

Cursed Tourism: Unique and Surreal Tourist Attractions

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Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

**(Note: transcript
consists of episode
outline)**

Bubblegum Alley

This next one is nearby. It's
in San Luis Obispo, home
of cal poly, two hours away

from here. If you're ever super bored and you think to yourself, I want to be bored and also disgusted and probably catch something, check out bubblegum alley. It's exactly what it sounds like...an alley coated on both sides with ABC bubblegum. Already been chewed. It's fucking gross. There are conflicting stories regarding the alley's history but the tradition of sticking gum on the walls was most likely started in the 50s by high school kids. That tracks. I was a disgusting teenager. According to a popular blog dedicated to San Luis Obispo, because apparently that's something that exists, "Bubblegum Alley is a must-see in SLO because it's not every day you can see an entire walkway

lined with gum,"

And none of that statement is true. The alley is not a must-see and you can *absolutely* see it every day if you live in San Luis Obispo and happen to be creepy AF. Also, if it *were* true that you can't that this alley is something you can't see every day... cool? "It's not every day you can see an alley teeming with dried spittle and bacteria." Yeah...good. "Over the years, San Luis Obispo residents have wavered on their opinions toward the icky tradition, coming together every now and then to campaign for its removal. Still, the city's Chamber of Commerce lists the alley as a "special attraction." So there's still the occasional complaint but it seems to me that the

controversy has been settled, because the city has allowed vendors to place bubblegum dispensers at the entrance to the alley. Advantage, bubblegum. so for the foreseeable future you can head to San Luis Obispo and add your own unique strain of hepatitis to the spit wall.

Ark Encounter

So you know how there are Harry Potter super fans, and the tourism industry has stepped up and provided various wizarding experiences around the world to cater to all of the muggles and slitherins and gryffendorians? Im not a Harry Potter expert. Well just like there are super fans of Harry potter there are also super fans of Jesus. And the Christian tourism industry does not

disappoint. There are all kinds of wacky ass Bible-themed tourist attractions that seek to invoke the nostalgia that many Christians feel for a fantasy era of floods and plagues and being subjected to the whims of a vengeful God. Take the Kentucky Ark Encounter. (Please.) the Ark encounter is a tourist attraction celebrating Noah's Ark and the famous biblical flood from genesis, because who wouldn't want to use their vacation time to travel to Bumfuck Kentucky to experience the extermination of life on earth. Like, these people know that Disneyland is an option, right? I guess you could do both. After spending time at the happiest place on earth, I want to celebrate the drowning of it. The

beautiful cleansing of humanity. I kind of DO want to celebrate that.

There are so many bizarre Christian Attempts to bring the Bible to life, but we're going to focus on Kentucky's Ark Encounter. this "lifesize" recreation of Noah's Ark— I put that in quotes because for something to be "life" sized it would presumably have had to have existed in real life —is located in northern Kentucky about 40 miles south of Cincinnati Ohio. Btw it's so weird to me when tourist attractions use the word "encounter." Because you don't encounter things on purpose. You could have an encounter with a lion in Africa. You're not going to arrive home from work and

encounter your couch. The definition of encounter is "An unexpected or casual meeting with someone or something" If you can see it on the horizon and you bought a ticket, that's not an encounter. Does this ark ambush people? I don't want anything to do with a sneaky ark. Ark experience? Sure. Ark encounter? No thank you. Anyway, the ark was the creation of Ken Ham, a Christian fundamentalist and textual literalist originally from Australia who founded the anti-evolution, anti-science "answers in genesis" organization. Ken believes that the Bible is a 100% true story with no embellishment whatsoever. So: ladies turned into salt, 900-year-old men, giants and demons and zombie

resurrections...you know, non-fiction. The Bible is an autobiography. A memoir of jehova. And on the eight day...he typed. Or dictated to his phone. God would probably be ahead of his time. He's the rockin' the iPhone 15 right now. The ark itself is five stories tall, and one and a half football fields long, and contains an animatronic talking Noah along with his seven family members, and sculptures of all of the ark animals. It also features a ton of nifty-looking museum style exhibits, including an artistic depiction of the rainbow covenant. Do you know about this thing? MFFI is the best, I love learning these kinds of facts. The rainbow covenant is from genesis nine, it's the biblical passage in which God informs Noah that he

