



A WINTER WONDERLAND

ORLANDO IN FLORIDA ISN'T A TRADITIONAL WINTER LANDSCAPE. MAGIC, HOWEVER, IS THE NORM AT THE ISLANDS OF ADVENTURE, SAYS **CHRISTIAN SYLT**

It doesn't get more surreal than this. Up ahead of me is a row of cottages with icicles hanging off the edges of their sloped roofs and snow piled up in their gutters. Smoke billows out of one of the chimneys and the group next to me is all wrapped up in long dark robes. I'm starting to feel like the odd one out because I'm wearing shorts and a T-shirt and am still dripping with sweat.

It may sound like I've got a horrible bug which makes me burn up in freezing weather, but it's actually 30 degrees

at the Wizarding World of Harry Potter land at Universal's Islands of Adventure theme park in Orlando.

The snow-capped cottages are a full-size recreation of Hogsmeade, the village which Potter calls home while training to be a boy wizard. The attention to detail is enchanting.

The windows of the cottages are filled with moving models of colourful creatures from the Potter films. There are shops inside that sell sweets from the movies like Chocolate Frogs and Fizzing Whizzbees. Parents will gravitate to the wooden carts which serve



Potter's favourite tippie Butterbeer, a non-alcoholic drink that tastes like cream soda and butterscotch.

If you've got kids in tow, you'll soon find yourself in Ollivanders where, with the help of some special effects, little ones are 'selected' by a magic wand (and usually end up buying it). Every building looks like it does on the silver screen right down to their wonky walls and the ornate iron signs, which swing over the shop doors.

Guests even play a part as they come dressed in the robes that Harry and his pals wear to Hogwarts in the movies. It makes you feel like an extra on a movie set and it's hard to resist tapping the bricks and wooden beams of the shops as you walk past them to check if they are real. It isn't long before you find yourself in the middle of the action.

There's a real sense of discovery in the land as there are no neon signs above the entrances to the rides. That would break the sense of immersion and veer away from the look of the land in the movies. The latest attraction is so well hidden that I didn't even realise I was in the queue for it.

The entrance to Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure couldn't be more inconspicuous. A crumbling archway at the end of Hogsmeade leads to

EPIC PROPORTIONS:
Universal's Islands of Adventure theme park in Orlando is mystical

a winding path lined with walls made from cobbles stacked on top of each other. Moss appears to be growing on top of them and on the sides of the wooden huts next to the path. A ruined church then comes into view and my sense of trepidation grows.

The cracked stone walls are covered in vines and there's still no indication of what's in store as I head through its wood-panelled door. The tension builds as I go around every corner. Sunlight seems to shine through the stained-glass windows in the hall even though it was getting dark when I went inside.

It leads to room which looks like a stable and seems to have been lived in. There are beams overhead, a wood fire crackling in the corner and a dusty stack of logs piled next to it. Splinters sticking out of them prove they are genuine and real creepy crawlies seem to be there too as the wood is covered in cobwebs.

I then come across a room filled with cages containing alien-looking creatures which escape, thanks to some high-tech wizardry. That chilling conclusion is seen at the end of my journey through the ruins where sun seems to be shining through the rafters in an indoor courtyard. The ceiling is actually a pin-sharp screen and shadows of the creatures I've just seen seem to be flying above. I soon find out that my

job is to round them up.

A message over the loudspeakers tells me that it's an errand for Hagrid, the gentle giant wizard from the Potter movies. So, the story goes, he is loaning his motorbike to guests to race into the Forbidden Forest and find his fleeing critters. No expense has been spared.

The ride is a roller coaster but not as you know it. Instead of having typical carriages, a row of 1930s-era motorbikes hurtle along the track. Each one has its own number plate, sculpted handlebars, complete with indicator switches, and a side-car. This is the ride's star attraction as the experience differs greatly depending on whether you sit on the bike or beside it.

The ride starts like a leisurely drive in the country. The revving sound of the engine emanates from hidden speakers in the bike as you slowly pass an eerily-realistic animated model of Hagrid and a giant scorpion which emits a fishy kind of smell.

