



ZAHA HADID

ARCHITECT OF THE FUTURE

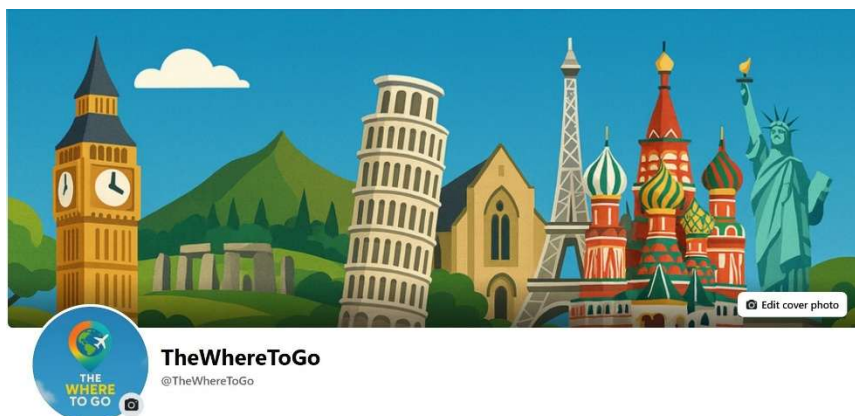
The inside cover for your information.....



This guide to Zaha Hadid's work is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can find a video of the places visited for this guide on my YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo. Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo.



Introduction



Zaha Hadid (1950–2016) was a visionary architect known for her bold, futuristic designs and pioneering role as a woman in a male-dominated field. She was born in Baghdad and studied mathematics at the American University of Beirut before moving to London to study architecture.

Zaha Hadid moved to London in the 1970s to study at the Architectural Association School of Architecture. Her early work was influenced by Russian Constructivism and abstract painting, which is evident in her dynamic, often fragmented architectural drawings.

In her early days, she had a reputation as a 'paper architect' because many of her designs were too avant-garde to move beyond the sketch phase and actually be built. As a result, her early career was marked by unbuilt but highly acclaimed conceptual designs.

She embraced sharp angles, curves and fluid forms that often looked like they belonged in science fiction. Her style combined art, mathematics and technology, creating spaces that felt organic, sculptural and completely new.

In 2004 she became the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize which is widely considered to be the Nobel prize for architecture. In 2012, she was made a Dame for services to architecture. Her design for the Heydar Aliyev Centre in Baku, Azerbaijan won her further awards.

In February 2016, the month preceding her death at the age of 65, she became the first woman to be awarded the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Despite her passing, her influence endures.

Her firm, ZHA, continues to design ground-breaking buildings worldwide. She inspired a new generation of architects, especially women and those from underrepresented backgrounds, proving that vision, determination and creativity can reshape the world.

Her architecture is not just about buildings—it's about movement, emotion, and the future. She once said, 'There are 360 degrees, so why stick to one?' That spirit of exploration and boldness continues to define her work and legacy.