has created rainbows, and that these arches of color will appear in the wake of storms as a reminder of God's promise to never flood the earth again. God is like, "look, I lost my temper alright? I know that. Sometimes I just get overwhelmed with god stuff, ruling the universe bureaucracy, and I lose my mind and I murder all of humanity. But it's not going to happen again. This time I mean it. I've changed. I'm not the same vengeful deity I was 40 days and nights ago. Listen, I got you something as a token of my love and a symbol of our genocide-free future. Look how pretty this is. I call it a rainbow. It's an optical illusion that lasts about thirty seconds, but it's very pretty. So let's just move past the whole

extermination of humanity thing. Look at all those colors. Those fleeting colors. Think about the good times...remember when we were walking in the sand, and you looked down and realized there was only one set of footprints? And you were like, get off my back, god, you're heavy as fuck. Remember when I created everything? We can recreate paradise together, the way things use to be, baby." I've pushed this domestic violence metaphor too far. I do want to mention that it was pointed out to me that the rainbow covenant only applies to flooding. God can still purge the world with fire, or plague, or velociraptors, he's God he's very creative. Creating is his thing. So next time you see a

rainbow, remember that it's God's promise that he'll come up with a much more horrific death for you next time. Thank you Lydia, our resident preacher's daughter, for helping me brush up on my Sunday school nonsense. So There are other exhibits. One of them seeks to explain how Noah could have fit two of every animal on his boat. Because the current estimate is that there are around 6.5 million species of land animal in the world. So here's the very creative explanation: "How did Noah fit all those animals? Noah didn't take two of every species on the Ark—only two of each "kind" of animal. The biblical "kind" is actually more like the "family" level of classification. That's a lot fewer animals! All of the

animals, food, storage, and supplies would have fit comfortably on the ark!" Cool. I also like to just say things, thank God we live in a capitalist country with freedom of speech where I can make dubious statements with minimal if any consequences, and publish nonsensical assertions online with zero fact checking in a country in which it's legal to profit from blatant falsehoods. 'Murica! My favorite exhibit illustrates life in the evil pre-flood world, in which humanity had become corrupt and wicked, and the exhibit is a lifelike depiction of a bloodthirsty crowd cheering on gladiators in an arena as they battle vicious carnivorous dinosaurs. I love this so much. So this depiction of the shenanigans on pre-flood

earth apparently help explain the God 's rationale for wiping out humanity and starting over, and honestly, yeah. That's the final straw.

When you create a world and it goes totally off the rails, like you turn your back for 30 seconds and when you look back down at earth it's just depravity and wickedness and dinosaur-human combat, it's time to shake that Etch-a-Sketch. from their website: "Ark Encounter is the largest timber-frame structure in the world, built in part by skilled Amish craftsmen from standing dead timber." It looks very beautiful and authentic and rickety as fuck. Maybe they should have used living timber, like trees that were recently alive, because the interior appears structurally

sketchy. The official slogan of the ark encounter is "bigger than imagination" which, OK. Right before covid Jodi and I spent a week on the largest cruise ship in the world, so I guess my imagination is pretty big. But The ark is a decent sized boat. Or I guess I should say it's decent sized for a non-boat. Because this thing is not anywhere near the ocean. It's in landlocked Kentucky. It's literally just a big building, laid on its side, and it's not even very big for a big building. How many arks do you think you could fit in the Empire State building? I didn't look that up, but I'm betting it's a lot.

The Ark Encounter cost 120 million to make,

significantly more expensive than Noah's version, inflation is a bitch. Noah's was free, he just needed a saw and a hammer and a forest, no contractors or cranes or tractors. It was a DIY project. Cmon Ken Ham, where's the authenticity? You wanna recreate a Bible story, recreate the story. Bust out a saw and some work ethic. It took Noah 70 years, but Noah was also supposedly over 500 years old when he started construction, so a 69 year old whippersnapper like Ken ham should be able to slap an ark together in a couple decades.

I have to be honest, I want to visit this thing so bad. It looks like crazy bonkers fun, all that's holding me back is the \$50 ticket price and more

importantly the fact that I would be financially supporting Ken Ham. Because the organization is more than a little controversial. First off, it received a ton of tax breaks and incentives from the city, county, and state, and I'm sorry but it's fucking ridiculous that taxpayers helped fund a religious for-profit tourist attraction. Not only that,

"As a condition of employment, the museum and ark staff of 900, including 350 seasonal workers, must sign a statement of faith rejecting evolution and declaring that they regularly attend church and view homosexuality as a sin." Members of Ken Ham's "answers in genesis" Organization have accused the creators

of SpongeBob SquarePants and various Disney films of pushing an evolutionary agenda, and in 2020 AIG released a competitor to Disney+ called answers.TV. They also recently lit up the ark in rainbow colors to reclaim the rainbow symbol from the demonic gays. I added the demonic part, but they were thinking it.

