

The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal: A Soft Opening Review

by Barry Hom, PassPorter Guest Contributor

I must admit -- I know very little about Harry Potter! I have a vague idea of who Harry Potter is and a general idea of his world, but I've never read the books or seen the movies. You can call me a "sub-muggle." Even so, I was very excited when Universal Orlando announced the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. I wanted to see what Universal Creative could develop from the Harry Potter literature and movies. I wanted to see how they would re-theme part of the Lost Continent and what the new ride would be like. The new area's official opening is June 18, but I had heard the Wizarding World of Harry Potter was in soft opening mode. I took a chance and visited Islands of Adventure on June 5, 2010 to see if I could get into the new area. Sure enough, I did!

I entered the Harry Potter land at around 9:30 am. The area was running for another hour. As I entered, I looked around and smiled. I loved how the theming was. I knew next to nothing about Harry Potter's environment, but I felt the theming captured the essence of his world. I loved the triangular-shaped, snowed-on rooftop buildings. It felt odd to see snow in the 90+-degree Florida heat! The Hogwarts Express train sat at the entrance. Several fake storefronts have Potter-themed merchandise.

The area has a few shops. I looked around the candy shop, Honeydukes. The store was wall-to-wall candy. The neatest item was cauldron cakes, chocolate concoctions shaped like cauldron pots. The Dervish & Banges gift shop is outside the exit of the Dragon's Challenge ride and sells dragon-themed merchandise. There's a small post office called the Owl's Post and has a neat stack of oddly shaped packages above it. There were several other gift shops and restaurants I didn't have a chance to experience.

The shops were nicely themed and had a good but pricey selection of merchandise, but they were small. The merchandise was very close together and had very narrow walking areas. When the shops were crowded, it was very hard to move. When I was in Dervish & Banges gift shop, I couldn't move at all.

The land has two live shows. One is an acapella group who sing Harry Potter-themed songs. Another is a Triwizard's Tournament celebration group with martial artists and ribbon dancers. The dancers and singers from these shows are available for photo ops after their performances.

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The Wizarding World of Harry Potter has three rides: the Flight of the Hippogriff, Dragon's Challenge, and Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey. Two rides are rethemed rides from the Lost Continent. The Flight of the Hippogriff is the rethemed Flying Unicorn roller coaster. You are riding a man-made Hippogriff to practice riding a real one. A nesting Hippogriff sits by the lift hill.

The Dragon Challenge was once known as Dueling Dragons. Fire dragon is now Chinese Fireball and Ice dragon is now Hungarian Horntail. The ride is pretty much the same. I feel that the theming was a missed opportunity. Dueling Dragons had one of the most extravagantly themed queues of all theme parks. Now that great theming is all gone. The exterior queue had many student-made banners of different dragon themes. The entrance to the castle was decorated with several lovely flags. Inside the castle, however, there were miles of miles of blank stone walls. I hope that more theming is added to the castle in the future.

The piece de resistance ride in the land is Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey. I describe the ride as a next generation Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man. As groundbreaking the Spider-Man ride was and still is, Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey breaks the barriers once again. The ride is basically a Kuka arm on a track. What is a Kuka arm? If you've ever seen a commercial for GM or a similar car manufacturer, you've seen video from the assembly line that has robotic arms with tools at the end. A Kuka arm is a robotic arm with you on the end instead of the tool.

Before you ride, the queue line winds through the castle. You'll see many moving and talking portraits and paintings. Harry Potter's friends appear and talk to you. The castle was amazing and heavily themed.

Then you approach the ride loading area. I waited 75 minutes for my ride, but the line never felt long. The line moved fairly quickly and had a lot of neat stuff to see. Each Kula arm, or as they call them, "magic benches" holds four guests with over-the-shoulder restraints (like Rock 'n' Roller Coaster at Disney's Hollywood Studios). The magic benches load off a moving sidewalk (much like Magic Kingdom's Haunted Mansion) and you load onto the ride vehicle. Pull down the restraint and you are ready!

The ride takes you on a flight over castles and into a Quidditch tournament. Most of the ride has a lot of scary scenes of dragons, skeletons, and a big spider. Watch out -- one of these beast spit at you! As you fly from scene to scene, you tilt back and forth on your bench. The magic bench never flips you over or turns you around. Still, I was

saying "Whoa, whoa!" many times! I was quite amazed at the ride.

The Forbidden Journey ride gives a great sensation of flight. Two scenes are small, inverted IMAX screens. One IMAX scene has you flying over a castle. This really made me feel like I was flying and it felt like a mini-Soarin'. As a matter of fact, I would call this ride a really fast Soarin'. I haven't experienced a ride like Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey before.

Even though I enjoyed the Harry Potter ride, I did find the story a bit hard to follow. There were so many neat things to see on the ride that it was a sensory overload to me. I was busy being so amazed that I didn't know why I was going through a castle or flying around. The Spider-Man ride's story is rather easy to follow. With the Forbidden Journey ride, I remember seeing a lot of scary things like dragons and I remember the great IMAX scenes of the Quidditch tournament but not a cohesive story. The ride also made me a bit queasy and nauseous. I had to catch my breath at the end of the ride. It's important to note what the ride did it me, as I've been on many crazy rides on my theme park adventures!

Also, I've heard guests of a larger size may not be able to fit on the ride vehicles. If you have to use the double-strap seat on the Incredible Hulk Coaster, you may not be able to go on the ride. Always use the test seats near the entrance if you are not sure. There's also an onride camera. The pictures are \$29.95 for one photo and \$5 additional for a second photo. These are the priciest onride photos ever!

Even though the Wizarding World of Harry Potter has some flaws, I did enjoy it and it is a great addition to Islands of Adventure. I will need to ride Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey again to figure out the storyline. Oh, and they also serve Butterbeer in the area. What does Butterbeer taste like? Well, it tastes like the official drink of the Federation -- root beer!

About The Author: Barry Hom is a roller coaster and theme park enthusiast. To date, he has ridden 498 roller coasters and has visited theme and amusement parks in 20 states and 5 countries. He is also a self-proclaimed "Star Trek" geek. He is looking forward to making another obscure "Star Trek" reference in his next PassPorter newsletter article.

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