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Muggles Take Flight at the Wizarding World of Harry Potter

By NEIL GENZLINGER

DID my homework before being dispatched to check out the new Wizarding World of Harry Potter attraction at the Universal Orlando Resort. Knew I'd be drinking some butterbeer. Knew I'd be talked at by paintings and have my mind blown by a high-tech ride. Did not, however, know that I'd be nearly trampled to death by a mob of post-Potter depressives.

Early on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, I was standing just inside the entrance to Wizarding World with my family, taking in the wonderfully detailed Hogsmeade, a village of quirky shops that plays a prominent role in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books. We were the beneficiaries of a press tour and had the place more or less to ourselves. There we stood beside a barrel-shaped beverage cart, chatting with our two tour guides.

It was a lovely, peaceful moment — until a shout went up and scores of people came storming through the entrance at full gallop, pretty much running right over us. Turns out that although Wizarding World doesn't formally open until June 18, access was granted for a few short hours on that weekend to people who had bought a certain vacation package. There were a lot of them, and they were of one, hordelike mind.

They didn't seem to care that a cello was playing itself in the window of the Hogsmeade music shop or that the train engine of the Hogwarts Express was parked right there waiting to have its picture taken. They also didn't seem to care that our guides were Mark Woodbury, president of Universal Creative, and Alan Gilmore, art director for the park (as he has been for some of the Potter films).

No, what these ruffians were interested in was getting to the other side of Wizarding World, the site of Hogwarts Castle, within which is a ride called Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey.

For serious Potter fans, this ride has become something like the evil wizard Lord Voldemort: a thing rumored to have awesome powers. And, in those preopening days, the ride was still being tweaked, so there was no guarantee that it would be running. Thus the stampede: the rowdies wanted to be first in line to increase their chances of getting on if the technical staff gave the all-clear.

As I picked myself up from the ground and checked to see if my camera had been damaged, I realized that for these people, it has apparently been a very, very long three years.

That is the amount of time that has passed since Ms. Rowling ended the tale of Harry and his wizarding pals by publishing the seventh and final book in her multizillion-dollar series. Since then, Harry's more ardent followers have been comparing notes online about what they call post-Potter depression: their gathering despair at the realization that there will be no more stories about Harry or Hogwarts, the witchcraft and wizardry school. When you have been drawn into a fictional world as deeply as these fans, it's dismaying to have to acknowledge that no matter how many times you straddle it, the household broom is never going to fly.

I know the type. I myself am merely an admirer of Harry and Ms. Rowling, not a Pottermaniac. But everyone else in my household leaped over the edge right at Book 1. How far over the edge? Our guest bedroom has Harry Potter posters on every available wall. Not demure, tasteful ones. Eight-foot-tall ones; a giant Daniel Radcliffe (who plays Harry in the films) and Emma Watson (Hermione) staring down at the bed. No guest has taken up our offer of the guest bedroom since spring of 2002.

The morning stampede might remain a daily ritual even after Wizarding World is fully open, because ardent fans are desperate for a new Harry Potter experience and hope the Forbidden Journey ride will provide it. Which is a bit incongruous, since Wizarding World isn't really an attraction that you do, it's one that you absorb.

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. — "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone"

Wizarding World is part of Islands of Adventure, one of two theme parks at the Universal resort. (It will not require a separate admission fee; the same \$79 that gets you onto the Jurassic Park River Adventure and the Caro-Seuss-el will also get you into Wizarding World.) But the new area is decidedly different from those around it.

It's the antithesis of most theme-park attractions, where the point is to get through one ride as quickly as possible to get to the next. There are only three actual rides in the 20 acres of Wizarding World, and two of them — to borrow an image from another fantasy — are ugly stepsisters to the Forbidden Journey. They're just conventional roller coasters, ones that were already in the park but now have Harry Potter themes. (One is called the Flight of the Hippogriff.) Costumed employees were more or less begging people to ride them the weekend I was there.

It's just as well that there's only the one truly outstanding ride in Wizarding World, because rides aren't really the point; workmanship is. This attraction was made for the kind of people who have more or less memorized Ms. Rowling's books, and it shows in all sorts of details. The weathering of the stone to make it look indefinably old. The way the snow sits on the rooftops, just on the verge of melting.

Even the somewhat scatological has not been overlooked. Not only are there lifelike owls in the rafters, but there is also lifelike owl guano on the wood beneath them. Moaning Myrtle, a ghostly

character from the books, can be heard in the women's restroom. Or so I'm told. She can definitely be heard in the men's restroom. And yes, it's creepy.

