

# East of EDEN

With lush rainforests, rare specimens and exotic gardens, the Eden Project is literally growing. A decade after her first visit, **Ruth Stokes** discovers just how well it's blooming



**T**he Eden Project, I discover, is not an experience to be rushed. Not only is there a lot to see and do, but it can get pretty hot in the depths of the rainforest. I'm quite pleased when my guide, Carla Wentink, pauses to look at a short green plant with delicate yellow flowers. The sunlight streams in through the clear panels above, pushing the humidity up a notch.

'This tropical periwinkle tells a story,' Carla says. 'It's on the ground floor, so in a real rainforest it would get just two per cent of the light that comes through from the canopy. But in places where people have taken out the canopy from the trees, the lower level plants can't adapt to the light.' She points to the plant – at that moment, half the leaves are in sunlight and half are in shade. The sun has only been up for a few hours, yet the exposed foliage is already wilting. 'It's a beautiful example of how easy it is to disrupt the balance in nature.'

The delicate balance of the natural world and the need to build a sustainable future have been at the heart of the Eden Project's ethos since it was launched 10 years ago just outside St Austell in Cornwall. Plenty else has changed, however. I first visited the site just before its launch, when there were still traces of the



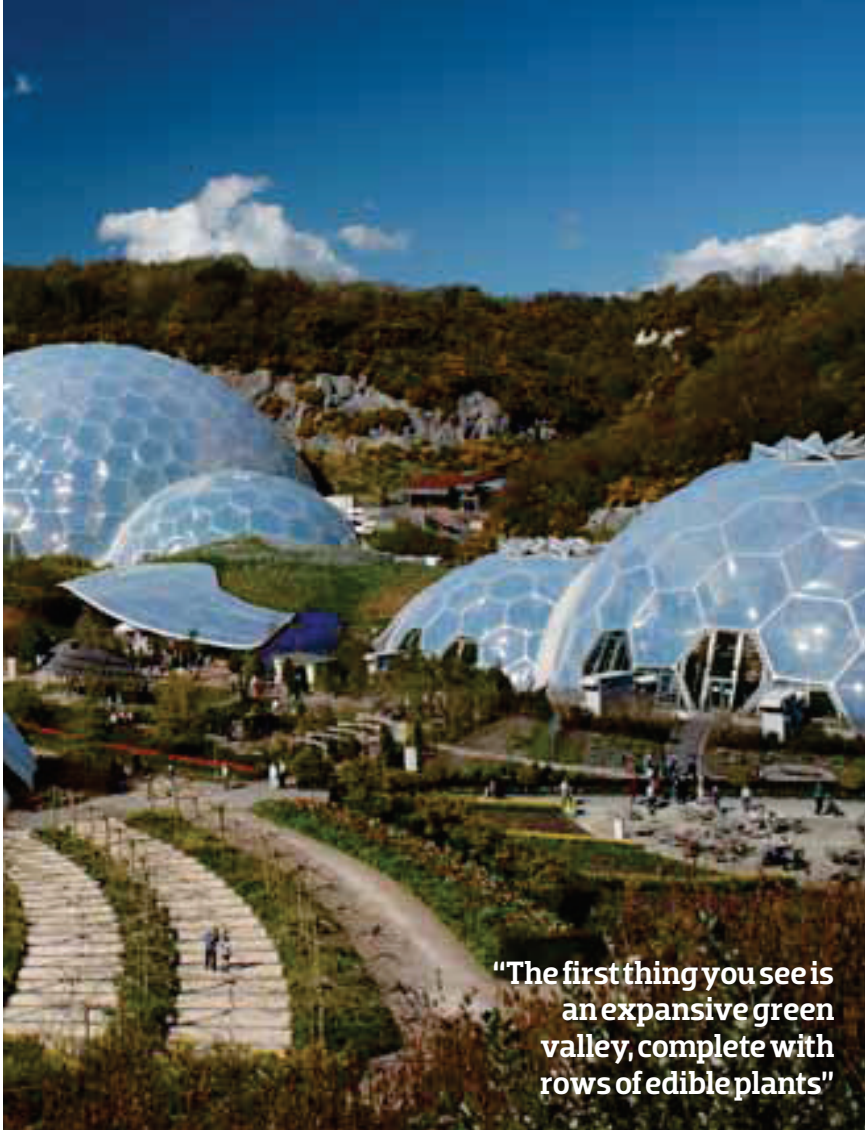
Inside the  
tropic biome

dusty clay pit that existed before. Now, the first thing you see when you step out of the Visitor Centre is an expansive green valley, complete with rows of edible plants, a Wild Cornwall section, a covered stage area, an educational building and, of course, the bubble-like 'biomes'.

