

The Atlantis Space Shuttle at Kennedy Space Center: An Orlando-Area Attraction Review

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

These days, if you visit the Kennedy Space Center on Florida's east coast, there's one big attraction that everyone wants to see, and that's the space shuttle Atlantis.

Don't get me wrong, there's a lot else at the site to keep you occupied for the day, but unlike most of the other theme parks, which have many E-ticket attractions, Atlantis is really the major big draw. As such, expect huge crowds there from opening.

We were no exception on our visit, and as soon as the park threw open its gate, we power walked our way past the Rocket Garden, which reminds you of space travel of a bygone era, and the various restaurants and counter service places, then we rounded a corner, and our breath was literally taken away by the sight of the launch power behind Atlantis. At the entrance, you see the vibrant orange external tank, along with its two white solid rocket boosters, in the upright position, and nothing really prepares you for that sight. The size of them is just amazing. I stood next to them and my husband got a picture of me, and to say I was dwarfed would be an understatement -- you could barely see me!

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□ You head inside the building, and you wind your way up a slope, not realising as you do that it actually circles the inner structure where Atlantis now lives. Like any good theme park attraction, they do an excellent job of raising the anticipation levels before you finally get to see her for the first time. We were lucky enough to visit on a very quiet day, but I can imagine during peak periods that the waits for these pre-shows would probably get very lengthy, although at least it keeps numbers inside with Atlantis at manageable levels.

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□ The first pre-show explains how the shuttle was development, and I was fascinated to see that it had its roots in the late 1960s. It then takes you through all the problems they had to solve before getting a shuttle into space became a reality more than a decade later. It was a really interesting film, much better than I was expecting, and I learnt a lot from it.

The next section is another film, this time of a shuttle launch. Although it's not quite 360 degrees, you do get to see the action in front of you,

above you, and to your left and right, before they move on to talk more specifically about Atlantis. I think everyone got the feeling that this was the big moment when we would see her for the first time in the flesh. Sure enough, with a huge crescendo of music, suddenly part of the film screen becomes see through, and then the curtain rises, and in a lovely touch, there are staff members applauding as you come out blinking, looking at Atlantis' nose cone right in front of you.

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□She's positioned as if she's suspended in flight, with her payload doors open, so that you get an idea of what was inside her. Having already seen Endeavour at the California Science Centre, I wasn't expecting to be quite so wowed by the sight of our second shuttle, but this was a much better display, and gave you an idea of what she would have looked like in space.

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□What I also liked is that you're seeing Atlantis as she is now, and by that I meant a battle scarred veteran of many space flights. You can look at all the marks on her and appreciate what she went through in her lifetime. I liked the fact they hadn't made any attempt to patch her up, but had shown her as she was.

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□Eventually, we tore ourselves away from just gawping at the splendour of Atlantis, and started to take in all the exhibitions they have around here. You can tell this is new (it opened to the public in summer 2013), as there's so much that is interactive, from sitting in a replica of the cockpit for a wonderful photo opportunity to trying to do a spacewalk, and carrying out tasks at the same time. There is also a lot to read here, and it took us about 40 minutes to move on from this level, which gives you an idea of how many exhibits there were. Pretty much any question you had would be answered here.

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□We finally made our way down the winding ramp that takes you past Atlantis' massive engines. As you do, you get a glimpse of some of the further exhibits they have downstairs, but before you get there, you have a choice to make. There are two ways to descend to the lower level, either by just continuing to walk down the ramp (my choice), or by throwing yourself down a slide, which gives you some idea of the pressures on the crew whenever a shuttle returned to earth (my husband's choice). I liked the way that they did this, with an option for everyone, and the ramp was still wonderful, as it displayed badges from each of Atlantis' missions.

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□Downstairs, there were lots more fascinating displays to see, and again plenty of interactive things to play with. My husband attempted to get the shuttle manoeuvred out of the vehicle assembly building, which went pretty well, although trying to fly the shuttle and getting it

touch down safely didn't go quite so well, shall we say?

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□ I personally liked the part where they showed how many different areas of the States contributed to creating the shuttle in one way or another, as it gave you a really good idea of the enormity of a project like this. Kids will no doubt love the section that shows you how astronauts eat and use the toilet in the space, and of course the adults will probably get a giggle out of it too.

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□ In all, I think we spent nearly two hours just in the Atlantis building, and when we left, although we went on to see some of the Space Center's other attractions, I felt we'd already got our money's worth. I have always personally had a soft spot for the shuttle program, something to do with having first learnt about it on my first visit to Kennedy when I was a child, about a year before one ever went into space. It's wonderful to finally see this important piece of space history getting the recognition it deserves, and this wonderful exhibit will ensure Atlantis and her sister shuttles will be remembered by generations to come.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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