

The Falkirk Wheel saw a massive increase in visitors during 2006, in a year which brought mixed fortunes for Scotland's top tourist attractions.

The world's only rotating boat lift was visited by 437,399 people, a 48% increase, according to the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (Alva).

Famous landmarks including Edinburgh Castle and the National Museum of Scotland saw smaller increases.

The National Museum of Costume, near Dumfries, was the least visited.

The figures related to attractions which are Alva members.

The group claimed that visitors had returned to attractions across the UK following a troubled period, which included the 7 July bombings in London and a weak US dollar affecting the plans of many North Americans.

Scotland's historic buildings experienced several ups and downs last year, according to the Alva figures.

'Vibrant' industry

Edinburgh Castle was one of Britain's most popular attractions, with almost 1.3 million visitors, an increase of 2% compared with 2005.

Stirling Castle received 439,709 visitors, the same as the previous year, while Crathes Castle, near Banchory in Aberdeenshire, saw a 26% drop, with 74,129 visitors.

Attractions which saw a big rise included the National Gallery of Scotland Complex in Edinburgh, visited by 942,788 people - a rise of 26%.

The UK's top attraction was Blackpool Pleasure Beach, visited by 5.7 million people, although figures were down 4%.

The National Museum of Costume, at New Abbey, was visited by 10,717 people, a decrease of 18% on the previous year.

Alva director Robin Broke said: "The industry is vibrant and continues to be a significant contributor to the British economy."

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