

OPEN ROAD



ON TRACK FOR FUN
Epcot's Test Track, Florida, left; guests enjoying the ride, below left and centre

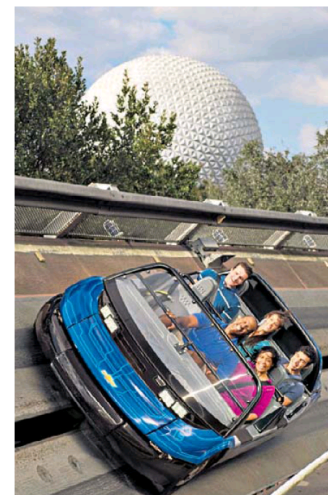


Disney puts visitors in the driving seat

With a glitzy Chevrolet showroom and the chance to design your own motor, Epcot's Test Track knows how to take the boredom out of queuing, says

Christian Syll

Florida conjures images of theme parks, cuddly children's characters and, inevitably, long queues. It doesn't evoke images of standing in front of a touch-screen tweaking car designs before they reach production – but it should. The Epcot part of Disney's sprawling theme park complex near Orlando, famous for its giant, grey golf ball-like structure, is a celebration of human achievement. The rides tend to be slow-moving and based on lofty themes like energy, marine conservation, space and environmentalism. There is one big exception. It is called Test Track and it has an industrial feel that begins the moment you join the queue. Exposed steel walk-



Even the size of the wheels can be adjusted to switch from a saloon with low-profile tyres into a monster truck in an instant.

Each change affects four values at the top of the screen – capability (handling to us Brits), efficiency, responsiveness and power. It's a bit of "edutainment" and it's carried through to the main event. All Walt Disney World park tickets now contain chips which allows them to store photos and video as well as credit card details (a cunning way of getting you to part with cash without thinking about the consequences). The tickets also interact with rides such as Test Track by storing your custom creations which then get a virtual test drive.

The ride itself couldn't be much more different to the rarefied air of design. You sit in six-seater, 250bhp cars decked out like test vehicles. They appear to be moving under their own steam but are actually giant slot cars which race through an indoor track. It climbs over rough road surfaces and twists and turns around artificial hazards to show the difference made by safety features such as anti-lock brakes. The finale comes when the car unexpectedly bursts through a hidden doorway on to a banked outdoor oval where the speedo hits 64.9mph – a fraction below the local speed limit.

Test Track is no slouch and when it launched, it was the longest and fastest ride in Disney theme park history. Throughout the ride, panels rank the performance of the cars created by the riders and at the end the winner is declared. A giant screen shows the day's



Waiting guests get four minutes to design a car, then a computer creates a 3D wire-frame model

You start by hand drawing a line from the front wheels to the back set to give your creation a general outline. Some computer trickery then smooths it out, like an aerodynamic airbrush, before you get a chance to drag the line in different directions thanks to three movable discs.

Want a long-nosed speedster? Then drag one of the discs over the nose and pop the other one over the rear to give it a natural spoiler. How about more of an SUV? Just space the discs at the front, middle and back then push them upwards to make your outline less streamlined. The possibilities are endless – and this is just the start. The computer then takes over again and creates a 3D wire-frame model of the emerging ride which will make your kids think they're on track to be the next Adrian Newey. It can be rotated and dragged to adjust the width and length before selecting the engine, bodywork, paint scheme, wheels and grille.

Accessories range from mundane spoilers to hubcaps that look like hi-tech sails. The huge number of options allows for the creation of cars that resemble moon landers as much as family four-doors.

top performer and although it doesn't affect the outcome of the ride, it gives guests a reason to return.

Chevrolet makes the most of the captive audience that is on a high after the ride. They are faced with more touchscreens, which allow kids to create a mock advertisement featuring the cars they designed.

Guests also get funnelled through a glitzy Chevrolet showroom where they can get hands-on with 10 cars including the all-electric Bolt and V8 Stingray. "The showroom at the end of the ride shows the end result of the design and testing that goes into developing a vehicle – it ties the story of the ride together nicely. Also, it is an excellent opportunity for us to showcase the newest designs and technologies in the Chevrolet line-up," says the spokesman.

Perhaps surprisingly, there's no hard sell as the cars aren't on sale. It gives it an atmosphere more like a motor show than a forecourt and it has turbocharged

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ways wind around futuristic micro-cars, while hanging from the ceiling is a dissected General Motors (GM) EN-V, a two-seat urban electric concept car developed with Segway.

Videos beamed on to the walls explain how cars are designed – and it soon gets hands-on. Chevrolet has its badge on the attraction and the partnership runs deep.

Although it may not be well known in the field, Disney has been involved with sponsorships for longer than many sports series. In the late Forties Walt Disney himself enlisted blue chip brands to help finance the construction cost of his first Disneyland theme park in California. An innovative marketing deal was struck where Coca-Cola was given rights to be the sole supplier of soft drinks within the park in return for its backing.

When Disney opened Epcot in 1982 it took corporate partnerships to a new level, as almost all of its main attractions had a sponsor. It helped ease the gigantic overheads of what was then the world's largest construction project. "General Motors became the first corporate sponsor and park partner at Epcot," says a GM spokesman. "Our relationship dates back to 1945."

Disney now has a suite of partners which sponsor attractions at its park complexes in the United States, France, Hong Kong, China and Japan. While some opt for product placement in shows on the Disney-owned ABC television network or even branding in superhero movies made by its comic book division Marvel Entertainment, others, such as General Motors, work with Disney to design and brand theme park attractions.

Disney's Imagineers, the wizards who design its theme park rides, collaborated with GM to create a unique and relevant way to while the time away in the Test Track queue.

"At Chevrolet, the diversity of talent on our team allows us to consistently produce sophisticated, refined and detailed design – but we don't typically design through the eyes of a 12-year-old," said Jeff Mylenek, GM's manager of global exhibit and merchandising design. "Working with Walt Disney Imagineering, we were inspired to see our brand story from a more youthful perspective and really opened the parameters on how to approach this design challenge."

In the Test Track queue, guests stand in front of touchscreens and are given four minutes to design a car.



