

How Ill a Wind?

Threatening to birds, bats, and beauty, wind farms can transform landscapes. Also, gallery glut in Carmel, and real peace in Central America.

By Jonathan Tourtellot

DRIVE WITH MY WIFE UP to the high, mountain-ringed plain of Lasithi, Crete, to see its famous profusion of classic Greek windmills, the kind with a triangular sail on each arm. Not far down another mountain road, we pause to admire several engines of 21st-century wind power: towering turbines, their mighty blades thwunk-thwunking away far above our heads. Gazing up, my wife says only, "Wow."

Despite the promise of smog-free electric power, controversy dogs the world's new wind turbines. Skeptics cite damage to both scenery and nature, since turbines have killed beneficial birds and bats in worrisome numbers. Environmentalists argue over the grimmer reaper: dirty air or turbines? Meanwhile proponents seek locations and designs that will reduce airborne carnage.

For travelers, the issue is aesthetics-definitely a matter of opinion. Turbine towers, high as a 30-story building, aren't pretty or

quaint, but they're certainly "wow"-worthy-and conspicuous. A long-term brouhaha is still raging over whether an array of towers planned for Nantucket Sound will ruin the view. But a smaller wind farm in the sea off Denmark is attracting, yes, tourism.

Which, then, is worse-a horizon wreathed in smog, or one lined with windmills? If better design or placement can solve the wildlife problem, current plans for a massive wind farm in North Dakota don't seem inappropriate.

After all, the windmills of the Great Plains-or Holland, or Greece-have each come to symbolize their locales. Perhaps in some future hydrogen-fueled age, today's wind turbines will end up on the nostalgia travel circuit, too.

* Carmel: Take This Art and . . .

I like art, you like art, all God's children like art-but how much is too much? When it has taken over everything, says Carmel, California. The town of 4,000, already home to 100-plus pricey art galleries, has restricted the opening of new galleries. Why? Retail space has become so dear that you can hardly find a shop to buy aspirin or underwear. Instead, jewelry shops (32!) and ritzy cafés cater to the clientele of galleries selling international artists' six-figure artworks. Even if you're rich, you may find more authenticity in

visiting a Carniel that has a better balance of shops and services. And under the new policies, you may see art galleries with actual local artists working on the premises.

* Open Borders in Central America

While visiting the Copán Maya ruins in Honduras recently, I noticed a parked station wagon with El Salvador plates: tourists, there for the weekend as casually as New Yorkers visiting Vermont. Once-troubled Central America is eliminating its elaborate border formalities-due in part to the imperative of tourism. Stopping only for a passport check, you can move among Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador with minimal hassle.

It's nice to know we travelers have power to heal international disputes. Just look at old enemies Greece and Turkey, for instance, brought to a grumpy détente by their mutual need for tourist revenue. The next time you buy a glass of retsina in Greece, or a bowl of coconut-milk seafood chowder in Honduras, you can feel good about doing your bit for world peace.