



Wednesday, Nov. 21, 2007

## Postcard: Cornwall

By Bryan Walsh

In the late 1990s, Time Smit--an archaeologist turned pop-music producer--decided to build a new Eden. The Dutch-born Englishman envisioned a grand environmental-education park in the depressed southwestern English county of Cornwall--with the world's biggest greenhouses as its centerpiece. All he needed was the money. Smit turned to private funders and gave them a professional pitch. "I told them, 'We are going to build the Eighth Wonder of the World in a clay pit west of Cornwall, it's going to be wonderful, and you'll want to be a part of it,'" he says. "Also, we have no business plan." Amazingly, the line worked. Smit scraped together more than \$100 million, and after a final construction season pummeled by 134 straight days of rain--soggy even for Britain--the park opened on time in the spring of 2001.

By all rights, the Eden Project should have been a commercial disaster, as even its founder admits. "All environmental-science centers go bust because they're boring as s\_\_\_\_," Smit says. But Eden wasn't boring, and it didn't go bust. The park has pulled in more than 9 million visitors since it opened, and it's still one of Britain's top attractions, more popular than the Tower of London. It helps that Eden is visually stunning. Visitors descend into the former clay hole, now landscaped and studded with native vegetation, to arrive at the main attraction: two honeycombed domes, shaped like grapefruit halves, bubbling up from the base. These are the biomes, giant greenhouses that shelter the flora and mimic the climate of tropical rain forests and Mediterranean farms. Enter the humid and heated rain-forest biome on a drizzly Cornish day, and you'll soon break a sweat worthy of Singapore.

The Eden Project is simultaneously futuristic and organic, and it's not hard to see why Brits voted it their favorite new building of the past 20 years. Similar efforts in the U.S., however, have been received less rapturously. Attempts to build an American version of Eden called Earthpark stalled for years as Midwestern cities like Cedar Rapids, Iowa, doubting the project's profitability, said no. (Pella, a tiny town near Iowa City, finally said yes to Earthpark, scheduled to open in 2010.)

But the surprising success of Eden is also a sign of how green concerns have become a daily part of British life. London broadsheets follow global-warming news the way their tabloid counterparts cover soccer and missing British children. The country's growing environmental industries were worth more than \$50 billion in 2005, a figure expected to grow to \$94 billion by 2015. And politicians on both sides of the aisle compete to look greener. David Cameron, the young leader of the Conservative Party, even changed his party's traditional freedom-torch symbol to an oak tree to trumpet his environmental credentials. Green living is "just higher up on the agenda," says Alex Harvey, a Canadian environmental activist who moved to Britain four years ago. "People are looking at lifestyle and consumption, across-the-board issues."

The greenest of the green join Carbon Ration Action Groups (CRAGS), whose members pledge to reduce their personal carbon dioxide emissions. Britain already has 14 active CRAG chapters, and a few are just starting to develop in the U.S. To Surrey CRAG member Jonathan Essex--who stays under his carbon limit by avoiding air travel--that just means Britain has to embrace its leadership role on the environment. "We've got to set an example for others to follow," he says.

Not every Briton is ready to join the environmental monkhood. There would go the budget holiday flights to Ibiza, for one thing. But to Smit, it's the spirit that matters, a spirit embodied in his Eden. "It's a horrible cliché, but part of our goal is to remake the world," he says. "We're here to help people realize that if they each do a few things, then times 6 billion, that adds up." --

With reporting by Alex Altman/London

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