Did I mentioned the zip lines? Oh yeah, there are zip lines. Because of course. There's also a planetarium, which promises to show you the heavens from a biblical perspective. The literal heavens.

We've spent enough time on this stupid nonsense, but I do want to point out that there is an ongoing

lawsuit between Ken Ham and an insurance company as a result of the ark being damaged in 2017 by, wait for it, a rain storm. You can't make this stuff up.

Aokigahara (ow-key-ga-hara)

Japan's Mount Fuji is an active volcano that last erupted in the 1700s, but the most recent truly epic eruption was in 864 CE, and that's when the volcano layed down a carpet of lava over a particular 12 miles on its northwestern flank. This area would later sprout a thick covering of trees so dense that it would be referred to as the sea of trees. Which is slightly more appealing than its other nickname: suicide forest. If any of our listeners have heard of Aokigahara forest recently,

it's most likely because a douchebag waste-of-breath American YouTuber who shall not be named shot an extremely disrespectful video of a dead body there, but we're going to ignore that and just focus on the tragic fact that this forest hosts as many as 100 suicides a year, so many that there is now a sign at the entrance to the forest advising suicidal visitors to think of their parents and the family they'd be leaving behind and encouraging them to reconsider. And of course because humans are who we are, the forest has become a major tourist attraction. The most popular methods of suicide in the forest are drug overdose and hanging, oh and did I mention that this area of Mount Fuji often hosts

school children on field trips? Highly educational field trips. It seems like at this point they know better than to head into the actual forest itself, but maybe let's not take kids to an area where we have to actively avoid the place where all the dead bodies are. The most likely theory as to why this forest became a popular suicide destination is that it was originally used for the practice of Ubasute, which is a Japanese word that signifies the abandoning an elderly parent in a remote location to die. There's a Japanese word for that. Not great. They were saying "that guy left his elderly parents in the forest to die" so often that they were like, "we've got to come up with a shortcut. It's taking up entirely too much off

my day, describing all of the parent-killing that's been going on around here."

So all of the rampant geronticide in the forest led to myriad ghost stories and an association with death and an overall morbid reputation which presumably attracts people who want to die. Suicide is a major problem in Japan, a country with higher suicide rates than most developed nations. And sadly, people who commit suicide often seek out locations that are known to be popular among suicidal people... many psychologists speculate that this is a subconscious way of seeking out a group, a cohort, feeling connected to people who are experiencing the same sense of hopelessness.

Surges in the suicide rate tend to occur in March, which coincides with the end of the fiscal year. In Japan, even more so than many other western nations, employment and financial success can be inextricably tied to one's sense of self-esteem and social status. I read a CNN interview with a man named Taro, who had survived his suicide attempt in Aokigahara. "Taro bought a one-way ticket to the forest, having been fired from his job at an iron manufacturing company." he slit his wrist but was saved by a hiker. Side note: Maybe we shouldn't be selling one way tickets to the suicide forest, I'm just saying. Or at least let's check in with the purchasers. That's a red flag. That's a red flare. Another factor in

Japanese suicide rates is that there isn't as much of a stigma in Japan against suicide, yet there's a pretty extreme stigma surrounding mental illness. So you might be judged more harshly for being mentally ill than for attempting to end your life because of it. Religion also plays a part. In Christianity there are believed to be consequences in the afterlife if you commit the sin of suicide. But Japan isn't as heavily Christian as the western world, and in fact, in Japan, one of the words for suicide is, "jiketsu," which roughly translates to "decide for yourself," So for some, suicide may seem like a proactive decision, more acceptable than seeking help. Just goes to show how the stigma against mental illness can be as

damaging as the illness itself, if not more so.

