

Pyramids? Been there, done that. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Can't even see 'em! Meet the newest kids on the wonder block that are setting the tone for the new millennium

By Rachel Smith

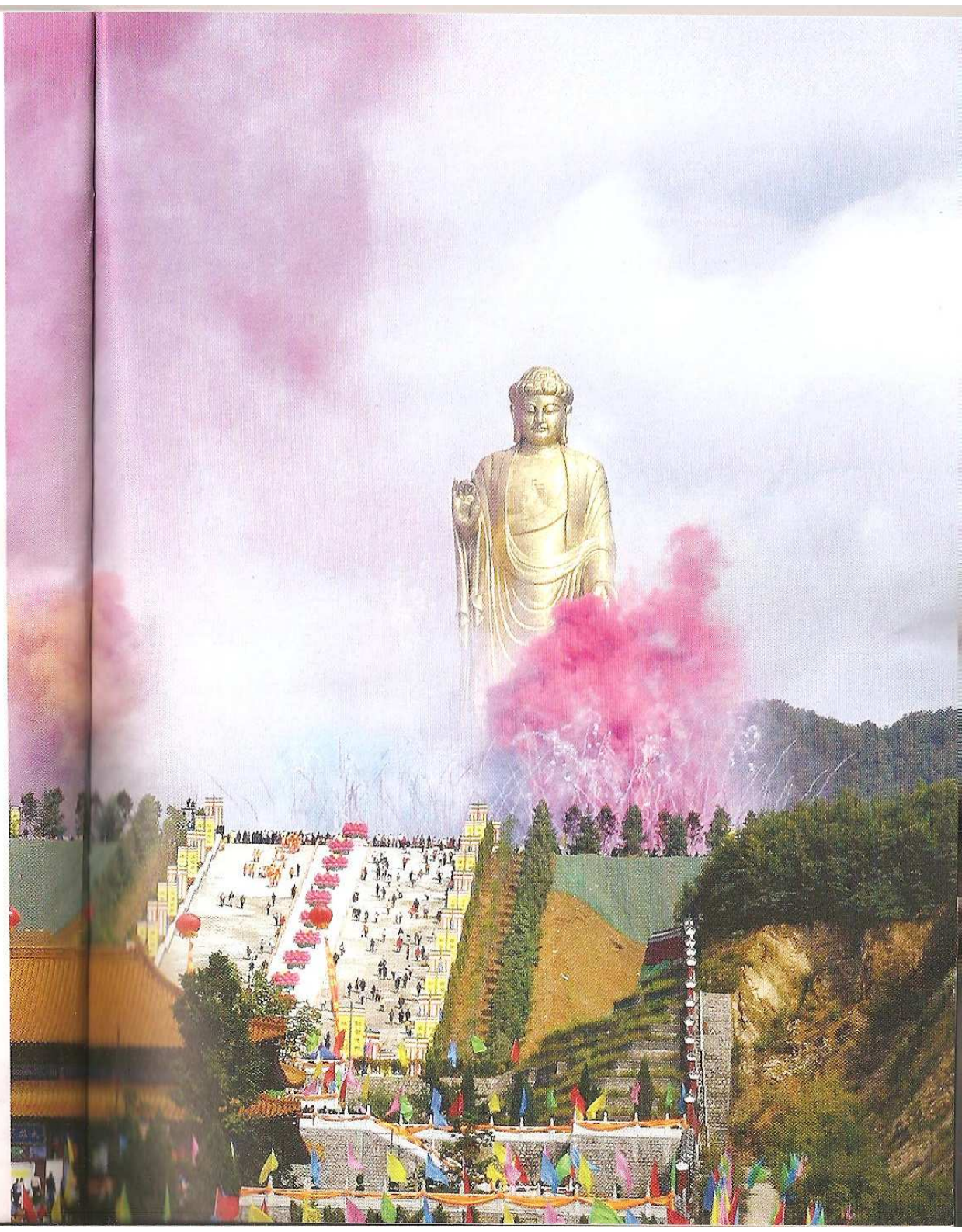
THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

