

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Slip slidin' away

Dubai's Aquaventure and its onsite hotel Atlantis takes the idea of a theme park and elevates it to a whole new level, writes **Christian Sylt**

If you've ever been in a situation where you've felt urged to do something even though you know you shouldn't, you can imagine how I'm feeling right now.

The trepidation is so great that the only way I can move is to step forward in an almost trance like state. Then comes that sinking feeling of shock that you get when you suddenly realise you've done something wrong. I feel like I deserve to be commended for what I'm about to do, but it's far from saving lives.

I'm at the Aquaventure water park in Dubai about to set off on the Zoomerango raft slide which hurtles up the sides of a giant basin. Even though I'm clinging on for dear life, I actually lift off the giant rubber ring that I'm sitting in as it climbs the almost-vertical walls. There's no time to scream.

The first incline is the worst and although it lasts just seconds the only

thought running through my head is when will it be over? Just a second later the ring has slid to the bottom of the basin with my stomach still in the sky above. Then it rockets up the other side to repeat the ordeal. By the time that I get used to the feeling it's all over and I realise the toll it has taken.

My hands are numb from holding the handles on the ring so tightly and my legs are quivering. However my mouth can't help but grin.

If you're thinking I must be barmy to have come to Dubai just to visit a kiddie park then think again. Aquaventure looks more like a country club. The flumes snake through lush gardens filled with palm trees and tropical birds.

You glide on a rubber ring from the exit of one slide and float off towards the next



The flumes at Aquaventure, main; the Atlantis hotel, above

The sprawling park sits next to a 700 metre stretch of private beach but any desire to spend time in the sun evaporates when I set foot on the searing-hot sand. In Dubai, daytime temperatures regularly hit 30 degrees in winter and in summer the mercury soars to well above 40. The heat comes from all angles and feels like standing in front of a huge hairdryer. It's so hot that you can't even cool down with fans which spray mist as the water warms up the moment it hits the air.

Thankfully there's no need to spend much time in the heat at Aquaventure as the slides are cleverly connected to a spaghetti-like network of lazy rivers. So you glide on a rubber ring from the exit of one slide and float off towards the next. It's not as serene as it sounds though as the rivers are actually anything but lazy.

One has a surf-sized wave that ripples down it every few seconds whilst others are more like the kind of white-water rapids you would take a canoe on. It keeps you on your toes as if you spend too long recovering at the exit of the slides a wave from the lazy river could wash over your head.

It's a handy way to stay cool whilst you're floating round the park which can take an hour in the lazy rivers. There are escalator-like belts to take you higher but you have to dismount to get to the highest slides. They are in Inca-like temples and make you feel like an adventurer.

One twists and turns in pitch darkness before you emerge in bright blue light as your ring glides through a clear tube in the middle of a giant aquarium. On my first run I got a view

of a shark's belly from below and on the second I raced alongside it. Needless to say, I lost.

Tourists flood the park so you spend a lot of time in rubber ring traffic jams but there's an easy way to get ahead of the game.

Hotels often say that their swimming pools are like water parks but actually they rarely live up to the hype. Aquaventure is the exception.

The park sits next to a coral-coloured palace dotted with turrets and spires. Called Atlantis, guests of the hotel get unlimited access to Aquaventure and a dedicated entrance.

The hotel's lobby looks like a temple to a lost civilisation with a huge domed ceiling supported by pillars in the shape of giant sea creatures. It is lined with mock Greek murals and tapestries. Everywhere you look there are marine motifs.

The chandeliers look like glass jellyfish and strands of colourful metal hang from wall lights like seaweed. A giant octopus arm, made of tiny multicoloured glass tubes, soars up from a fountain in the lobby so it even smells of water. The theme continues in the brightly coloured rooms which have a Polynesian look. There are shell-shaped mirrors, coral swirls stitched into the curtains and cabinets with wavy sides.

No detail has been overlooked. There are complimentary sandals in the rooms and a plastic luggage tag that you can put the room key in and hang it around your neck so it doesn't get wet in the water park. UK plug sockets are even the norm in Dubai.

It's easy to forget the outside world in Atlantis. There's a network of caves lined with Atlantean armour, ancient-looking maps and tanks of exotic fish. The main aquarium is one of the largest in the world and is home to more than 250 types of fish. You can walk on its floor, swim with dolphins or feed salty squid to the fish (you'll be thankful for the free gloves).