So extensive is the detail that it quickly becomes apparent what is most missing from Wizarding World: a first-aid station staffed by an orthopedist specializing in damage caused by impatient 5-year-olds pulling on parental arms. With the exception of the Honeydukes candy store and a sweet little tableau performed by an actor in Ollivanders Wand Shop (one lucky child is chosen by a wand, just as Harry is in "The Sorcerer's Stone"), this is not a short-attention-span kind of place.

"Just a minute, Joey; Mommy's admiring the way the stonework in this castle evokes real castles in Europe."

"WAAAH!"

"Shut up and go find the Caro-Seuss-el. I'll pick you up in five hours."

Once and for all, Harry, do I have your word that you will do all in your power to make me keep drinking? — "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince"

Wizarding World carries the weight of responsibility on its shoulders. Just as the Potter films gave readers the official interpretation of what the scenes they had been imagining actually looked like, Wizarding World is the official, Rowling-blessed interpretation of what it would feel like to be in those scenes. So there are no hawkers who would not be on the streets of Hogsmeade; no giant foam-rubber hands in sight. But make no mistake: this place is built for commerce.

Which is why, though it's a tad out of character, just off the main street there's an A.T.M. (a Gringotts A.T.M., of course, named after the bank in the stories). It's needed, because the wand shop, candy store and other establishments have plenty to sell. In Honeydukes that Memorial Day Saturday, the shelf of chocolate frogs — \$9.95 each — was empty in an hour.

Fans, of course, will not be able to leave without trying two drinks invented in the books and brought to life here. Heresy alert: butterbeer (\$8.50 in a souvenir mug), while better than what you get if you pour melted butter into a Budweiser, is indistinguishable from a good-quality cream soda. Pumpkin juice (in a cute, pumpkin-topped bottle) is far more interesting, perhaps because the actual pumpkin content seems minimal — it's more like a feisty apple cider with a little pumpkin thrown in.

The stampede that Saturday morning had one thing right, at least: best not to have a volatile mix of butterbeer, pumpkin juice and chocolate frogs in your stomach when you embark on the four frenzied, disorienting minutes that culminate the Forbidden Journey.

Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real? — "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows"

Amusement park officials generally will rip their tongues out before they acknowledge that their best attractions have ludicrously long lines, but the people behind Wizarding World have made a concerted effort to turn waiting time into an integral part of the experience. Ask them how long the ride is and they'll tell you an hour, because that's how long they want you to spend getting to the four-minute payoff.

The line for the Forbidden Journey winds through the hallways and rooms of Hogwarts Castle, and for those attentive enough there's a story going on. The riders become part of it, aided by talking portraits and figures from the films — projections, or holograms, or something.

The gist of it: Harry and his pals Hermione and Ron — appearing from beneath Harry's cloak of invisibility — urge you to cut class to go flying. The characters from the movies who put in appearances — Dumbledore, the headmaster, is another — are so “there” that ardent fans may be reluctant to leave these preparatory scenes behind, but the ride beckons.

Its seats come four to a row, but each row is an independent unit, which enables the row to be tipped every 360-degree way available and creates the sense that you alone are on the ride (since you can't see the people to your left or right). No toddlers need apply; there's a 48-inch height restriction.

The combination of projected images and real objects that come at you as you soar across Hogwarts is startling. Perhaps you'll even have to close your eyes at points, which, if you're a journalist, will conveniently prevent you from giving away too much of what happens because you didn't actually see it. Suffice it to say that by the ride's end, you have had encounters with Quidditch (the aerial game favored at Hogwarts), Dementors (nasty ghostlike creatures), a dragon and a particularly grumpy tree.

So will Wizarding World cure all those post-Potter depressives? Is it the answer to their prayers or incantations or whatever?

Yes, this attraction will certainly be a balm for their deprived souls. It will convince them that, though the outpouring from Ms. Rowling's pen has stopped, Hogwarts lives on. The trouble is, you have to leave sometime. And once outside, the ordinary may seem more drab than ever. Even for a merely casual fan like me.

We were staying at the resort's Hard Rock Hotel. Back in the room, I found myself downright annoyed that the vintage photographs of Elton John and the Kinks on the walls refused to spring to life and sing. Beating on them with the \$30 wand we bought at Ollivanders didn't help.

The hotel has a pretty nice bar, a good place to go when confronted with the truth that real life is generally an unmagical thing. Barkeep, a beer, please. Hold the butter.

Neil Genzlinger is a staff editor on the culture desk of The New York Times.