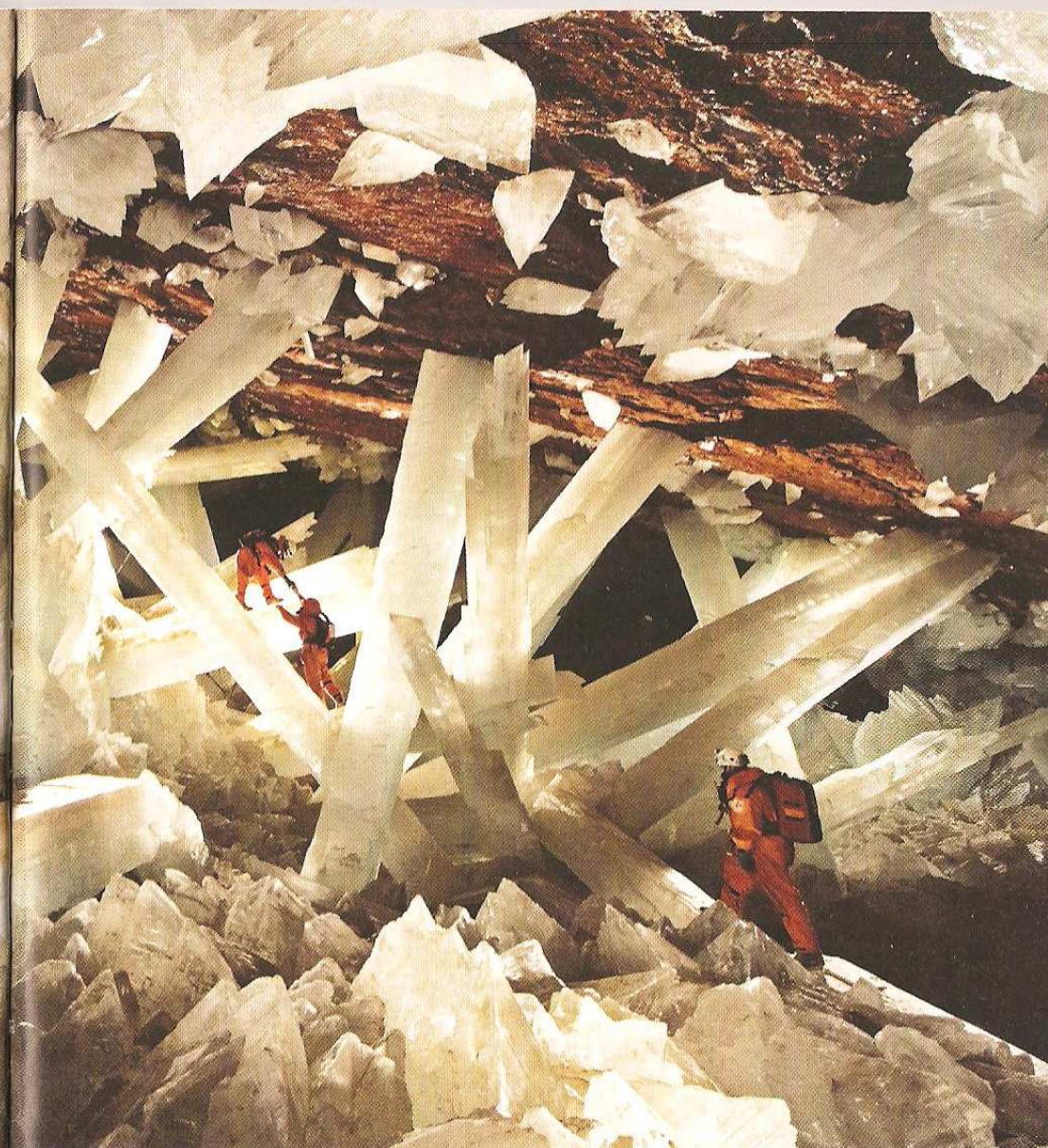
1 SPRING TEMPLE BUDDHA, CHINA

People have made pilgrimages to the Tianrui Spring in Lushan County, China, for centuries—its 60°C water is said to have curative powers. But now it finds itself in the shadow of a huge new neighbour: the Spring Temple Buddha, the tallest statue in the world. The 420-foot, £35m gold structure was built by the Chinese

government in 2002, in response to the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan—thought to be the previous biggest buddhas in the world at 174 feet.

