

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



It still has the magic

Disneyland Paris is 25 this year and with revamped rides and new attractions it is putting on quite a show to celebrate. By **Christian Sylt**

The surroundings are familiar. I'm sitting in a packed theatre with plush velvet chairs. As the lights go down there's not a murmur in the room with even the youngest children silenced by the prospect of what is to come.

The stage is dripping with detail. It resembles the inside of a magic store filled with cabinets and curios and a starry sky as the backdrop. What follows is 30 minutes of barnstorming Broadway-calibre songs, magic tricks and puppets straight out of the *Lion King* theatre show. The twist is that the star of this production is Mickey Mouse and I'm in Disneyland Paris.

This year Disneyland Paris celebrates its 25th anniversary and with a wave of its magic wand it has brought many of its classic attractions bang up to date.

The runaway mine train hurtles through a new exploding cavern

whilst the *Star Wars* simulator has been upgraded to 3D and features a random selection of scenes set in locations from the sci-fi movie series. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* boat ride now has characters from the movies in it including one which seems to magically transform into a skeleton. There's a spectacular new *son et lumière* show and a parade with a giant fire-breathing steam-punk dragon. No expense has been spared.

The biggest surprise is the *Mickey and the Magician* show at the movie-themed Walt Disney Studios park which sits next to the fairytale-inspired flagship Disneyland Paris. The star may be a cute and cuddly rodent, who is high-tech too as his mouth now moves in time to his voice, but there's nothing Mickey Mouse about this production.

The ornate set hides secrets such as a broomstick which appears to move on its own and a lifelike animated model of Lumière, the



Fireworks and lasers feature in *Disney Illuminations*, main; Mickey and Minnie are still stars of the show, above

talking candlestick from *Beauty and the Beast*. But it's the songs that steal the show.

Performers fill the stage to belt out Disney classics like *Be Our Guest* and *Circle of Life* which is the cue for an invasion of the giant origami-style animals from the *Lion King* stage show. Entering from hidden doors they fill the aisles whilst a giant savannah rock is moved on stage and the starry backdrop becomes

The Ratatouille ride, themed to the movie, is set inside a Parisian townhouse

a setting sun through high-tech projections. Amateur dramatics this is not.

Just when you think it couldn't surprise any more, it does. The magic in its name is far from a frivolity as the show features tricks created by Paul Kieve who consulted on the *Harry Potter* and *the Prisoner of Azkaban* movie.

Without giving too much away, you will leave *Mickey and the Magician* wondering how Cinderella disappears when she is wrapped in a carpet and how a levitating box could contain a six foot singing and dancing genie. But perhaps the biggest trick of them all is how the performers manage to keep it up. There are 20 on stage with another 40 behind the scenes and unlike most West End shows *Mickey and the Magician* plays five times daily.

It is one of several flagship attractions at the Studios which can't be found in any other Disney park. They are all up there with the best on offer at Disneyland Paris' bigger brothers in America. The must-see is *Ratatouille* and the scene is set long before you get anywhere near

the entrance. The ride is tucked away in the corner of a bustling Parisian square with a cartoon feel to it. The give-away is the abundance of rats. Images of rodents can be found on railings, manhole covers and even on the side of the centrepiece fountain.

It is in honour of Remy, star of the Oscar-winning movie *Ratatouille* about a rat who lives in Paris and loves to cook. Fittingly, the ride themed to the movie is set inside a traditional Parisian townhouse and inside you get the impression that you have been shrunk down and transported to its rooftop.

Donning a pair of 3D goggles you sit in a ratmobile, essentially a roving simulator which can pitch and tilt independently of the direction it is travelling in. This trick comes into its own soon after the ride begins and giant 3D screens show Remy being chased through a restaurant. Although the simulator cars stand still it seems as if they are hurtling through the rooftops and into a restaurant as they move in time to the on-screen action.

It doesn't stop there as smells are pumped into the ride in time with the action. There's a pungent odour of cheese in the kitchen and the trip through the larder is complete with scents of bread and oranges.

The most important tip to make the most of a trip to Disneyland Paris is to bring a well worn pair of shoes. Be prepared for long days but there's a happy ending in store every night. Through technical wizardry the centrepiece castle becomes the backdrop for one of the most spectacular fireworks shows anywhere, not just in a theme park.

