

Lessons from the Pyrenees (5) – Banos de Panticosa, a Spanish Flamingo Land?

Description



Descending from the Brazato pass, after a long and wild walk up the Valle del Ara ([see here](#)), Banos de Panticosa came as a surprise. While in a brilliant location, nestled under a chain of 3000m peaks, it provides an example of how not to do developments, whether in National Parks (its right on the edge of the buffer zone to the Ordesa and Monte Perdido National Park) or elsewhere.

balneario de panticosa

El Balneario de Panticosa está situado en el término municipal de Panticosa, que forma parte del Valle de Tena, en el Pirineo Osoense.

El Balneario se halla en una pradera de unas 32 ha. a 1.636 metros de altitud (hasta el año 1877 se creyó que estaba a 2.500 pies, es decir, a unos 2.330 m), que cubre un típico circo glaciar de forma elíptica. El río Galdarés, que recoge las aguas de una serie de ríos, atraviesa la pradera y forma en la salida una laguna de unas 5 ha. llamada Ibon de Baños.

El circo está enmarcado por un anfiteatro de escarpes graníticos con picos superiores a los 2.500 m (Argüelles a 3.046 m, Gamo Negro a 3.051 m y Infernos a 3.032 m). La flora y fauna que convive en este paraje es muy diversa. Rodeados por coníferas, podemos encontrarnos con un manto vegetal de pinos, abetos, robles y en las alturas veremos la extraña flor nieve -edulis-. Con respecto a la fauna, especies autóctonas como la marmota, el samio, truchas y mariposas únicas en el mundo.



panticosa resort



historia del balneario de panticosa

El Balneario de Panticosa se encuentra precisamente, como ya hemos señalado, en uno de estos circos glaciares, situados en depósitos y domos. Y en esta zona leonés de rocas graníticas con abundantes fracturas en donde emergen los manantiales termales de Panticosa.

Los manantiales más importantes surgen en esta zona y son los explotados en el Balneario de Panticosa: Tiberio y Estornago.

En los siglos XVI y XVII se había perdido totalmente el riego del primer

y solo se explotaban los manantiales del Estornago y Tiberio, a los que se añadieron, en la década de 1870, los de los Herpes y la Laguna (o Purgatorio).

Durante un siglo, estos manantiales fueron explotados en el Balneario de Panticosa, pero en la década de 1970, por la construcción de la presa de Tiberio, se interrumpió la conexión de los manantiales con el río Galdarés.

El 1881 se descubrió el de San Agustín y, en Diciembre de 1951, se "redescubrió" el manantial de Tiberio.

Normalmente, el descurrimiento de estos manantiales termales se debe a la curiedad provocada entre los lugareños por los fenómenos de calentamiento que se producen en los puntos de emergencia.



mapa situación



Banos de Panticosa developed as a luxury thermal spa in the 19th Century with a Grand Hotel and thermal baths. It declined in the second half of the twentieth century, was bought by developers in 2000 who had grandiose plans which then collapsed leaving it a soul-less place.



The Casino and Grand Hotel are the main buildings surviving from the 19th century.

The area around the Grand Hotel was lifeless and rather shabby compared to the promised luxury inside but then, if you are looking for a substitute experience for Las Vegas, you are perhaps unlikely to be interested in what happens outside the gambling halls let alone outdoors.





Other 19th Century buildings, including the old thermal baths, have been abandoned and allowed to fall into disrepair. There seems to have been little attempt to preserve older buildings – a disregard for history and heritage – which might still have attracted people to visit and have helped, to use the Scottish jargon, create a sense of “place”. What was a place with some historical interest has been wiped clean.....rather like what has happened to most of the Riverside site at Balloch.



Is this much different to the Drumkinnon Tower?

As a replacement for the old thermal baths, these new baths, together with green roof, were completed in 2008, the year of the financial crash.

This is how the architects describe the building:

“In designing the Baths building we have sought a balanced response to the natural setting on one hand and to the urbanized context on the other. The structure is built up to and, in places, into the side of the mountain, integrating its volume with that of its natural setting. To its neighbors, a church and a hotel, the building design offers a neutral response, moderately acknowledging the traditional space-making of these rectilinear blocks disposed orthogonally to one another. A series of curving walls or “ribbons” define the building’s exterior form. These “ribbons” spring from the mountainside and terminate equally, while between them are green roof surfaces in a series of terraces, forming extensions of the mountain landscape. This ‘watery’ shape gives a reduced appearance of bulk, and results in a structure that is thoroughly integrated into its immediate environment.”

And the reality?

Unfortunately this type of planning and architectural blurb is now used to justify anything. Its not difficult to find parallels in the Flamingo Land Planning Application: *“Small pockets of holiday lodges will be sensitivity integrated into the existing woodland.....”*. That word “integrated” again.....

default watermark



The other large hotel, the continental, has been built in front of the thermal baths, is partially faced with wood and has green roofs. While more obviously frequented than the Grand Hotel, the design appeared more suited to an air terminal, with raised covered walkways linking the buildings. Why, in this beautiful setting nestled between 3000m peaks, would you want to be confined to glass corridors? Again there are parallels with Flamingo Land, such as the proposed monorail

The adjacent building, again with green roof, had been abandoned completely or perhaps never finished:



Continental hotel top left – notice how the green roof on the abandoned building even features a pond!