It is one of the magical creatures that the ride is named after and you pass the others as you race through a forest of 1,200 trees. There's a three-headed hyena and a unicorn at the finale, but you zip by so fast that it's all a blur. The ride is nippy enough to get adults' pulses racing but silky smooth, so it's comfortable for kids. It uses every trick in Universal's spell book to immerse guests in the wizarding world.

At one point, the track passes through a curtain of mist and up an almost vertical incline which comes as Hagrid tells you over the on-board speakers that the bike's engine has cut out. It gives you a few seconds of weightlessness before you hurtle down backwards, so it's not one to ride after lunch. For the most thrilling experience, try riding at night when the path ahead is lit by the bike's headlight so you can barely see the turns coming.

The effects help to tell the story. The ride accelerates a record seven times, which is meant to represent the bike changing gears. At one point, the track even drops straight down suddenly in an indoor section which weaves through the foreboding Forbidden Forest. The drop is your ticket to escape the tendrils of the evil Devil's Snare vine and return to terra firma.

If you're looking for a sequel, then head into the soaring replica of Harry's alma mater Hogwarts Castle which looms over the land. The queue is even more spellbinding than the ride this time.

First the line snakes past talking paintings which are actually pin-sharp screens with an oily sheen and texture to make them look like art. You then enter the vaulted office of Hogwarts' headmaster Albus Dumbledore who appears to turn to face you as you pass through the queue thanks to some more technical wizardry.

The same effect is used to make Harry and his fellow pupils Ron and Hermione appear on a balcony above the queue. They tell guests to join them on an adventure and then cast a spell which makes snow (it's actu-



MAGICAL MOMENTS:
1. Diagon Alley with the wizarding world's famous establishments;
2. A roller coaster ride to the Forbidden Forest to find the fleeing critters;
3. Hagrid, the gentle giant wizard from the Potter movies looking life-like.

ally soap suds) fall from the ceiling. The effects change randomly which is a cunning trick to keep guests occupied when the queue is long and if it is short it means they have to come back to see everything. That's before the main event even begins.

The ride this time looks like a typical roller coaster seat which, according to the story, is meant to be an enchanted bench. It has an over-the-shoulder harness as although it doesn't go upside down, it moves in directions which none of its rivals can copy.

Ingeniously, the seats are attached to a robot arm which itself is moving on a roller coaster track hidden under the floor. This allows it to stop in front of huge projection screens and move in synchronisation with the action on them to make it seem like riders are climbing, swooping and diving with Harry as he flies around the castle on a broomstick. It doesn't stop there.

For a more leisurely ride, board the Hogwarts Express,



a full-size steam train which takes guests to the neighbouring Universal Studios park with its rides based on classic movies like *ET*, *Transformers* and *The Mummy*.

The windows in each carriage are actually screens which show special scenes of Potter's world zipping by. It appears to have the same kind of depth that it would in real life, but you don't need to wear 3D glasses to see it. The train pulls into a mini mock-up of my local train station Kings Cross and I couldn't help but smile as it's so similar to the real thing in London, right down to the posters on the walls.

Next door is the spooky Diagon Alley with its Dickensian row of dingy buildings. But unlike in Dickens day, there's no rubbish blowing down the street and the only smell wafting through the air is popcorn. At the end of the street is a tower with leaning columns and a stone dragon sitting on top which shoots fireballs from its mouth every few minutes. If you're a crack

4. Fluffy, the three-headed dog snarls during the ride;

5. The blast-ended skrewt, rather the giant scorpion meets elongated crab;

7. The 1930s-era motorbike each with its own number plate, sculpted handlebars, indicator switches, and a side-car.

shot, then get a selfie with it erupting in the background before heading into the tower to complete the trilogy of Potter rides.

It takes more than the wave of a magic wand to beat the queues and the key to this is having a room at one of Universal's on-site hotels. Guests get queue-cutting privileges and the hotels are just as elaborate as the rides.

One of the most lavish is the Royal Pacific, a recreation of a traditional south seas pavilion situated in dense undergrowth of palm trees and creaking bamboo poles. The hotel has a 50s setting so a biplane sits on the lake next door and the corridors are lined with cabinets containing models of old steam ships and maps.

Best of all, free boats take you from the park gates to the doors of the hotel. After you've spent all day on your feet pottering around, that really is a happy ending. **W**

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