

The hot 10 for 2009

From a solar eclipse in China to walking with dinosaurs, by way of Peter Pan and Robbie Burns, Annabelle Thorpe lists the year's must-dos

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Living dinosaurs ... the eye of an Ankylosaurus dinosaur from the Walking with Dinosaurs show.
Photograph: Ted S Warren/AP

1. The natural wonder

The longest total solar eclipse of the 21st century takes place on 22 July, when parts of [China](#) will sink into darkness for nearly six minutes. One of the best places to watch will be on the banks of the Qiantang river, where visitors can also witness the incredible tidal bore, a wave several metres high where the river penetrates the relatively narrow river mouth, caused by the gravitational pull of the sun and the moon.

- Wendy Wu Tours (0844 499 3899; wendywutours.co.uk) has a nine-day Eclipse and Eastern China tour departing 15 July, which takes in Hangzhou, Suzhou, Shanghai, and time by the Qiantang river for the eclipse itself. It costs £1,760 including flights and all meals, accommodation, visas and transport.

2. The spectacle

Dinosaurs hold a perennial fascination for children, and one of the year's biggest draws for families will be the "Walking With Dinosaurs" show. After years of planning, the event promises to bring 15 life-size dinosaurs - walking, roaring re-creations - to arenas around the UK, including Glasgow, Sheffield, Manchester and [London](#)'s O2. The £10m spectacle tells the story of their 200 million years on Earth and their fight for survival, with a mixture of science, special effects and "magic".

- Tickets from £20 (plus £2 booking fee per ticket), bookable on 0844 875 9000; dinosaurlive.co.uk

3. The island

The Bintan Islands, in the Indonesian archipelago, have opened up to tourism over the past few years, with hordes travelling from Singapore to make the most of the coral reefs, rainforest-clad hills and crystal water. Some of the smaller ones have avoided mainstream development, however; such as the private island resort of Nikoi, which opened with just six beach houses in 2007. Another nine houses should be completed in March, leaving the island free of building works and utterly tranquil - perfect for a beachfront massage, romantic supper under astonishing skies or wildlife-spotting excursions.

- Houses from £120 per night, through I-Escape (i-escape.com)

4. The gathering

This year sees the 250th anniversary of the birth of Scotland's most beloved son, Robert Burns, and there will be celebrations there throughout 2009. "The Gathering" is a coming-together of clan members from all over the world for a Highland Games at Holyrood Park in Edinburgh. The games will take place on 25 and 26 July, and on the Saturday evening the clans will parade up the city's historic Royal Mile.

- Tickets cost from £15 for one-day access to the Games, bookable on 0131 561 1323; clangathering.org

5. The country

French Guiana, and its colourful capital, Cayenne, is set to be the hip destination this summer; the city is like a less-touristy Cartagena in Colombia, with bustling markets, stunning colonial architecture and delicious Creole cuisine. Ethnically diverse, it has a mix of Creole, Haitian, European and Asian communities, which create a bohemian feel. The country itself is a French département, with landscapes that combine lush rainforests and long sandy beaches that are home to leatherback turtles, while gold-panning still takes place in the hills.

- Black Tomato (020 7426 9888; blacktomato.co.uk) can tailor-make an itinerary to include French Guiana, British Guyana and Surinam

6. The show

Kensington Gardens was the fictional home of Peter Pan and this spring he returns there in a new stage production of JM Barrie's classic story. The play runs from 26 May until 30 August in a specially commissioned pavilion, designed to give 360-degree backdrops for a theatre-in-the-round experience, with all seats close to the stage. Computerised effects will give the audience the illusion of flying with Peter Pan and standing on the deck of Hook's ship.

- Tickets from £22.50 (25% off for under-16s); visitlondon.com/peterpan

7. The city break

The Austrian city of Linz becomes one of two European Capitals of Culture in 2009 (the other is Vilnius, Lithuania), and celebrates with a vast programme of festivities, exhibitions and art projects. The Ars Electronica Centre re-opened in a stunning new building on Friday (with lots of interactive virtual displays for adults and children) and galleries and concert halls will have special programmes throughout the year. The Spitz Hotel was created specifically with the Capital of Culture year in mind; it is full of works by local artists, furniture and lighting have been created by regional designers and students at Linz university were given free rein to design the entire fourth floor. Doubles from £130.

- linz09.at; spitzhotel.at

8. The garden

The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew is celebrating its 250th anniversary this year with the biggest, boldest displays of flowers and a series of special events. In spring, five million bulbs come into bloom - the biggest display of spring colour in Britain - followed by a wildflower display throughout the summer, and new exhibitions and displays.

- kew.org

9. The party

Berlin celebrates 20 years as a reunited city, two decades after the Wall was pulled down. The party begins in May, with an open-air exhibition on the Alexanderplatz, while buildings will be transformed with light installations, oversized "façade art" and exhibitions, spotlighting how the city has changed over the period. But the biggest celebration will take place on the anniversary

itself, 9 November, with a huge concert, a street festival and performance art symbolising "the Fall of the Wall".

- visitberlin.de

10. The ship

The biggest cruise ship ever built, Oasis of the Seas, sets sail with its first passengers in December, carrying more than 5,000 guests in seven "neighbourhoods", including Central Park, with a lush, lawned area for alfresco eating and drinking. Cabins include loft suites that wouldn't look out of place in Manhattan and apartments overlooking the park, and four separate pools cater for different needs, from the aquapark H2O Zone for families, to the lounge pool, surrounded by private cabanas.

- oasisoftheseas.com

The year's hippest new hotels

Crosby Street Hotel, New York

Firmdale Hotels, the company behind the Soho, Charlotte Street and Haymarket hotels in London, opens its first hotel in New York this summer. The Crosby Street Hotel will be between Prince, Spring and Lafayette in SoHo, with 86 rooms over 11 floors, an outdoor garden, screening room and a gym.

- www.firmdalehotels.com

The Savoy, London

The capital's grand dame of hotels reopens in spring, after an 18-month closure and an estimated spend of more than £100m. A winter garden beneath an ornate glass dome, a Gordon Ramsay-managed Savoy Grill and a tea shop promising lip-smacking patisserie are all new. The American Bar and River Restaurant will also return, albeit remodelled.

- Norway

Opening in the summer to make the most of the white nights, the Other Side is close to Norway's borders with Russia and Finland, and combines luxury on the inside with the wild, tundra landscapes that surround the hotel. There are 12 houses grouped around three themes - fire, air and water.

- designhotels.com

Aman Sveti Stefan, Montenegro

The Aman chain opens its first European hotel, on the Montenegrin island of Sveti Stefan, separated from the mainland by a causeway. The Villa Milocer, with six suites, opened in December, and will become part of the main hotel when it opens in August, with 47 rooms inside the terracotta-roofed houses.

- designhotels.com

Armani Hotel, Dubai

Armani is opening its first hotel in 2009, in the Burj Dubai, the world's tallest building. Set to open in the autumn, it will have 160 rooms and suites, five restaurants and a suitably indulgent spa, covering 40,000 sqm.

- armanihotels.com

Le Gray, Beirut

The Lebanese capital gets an injection of style when Le Gray finally opens its doors in May. The hotel will have 80 sleek suites, a top-floor piano bar and underground nightclub, and a rooftop pool with great views across the city.

- legrayhotel.com