The show is *Disney Illuminations* and it uses every trick in the book. The first jaw-dropping moment comes within minutes of the start as images are projected onto the castle and, thanks to an ingenious system, appear to be flat despite being beamed onto protrusions, balustrades and turrets.

One moment it looks like water is pouring out of the windows of the castle then it appears to be covered

in vines before seeming to be lit up with neon signs, all in pin-sharp high definition. To give it added depth, giant fountains at the front spray a fine mist which more videos are projected onto.

It is an emotional tour de force featuring flame-throwers, lasers and fireworks launching from the castle in time to the images shown on it.

It takes place at park closing and after spending all day on your feet you won't want to walk far to get to bed. The best of the bunch of the seven Disney hotels is the Newport Bay Club, which resembles a palatial New England coastal mansion with white clapboard walls and rooms replete with nautical trinkets.

It has been designed by the same wizards who create the theme park rides and it shows. There are deep blue carpets and mahogany abounds to give the impression that you're on a yacht. Walls are lined with flags whilst the wooden handrails in the corridors have brass fittings. Completing the theme there are brass lamps and in-room desks formed from giant luggage cases. Fortunately the fittings aren't in-keeping with the old-fashioned theme as there are UK plug sockets, flat screen TVs and USB charging sockets.

It's extreme escapism with enough attention to detail to keep adults interested whilst kids will love the little touches like Mickey and Donald Duck dressed in sailors' outfits peeking from portholes drawn on the wallpaper. It's just a few hours from Scotland but it feels like a world away. ■

EasyJet (0330 365 5000, easyjet.com) flies from Edinburgh to Paris Charles de Gaulle airport for around £140 return. The TGV (raileurope.com) from the airport to Disneyland Paris takes 10 minutes and costs around £45.50 return. Three nights' room-only accommodation at Disney's Newport Bay Club (08448 008 898, disneylandparis.com), including four days of park passes for two adults and two children under 17, costs around £2,000.



The giant fire-breathing steam-punk dragon on parade

SHORT HAUL



Take refuge in

Tolerant and open minded, Geneva is a most welcoming city, finds **Neil Geraghty**

Geneva can be a sweltering city and when temperatures soar into the 30s there's only one place to head: the Jet d'Eau, a colossal 140 metre high fountain in the middle of Lake Geneva that sends clouds of refreshing spray wafting over the lake's shore. A jetty leads out to the fountain where tourists can enjoy spectacular close up views but as locals know only too well, it's wise to keep your distance. On a sultry July evening I wander down to the lake to cool off and as I walk along the promenade I pass groups of locals sitting on the wharves drinking ice cold beers and enjoying the cool mist blowing over from the fountain. The Jet d'Eau pumps out 500 litres of water per second and as the water falls down it forms swirling patterns that are strangely hypnotic to watch. I follow two young couples onto the jetty and as we approach the fountain, the roar of cascading water becomes deafening. The couples are well ahead of me when the wind suddenly changes direction and the plume of water veers round towards us. I turn and run as fast as I can but it's too late for the couples behind me. I hear a shriek as 7,000 litres of water begin raining down on top of them, much

to the mirth of the beer drinkers.

Geneva has an easy going international ambience and its long tradition of harbouring exiles fleeing persecution made it a natural choice for the European Headquarters of the United Nations as well as home for numerous NGOs. A stroll around the historic city centre reveals a who's who of eminent refugees and by the city walls I stumble across a statue of the father of Scottish Presbyterianism John Knox who lived in exile here in the 1550s and penned some of his most fiery missives against the Catholic church and the Scottish monarchy. Lenin was another famous exile and a carved relief of him with the words *Geneve Cite de Refuge* is carved onto the 16th century Molard Tower that once stood guard over Geneva's port. Behind the tower lies one of Geneva's prettiest squares which in summer transforms into a sea of outdoor terraced restaurants. I take a seat at Cafe du Centre, one of Geneva's most popular seafood restaurants and over a dinner of grilled pike perch, caught fresh from the lake, I take in the atmosphere. A third of Geneva's population are ex-pats who hail from all over the world and amid the animated chatter waiters glide around effortlessly switching between French, German,