

top ten sky-high destinations

An empire state of mind

Whether it's constructing soaring towers or scaling colossal mountains, lofty pursuits are rarely rational. Yet this obsessive striving to reach the sky represents a unique aspect of the human spirit. From the world's tallest building to a continent's highest mountain to a flight to the edge of space, sky-high destinations just keep on getting higher. In the 21st century, one thing is certain: the only way is up. **Robert Carroll chooses 10 pinnacles where the view is a destination in itself**

1 Burj Khalifa, Dubai

The Burj Khalifa does not so much scrape the sky as pierce it. This towering needle, which can be seen from a distance of 95km, has reclaimed a long-lost mantle for the Middle East: the tallest building in the world has returned to the region for the first time since Lincoln Cathedral overtook the Great Pyramid of Giza in 1311. The building's simple, tapering shape belies its vast height, but, at 828 metres, the Burj Khalifa dwarfs all rivals. It is more than 300 metres higher than the world's former tallest building, the Taipei 101 tower in Taiwan. The building's "buttressed core" will no doubt provide the model for even taller buildings in the future. But since the recent global financial crisis has stopped any such ambitious plans in their tracks, the Burj Khalifa's title is secure for a few years at least.

The lift to the "At the Top" observation deck on the 124th floor travels at 10 metres per second. It goes slower on the way down to avoid causing sickness. On the clear day, the view from the top stretches well beyond the city and out into the desert beyond.

Burj Khalifa, 1 Emaar Boulevard, Dubai (www.burjkhalifa.ae; 00971 4 366 1655). Tickets cost US\$109 (Dh400) per person for immediate entry or \$27 (Dh100) per person in advance.

2 Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur

When they were completed in 1998, the Petronas Towers became not just the tallest but the two tallest buildings in the world. These twin towers were the most famous product of a frenzy of construction, which put the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur (KL) on the list of the world's global metropolises along with New York, London and Shanghai.

The owners hired different companies to build each tower and awarded a bonus to first to complete, effectively turning the construction into a race into the sky.

Built around a symbol from Islamic geometry, the Petronas Towers have a beautiful, distinctive shape and an unusual coarse, nobly exterior. The Skybridge – a pedestrian bridge between the towers on the 41st and 42nd floors – emphasises the space between the towers and highlights the void created by the buildings' gargantuan presences.

The biggest problem with a trip up the towers is that the finest sight on KL skyline is missing from the view. Solve this minor snag by having lunch at the top of the KL Tower nearby and feast on the magnificent sight of the Petronas Towers. Lunch at the Sri Angkasa Revolving Restaurant (www.sriangkasa.com) costs from \$20 (Dh75) per person.

Petronas Twin Towers, 50088 Kuala Lumpur (www.petronastwintowers.com.my; 00603 20511320). No advanced booking. A limited number of tickets are available free-of-charge from 9am each day.

3 Empire State Building, New York

The Empire State Building ceased to be the tallest building in the world in 1967, but it remains one of the most iconic. Built in 1931, the 381-metre Art Deco structure is among the most famous sights on the Manhattan skyline. Along with the Chrysler Building, it has become synonymous with New York. It is part of the city's mythic identity, starring in films from *King Kong* (1933) to *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and gracing countless photographs and posters.

Taking a trip to one of the building's

observatories may be anathema to native New Yorkers, but it is almost essential for first-time visitors to the city. The views from either the 86th floor or the summit at the 102nd floor, which reopened in 2005 after being closed for many years, are spectacular. Looking out over the sparkling city lights at night makes you feel like you are on top of the world.

Empire State Building, 350 Fifth Avenue, between 33rd and 34th Streets, New York, NY 10118 (www.esbny.com; 001 212 736 3100). Observatory tickets cost \$18.50 (Dh68).

4 Grand Canyon Skywalk, Nevada

The Grand Canyon is simply an awe-inspiring sight. Nearly 450km long, 29km at its widest and 1.8km at its deepest, water and wind have helped to carve this geological wonder over billions of years. It is an immense and detailed record of geological events: half the history of the world's five billion year old existence is etched on the canyon's deep and variegated walls.

