



TICKET TO RIDE

If plans for the London Paramount entertainment resort are approved by the government in 2017, its creators believe it has the potential to become one of the most popular tourist attractions in the UK

BY JAMES WOOD

For nearly a quarter of a century, families and eager children on school trips are among those to have travelled across the English Channel to visit the Disneyland Paris theme park. It was only a matter of time before a similar attraction of competing stature would be proposed for the UK.

Plans for the London Paramount entertainment resort are well advanced. At the beginning of 2015, a land deal was agreed for the £3.2 billion project, on 353ha of mostly saltmarsh and a small amount of brownfield land, at the Swanscombe Peninsula near Ebbsfleet Garden City.

A planning application is being prepared by developer London Resort Company Holdings (LRCH) for possible submission in 2017. If the secretary of state for communities and local government grants permission, the attraction is scheduled to open in 2021, a date which chairman Steve Norris says LRCH remains committed to, despite the submission date being pushed back. Designation of the site by the UK government as a nationally significant infrastructure project – the first leisure scheme in the country to be given this status – has boosted the chances of success.

Having one of the world's most famous production companies, Paramount Pictures, at the forefront of the project has attracted other prestigious organisations too.

BBC Worldwide, Aardman Animations (behind the much-loved Wallace and Gromit) and the British Film Institute are among those to have signed agreements with London Paramount during the last year – all helping to create a unique crowd-puller. The project is now being marketed as combining the best of Hollywood – through Paramount – with the best of British, through the BBC.

Details of these organisations' participation are under wraps. What has been revealed indicates the resort will feature a theatre, a cinema, music clubs, hotels, shops, cafes, restaurants, bars and up to 210,000sq m of indoor and outdoor spaces for events. It has also been suggested that the project could include Europe's largest indoor water park.

CEO of London Paramount and executive director of LRCH, David Testa, explains: "Our landmark agreement with Paramount Pictures, the oldest major Hollywood studio in



Spectacular attraction – London Paramount will be a massive creator of jobs and boost the economy, a destination to rival Disneyland Paris.



existence, allows the resort access to iconic movies such as Mission: Impossible, Star Trek, The Godfather and The Italian Job.

“The entertainment resort will contain a number of themed zones, with exciting rides and attractions for families and children, as well as for more adventurous, thrill-seeking visitors.”

The search to find the perfect site for London Paramount began in 2013 and Testa says those behind the project looked at 15 or 16 locations before settling on the Swanscombe Peninsula.

“You always have to be careful when you’re selecting a location,” he says. “There are a number of factors to consider – such as minimising the impact a project such as this can have for people who already live in the area.”

So what qualities persuaded Testa of the Swanscombe Peninsula’s potential?

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DAVID TESTA, LRCH

“We chose the site for a number of reasons,” he says. “It has excellent connectivity to central London and the continent, it is accessible in 17 minutes from London St Pancras and is just over two hours away from Paris.”

Eurostar trains leaving from Ebbsfleet International Station make journeys to mainland Europe possible, which it is hoped will result in increased numbers of visitors from abroad.

There are other benefits too. “We will be regenerating a brownfield site, which has been isolated by its previous industrial uses,” says Testa – it was owned by Lafarge Tarmac for more than 140 years. “Through this project, we intend to harness the potential of the River Thames. We want to make it not only possible, but an attractive option for people to walk, cycle or bus around the site. The Development Consent Order proposal for





“London Paramount complements existing regeneration in the area providing up to 27,000 jobs, and it will act as a catalyst for the garden city in Ebbsfleet”

DAVID TESTA, LONDON PARAMOUNT



London Paramount also complements existing regeneration in the area by providing up to 27,000 new jobs, and it will act as a catalyst for regeneration at the garden city in Ebbsfleet.”

Projections indicate that 50,000 people will visit the site every day, equating to 15 million visitors a year, which would lead to a significant return on the £3.2 billion investment, with benefits for local businesses and employment for residents too.

The challenges now are to get planning consent and to raise the required funding. Kleinwort Benson has acted as financial adviser on the project since May 2015. The following October, news emerged that Chinese infrastructure and investment company, SinoFortone, intends to provide around £100 million – which Testa believes shows the global appeal of the project.

But the benefits the resort will bring to the local economy are also significant. Testa says the multimillion-pound investment will profit the economies of Dartford, Gravesham and elsewhere in Kent. “There will be an increase in economic activity in the area, leading to an associated increase in local spend,” he says.

Construction of the scheme is due to last around three years, leading to employment for skilled and semi-skilled workers. Job creation will extend beyond those employed directly at London Paramount with thousands of jobs also to be created in the supply chain.

Consultation with stakeholders and residents has been very positive, says Testa. More than 3,000 people attended the latest public exhibitions of the plan during April and May 2015 in Dartford and Gravesham. A scaled model and new visuals revealed what is proposed, and details of the themed zones have begun to emerge.

Fenlon Dunphy of Kuwati European Holding, the holding investment company

with a majority share in LRCH, believes the feedback was “hugely encouraging”.

“We are carefully considering all feedback provided with the intention to feed this into the proposals we submit to the secretary of state,” he adds.

Around 46 hours of public consultation took place in village halls, leisure centres, council offices and at Bluewater shopping centre.

Feedback was collected from those who gave their views on the masterplan, opinions were also sought on proposed transport options and the project’s approach to education and jobs.

Of 661 forms submitted, 84% approved of the draft masterplan, 83% backed the approach to walking, cycling and making use of the River Thames and 78% recorded their approval for the mitigation strategies proposed to protect the environment.

Improvements will be made to the roads, including a dedicated access route from the A2, and habitats will be created for wildlife, according to Testa. Maintaining strong relationships with the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation (EDC) is important in seeing the successful implementation of the project and Testa says this has been achieved: “We have a fantastic level of engagement with the EDC.

“Overall, we believe that London Paramount will be a world-class attraction, which will have a tremendous effect on the locality and we also have no doubt that it will attract millions of people from all over the world.”

As central government’s decision over the resort looms, Testa is confident that his ambitions will be brought to fruition.

Years from now, Parisian teachers may generate excitement by promising their pupils a school trip to the London Paramount entertainment resort, every bit as great as the undisputed popularity a visit to Disneyland Paris holds among British school kids. ●



National treasures –
Aardman Animations’
creations *Shaun the
Sheep* and *Wallace
and Gromit* could
feature at London
Paramount, along
with *Star Trek*.