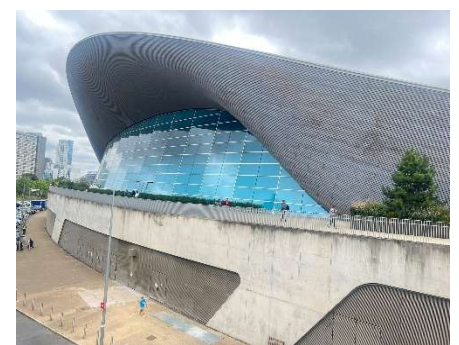
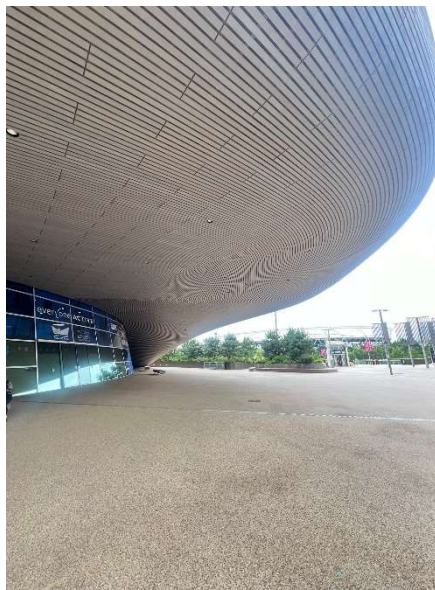
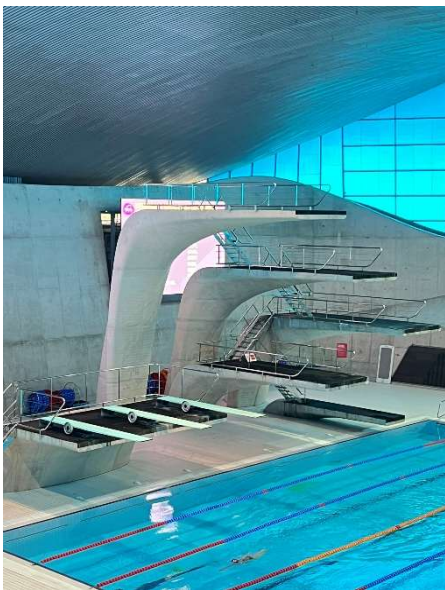
Aquatics Centre, London Olympic Park



Designed for the 2012 London Olympics, Zaha Hadid's Aquatics Centre exceeds its function as a sporting venue, embodying a powerful sculptural expression of aquatic motion. Its most defining feature is the undulating roof, which appears to flow effortlessly over the pools below. This 525-foot (160-metre) wave inspired canopy rests on just three concrete supports, creating a vast, column-free internal space.

The structure houses two 50-metre swimming pools and a 25-metre diving pool under this wave-like canopy that seems to float effortlessly. The original Olympic configuration included two temporary wings to house 17500 spectators, but these were removed after the games. The building is not just a visual statement but also an efficient sports facility, praised for its acoustics and sightlines.

The building is clad in shimmering aluminium, tempered by timber finishes and punctured by strategically placed rooflights which bathe the interior with natural light while maintaining an intimate atmosphere. Today, it continues to serve the local community and is a popular venue for many aquatic-based activities and competitions. a legacy of both the Olympics and Zaha Hadid's design genius.