Isla De Las Munecas (Island of the dolls)

This is the story of an exceedingly creepy tourist location, but it's also the story of an exceedingly creepy man named Don Julian Santana Barrera. It takes some sifting to unearth or assemble an accurate backstory for this guy. Wikipedia will tell you that he was the owner of a tiny Mexican island, but after additional research it has become clear that he was the owner of an island in the same way that you're the owner of any candy wrapper you find on the sidewalk. If no one else wants it, and you claim it,

it's yours now. Other articles refer to him as the "caretaker" of the island, and, yeah. same situation. You can be the official caretaker of any candy wrapper you choose. This tiny island near Mexico city was indeed the candy wrapper of islands, it was small and kind of filthy and no one was using it, and so Don Barrera moved in, and that's where the metaphor kind of breaks down. Can't move into a gum wrapper. But I stuck with it for I feel an admirable amount of time. What happened next is debatable, but what is clear is that Don Barrera slowly became more and more eccentric, which is a very polite way of saying he lost his everloving mind. He would later claim that there was a specific incident that led to his

erratic behavior: he found a drowned girl face down in a lagoon, and not long after that a doll washed up on the island's shore. He believed that the doll belonged to the girl, and in some versions of the tale he insisted that the girl's spirit inhabited the doll. In order to "appease the spirit of the deceased girl," he hung the doll up from a tree. Ok. Nothing appeases a restless spirit like a lynching. But for whatever reason, Barrera began collecting dolls, and stringing them up with fishing line and rope all over the island. Every type of weird plastic doll that he could scrounge from garbage bins and dumpsters, in every state of disrepair. With zero protection from the elements, the dolls slowly disintegrated, and Barrera

replaced many of them over time, and eventually the island was host to one crazy old man and a constant shifting population of rotting dolls. Word spread, and people began trekking to the island to see the dolls, and a tiny industry evolved around ferrying tourists to the island, an industry mostly run by the son of Don Barrera. In 2001, Barrera was found face down in the water, drowned in exactly the same location where he had claimed to have found the girl years before. The strange circumstances of his death resulted in some modest media attention, which in turn fueled tourism. To this day thousands of tourists visit the island of the dolls every year, many of them bringing their own dolls to

string up in the memory of Don Barrera. The creepy, disturbing memory of creepy disturbing Don Barrera

Bunker 42

From a place I have no interest in visiting to the opposite extreme, I super want to check out this next one. I won't, because of my many and varied phobias, but I WANT to. Bunker 42 is a decommissioned Soviet era command center buried some 65 meters (or more than 200 feet) below the city of Moscow. The entrance is disguised as a nondescript, generic, unattractive building, which conceals a flight of 288 stairs dropping some 15 stories into the earth and leading to a series of tunnels and heavy airlock-

style doors and Soviet communication technology...and a restaurant. The entire bunker has been reimagined as a kitschy tourist trap and is still under development with an underground spa planned for the future, but I just kind of love every part of this because it's this cynical scammy tourist trap that is built on a genuine creepy authentic underground command and communication center that was capable of sustaining 600 workers for a month using air recyclers, diesel generators, food storage, and artesian wells for drinking water. Workers reached the facility via special metro trains that only ran at night. The modern version of the facility represents a

connection to the Cold War era that bridges the divide between Soviet, communist Russia and contemporary capitalist Russia. It's fascinating. And apparently surreal. A private company purchased the bunker in 2006 and gutted the facility so that almost nothing except the heavy doors and Metal paneling remain. They then reconfigured the design to conform to what they think tourists would expect to see inside a Soviet bunker.

from a darktourism article by a man who paid to take the tour, in one of the checkpoints "a dummy stalin taring contently into space in front of a lemon portrait on the far wall and a Lenin bust in front of him on the desk. From the ceiling were hung several delicate chandeliers,

providing an odd juxtaposition with the heavy steel ceiling.

"All these interiors are obviously fake and just there for effect. Stalin had long been dead before the bunker became properly operational and it is more than doubtful that he would have been given such a plush office (on a stage!) here, when this was an Air Force command bunker (and anyway, Stalin had his own bunker elsewhere)."

JEJU LOVE LAND

If you ever find yourself on Jeju Island in South Korea—the largest South Korean island—and you feel like sharing an extremely awkward experience with a bunch of strangers, be sure to visit Love Land, a

sex-themed interactive sculpture park. Obviously the park is 18 and up, but if you have a family, if you and wifeness are raising some little

MacCrazyGoNutzes by then, they can hang out in the adjacent child-friendly anime-themed play area.

Super wholesome. You have to keep your children occupied while you get all horned up in public, that's sex tourism 101.

The park is about the size of two football fields, I'm not sure if that's American football or soccer football but either way you can view all 140 of the...

attractions...in about an hour. Or you can take your time. You know...Edge.

