

London Eye: A Bird's Eye View Of An Amazing City

By: Karen Dabrowska

As the London Eye makes its slow journey rising higher and higher above the tallest buildings an amazing view of the capital unfolds. Passengers in the eye's capsules can see up to 40 kilometres in all directions. Since opening in March 2000 The Merlin Entertainments London Eye has become an iconic landmark and a symbol of modern Britain. The UK's most popular paid for attraction, is visited by over 3.5 million people a year.



A flight, as a journey on the eye is named, provides a new perspective on London's famous tourist attractions: The Imperial War Museum, The Globe Theatre, The Oval Cricket Ground, The Tate

Gallery, Westminster Abbey, The Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, The Tower of London, St Paul's Cathedral, The National Portrait Gallery, Buckingham Palace, The British Museum and the Telecommunications Tower.

When it opened to visitors in 2000 the eye was largest wheel of its kind ever to be built, at a height of 135m (450feet) and 1600 tonnes. It has subsequently been

surpassed by the Star of Nanchang (160m) and the Singapore Flyer (165m) but the operators still describe it as "the world's tallest cantilevered observation wheel" (as the entire structure is supported by an A-frame on one side only).

The eye's vital statistics make impressive reading: The wheel carries 32 sealed and air-conditioned egg-shaped passenger capsules, attached to





its external circumference, each capsule representing one of the London Boroughs. Each 10 tonne capsule holds 25 people who are free to walk around inside the capsule, though seating is provided. It rotates at 26cm (10in) per second (about 0.9km/h or 0.6mph) so that one revolution takes about 30 minutes. The wheel does not usually stop to take on passengers; the rotation rate is slow enough to allow passengers to walk on and off the moving

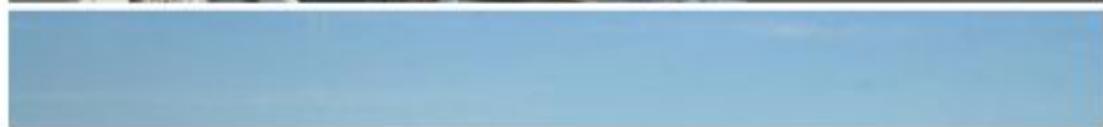
capsules at ground level. It is, however, stopped to allow disabled or elderly passengers time to embark and disembark safely.

As the capsule descends, passengers wishing to have their photos taken stand in a specially designated square. A camera attached to the wheel takes their photos, which are ready for collection in the kiosk at the end of the flight.

Launched in 2000 to commemorate the new millennium, the eye has won 75 awards for national and international tourism, outstanding architectural quality and engineering achievement and has now welcomed over 36 million visitors.

Before their «flight» passengers are provided with an experience what it's like to soar high like a bird over London's dramatic skyline through a 4D Film Experience.

The four minute film focuses on the journey of a little girl and her father in London in which they visit the London Eye and enjoy a spectacular take of the capital, viewing it from a bird's eye perspective. Their experience is brought to life with vibrant 3D images of colourful parties and events inside the London Eye capsules, dramatic firework displays, a snowfall over the city, revolutionary aerial footage of





other iconic landmarks and sophisticated, fun 4D effects. Set to the music of international artists Coldplay and Goldfrapp, the film provides a completely new vision of the city and the perfect prelude to a flight.

But the eye is not just for taking in spectacular view of London. It can be used for weddings, and corporate hospitality. The London Restaurant Festival used it for a unique pop-up revolving restaurant. Each night over the

course of the six-day festival a different chef cooked for ten lucky diners, who ate eat in a capsule converted into a dining room.

The London Eye was the brainchild of David Marks and Julia Barfield, a husband and wife architect team. The wheel design was used as a metaphor for the end of the 20th century, and time turning into the new millennium. David and Julia wanted to present not just a monument, but something celebratory, that people could

participate in and enjoy. David researched and developed the idea for a giant observation wheel and Julia found the ideal site by drawing a circle round London and finding the dead centre, Jubilee Gardens on the South Bank.

Tracing the history of the eye Wikipedia notes that it was formally opened by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on 31 December 1999, although it was

not opened to the public until March 2000 because of technical problems.

By July 2002, 8.5 million people had ridden the Eye. It had planning permission only for five years, but at that time Lambeth Council agreed to plans to make the attraction permanent.

Since 1 January 2005, the Eye has been the focal point of London's New Year celebrations, with 10-minute fireworks taking





place involving fireworks fired from the wheel itself.

In 2008 the Tussauds Group bought out the other two joint owners, British Airways and the Marks Barfield family (the lead architects). Following Merlin Entertainments purchase of the Tussauds Group in 2007, it now owns 100% of the Eye. British Airways continued its brand association, but from the beginning of 2008 the name «British Airways» was dropped from the logo.

On 12 August 2009 the London Eye saw another re-brand, this time calling it «The Merlin Entertainments London Eye» to show Merlin Entertainments ownership. A new logo was designed for the attraction - this time taking the actual form of an eye made out of London's famous landmarks. This also came at the time when the new Merlin Entertainments London Eye 4D Experience pre-flight show was launched underneath the ticket

centre in County Hall.

During the bidding process of the 2012 Olympic Games, the London bid organisers announced the Olympic emblem would be attached to the Eye for the duration of the 2010 Olympics.

On 5 June 2008 it was announced that 30 million people had ridden the London Eye since its opening in March 2000.

The London Eye stands on the

South Bank of the River Thames.

The site is adjacent to that of the former Dome of Discovery built for the Festival of Britain in 1951. Clearly an attraction in itself, a flight on the eye can be combined with visits to other iconic London attractions such as Madame Tussauds, the London Aquarium or a London River Cruise.

Photos by: Roy Coutinho