But even one of the Seven Wonders can't take anything for granted—a new 500-foot buddha in Uttar Pradesh, India, is being planned. ▶





2 CAVE OF CRYSTALS, MEXICO

Like a lost cathedral-sized jewellery box, buried 1,000 feet underground, this cavern full of huge selenite shards was only found by silver miners 11 years ago.

Situated close to the

north Mexican town of Naica, the Cave of Crystals' sparkling obelisks are up to 37 feet long and can weigh around 500 tons. A huge pool of magma sits below the chamber,

so temperatures inside reach 50°C and humidity levels pass 90 per cent. As the cavern has flooded over a period of 600,000 years, this oven-like environment has simmered

the water and solidified the minerals it contains, to form these remarkable crystals.

An iron door stops anyone breaking into the cave, so the only way to visit is with a guide and a

medical support team. A special cooling suit—with an ice vest and respirator pumping out chilled air—is essential, or you're likely to pass out within 15 minutes of entering.

3 MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART, QATAR



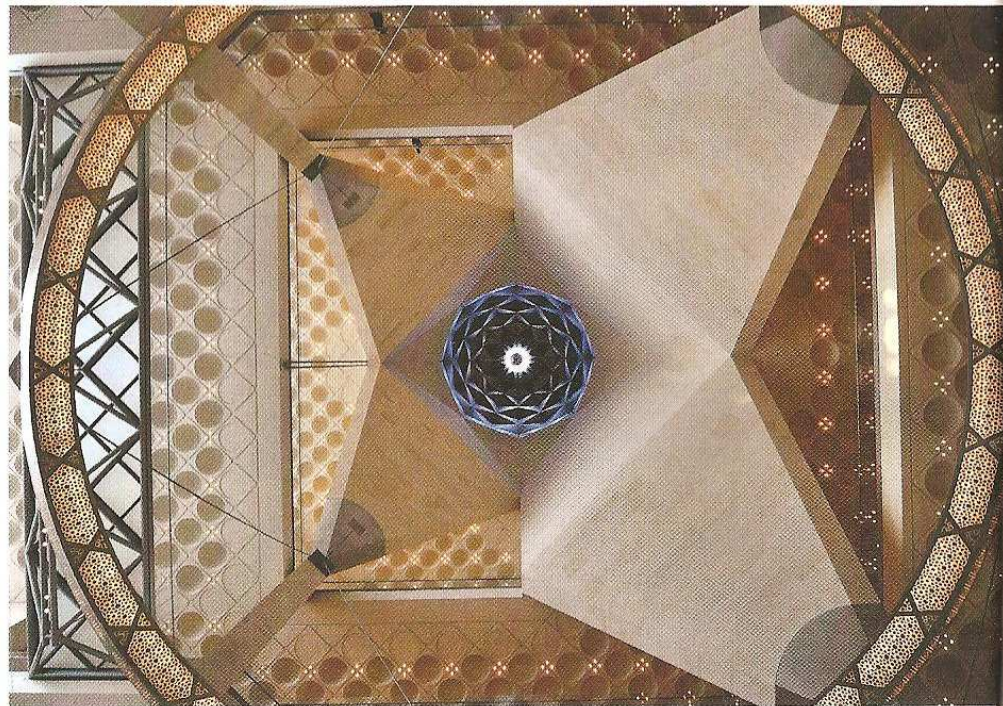
When the ruling Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, coaxed 91-year-old I M Pei—designer of the Louvre Pyramid—to do one more major commission, the pair decided to go large.

The Emir wanted to build an unrivalled museum celebrating Muslim culture, so before Pei settled on a design, he went on a world tour studying Islamic architecture. The result is a strikingly angular building that's both traditional and modernist—and, says Pei, “comes to life in the sun, with its shadows, shades and colours”.

