

Busch Garden Africa's SheiKra: A Coaster Review

by Barry Hom, PassPorter Guest Contributor

2005 marked the opening of Busch Gardens Africa's SheiKra roller coaster, in Tampa, Florida. SheiKra was noteworthy as the first dive coaster in the United States. I found it to be a smooth roller coaster with many exciting moments, a great addition to Busch Gardens Africa's thrill arsenal. On June 16, 2007, the park made a notable change to SheiKra: it went floorless. I tried to play devil's advocate and looked at the change as a gimmick. Rather than building a new ride or attraction, Busch Gardens Africa made a small change to an existing ride to bring guests through the gates. Would making SheiKra floorless actually make the ride better? I decided to find out.

First, for those who are not roller coaster enthusiasts, what is a "dive coaster?" With many other roller coasters, the lift hill pulls you up and you're dropped at an angle. A dive coaster still has a lift hill, but it drops you vertically at a 90-degree angle. That means you're going down face first! Only three other roller coasters in the world are like SheiKra. The other three are Oblivion at Alton Towers in the United Kingdom, Diving Machine G5 at Janfusun Fancyworld in Taiwan, and Griffon at Busch Gardens Europe in Williamsburg, Virginia. Roller coaster designers Bolliger and Mabillard (B & M to coaster enthusiasts) built SheiKra, and have made such other famous coasters as The Incredible Hulk Coaster and Dueling Dragons at Islands of Adventure in Orlando, Florida.

For those who have never ridden SheiKra, what is the experience like? Each train on SheiKra has three rows that hold eight passengers each, for a total of 24 riders. The ride has a dual loading station (two trains are loaded at the same time). As the train heads up the lift hill, look to the left to see downtown Tampa. Look to the right and you can see another train plummeting down the first vertical drop. Soon, you will be dropping, too! At the top of the lift hill, the train turns around and heads toward the first vertical drop. Before the train drops, it stops and hangs for a few seconds. This will seem like eternity to many guests. Then the train plummets down the vertical drop at about 70 mph. According to the SheiKra's statistics on the website Roller Coaster database (<http://www.rcdb.com>), this drop is 200 feet, making it the tallest roller coaster in Florida.

After the drop, you head into an Immelman (a c-shaped inversion that flips you near the top) and the train turns into the second vertical drop. There is no stopping here - the train keeps on rolling into the second

vertical drop. Then the train travels along a banked curve that splashes down right into the water. If you are watching from the sideline, you can see a huge flume of water rise from the back of the train. The train then turns around into the station and then you disembark.

After riding SheiKra for the first time in 2005, my overall impression was "Wow!" SheiKra's drops are really amazing. The drops are the best parts of the coaster. You have a short time to catch your breath before the second drop, and your breath is snatched away as soon as you catch it. The Immelman (SheiKra's only inversion) was fun, but I hardly knew I was inverted during my first ride. Ride in the first row for the best view. If you want airtime, ride in the last row. For a more intense ride, ride on the right side.

Now two years have passed, and Busch Gardens Africa removed the floor from SheiKra. However, even when SheiKra did have a floor, the second and third row had a "floorless" element. The second and third row had raised seating, so unless you had long legs, your feet never touched the ground. Now with no floor, nobody's feet touch the ground!

The floorless element of SheiKra draw fresh attention to a relatively new roller coaster. The ride layout hasn't changed - you still have the Immelman and the two drops. You still have the great view from the front row, the airtime in the back row, and the intense ride on the right hand side seats. The big change comes in the "scary factor" when you sit in the front row. When SheiKra had a floor, the front row had a small upraised bar that I call "the bar of protection." This bar obstructed the view as you stared down into 90 degrees of oblivion. It gave you a sense of comfort (albeit a false one) that if your restraints inexplicably failed, you would be saved from falling to your doom by "the bar of protection."

With the floor gone, the bar is gone as well. When you hang there at the first drop, all you see is the 90-degree drop and your shoes dangling. Nothing stands between you and oblivion! When I was in the front row and saw the first drop, I remember nothing but what seemed like a bottomless pit and my feet dangling. As my butt slipped down the seat a little, I had thoughts that my restraint would indeed fail and I would plunge to my death. In that moment of sheer terror a string of obscenities left my mouth. Keep in mind I've been on many roller coasters all over the world. I've been on the 420 foot tall Top Thrill Dragster at Cedar Point. However, I've only ridden two coasters that gave me a potty mouth: Top Thrill Dragster and floorless SheiKra! If a ride gave me a PG-13 vocabulary, then it must have been a good ride! The same sensation came to me during the second drop. I looked down and saw nothing but my sneakers and a seemingly never ending drop!

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Terror and curse words struck again!

I decided to ride the second row after my first row experience. It was a good ride, but it was not as exciting as the front row. When riding in the second row, the front row became a "protective row." It gave the same false sense of comfort "the bar of protection" once did.

Yes, pulling the floor out of SheiKra gives the park attention. I recall it getting a lot of press and advertisements the weeks leading up to it's re-opening. Making SheiKra floorless also makes it more a thrilling ride in the front seats. Don't be scared off by the long line either. Even when the regular queue is over 80 to 90 percent full, the wait is generally no longer than 30 minutes. If you want to be scared out of your pants, sit in the front row and look down during the first drop. You won't forget the terror you will experience as you're face first and staring down from 200 feet above!

For more information on Busch Gardens Africa:

<http://www.buschgardens.com>

My video of SheiKra in action from 2005:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOoZZ1K6jpg>

About The Author: Barry is a roller coaster and theme/amusement park enthusiast. So far, he has ridden 386 roller coasters and visited over 80 theme and amusement parks in many U.S. states, France, United Kingdom, Norway, and Sweden. He is also a columnist and a moderator for the website IOA Central (www.ioacentral.com). He is looking forward to a group trip with the website Theme Park Review (www.themeparkreview.com) to Japan in September and a side trip to SoCal shortly afterwards.

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