Most visitors to the area go to either the South Rim – home to postcard panoramas – or the higher and less popular North Rim. Since 2007, there has been a third way: the Skywalk is a horse shoe of steel and glass, which juts out into a remote section of the Grand Canyon and hovers over 1km above the Colorado River.

In an ironic reversal of environmental guardian and commercial exploiter, the Hualapai, who own this land, decided to build this \$30 million structure to attract more visitors. It would never have been allowed in the National Park. The result is a hi-tech spectacle, which offers a new, exciting and controversial perspective on this ancient landscape.

Grand Canyon Skywalk, 5720 S Arville, Ste 102, Las Vegas, NV 89118 (www.grandcanyonwalk.com; 001 702 220 8372). Entrance to the western region of the Grand Canyon costs \$41 (Dh150). The Skywalk costs an additional \$30 (Dh110).

5 Climbing Sydney Harbour Bridge, Australia

Few cities can rival Sydney's stunning setting. The Pacific Ocean is an ever-present force, whether it be in the coves and inlets of the city's natural harbour or the famous surf of its beach suburbs. The city's two most iconic structures – the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge – use this remarkable topography and proximity to water to the full.

The Harbour Bridge is an economic and engineering marvel. Completed in 1932 despite the Great Depression and spanning 1.15km from Dawes Point to Millsons Point, it was the city's tallest structure until 1967.

Since 1998, climbing its steel arches has provided an exhilarating path to a superb vantage point over the city. With traffic streaming along below, climbers make their way up the bridge's outer arch to the summit of 134 metres. It is a thrilling trip, but it's too daunting, climbing the steps to Sydney Pylon Lookout – at the top of one of the bridge's concrete pylons – offers a less dramatic and cheaper way to take in the views.

Sydney Harbour Bridge Visitor Centre, 3 Cumberland St, The Rocks, Sydney (www.bridgeclimb.com; 0061 28274 7777). Tickets cost from \$166 (Dh610) depending on the time of day and type of climb. The Pylon Lookout costs \$9 (Dh32) per person.

6 Watching the world's highest polo match, Pakistan

It is hard to grasp the debilitating

effects of high altitude. The breathlessness caused by gasping thin air makes strenuous activity difficult. It doesn't get much more elevated or more gruelling than the annual polo match between the districts of Chitral and Gilgit, which takes place every July at the Shandur Pass in Pakistan. At 3,738m above sea level, it is the highest polo match in the world.

With the soaring, snow-covered peaks of the Hindu Kush forming a grand, stadium-like backdrop, riders gallop around wielding mallets and clashing fiercely with rivals. People get hurt – often. This is "freestyle" polo, stripped of most of the rules of the Argentinian or British games, which tend to limit broken skulls and fractured limbs.

Like all great sporting events, the tournament gives vent to wider rivalries and tensions. In a region notorious for war and conflict, the match attracts spectators from around the world and stands as a beacon of hope for a more peaceful future.

Shandur Polo Ground, Chitral district, Pakistan (www.shandur.com). The match takes place every year in July. Pakistan International Airlines (www.piac.com.pk) operates flights from Peshawar to Chitral.

7 Rose Rayhaan by Rotana, Dubai

Dubai is home to three of the top five tallest hotels in the world. The others are in North Korea and Thailand. For a building to qualify as the world's tallest hotel, it must be used exclusively as hotel. When it opened in December 2009, the Rose Rayhaan took this title from its neighbour, the Burj Al Arab.

Built on a tiny plot on Sheikh Zayed Road, the city's main road artery, the Rose Rayhaan looks taller than its 333 metre height. If the Burj Al Arab is a billowing sail, the Rose Rayhaan is a beanpole: it goes straight up.

Besides the standard trappings of five-star opulence – plush suites, gym, swimming pool, sauna, steam room – many of the hotel's 482 rooms on 72 floors have excellent views, including some with a fine perspective on the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa.