Features include a north-facing window that stretches over five floors and a 164-foot-high domed atrium—with an oculus that reflects patterned light into the gallery (see below). Artefacts in the 400,000-square-foot interior include Qurans and textiles, ceramics and jewels dating back as far as the seventh century.

The museum sits on a specially built island just off Doha, so it won't be encroached upon by any new buildings. Since it opened in 2008, it's had more than half a million visitors.

COURTESY MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART



4 BAHÁ'Í TERRACES, ISRAEL

Religious sites have always dominated lists of Seven Wonders—and they feature heavily in our 21st-century rundown, too. This marvel, built by devotees of the Bahá'í faith, is such an extraordinary example of landscape horticulture that it's been nicknamed “The Hanging Gardens of Haifa”.

The landmark in northern Israel is made up of 19 terraces running just under a mile up the slopes of Mount Carmel, and has 1,700 steps to the top. One of the faith's most venerated figures—the 19th-century spiritualist Báb—is buried in a shrine halfway up. The gardens contain 450 different plant species, designed to create a meditative feel.

The terraces, which were completed in 2001, frame spectacular panoramic views of the city, the Galilee Hills and the Mediterranean. Their construction was funded by voluntary donations from Bahá'í's five million followers worldwide. The faith promotes religious unity, so the gardens' 90 or so staff are drawn from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

PHOTO: ISTOCK/ISRAEL/PHOTOLIBRARY.COM



5 AKSHARDHAM TEMPLE, NEW DELHI

The Taj Mahal used to be the undisputed champion of Indian architecture, but a new contender has now stepped into the ring: Akshardham Temple.

The biggest Hindu temple in the world, it was completed in 2005 and houses 234 hand-carved pillars, a 12-minute indoor boat ride, an Imax cinema and more than 20,000 statues (including 148 life-sized stone elephants). Hindu guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj was the driving force behind the project, and a lotus-filled lake surrounding the building contains water from 151 holy rivers he's visited.

Construction took 12 million man-hours—if one person had started building Akshardham in AD650, they still wouldn't quite be finished—but 11,000 artisans and volunteers chipped in, so the temple shot up in five years and cost some £30m.

There are no concrete or steel supports throughout the ten-storey design. Instead, it's made up of carved pink sandstone blocks that have been expertly slotted together. Still, it's so well built that it's expected to see in the third millennium. ▶