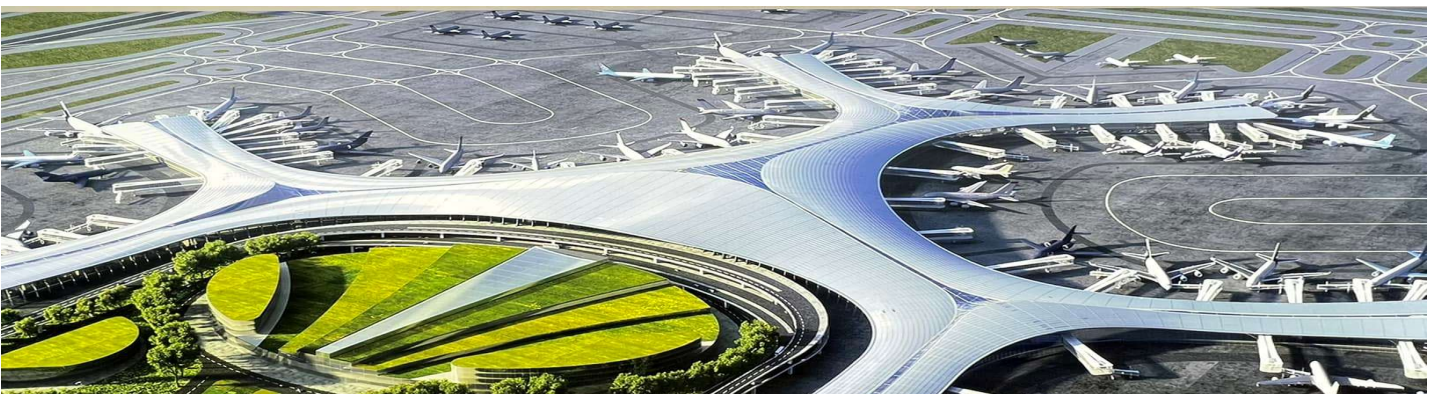
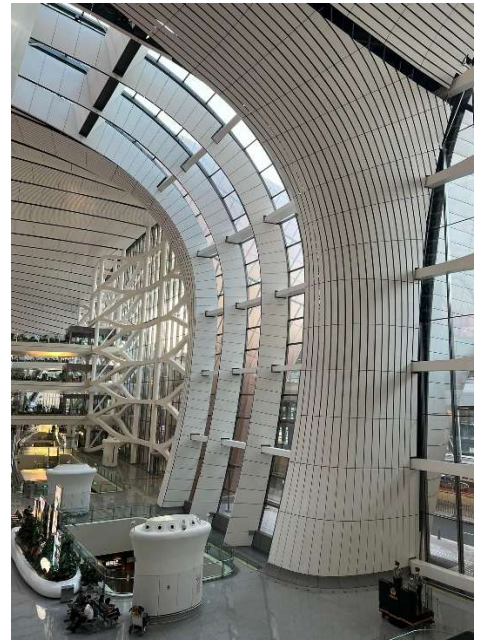
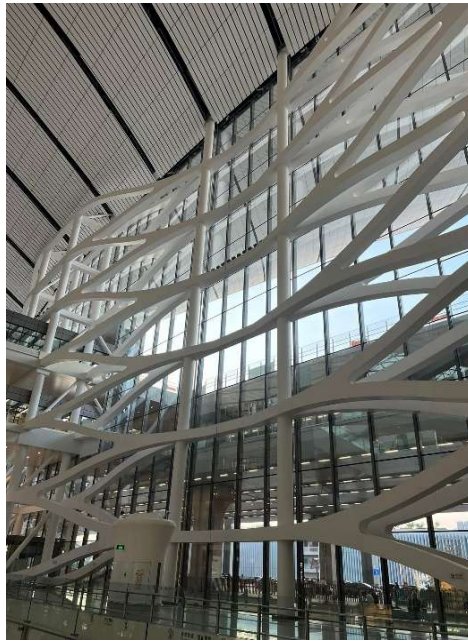


Daxing Airport, Beijing

Beijing Daxing International Airport opened in 2019 and is one of the largest airports in the world. Its striking starfish-shaped design allows for efficient passenger flow, reducing walking distances. I first visited the airport in September 2023 when I took a flight to Dalian for the sole purpose of flying from this airport. In July 2024, I was fortunate to fly into this airport on my second visit to China and I visited again in January 2025 travelling from Shanghai to Beijing with Juneyao Air.



The airport is situated approximately 30 miles from Beijing with high-speed rail links offering business-style seating in the economy section. Various reports suggest this is the largest airport in the world, but this is not (yet) true although it is the largest single terminal airport in the world. The statistics are impressive, and the airport has four runways with plans for a further three runways which could possibly make it the largest airport in the world in terms of passengers.



Galaxy Soho, Beijing



The Galaxy Soho is one of the biggest shopping malls in Beijing and has been recognised by the Royal Institute of British Architects as 'demonstrating a rare generosity of civic space in a country determined to outdo the West in terms of commercialisation.' Others describe it as an eyesore which has contributed to the destruction of Chinese architectural heritage in Beijing.

The Galaxy Soho is a futuristic commercial complex designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The complex was completed in 2012 and features four main domed structures that seamlessly merge inspired by traditional Chinese courtyard architecture. The design eliminates sharp corners and straight lines in favour of fluid curves creating a seamless urban landscape. The building houses offices, shops and entertainment spaces.



