

# THE NEW YORKER



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### REINCARNATION DEPT. BUDDHAS FOR BAMBIAN



Earlier this year, after the Taliban blasted into dust two giant statues of the Buddha that had stood for the better part of two thousand years in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, a Swiss filmmaker and entrepreneur named Bernard Weber met with Paul Bucherer, the director of the Afghanistan Institute and Museum. The museum, which is based in Bubendorf, Switzerland, houses cultural treasures salvaged from Afghanistan; Weber is the founder of New7Wonders.org, an Internet project that invites participants to cast votes to nominate the seven wonders of the contemporary world. Although the Bamiyan statues had not registered significantly in voting patterns—the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, and Chichén Itzá were among the leading contenders, nominated by more than five million voters—Weber nonetheless asked Bucherer whether there was anything he could do to help restore the statues, or, at least, preserve their memory.

As it turns out, there was: Bucherer had in his possession a set of precise

photogrammetric measurements of the statues, which had been taken in 1970 by a scientist named Robert Kostka. Using these, and other photographic evidence, Weber and Bucherer intend to create a three-dimensional image of the Buddhas, which will be made available on the Internet. Next, they hope to rebuild the statues at a tenth of their original size, and install them at the Afghan museum in Bubendorf. They expect to draw on the resources of a prominent Afghan construction engineer, who, along with several other members of the pre-Taliban ruling class, lives in Switzerland. Fund-raising for the project will be conducted through the New7Wonders database of voters, and the virtual statues are expected to be completed by early next year. Speaking last week by telephone from Switzerland, Weber said, "I am sending a million people E-mails."

Weber says he came up with the New7Wonders concept a couple of years ago, while searching for a suitable subject for an Imax film. He consulted with officials of UNESCO's World Heritage program and historians of art and architecture to create a list of seventeen of the greatest man-made structures; then he invited visitors to his Web site to make suggestions, as well as to vote for their top seven. (Once the voting has been completed, in 2003, Weber intends to produce or license New7Wonders merchandise, television programming, and books.) Among U.S. architectural achievements, the Empire State Build-

ing and the Statue of Liberty both made the shortlist. The World Trade Center did not, though Weber says that since September 11th he has received a number of messages urging him to include it.

Weber, who is forty-nine, says that his interest in the Buddha statues was prompted in part by memories of UNESCO's successful effort to save the Abu Simbel temples in Egypt, which were to have been flooded during the building of the Aswan Dam, in the nineteen-sixties. (To thank the United States for its role in the preservation project, Egypt made a gift of the Temple of Dendur to the Metropolitan Museum.) Weber and Bucherer's plan is that the third and final stage of the Buddha-statues project will be a full-scale reconstruction in Afghanistan. "Two months ago, people would ask me about this, and say I am being naïve to think this," Weber said. "Now, after all this tragedy, maybe in two or three years, the situation will be such that the people of Afghanistan will invite us to build these statues back." Weber added that the rebuilding would have not merely a symbolic value but a practical one. "In the Bamiyan Valley, the people had an infrastructure to live on, because the few tourists who went to Afghanistan went to see these statues," he said. "If we rebuild them, I think that, with all the media attention, we can create a very good incentive for people to go and visit what is actually a very beautiful country."

—Rebecca Mead