy of Millennium Commission

of too many attractions across the UK, more a case of too many of the same. Differentiation is absolutely critical.

**HP:** We mentioned shopping earlier as a competitor to theme parks, and that really is how the big shopping centres see themselves these days. Bluewater, for example, sees itself attracting whole families on full days out. Should we really see shopping centres as competitors to visitor attractions?

**JA:** Most certainly. Locum Destination Consulting has spent a lot of time looking at this. What interests us is the blurring of the edges between attractions, retail, leisure and entertainment.

**HP:** At least Bluewater will compete on a commercial basis. Over the last year, however, a great cry of 'Unfair!' has emerged from the ranks of the attractions that don't have Millennium funding, as they watch their luckier and newer competitors surge ahead – or not, in some cases, like you-know-what down in Greenwich. James, was the Dome's visitor figure of 12 million ever feasible?

**JA:** Not to our minds. We started modelling the number on 1 January 2000 and by the end of that first month we said the Dome would get in the region of 6.5 million if it was lucky.

**HP:** So was the 12 million a big fib or did they just make a mistake?

**JA:** I think they got the business planning upside down. They needed the 12 million to justify other financial targets. No one in the market ever believed 12 million, including many of the designers of elements of the Dome.

**HP:** It does seem extraordinary that we've got all these Lottery-funded projects like the National Pop Music Centre, the Royal Armouries and the Dome, which have had the money but just aren't working. Have they had the kiss of death or what?

**JA:** No, I think it's the whole process. Five years ago there were two or three huge crocks of gold stuck out there for public consumption – the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Millennium Commission – and everyone was clamouring to get a piece of the action. What that created was a false economy, with projects competing against one another. People were asking, 'Who's got the biggest and the best? Who is the most sustainable?' What happened was that everything got skewed, and visitor numbers were used to make business plans look wonderfully sustainable without any real consideration of what would happen to the market more generally, and I'm afraid we've not seen the last of the casualties.

**HP:** Publicity is something all destinations can benefit from. The Eden Centre, for example, has been welcoming visitors to its site as it is being constructed, and in doing so has received huge amounts of publicity in advance of its March 2001 opening. How important is publicity?

**JA:** I think publicity is key, and what I think is interesting about the Eden Centre is that it has opened up what is effectively a building site and, to coin an Australian phrase, people love 'sticky-beaking' – they're nosy. Taking a European example, at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, which is perhaps the biggest building site in Europe, there is something called 'The Red Box', which has attracted over 8 million visitors, who just watch real life from a viewing gallery.

**HP:** So how do you think Eden compares with other Millennium projects?

**JA:** I think it's terrific, for a number of reasons. First of all, the forethought given to publicity and the PR machine. Secondly, the imagination with which it has been thrown together. I think the challenge of Eden isn't success over two years but over 20 years.

**HP:** James, what about the idea that it's a bit unfair when you throw free money at projects like this, and the poor old attractions which have been there since time immemorial have to compete with them?

**JA:** It might be unfair, but I think competition is a good thing. There's no point in sustaining the unsustainable in a closed market. Let's get as much good product in there as we can and see the product that is already there pulling its socks up.

**HP:** As consumers grow increasingly affluent and have greater and greater opportunities to use the internet and no-frills airlines to effectively become their own travel agents, are UK attractions of sufficient quality to keep us here at home?

**JA:** For all the people leaving this country there are lots coming in. What it means is that as an industry we've got to get our act together and compete in that global market, and that's a wonderful challenge. With all the Lottery and European money that has been put into visitor attractions in the UK, you would have thought we'd get it right. We've haven't quite yet, but I think we will in time and we're learning quickly.