Guangzhou Opera House

One of the reasons for visiting Guangzhou was the opportunity to see another one of Zaha Hadid's designs for the Guangzhou Opera House. As mentioned in my piece on Daxing Airport, Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid was an Iraqi-British architect, artist and designer who became the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize which is widely considered to be the Nobel prize for architecture. Having already acquainted myself with earlier work, it is interesting to see some of her earlier ideas and observe how her style has developed over time.



The Guangzhou Opera House was opened in 2010 and is situated at the heart of the cultural neighbourhood. This was Zaha Hadid's first project in China where she is highly regarded. The structure of the building is designed to represent two pebbles washed up by the Pearl River. Inside, futuristic glass panels create a visual effect that has been described as pebbles on the bed of the Pearl River. The opera house includes a 1800-seat auditorium whilst the smaller building offers a 400-seat multifunction hall designed for performance art, opera and concerts in the round.

I didn't get to see the auditorium as rehearsals were taking place, so I have included this video downloaded from the internet..... https://youtu.be/EePmw1yz4EY?si=oRh_TWvqHsRk4qsg

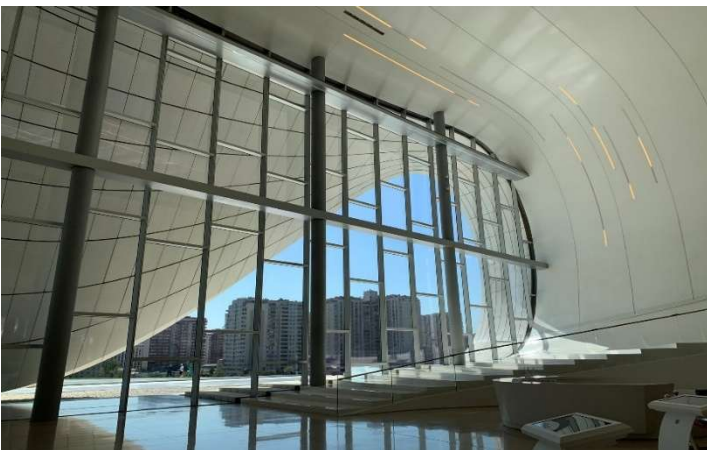


Heydar Aliyev Centre, Baku



The Heydar Aliyev Centre is a gigantic cultural and conference centre built on the outskirts of Baku. The centre is eight stories high and includes an auditorium with 1000 seats, a vast exhibition space, a conference hall, a workshop and a museum. The shape of the building is wave-like and there are no straight lines anywhere..... except the lifts, I guess.

The building is named after Heydar Aliyev (1923–2003) who was a former Soviet secret police general, the first secretary of Soviet Azerbaijan from 1969 to 1982, and subsequently president of the Azerbaijan Republic from 1993. Zaha Hadid was widely criticised for accepting this commission due to the controversial legacy of Heydar Aliyev.



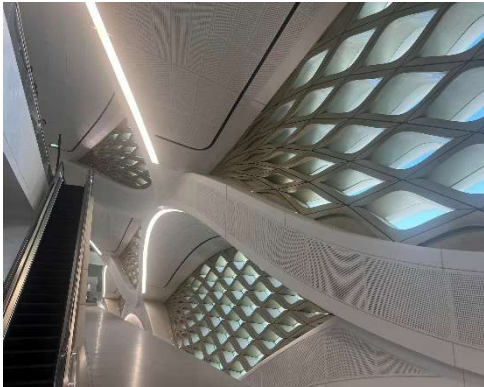
This is the building that first introduced me to Zaha Hadid and after that I fell in love with her architecture and tried not to miss any opportunity to visit and take some photographs.

