

Laura Deeley. The Times Online. July 14, 2007

The wildest art on earth

The most beautiful works of art merge with nature and merit the journey to see them. Once seen, never forgotten



Whether it's Trafalgar Square covered in grass, or super-size angels on the horizon, we are increasingly attracted to art outdoors: big, larger-than-life installations and sculptures that make us stop, look and interpret our surroundings differently.

This summer, for example, the Loire River in France is home to Estuaire 2007 – a temporary exhibition between Nantes and St Nazaire that turns the riverbank into an open-air gallery full of extraordinary artworks, such as a floating house, that you can view from a boat.

Farther afield, over the past few decades artists have made startling, ambitious outdoor pieces that work in harmony with the landscape and are permanent exhibits. They merit the sometimes difficult journeys to see them. Once seen, never forgotten.

Masterpieces of the great outdoors

Italy

Giardino dei Tarocchi, Niki de Saint Phalle

A riot of colour erupts from the hills of southern Tuscany, where Niki de Saint Phalle has built a Gaudi-like homage to the characters of the Tarot. The Empress, a huge woman with mirrored hair, in which the artist lived for almost 20 years while working on the project, presides over other key figures, including the Devil and the Magician.

Details: Pescia Fiorentina, Capalbio, Provincia de Grosseto, Italy (00 39 564 89 5122, www.nikidesaintphalle.com).

Nearest airport: Leonardo da Vinci, Rome.

USA

Sun Tunnels, Nancy Holt

When the artist Nancy Holt bought 40 acres of barren land in Utah in 1974, the locals thought the sun had gone to her head. But Holt went on to build a celebrated artwork in the desert. Four vast concrete tubes mark the position on the horizon of the sun during the winter and summer solstices. The tubes are drilled with holes that correspond to celestial constellations. By day they create a changing pattern inside the structures as the sun moves overhead.

Details: Great Basin Desert, near Lucin, Box Elder County, Utah.

Nearest airport: Salt Lake City.

Australia

Inside Australia, Antony Gormley

Fifty-one black human figures, created from alloys taken from the mineral-rich landscape around them, cast long shadows in the glorious red-gold sunsets of Lake Ballard, Western Australia. By day, against the dazzling white saltbed in which they are set, they look more like an invading army. Each figure in the artwork by Turner prize-winner Antony Gormley is based on a local resident. Gormley hopes that his work is "in a modest way, another place that people go to look at and wonder".

Details: Lake Ballard, Menzies, Western Australia (www.menzies.wa.gov.au). Antony Gormley: Inside Australia (Thames & Hudson, £24.95).

Nearest airport: Perth.

USA

Lightning Field, Walter De Maria

The earth and sky connect – quite literally – with explosive power when lightning strikes one of these 400 needle-tipped, stainless-steel poles in the New Mexico desert. But even without a storm, when the air hums with energy, it's still worth a visit: the Lightning Field sits in a basin 1,200m (7,200ft) above sea level, and is surrounded by dramatic mountain scenery.

Details: Corrales, New Mexico, USA. The Dia Art Foundation will organise groups of up to six to visit the site, staying overnight in a cabin (001 505 898 3335; www.lightningfield.org).

Nearest airport: Albuquerque.

USA

Double Negative, Michael Heizer

Heizer removed 240,000 tonnes of rock from the Nevada mountains, using dynamite and a fleet of bulldozers. The result is two colossal rectangular trenches, 18m deep and 10m wide. Half the thrill of seeing Double Negative is the journey: a four-wheel drive along rocky roads with not much between you and a steep drop over the Mormon Mesa Road.

Details: Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada.

Nearest airport: Las Vegas.

Mexico

Las Pozas, Edward James

Nestled in the lush, semi-tropical vegetation of the Mexican rainforest, Las Pozas is the brainchild of an eccentric British millionaire, Edward James. This city of unfinished buildings has huge towers, columns topped with blooming concrete flowers, colourful gateways and Escher-like spiral stairways that lead nowhere. Since James's death in 1984, Las Pozas is being reclaimed by the rainforest. Spring and autumn are the best times to visit.

Details: Ocampo, Xilitla, Mexico (www.junglegossip.com).

Nearest airport: Tampico.

Finland

Tree Mountain: A Living Time Capsule, Agnes Denes

In the mid-Nineties 11,000 people from all over the world each planted a pine tree on a man-made mountain in Finland. The work was designed by the pioneering environmental artist Agnes Denes, whose aim was to "affirm our commitment to the future wellbeing of the ecological, social and cultural life of our planet". Each planter's family was made custodian of their tree for 26 generations to ensure the forest is protected for 400 years. The Mountain, which sits in a reclaimed gravel pit, is 420m long, 270m wide and 28m high, making it one of the largest pieces of land art in the world.

Details: Off Pinsiontie, Pinsio, Finland; www.ylojarvi.fi/english/sights.

Nearest airport: Tampere.

Reading: Destination Art by Amy Dempsey (Thames & Hudson, £24.95).