

Seven world wonders contest courts controversy

Two millennia after the Greeks listed the seven wonders of the ancient world, a foundation created by a Swiss millionaire is about to announce seven sites elected as the modern world wonders in a global Internet vote.

A glamorous gala event will be held at a huge Lisbon stadium Saturday to make public the winners of a competition that has generated enthusiasm outside the western world but come under criticism from art experts and the United Nations.

India's Taj Mahal, the Christ statue of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, the Inca city of Machu Pichu in Peru, the Great Wall of China, the stone city of Petra in Jordan and Timbuktu in Mali are among the 20 candidates vying to be included among the seven wonders.

Other proposed sites are located in western countries, such as the Statue of Liberty in New York, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome or Spain's Alhambra palace.

The ancient world wonders listed by Greek scholars included the hanging gardens of Babylon in Iraq, a statue of Zeus and the Colossus of Rhodes in Greece, a temple of Artemis and the Halicarnassus mausoleum in Turkey as well as the Alexandria lighthouse in Egypt.

Only one of the ancient wonders, the great pyramid of Giza in Egypt, still stands.

The ancient wonders were all in or near the Mediterranean area and the project launched in 2000 by Swiss adventurer and millionaire Bernard Weber has aroused interest in economically less developed countries critical of a euro-centric view of world history.

When the Greeks compiled their list, new world wonder enthusiasts point out, they were not even aware of the existence of the Great Wall of China.

'Putting the Machu Pichu in the same category as the Eiffel Tower and the Colosseum is very exciting,' said Tia Viering of the New Seven Wonders Foundation.

'For the first time in history, we are creating a global memory,' Weber said.

A panel of experts headed by Federico Mayor Zaragoza, former director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), selected 20 candidates from among 77 initial ones.

More than 70 million votes have come in over the Internet and SMS messages in what is being billed as the first global democratic vote.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva urged citizens to vote for Rio's statue of Christ the Redeemer, the Jordanian royal family campaigned in favour of Petra, and the Peruvian government set up Internet terminals to encourage votes for Machu Pichu.

Companies and celebrities have joined in, with Brazilian telephone companies waiving the cost of SMS votes and Indian singers crooning about the beauty of the Taj Mahal.

Spain's King Juan Carlos and Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero voted for the Moorish palace-fortress of the Alhambra in Granada, but generally there has been little enthusiasm in western countries.

In the United States, for instance, the candidacy of the Statue of Liberty does not appear to have mobilised voters.

The most critical country, however, has been Egypt, which houses the only remaining ancient world wonder and where officials described Weber's project as unscientific and 'absurd.'

The New Seven Wonders Foundation finally removed the Giza pyramid from the list of candidates, giving it a special status as an honorary world wonder.

Weber has also been accused of self-promotion and of seeking financial gain.

The organisers of the competition claim that publicity will help to protect endangered monuments.

They pledge to use half of the funds raised through sponsorship, media rights and marketing schemes to restore monuments such as the Bamiyan Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001.

The Unesco, however, distanced itself from the new world wonders project, stressing it had no relation with the UN World Heritage Sites.

It was not sufficient to recognise the emotional value of certain sites, but they had to be evaluated with scientific criteria and protected with legal measures, Unesco said on its website.

Weber's project only reflected the opinion of people with access to the Internet, Unesco pointed out.

Voting was often based on nationalism rather than objective criteria, and there was no control to prevent the same people from voting many times, observers said.

'You cannot measure artistic quality with a popular vote,' Spanish art historian Francisco Calvo Serraller said. With such a method, he added, Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu football stadium - the seat of Real Madrid - could also be included on a list of world wonders.

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