Rose Rayhaan by Rotana, Sheikh Zayed Road, PO Box 126452, Dubai (www.rotana.com; 04 323 0111). Rooms start from \$196 (Dh720) including taxes. The Rose Rayhaan does not serve alcohol.

8 A trip to the edge of space, Russia

Until a few years ago, flying in a fighter jet was only possible for the few. The cockpit of aeroplanes such as the MiG-29 was reserved for elite pilots with years of training. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened up this high-flying market. Now, at 2,400 kph is now attainable by anyone with enough money to pay for it.

Nizhny Novgorod, Russia's fourth largest city, is home to Sokol airbase. It is the starting point for what the promotional brochure describes as an "inherently dangerous" adventure to the Earth's upper atmosphere ends around 100km and the MiG only flies to between 21km and 23km in altitude, but when you are soaring along at over twice the speed of sound who cares about such details?

It is the ultimate tourist adventure: a rush of adrenalin and a flash of exhilaration before you come back to earth many thousands of dirhams lighter.

Incredible Adventures, 6604 Midnight Pass Rd, Sarasota, FL 34242 (www.incredible-adventures.com/edgeofspace.html; 001 941 346 2603). Flights start from \$13,000 (Dh47,749) per person. Clearance to fly takes at least 50 days with booking usually taken three to 10 months in advance.

9 A "flight" on the London Eye, England

London is not a city of skyscrapers. Protected views – a legal planning requirement which restricts the height of buildings – has for the most part kept the city's skyline diminutive. London's tallest building, One Canada Square, is only 235 metres

and is located many miles from the centre, while other tall buildings such as the BT Tower, Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe (otherwise known as the Gherkin) do not top 185 metres.

As a result, even relatively small elevations provide fresh and often surprising perspectives on the city. The London Eye, a 135m Ferris wheel on the banks of the River Thames, gives excellent views over famous landmarks such as the Palace of Westminster, Tower Bridge and St Paul's Cathedral. On a clear day, you can see Windsor Castle, nearly 40km away.

When it opened in 2000 the structure was intended to be temporary, but with an average of 3.5 million visitors every year, it is well on its way to becoming a permanent landmark in its own right, and other cities have copied its example.

London Eye, Riverside Building, County Hall, Westminster Bridge Road, London (www.londoneye.com; 0044 871 781 3000). Entry costs \$29 (Dh106) per person.

10 Climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania

Tanzania is famed for its wide open spaces. The migration of wildebeest across the seemingly endless grassy plains of the Serengeti is one of the natural wonders of the world. But the country is also home to Africa's highest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro, which rises dramatically from this flatness.

There is no logical reason to climb this great, high and oft-snow-capped peak. It yields nothing tangible. There are no fruits to harvest or beast to hunt. Yet thousands attempt to scale the 5,896m high mountain each year.

Around half do not make it to the summit and a few people die trying. Climbing Kilimanjaro is a serious undertaking and is only possible with a guide or as part of an organised trek, which usually lasts between five and seven days. There are several routes up the mountain – Marangu, Machame and Umbwe – none of which demand technical climbing experience or equipment such as ropes or crampons. Nevertheless, reaching the summit is physically and psychologically demanding.

Tropical Trails, PO Box 223, Arusha, Tanzania (www.tropicaltrails.com; 00 255 27 250 0358) offers seven-day treks climbing the Machame route for \$1,505 (Dh5,528) per person, including park entrance and camping fees, porterage, guiding, and a cook.

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Randi Sokoloff / The National

traveller's world
Sue Ryan

Gray's anatomy

Gordon Campbell Gray is one of the hottest hoteliers of the moment. Investors are queuing up to do business with him; his name appears on every respectable "best" list including *The Times*'s "Top 50 people that every traveller should know".

So, there was more than a whiff of speculation when he was in Dubai on business last month that he might be setting up a new venture in the emirate, or at least somewhere in the Gulf.

"It is something that I have been asked to do many times," he says when I caught up with him at One Aldwych, the London hotel that first gave him international recognition. But anyone who knows him can read between the lines when he says: "It's not for me."