I took a look at some of the sculptures...for research. The park's mascots, which greet visitors at the entrance,

are a phallus wearing yellow mittens and a vagina with a floppy hat. There's a life size depiction of a man having sex with a woman from behind through a doorway. The door is very thick and you can't see his actual penis but the sex act is not anatomically feasible unless this guy is hung like a mule. He has an expression on his face like he's passing a kidney stone, he is not happy, there might be splinters involved, it's a very confusing piece of art. There is a sculpture of a massive hand emerging from the ground, middle finger plunged into a vagina made of multicolored tiles. There is a giant masturbating golden woman that tourists like to photograph themselves molesting.

That's a good look for your Instagram. There are others that are super artsy and creative and you just have to see these. I can't do them Justice. I'll try. Like the line of urinals that are flanked by statues of various naked men, mostly geriatric, who seem to be dangling their penises over the urinals and peeing into them from behind, so that if you were to use one of these urinals you'd be practically making out with a ceramic old man. It's a weird place. There's a goat-footed pan-type character banging a human lady, there's actually a lot of straight up bestiality, there's a dog statue in full color with his leg raised as if he's peeing but with his red rocket on full display. The lipstick is out of the tube. It's fucking weird.

So although the park didn't open until 2004, the genesis of this place supposedly goes back to the 1970s. You could say the seeds were planted in the disco era. Due to lingering policies related to the Korean War, travel outside of the country was restricted in the 70s, and as a result, many newlywed couples would honeymoon on Jeju island. And at the time, arranged marriages were extremely common, so many of these couples were for all intents and purposes strangers, and very sexually inexperienced. So—and this is the part that strikes me as dubious—supposedly the island became known as being a “center for sex education.” I don't even know what that means, but various articles mentioned that

local hotels would offer erotic entertainment to help couples relax. And somehow this led to a bunch of students in 2002 creating porn statues, which were then put on display in 2004...question mark. Sure. Translation: we need a non-sleazy backstory for this porn park. But whatever. We don't kink shame, so go check out Fido's red rocket while your kids play nearby, ya horny weirdo.

Carhenge

So if you ever get homesick for jolly old England, but you don't want to travel 6,000 miles, I have an alternative that is only 1/6th as far. In the town of Alliance Nebraska stands an almost-to-scale replica of the sacred ceremonial site on

England's Solsbury plain known as Stonehenge. In fact the only difference is that instead of giant slabs of stone, the Nebraska henge is constructed of rusty old cars. But otherwise it's pretty much exactly the same.

Back in 1987, Jim Reinders was a man with a vision and seemingly a lot of free time. He decided to build carhenge as a tribute to his late father, and he worked tirelessly with help from friends and family—some very patient and tolerant friends and family. I gotta give it to this guy, my friends and family are not that cool. None of them have taken seriously my lifelong goal of building an Eiffel Tower out of dildoes. He said that he and his friends built the henge with just "blood sweat and beers." Just like

the Druids. I'm pretty sure that's how Stonehenge was built. Just a bunch of hillbilly druids with way too much time and mead. A song that Reinders and his friend sang during the construction: "By day I plant cars, by night I make bars." I don't even know what that means, but That's the level of poetry I expect from Nebraska. The cars are all vintage models from the 50s and 60s, some of them planted with their hoods in the ground and wheels in the air, others welded together and straddling the upright cars like the lintel stones of the original Stonehenge. They're all painted grey to appear more stoney. Reinders had spent years in England "studying" Stonehenge, which as best as I can tell means he looked at it pretty often

and may have taken some photos. But he certainly talks a good game.

"There's a circle of cars, with a heel stone, slaughter stone, and two station stones (the honor of depicting the heel stone went to a 1962 Cadillac). The 96-foot-in-diameter creation has been built to scale, and it mimics Stonehenge's current, dilapidated state. All 38 of the major stones found at Stonehenge are represented here at Carhenge."

Construction took approximately a week. According to Jim, "We were able to reduce the time of the original Stonehenge construction by 1,999 years and 51 weeks...Furthermore, their foreign stones had come only the 250 miles from Wales while we had a car

from Japan, some 6,000 miles." Yeah. Take that, druids. Why didn't you just use a forklift, and international supply chain? Idiots.

Carhenge is now officially known as the Car Art Reserve, and entrance is free, though a donation is encouraged. just bring a bud light.

Sedlec Ossuary, Czech Republic

The Paris sewer system

Glass beach ca

Catacombs

Wang Saen Suk Hell Garden - Thailand

Hakone Kowakien
Yunessun Spa Resort –
Tokyo

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