With 23 restaurants you won't get bored. If you fancy feeling at home try Gordon Ramsay's Bread Street Kitchen which has the best beef Wellington outside Blighty.

Atlantis makes most theme parks seem mundane but if you stray outside the hotel, Dubai has one of the most elaborate outside Disney.

Inside the Motiongate movie park is a mini-park themed to the Dreamworks animated films. The Shrek ride weaves through a giant puppet show and there's a high-tech roller-coaster which spins in all directions to face models and scenes from the movie *How to Train Your Dragon*. The highlight comes when it bursts out of the ride building and soars around the surrounding land featuring a full size Viking village.

After that, head to downtown Dubai which looks like the set of a sci-fi movie with its futuristic skyscrapers and overhead railway running directly to Atlantis. The best night spot is also water-themed: La Perle, a circus show on a grand scale.

I could barely watch when four motorbikes raced around the inside of a tiny suspended orb. They weave in and out of each other's path on their sides and upside down in a loop-the-loop. Then comes the technical wizardry.

A giant IMAX screen behind the stage? Check. Projections that turn the stage and theatre walls into everything from a city to a desert? It's here. There's fake snow (it's actually soap suds), rolling fog and 55-foot waterfalls which flood the stage in seconds. You will get wet and that prepares you for the trip home because only in Dubai does the sun always shine. ■

A week at Atlantis costs £1,879 per person with Virgin Holidays including scheduled flights direct from Edinburgh to Dubai and room only accommodation, including access to Aquaventure. Price is based on two adults departing on 9 November 2018. To book: visit www.virginholidays.co.uk or call 0344 557 3870. Tickets to Motiongate cost from £48 for adults and children and can be booked at www.attraction-tickets-direct.co.uk or by calling free on 0800 787 0962. La Perle tickets start at £87 and are available at www.laperle.com



One of the rides at Aquaventure takes you through a giant aquarium

STAYCATION



Beside the lake,

The Wordsworth Hotel in Grasmere is piled high with ye olde charm, finds **Fiona Pringle**

There is no better way to describe the setting of Grasmere than perfectly, faultlessly quaint.

Well, there probably is. And evidence to back the theory is abundant from Poet Laureate and former resident of the parish, William Wordsworth.

Sitting atop the steep, and meticulously cared for, garden to the rear of his home Dove Cottage (<https://wordsworth.org.uk/>) a short walk from the village centre, Wordsworth pondered the great Cumbrian countryside at his feet, penning poems about the beauty and serenity of the natural world.

Along with his sister Dorothy he traversed the area, just a short distance from Lake Windermere in the Lake District, absorbing the spellbinding sights and sounds.

Much like the celebrated writer, I wandered lonely as a cloud (-ish, my mother was in tow and took the edge off the solitude), through the picture perfect streets, the vales and hills. Due to the season and not Grasmere's failings, there were few daffodils in sight, but we were not left wanting.

Grasmere is certainly no secret and with coaches and packed streets, it's a favourite on the tourist trail.

Luckily for me the Wordsworth Hotel and Spa (www.thewordsworthhotel.co.uk), which was hosting us for the weekend, was central to all the

bustle but with enough quiet corners to escape the hubbub.

Dripping with flowers and ferns, the slate building certainly blends with its attractive surrounds. Piled high with ye olde charm it is set in sprawling grounds, sprinkled with a variety of seating options so you can laze in the shadow of the rolling hills.

Although a warning before I venture into more of its quaint delights; a full hotel and a wedding doth not mix at the Wordsworth.

Dinner and by the looks of it, the sanity of staff in general, was severely tested as matrimonial guests mingled with hungry diners. In short, it was chaos. In long, having had the opportunity to stay the following night, I can confirm chaos is not reflective of the service and quality of a "normal" stay.

Almost flawless throughout the disarray of night one and amiable ambiance of night two, was the quality and delivery of the food.

The AA rosette Signature Restaurant boasts a balanced menu with great variety of seasonal, exquisitely presented, fresh and delicious fodder. The kitchen deserves a medal for pounding out a wedding breakfast before slipping into an entire dinner service so the last word on it – guests should not have to suffer because of other events.

Nonetheless, the welcome at the four-star hotel was warm and