King Abdullah Financial District station, Saudi Arabia



One of the main reasons for visiting the Riyadh Metro was the opportunity to go and see the King Abdullah Finance District (KAFFD) station which is one of four interchange stations linking the Yellow, Blue and Purple. I saw this station on my very first visit to Riyadh and realised who the architect was. I saw the station being built in 2021 and could not wait to see it completed.

Those of you who follow my adventures abroad will be aware that I am a great fan of the architect Zaha Hadid, so you imagine how excited I was to find out that this particular metro station was from her design company. The structure is described as 'a sinuous design defined by a lattice structure composed of rhythmic sine waves.'



King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



The King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Centre (KAPSARC) is situated just outside Riyadh close to the King Khalid International Airport. The facility was founded by a Royal Order in 2010 by the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. It is dedicated to advancing the understanding of energy economics, policy, technology and the environment, with a strong focus on global impact.

The campus is another architectural landmark designed by Zaha Hadid Architects which was officially opened in 2017 in Riyadh. Unfortunately, access is highly restricted as it is a dedicated research facility and not a public institution. As such, my attempt to get any pictures of the building were severely restricted, so I have reluctantly resorted to offering a selection of copyright free pictures available on the website.



Serpentine North Gallery, London



The Serpentine North Gallery, also known as the Serpentine Sackler Gallery masterfully juxtaposes historic preservation with radical contemporary architecture. The project centred on the sensitive restoration of The Magazine, a Grade II listed 1805 brick gunpowder store characterised by its robust form, thick walls and minimal openings.

The Magazine had lain largely unused until the Serpentine Galleries commissioned Zaha Hadid to transform it into a new cultural venue. Her intervention took the form of a curvilinear extension that adjoins the brick building without compromising its historic fabric. The extension's flowing form appears to hover effortlessly over the building creating a seamless transition from old to new.

Zaha Hadid's genius lies in engaging this historic relic in a symbiotic architectural partnership with an undulating roof which resembles a billowing cloud and is so typical of her style ...but on a much smaller scale. This building encapsulates Zaha Hadid's versatility, proving she could do intimacy and subtlety as effectively as drama and spectacle.



Sheikh Zayed Bridge, Abu Dhabi



The Sheikh Zayed Bridge is a landmark architectural marvel in Abu Dhabi. The bridge connects Abu Dhabi Island to the mainland, spanning the Maqta Channel. The bridge was designed by the renowned Iraqi-British architect, Zaha Hadid.

The bridge is well known for its striking design mimicking a 'sinusoidal waveform' inspired by the undulating sand dunes of the UAE desert. The bridge is 2800 feet (840 metres) long and accommodates eight lanes handling an average of 16000 vehicles per hour there is also a pedestrian walkway.

The bridge was started in 1997 after Zaha Hadid won the commission. However, the bridge faced significant delays due to the complexity of the design. It was not completed until 2008 and officially opened in November 2010 in the presence of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



The Opus, Dubai



The UAE may be known as 'the promised land for renowned architects with ambitious designs' but you would be hard pressed to find much evidence of the work of Zaha Hadid in this place.

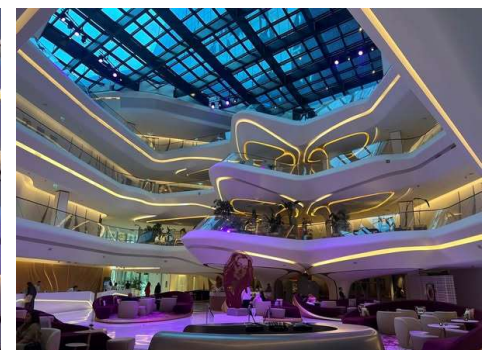
There's the Sheikh Zayed bridge in Abu Dhabi and the Beech Headquarters in Sharjah as well as Aljada Central which is nearing completion and the Signature Tower in Dubai which has just been started after a considerable delay.