◀ 6 THE DARVAZA GAS CRATER, TURKMENISTAN

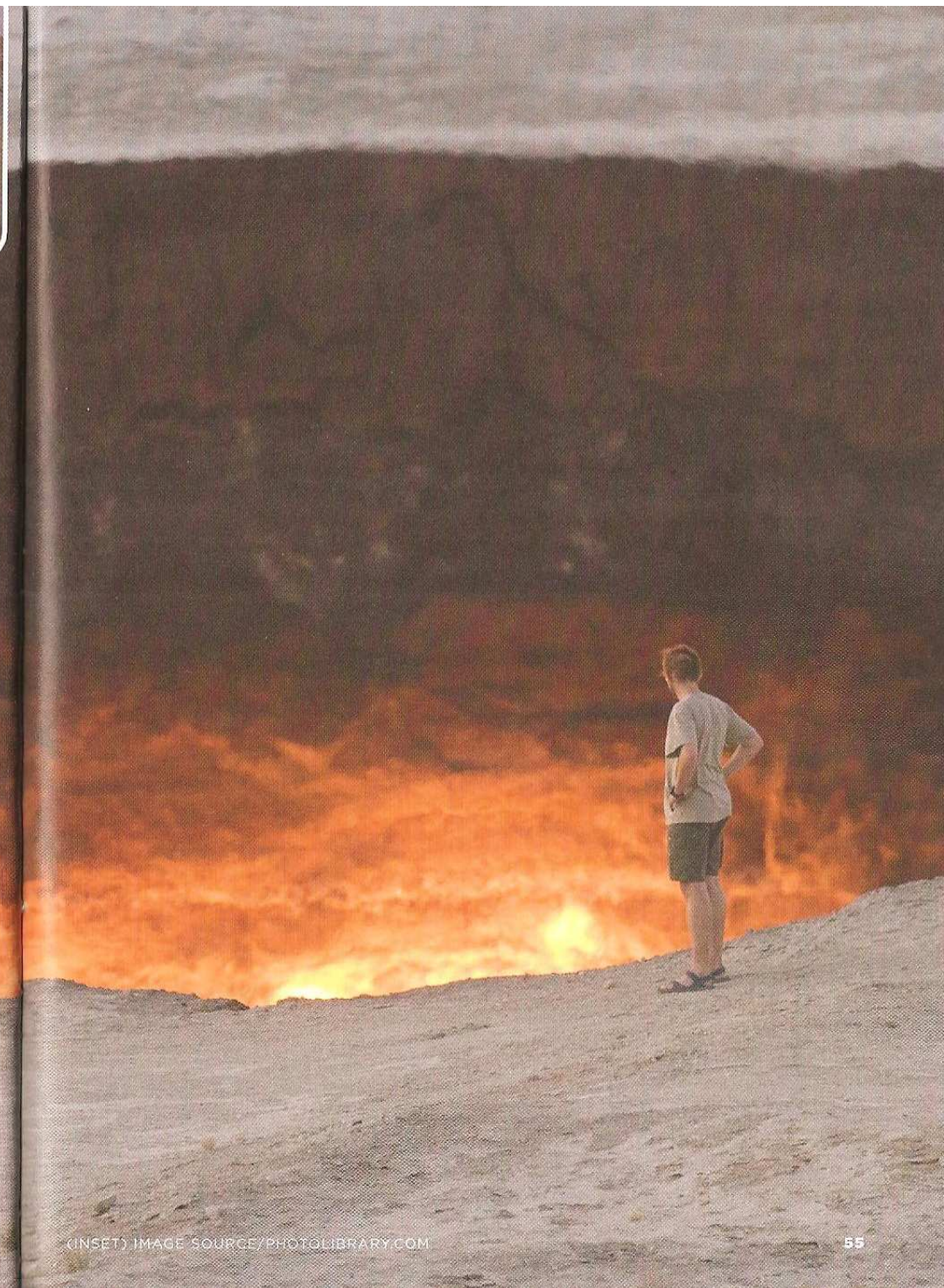
Deep in Turkmenistan's Karakum desert lies a hole that's the closest mankind has come to opening the gates of Hell.

The Darvaza Gas Crater was discovered in 1971 by a group of Soviet engineers who were hunting for gas. While they were drilling, the ground beneath their

rig collapsed, revealing a 200-foot-wide pit filled with methane. Worried that the fumes would engulf Darvaza, a nearby village, the engineers decided to burn the gas off. They assumed this would take a couple of days, but, four decades later, the underground gas supply shows

no signs of running out and the flames still eerily light up the desert night.

Though the locals have always known about the 65-foot-deep flaming cavity, it's only now, thanks to a trickle of intrepid foreign visitors, that it's starting to gain international recognition. ▶



» What are your favourite 21st-century wonders? Let us know at readersletters@readersdigest.co.uk.

7 MILLAU VIADUCT FRANCE

A cut above the average small-town bypass, the Millau Viaduct in southern France is the world's tallest vehicular bridge and gives motorists stunning views of the Tarn River valley.

Reaching a massive 1,125 feet high, the raised motorway is around 60 feet loftier than the

Eiffel Tower, more than a mile and a half long and often sits above the clouds. After 14 years of planning, construction began in 2001, under the guidance of British architect Lord Norman Foster, and was finished three years later.

You might ask how a concrete structure that

slashes across unspoilt countryside can be classified as a "wonder", but the alternative was far less appealing. Before the bridge was completed, there was a phenomenon known as "The Millau Bottleneck": a notorious traffic hot spot where angry holidaymakers—

following a route that stretches from Paris to the Mediterranean—would stew in their cars in the cramped town for up to four hours.

Not only is the viaduct beautiful, but it also came in at just €300m—half its estimated cost. A modern wonder indeed. ■