He is certainly not fazed by war – the building of Le Gray in Beirut – was interrupted twice by Israeli attacks, delaying the project by two years. "Everyone assumed that I would give up in 2006, along with the big chains, but I never once thought that way. People said I was mad and that I would be ruined. But we held tight and now it is the hottest city on the planet," he says.

But he is more cautious when it comes to setting up in Dubai – or Doha, where he was a couple of weeks ago to view a potential property. Neither are his kind of town. "I was asked to go to Doha and I went to be courteous, but no way," he says stopping short of saying anything rude in case it offends. "Give me old-fashioned cities. I love places like Damascus and Oman."

Abu Dhabi is more of a possibility – he says he is talking with a potential investor but has yet to be shown a location that he feels will work. He appreciates the qualities that the emirate desires to offer travellers: a sophisticated place where visitors do not become ensnared in tourism traps.

He is, however, openly in love with Beirut and revealed that he is planning two more properties in Lebanon. "I love it. I love that sense of living for the moment. The West is going through such a joyless period. But in the Middle East everyone is in such a good mood. We opened the hotel at such a good time for Lebanon."

"I feel that here [in the UK] politically, economically, spiritually, morally, we are in a slump. I find it quite sad actually and I think the more you are away from it the more you are conscious of it," he says.

If the planners give the go-ahead for his new hotel on the coast in Damour, on the outskirts of Beirut, he hopes to have it open within 20 months. A new build, it is about 20 minutes away from Le Gray but will have a very different feel and is intended as somewhere to go to relax and chill out. "It will be very simple and beachy; the setting is in the design," he says. They are still debating whether it will be 80 or 100 rooms but he is confident that the planners will give approval.

The key to the design, he says, is making it as ecologically sound as possible, something he feels that Lebanon is not very good at, but that every hotelier should take seriously. The company is opening a new hotel in Montpelier in the south of France in 2012, and one of the things that attracted him to the location is its ease of access. "It's so easy to get there by train and I believe that is the way forward." He envisages the Lodge at St Germaine as somewhere to go "if you feel exhausted".

In the "design stage", but as yet without a plot of land, is his third project in Lebanon which will be in the mountains. And if it seems odd to have three out of eight hotels in Lebanon, and none in the Gulf, it is because he is not interested in what makes sense on paper. Indeed, he describes himself as "remarkably unambitious".

Gray has never had a master plan, doesn't employ or listen to analysts and eschews feasibility studies. Instead, he trusts his instincts and jumps if it feels right. Beirut happened because one morning, five years ago, he

was called down to the lobby to see a guest and assumed it was a complaint – it was a proposal Gray had never been to Beirut before but booked a flight for the following Monday, loved what he saw, and the deal was done by Friday.

His only quibble about Beirut is that it is quite a snobbish place. "We are working through that though. Le Gray is a snob-free zone." He is a refreshing voice in the industry, if an unusual one for a five-star hotelier. He had a strict Scottish upbringing and says, "I enjoy the concept of frugality... My mantra is 'live below your means'. That is, you can say 'I can afford it but I choose not to'."

Translated, this mantra means that he wants his hotels to be exquisite, but not excessive, which is perhaps the real reason we won't see a Le Gray in Dubai or Doha.

The ultra trendy hotel he stayed at in Doha drove him mad. "It was so complicated. I want my telephone to be a telephone, I don't want it to work the curtains and the air conditioning. It's not an age issue. If you want it in your home, good luck, but if you are staying somewhere one night, you need it to be simple."

"I do not want to be picked up at the airport by a Rolls-Royce – that to me is a dinosaur. Nor do I want to have strawberries dipped in chocolate in my room unless I have asked for them..."

"No one stops coming to my hotels because their shirts are not triple-wrapped. I am offended by waste."

He is also critical of the luxury hotel chains who train their staff to name check everyone. Recently in one hotel, in the journey from his room to the front door 17 staff said "Good morning, Mr Gray". "Where is the privacy in that?" he asks.

Similarly, he is unimpressed by doormen who say "welcome back" whether you have stayed there before – or just come out of the door two seconds ago and turned back because you have forgotten something. "That is not genuine," he explains. "It's programming."

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