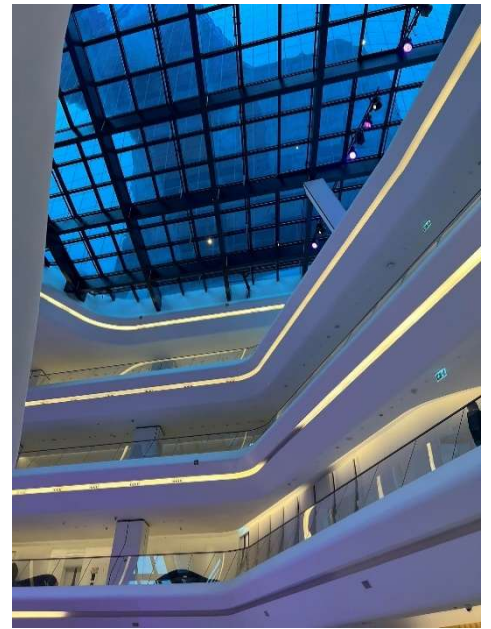
So, this afternoon I am taking a break from my work in Dubai to go and see the Opus which is situated in Business Bay and a short distance away from the Burj Khalifa. The building is part residential and part hotel. It is home to the ME Dubai hotel.

The Opus is described as a sculptural and emblematic landmark which was completed in 2020. It features a cube-shaped structure comprising two separate towers linked by a four-story atrium and a three-story bridge.

The ME is the only hotel with both architecture and interiors by Zaha Hadid. This was one of her last designs before she died in 2016. Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid was an Iraqi-British architect, artist and designer.

If you find yourself in the Business Bay Centre of Dubai, then please go and visit this place if only to recline on those amazing sofas and enjoy the interior of this wonderful hotel.





Wangjing Soho, Beijing



Having visited Galaxy Soho, I met up with a great friend of mine who tells me that there is another building designed by the same architect and invites me to take a ride on the back of her scooter to go and see it. The Wangjing Soho is situated between Beijing's city centre and the airport. The project is environmentally conscious, incorporating energy-efficient systems and sustainable materials.

The Wangjing Soho is a complex of three 'curvilinear asymmetric skyscrapers' located in Beijing's bustling Wangjing district. The three towers, which reach up to 200 metres in height, are designed to resemble smooth pebbles sculpted by natural forces. The complex was completed in 2014 and is home to office spaces, retail units and public plazas.



Summary

Zaha Hadid (1950–2016) was a revolutionary Iraqi-British architect whose avant-garde designs redefined modern architecture. Born in Baghdad, she studied mathematics in Beirut before pursuing architecture in London, where her early career was marked by unbuilt yet visionary projects influenced by Russian Constructivism and abstract art. Dubbed a 'paper architect' she later shattered barriers, becoming the first woman to win the Pritzker Prize (2004) and the Royal Gold Medal (2016).

Zaha Hadid wasn't just an architect—she was a force of nature. Her buildings don't merely occupy space but rather they reshape it. From the sweeping, sculptural roof of the London Aquatics Centre to the sinuous waves of the Heydar Aliyev Centre, every structure is a masterclass in fluid form and fearless engineering. Across continents and functions—from civic icons like the Guangzhou Opera House to commercial giants like Galaxy Soho and Wangjing Soho—her work consistently pushes the limits of what architecture can be.

Her designs are not always universally loved. In Beijing, for instance, critics accused Galaxy Soho of trampling on heritage, while in Baku, her involvement drew controversy over the political context. But no one can deny the ambition or impact of her work. Whether it's a starfish-shaped airport terminal in Daxing, a cloud-like gallery extension in Kensington, or a desert-inspired bridge in Abu Dhabi, Zaha Hadid created bold statements with structural integrity and conceptual clarity.

She brought that same boldness to Saudi Arabia. The KAFD Metro Station in Riyadh stands as a fluid, futuristic interchange hub with a lattice of sine waves brought to life in steel and concrete, embodying movement and connectivity in one architectural gesture. Similarly, the King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Centre elevates energy research with a tessellated honeycomb design that turns a closed, inaccessible campus into a geometric marvel.

