

## TRAVEL



The "world's largest indoor carousel" at the House on the Rock features 20,000 lights and 269 centaurs, dragons and other creatures.

The House on the Rock

# Wisconsin's oddball House on the Rock

Story and photo by MELANIE RADZICKI McMANUS • Special to the Star Tribune

As I wander through the Streets of Yesterday, peeking into replicated 19th-century storefronts, a circuslike cacophony begins reverberating through the air. Curious, I stride toward the music, glancing at a group of people surrounding a fortunetelling machine, where a mechanized Esmeralda is dispensing prophecies printed on tiny cards.

At the end of the street, an immense music machine called the Gladiator Calliope has sprung to life. As high-pitched toots, trills and whistles erupt from the steam-whistle organ, a line of mechanized gladiators clutching sticks and mallets strike a drum, cymbal and bell. At their feet, invisible breaths blow across ceramic jugs.

"Oh, my gosh, this is insane," someone in the crowd whispers.

Rounding the next corner, a snarling, 200-foot-tall fiberglass sea creature improbably rises from the floor, as the Beatles' "Octopus's Garden" gaily plays.

Welcome to the House on the Rock, one of the nation's more notable roadside attractions. It's a hard-to-describe mélange of art, history, music and fantasy that excites and amazes you one minute, then leaves you bewildered and unnerved the next.

The destination outside Spring Green, Wis., has also gained notoriety for its physical and mental challenges: Visitors once had to walk through the entire three-plus-hour experience, squeezing through some narrow passages and climbing to heights that some found unnerving, before they could exit.

Today, you have the option of touring one, two or all three sections of the House on the Rock. And for guests with claustrophobia or acrophobia, brochures note that they can tap employees for help in finding alternate routes.

## How it all began

The House on the Rock was never intended to be a public attraction,

much less one so immense and unusual. It began innocently in 1945, when a young Alex Jordan Jr. wanted to build a hideaway at Deer Shelter Rock, a 60-foot stone tower in southwestern Wisconsin. Jordan's family helped him purchase 240 acres, and he spent the next decade-plus tirelessly working to construct a home on and around the rock. Locals called him "the mountain goat," as they witnessed him repeatedly place stones and mortar into a basket, strap it to his back and haul it up the rock via ladder.

Fast-forward to 1960. Jordan's fantastical home was largely finished, although it wasn't so much a house as a collection of cozy nooks and fireplaces with massive hearths. Unfortunately for the private Jordan, the number of people who regularly begged for a peek inside grew uncomfortably high. To drive them away, he said tours cost 50 cents. To his dismay, they gladly ponied up.

At the end of the year, Jordan had raked in a surprising \$5,000 from his tours. The following year, he bagged \$34,000 — or \$340,000 today, when adjusted for inflation. He never looked back.

Now officially operating a tourist attraction, Jordan began amassing random collections for additional displays: bisque dolls, swords, scrimshaw artwork, Burma-Shave advertising signs. Then he built a network of sprawling buildings to house them all. These structures also contained his various creations, such as the Streets of Yesteryear, that enormous sea creature and a variety of music machines that eerily spring to life when fed a token.

"Alex loved musical machines and made sure he always had skilled workers that could create the machines he envisioned," says Jennifer Greene, the House on the Rock's director of operations. "Alex was in complete control of the process and had the perseverance to



Source: OpenStreetMap contributors

## The House on the Rock

**Where:** 8 miles south of Spring Green, Wis.

**Hours:** 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Thu.-Mon. through May 14 and from Sept. 25-Nov. 12. Daily May 15-Sept. 24 and Nov. 16-Dec. 31. Arrival before 3 p.m. is recommended.

**Admission:** \$20-\$36 adults.

**Info:** thehouseontherock.com.

make his dreams come true."

Two of those dreams were to create an Infinity Room and the world's largest indoor carousel, which today are guest favorites. His Infinity Room is a 218-foot glass-walled, cantilevered platform that juts out over the Wyoming Valley 15 stories below. His massive carousel, set aglow by 20,000 lights, holds 269 centaurs, dragons and other fantastical creatures — but no horses.

## Mystery is the point

As my group wanders through the attraction, which today also features a welcome center, interpretive center, two Asian gardens and an extensive system of exterior walkways, we continue to be shocked, amazed and baffled by what we see. A 1963 Lincoln Continental with suicide doors that's completely covered in blue patterned tiles. An antique, multi-barreled pistol akin

to a mini-machine gun. A bright red "humor tester" chair which, after a token is deposited, reveals whether your temperament is that of a sourpuss or a clown.

"It's so improbable that something like this exists," says John Junghans, a member of my party visiting from San Antonio.

Soon questions begin bubbling out of us. Why is there such little signage to explain what we're seeing? How did Jordan pay for everything? Are the mechanical instruments really playing, or are we hearing recorded music?

"I want to know all of this," says my daughter Maura, "but I'm actually glad they don't tell us. It adds to the mystique."

Exactly, says Greene. "Alex Jordan was very committed to not supplying a lot of information," she says. "He wanted the House on the Rock to be a mystery, and one that would amaze and captivate guests. He was not looking to create a museum."