The biomes are made with inflatable, transparent foil windows, designed to let in UV light. The smaller one maintains a Mediterranean climate between 9C and 25C, while the larger one keeps tropical temperatures between 18C and 35C. As I walk through each I encounter plants from different areas of the world – from South Africa to Malaysia and tropical South America. The uncovered section is known as the Outdoor Biome, and is equivalent in area to 30 football pitches.



Flowers flourish among the statues at the Eden Project



**"The first thing you see is an expansive green valley, complete with rows of edible plants"**

## WHAT'S ON AT EDEN 2011



### ROCK CLIMBING

**Until 4 September**

Choose from five different routes up the cliff face to the left of the Rainforest Biome, each of varying difficulty. £10



### FESTIVAL OF PLAY

**Until 4 September**

Kids can learn how to build a den from recycled materials, how to carry water with buckets, funnels and pipes, and enjoy circus lessons. Cost included in entry



### FAMILY OUTDOOR CHALLENGE

**Until 31 August**

Test your survival skills with a day of challenges, bush craft, storytelling and creativity. Choose either the Fire Quest or the Den Trial by Storm. Adults £25; Children £12.50 (includes entry to Eden)



### LABYRINTH

**Until 29 August**

Enjoy aerial acrobatics and stunts across the whole of the Eden Project, in a special show created for the attraction's 10th birthday and performed by the award-winning NoFit State Circus. Adults £25; Children £12.50

The visitor experience at Eden is a unique one. Over the years, the project has moved away from traditional tours in favour of something more interactive. Carla is part of the Pollination Team, which is there to tell stories, run demonstrations, put on public performances and offer tasters (their smoothie made from crushed Baobab seeds is particularly good). Scheduled storytelling – often relating the environment to human behaviour – happens every day at midday and two o'clock in the Mediterranean biome, but it's also possible to stumble upon impromptu events.

Eden has developed artistic leanings, using sculptures dotted around the site to convey ideas about nature and sustainability, and hosting events in the summer months. For the most active visitors, a climbing wall is available in the Outdoor Biome, while a treetop lookout offers a view over the canopy in the rainforest.

There's also plenty on offer for children. For a few years now, the Eden Project has run den building competitions for families, and this autumn will see more of the same.

**ABOVE**  
The Eden Project  
**BELOW**  
Bronze statue of a bull at the Eden Project




In winter, the stage area will be transformed into an ice skating rink. The Core educational centre also offers interactive displays all year round, and in the Global Garden, or allotment area, adults and children alike can plant a seed and take it home. When I visit, I see groups of school children with maps and clipboards, out on a treasure hunt for food.

The project has become hugely popular, drawing around a million visitors every year. 'People can find out how chocolate grows or how coffee sits on a plant,' explains Carla, who has been at Eden for nine years. 'They can see a cola nut or rubber plants. This whole place is about making people love plants again. We try to spread awareness, but in a playful manner.'

When it comes to promoting sustainability, the Eden Project is doing more than just talking the talk. As well as cooking the herbs it grows in its café and using the water collected from the valley, the project hopes to build the UK's first ever geothermal power plant on-site. Power is expected to be delivered

from late 2013 and should produce enough electricity to power Eden and around 4,000 households in the surrounding area.

It is big ideas such as this that define Eden's mission, but it's the project's attention to detail that really makes it worth visiting. An ever-changing collection of plants and displays reflect events and discoveries around the world, meaning there is always something new to see. 'We want to make people more perceptive,' Carla tells me, smiling. 'In the end, we're more about people than plants. What we're looking to influence is human behaviour – the plants will look after themselves.' Now that's certainly an idea worth taking time over.

 **The Eden Project is about a 20-minute bus ride from St Austell station. Admission prices start from £17 for adults and £6.35 for children aged 5-16 if bought in advance online. Concessions available. Get money off your entry ticket by showing a valid bus ticket at the Eden Ticket Office. Go to [www.edenproject.com](http://www.edenproject.com)**