She could do monumental: Daxing, the Opus, the Sheikh Zayed Bridge. She could do intimate: the Serpentine North Gallery proves that. She could handle airports, stations, auditoriums, hotels, schools and high-rise buildings with the same bold hand and uncompromising style. Her architecture is as much about the future as it is about form.....curved, asymmetric, sculptural, organic...and always unapologetically inspiring and beautiful.

What ties all these buildings together is a distinct architectural language: seamless curves, dynamic movement, spatial drama, and fearless originality. Whether admired from a scooter ride through Beijing or a walk into a Dubai hotel lobby, her work demands attention and earns respect. Each visit reinforces a simple truth—Zaha Hadid didn't just design buildings. She created icons....and the world is more interesting because of them.

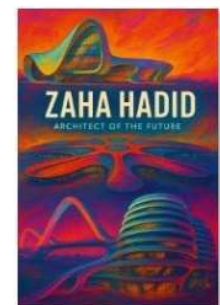
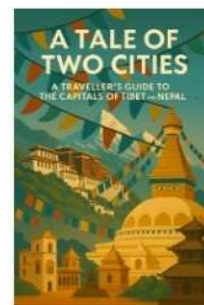
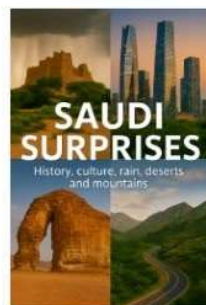
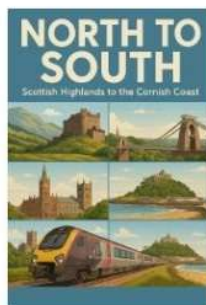
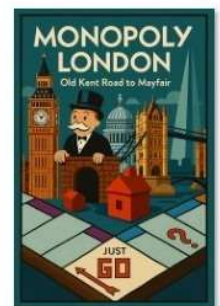
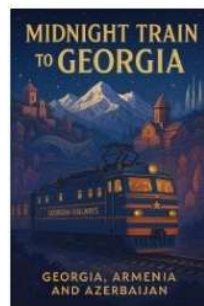
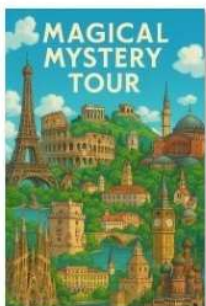
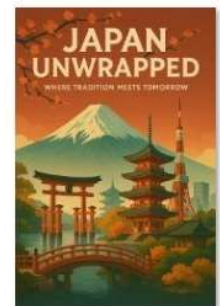
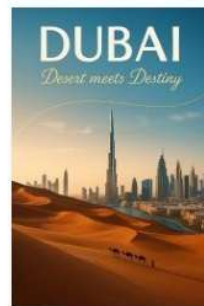
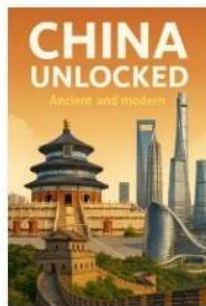
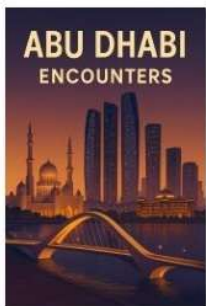
She challenged gender norms in a male-dominated field, inspiring women and marginalised groups. Her firm, Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA), continues her ethos of innovation, merging sustainability with futuristic design. Despite controversies, such as her association with authoritarian regimes, her work remains a testament to her mantra: 'There are 360 degrees, so why stick to one?' Her legacy is immortalised in her vision of architecture as movement, emotion and a bridge to the future.



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



This guide to Zaha Hadid is just one of a growing series of documentary travel guides collated under 'The Where To Go' banner. The following titles are presently available or coming really soon.....



An extra page because 13 is unlucky
Maybe I will visit some other designs