To keep visitors engaged, Jordan carefully sited his collections and creations so that every room contained items appealing to a variety of tastes. He also took delight in placing pieces in a contrary and even shocking manner, perhaps to keep visitors unbalanced. To wit: In section three, dainty bisque dolls slowly spin around on carousels, while a creepy, skeletal rendition of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse hangs overhead.

After departing the House on the Rock, we immediately pass Taliesin, the home and studio of renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright would have been putting the finishing touches on his lifelong masterpiece just as Jordan was working on a masterpiece of his own, a few miles away.

Surely, both men appreciated the irony.

Melanie Radzicki McManus is a travel and adventure writer. She lives near Madison, Wis.

## KNOW & GO

### Flying on top

For the second consecutive year, Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP) has been named the best airport in North America.

"For MSP to be recognized by our travelers as one of the best in the world year after year is a testament to our focus on providing exceptional airport experiences so Minnesota thrives," said Brian Ryks, CEO of the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC), in a news release.

The top honor by the Airports Council International (ACI) global Airport Service Quality (ASQ) program was based on 465,000 travelers surveyed at nearly 400 airports and in more than 90 countries in 2022. The survey takes into account 30 key factors such as ease of check-in, security, cleanliness, shopping and dining.

Nearly 400 airports participate in the survey. This is the second straight year and sixth time in seven years that MSP has received the accolade for airports with 25 million to 40 million passengers per year.

NANCY NGO

### Passport wait times

The State Department is taking longer than usual to issue new and renew existing U.S. passports because record numbers of Americans are going overseas.

In recent months, the department was sometimes processing as many as 500,000 passports a week. That number is unprecedented, said Andres Rodriguez, lead community relations officer for passport services at the State Department.

As wonderful as renewed wanderlust may be for U.S. citizens, the wave of new applications has strained the State Department employees who process them. To confront the flood of passport applications, the department says it is "aggressively recruiting and hiring."

It's also warning citizens that processing a passport will take eight to 11 weeks. Expedited passports, which cost an additional \$60, will take five to seven weeks. And some countries, including popular European destinations, won't accept passports that have fewer than six months of validity remaining.

Last year, the U.S. government issued 22 million passports, a record and a jump of about 85% over 2020, the first year of the pandemic.

"All signs are pointing to having another record this year," Rodriguez said.

For questions about the process, or to check on an application, citizens can visit travel.state.gov.

LOS ANGELES TIMES



Christopher Reynolds • TNS Passports are being processed in unprecedented numbers.

### Traveling with kids

The Transportation Department released its latest tool to fight what it calls "junk fees": a chart that shows which major airlines have committed to "fee-free family seating."

According to the airline family seating dashboard, only three carriers had met the criteria to earn a green check mark: American, Frontier and Alaska all guarantee that kids 13 or younger will be able to sit next to an adult in their party at no additional cost.

In its news release, the DOT said that a four-month review last year found that no airlines guaranteed that parents and kids could sit together without additional charges, though most airlines said they would try to do so.

"DOT is not satisfied with airline statements that they will 'make efforts' to seat families traveling with children together at no additional cost," the department's website says. "The Department urges all airlines to guarantee family seating."

WASHINGTON POST

# Lost ring in rental car leads to a bill for \$452

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

**Q:** I recently rented a car with Enterprise in Miami. While I was using the vehicle, I lost my engagement ring. I told an employee about it, and he agreed to look for my jewelry.

The next day, I called Enterprise to see if they had found the ring. An employee told me they would charge me for some repairs while looking for the ring and that the ring was "a hazard."

Two days later, I found my engagement ring at home.

Eventually, I received a bill from the Enterprise claims department for \$452 for damage done to the car while looking for my ring. I told them I didn't think that was fair. I returned the car exactly as I had picked it up. Can you help me?

**A:** I've had plenty of cases involving renters damaging their cars. But this is the first story of a car rental company charging a customer for its own damage. Enterprise's bill is interest-

ing. It charged you almost \$100 for "scanning" the vehicle. Then there's work to the glove box, the instrument panel and almost eight hours of labor. It looks like the car rental company took your rental apart to find your engagement ring.

I'm not saying these charges are bogus. But someone from Enterprise should have apprised you of the extra charges for finding your ring. Unless you told the company, "Do whatever it takes to find the ring" — which you didn't — Enterprise should have

obtained approval before tearing the car apart.

Your case offers a lesson in the importance of effective communication. If you ask a company for something, make sure you get a price before it starts the work. If the price is right, try to get an estimate in writing. Otherwise, you could get broadsided by the final bill.

You might have sent a brief, polite appeal to Enterprise in writing, noting that you did not knowingly order the work performed on the car. If the company insisted on charging you,

then you could have appealed to one of the Enterprise corporate contacts I list on my website, Elliott.org.

I contacted Enterprise on your behalf to find out more about your charges. The company contacted you and said it would drop your \$452 bill. Keep an eye on your engagement ring the next time you rent a car.



Christopher Elliott is the founder of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit consumer organization. Contact him at [elliott.org/help](mailto:elliott.org/help) or [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).