It was hard not to contrast this lifeless green roof with the profusion of flowers in the woods above.

On the edge of the resort the wreckage was even more stark:



Half completed multi-storey carparks for the people who never came.

This concrete development on the edge of the village, south of the Lake, had all the appearance of being part of development bonanza that gripped Spain before the financial crash.



The size of the scrub – there was a huge area of half completed buildings – was another indicator of what happened

Its unclear whether this folly will ever be cleared up.



Meantime the former mineral water bottling plant – Banos was marketed on the health promoting qualities of its waters – has been abandoned replaced perhaps in world markets by Highland Spring. I wondered where all the workers used to live – probably down the valley in Pantecosa – as there is no housing in Banos, only resort buildings and the Refuge.



More wreckage and incompleted foundations for new buildings in foreground adjacent to the Refuge



Refuge in early morning – the night before lots of people, both people staying and day visitors, had been sitting out under the trees

The Refuge provided the only human friendly space in the resort, and when we arrived people were sitting out having a drink under the shade of the trees, as they do all over France and Spain but not in the rest of Banos de Panticosa.



Most of the area around the buildings was dominated by three quarter empty tree lined car parks which, while pleasantly cool and hidden from afar, added nothing to the “visitor experience”. Balloch is similarly dominated by large car parks, empty for much of year but insufficient to meet peak demand, and now the new Flamingo Land proposals are to add to that capacity with 311 new places. Besides the practical issues – traffic jams etc – how do car parks make places better?

Despite the number of walkers and climbers passing through there was nowhere to stock up on provisions, only a gift shop. No room for local enterprise when one large developer has bought the place and wants to channel everyone through their doors. No space either for people to live outside of staff quarters linked to the accommodation. As a consequence there was no local community which might have some ownership of the place.

The resort of Banos de Panticosa is just that, somewhere for people to visit temporarily and spend money and which no-one calls home. Since demand has now dropped – one factor contributing to this is that with modern air conditioned buildings the rich no longer need to the coolness of the mountains

in the summer – its now dead and much of it down at heal. And, because its own privately owned, there is nothing anyone can do about this. In wishing to flog off the Riverside site to Flamingo Land how do Scottish Enterprise know that it will not end up like Banos de Panticosa?



The old and the new – what appears to be a mural centre is also an outdoor climbing wall!

The contrast with Sallent de Galliego, where we arrived two days later was striking. Large amounts had been invested in restoring and upgrading old buildings, along with interpretation of the history, and the streets were bustling with both tourists and residents. There was even a traffic warden shepherding cars out of the way of pedestrians! A successful place from which our National Parks could learn.

So what are the implications for Flamingo Land?

Banos de Pantecosa shows how resorts, even in beautiful places (like Loch Lomond) can go badly wrong if demand for the tourism offering drops. Leaving aside its in a National Park, Flamingo Land's proposal to build over 100 Lodges on the site seems particularly risky: why go to stay in a Lodge set back from the river where you cannot see anything? The only reason for staying here, apart from a night on the way somewhere else, is to spend time in the Visitor Attraction on the shore or possibly go shopping at Lomond shores. Like them, the attraction of both the proposed monorail and the aerial walkway through Drumkinnon Woods is likely to wear off pretty quickly. So, how soon before the Flamingo Lodge Park becomes deserted like Banos or the other half deserted chalet parks littered round Loch Lomond? I cannot see it becoming a successful vibrant or day I say it "sustainable" place. But maybe the developers and authorities know this already and the long-plan, once the development fails, is to sell off the land for housing as originally proposed?

Developed places need people to work but Flamingo Land is being developed in almost complete isolation from Balloch and the local community. The people of Balloch have been offered two poisoned choices for the Riverside Site: a few years ago it was a housing estate, now a resort. Perhaps the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park could learn from Luss, which has preserved its history, is of a human scale and is somewhere people actually live. Its thronged with tourists without trying, too many in fact and has been crying out for help from the LLTNPA to manage this pressure without success.

To me the choice that should be being developed and debated for the Riverside site should be between the extent of natural areas and how far and how the town should be extended along the river, with high density housing using local materials along with lots of public space and facilities such as bars such as you can find in many places abroad. In Scotland we are not good at riversides – think of the Clyde. The Balloch charrette started to develop ideas in these directions but, apart from station square most of which is outwith Flamingo Land control, these ideas from river walkway with cafes to bridge have been dropped (apparently because of cost). Instead another Banos is proposed.

There is, however, one positive thing the LLTNPA could learn from Banos.



The shore of the lake, which is probably the main reason people still visit and and was artificially expanded by damming, remains undeveloped and available for people to enjoy. The buildings at Banos, whether luxury or fallen into a state of disrepair, are now hidden by trees (which old photos show weren't there in the 19th century). At Flamingo Land, it is proposed that the core of the development – details about which are yet to be released – should be right on the loch shore. The big idea is if people want to look out over the loch they will need to spend money in the resort. That is totally inappropriate for a National Park.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
2. National Parks

Tags

1. flamingo land
2. landscape
3. LLTNPA
4. Local communities
5. natural environment
6. planning
7. Tourism

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