

Vinopolis - London's wine-based tourist attraction

24 Nov 2004 by JR

Wine-loving visitors to London who have half a day to spare could do far worse than visit Vinopolis on the south bank of the Thames between London and Southwark Bridges.

The easiest and arguably most scenic way to get there is to approach it from the City of London (St Paul's or Mansion House tube station for example) and walk across Southwark Bridge with Vintners Hall and the headquarters of the Vintgners Company, Masters of Wine, Wine and Spirit Education Trust, Wine and Spirit Benevolent Society and Wine Standards Board all at 1 Queen Street Place on your right, on the corner of Upper Thames Street and Southwark Bridge.

Once on the south bank, take the steps down by the Financial Times building on the left and walk along the river, past the pub until Vinopolis hoves into view on the right, under the southern reaches of the Cannon Street railway bridge. (The alternative is to go via London Bridge station, Borough High Street exit and make your way via Borough market, a good fresh food market at the weekend. You may have to ask the way.)

Vinopolis was launched with much hue and cry in July 1999 as a three-million-pound tourist attraction for wine lovers. So, now that 'Vinopolis, City of Wine' is up and running, as opposed to existing in the dubious form of a sheaf of ecstatic press releases and a hopeful gleam in the eye of the investors, is the reality worth visiting and how is it doing?

The first thing to be said is that the site itself is fantastic - fantastically awkward for the architects no doubt, as it is an oddly shaped warren of soaring brick arches wedged under a major railway line just south of the river Thames in an area which does not have its own tube stop. But the majesty of these towering Victorian vaults is inescapable, and the designers have been clever enough to make the most of them, leaving the warm brickwork fully exposed and well-lit. (Note that word warm. Most British railway arches are so damp that they've traditionally been used for wine storage, to keep all those corks nice and moist, so someone must have performed some dehumidifying miracles.)

The second thing that really surprised me is the quality of the design and materials. (The initial storyboards I was shown were the work of one of those naff artists who seem to have cornered the market in drawings for new airport lounges and midmarket housing developments: lots of 1960s women pointing their toes, that sort of thing. But the real thing is 21st century.)

Most London tourist attractions are aimed at, if not necessarily the lowest common denominator, then certainly those who will not notice whether the lavatories are lined with brushed stainless steel or scuffed hardboard. Much to my surprise and delight, the original Vinopolis gave every impression of aiming at some major design award.

That said, Vinopolis' original design turned out to be almost too tasteful for the masses - too much space. So the original tour has been redesigned with more clutter, and possibly more interest, but I imagine the original designer is pretty sniffy about it.

But visitors to London will really want to know, is it worth paying £11.50 to visit Vinopolis?

I suppose it all depends a) how much you know and b) how bored you are, but it's difficult to see exactly at whom the principal (educational) circuit, 'the Wine Odyssey', is aimed. Not at the deaf, that's for sure. The printed word is virtually banned. You wander from arch to arch with your elegantly designed, black leather audio guide (in six languages) slung round your neck. As you enter a new area, infra-red beams trigger the relevant introductory commentary. Otherwise you can key in the number posted on various exhibits for a brief explanation. Mostly it works - although if you're a real wine nut, you may not learn a great deal. (The bits I found most stimulating were a chart showing the relative altitudes of different wine regions and a large map of the vineyards of the ex Soviet Union, but this probably says more about how weird I am than Vinopolis.)

The scripts and graphics are unimpeachable (I had expected to be nitpicking throughout) but, in the end, not desperately exciting or informative. If you knew nothing about wine, you'd have to rely on a distinctly atypical video sequence on winemaking in hollowed out tree-trunks and buried earthenware jars in Georgia to learn how the stuff was actually made. There are not many moving parts, and none of that archival detail that can be so fascinating. Surely they could have

found some old order books? Or, if they're so terrified of history, even a list of all the vine varieties and clones a modern nursery has to offer? Another example of phobia of the printed word.

They've tried hard not to be too, too stuffy, but arguably not hard enough. The voices (those of Hugh Johnson, Oz Clarke, Matthew Jukes and moi) are uniformly plummy. There's too much space devoted to France - although the Australian film sequences shown as though on a long-haul flight provide some welcome respite from the baroque doc style that predominates.

The breaths of fresh vinous air come in liquid form. Originally visitors would emerge, blinking, into the tasting hall only at the very end but the tour has sensibly been redesigned to offer tasting tables along the entire route, so glasses become rose-tinted earlier on. Visitors redeem vouchers for five quite generous pours chosen from dozens of different wines (a further five cost £2.50). These, of course, are sponsored, so it's more Dourthe than Domergue, for example, but on one visit there was vintage champagne (Nicolas Feuillatte) and Napa Valley Cabernet BV Georges De Latour 1995, no less. (The selection is changed every few months.)

And if the fresh air is not to be found in every single glass, it certainly emanates from the mouths of the young, enthusiastic staff here - a good proportion of them non-Brits, I should admit. They positively bristle with encouragement to try new wines and talk, potentially *ad nauseum*, about them.

After this, in the best traditions of tourist attractions everywhere, comes the sales pitch. You are directed towards the Vinopolis branch of Majestic Wine Warehouses, an excellent shop selling wine glasses, books and paraphernalia, another selling Neals Yard's superior cheeses, coffee etc, and you are encouraged to eat and drink some more.

So far, numbers through the ultra-chic, electronic turnstiles have fallen well short of the originally projected half million a year and, wouldn't you know it, the most financially successful parts of the operation have been the cavernous restaurant, Cantina Vinopolis, and the newer wine bar Wine Wharf which has one of London's best, constantly changing selections of wine by the glass and a range of good, light food. (Vinopolis has also enjoyed great success as a place for corporate entertaining, so atmospheric is it.)

It's not much good for visitors with children (although older ones might be diverted by The Clink, a prison museum next door, or the London Dungeon not too far away). And last entry is generally around 6pm with the tour closing at 8pm (Monday and Saturday are currently an hour later), although on holidays last entry can be as early as 4pm.

But Vinopolis will give wine-friendly visitors to London the warm, cosy feeling of being surrounded by like-minded people. You don't even have to buy an entrance ticket to absorb this heady, vinous atmosphere; just wander round the shops and have a glass or a meal in the Cantina Vinopolis or Wine Wharf. It's a beautiful space devoted to wine - and, outside the Napa Valley (which has lent Vinopolis part of the Hess art collection), the world boasts far too few of those.

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