

All decked out

Updated Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland sails on amid mixed reviews from purists and pundits

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Published 12:01 am PDT Sunday, July 2, 2006
Story appeared in Travel section, Page M1



The Wicked Wench pirate ship, a set piece in Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean attraction, gleams after refurbishments. Disney Enterprises

ANAHEIM -- Shiver me timbers! That be changes ter one of yer favorite Disneyland rides, Pirates of the Caribbean, 'n' sum lily-livered fans are ready ter mutiny over 'em.

Tha' scalawag, Cap'n Jack Sparrow, who's bin prancin' roun' on movie screens, ha' joined the pillagin' and pilferin' pirates, along with tha' scurvy bilge rat Barbossa an' tha' dreaded Davy Jones.

But avast, me hearties! The Bee be pleased ter say it signed up its own crew o' wee beauties 'n' buccaneers fer a first look-see, and they ha' a message for ye complainin' ol' salts:

"Yo! Chill, dude."



In a cool-headed appraisal of the "enhanced" pirates ride Disney reopened on Monday, my 12-year-old son, Ryan Walker, declared: "It's not that different."

"I wished they'd changed it more," his 8-year-old sister, Grace, said. "It just looks like the old ride. It was kind of boring."

Cole Feaster, an 11-year-old critic on The Bee's crew, wanted a faster ride, while 7-year-old Claire Regenstreif thought Disney should have updated all the pirates.

"Most of the old ones were dirty and gross," she said.

The kid critics are Southern California-resident Disneyland veterans who have been to the park countless times and count among their favorite flicks the 2003 blockbuster inspired by the ride, "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl."

Come about, full!

With the Pirates of the Caribbean sequel "Dead Man's Chest" set to open nationwide Friday, the concept has gone full circle so that the movies now are inspiring the pirate ride.

Disney gave the 39-year-old attraction a face-lift by inserting animatronic figures based on the movie characters of Sparrow, the fey pirate captain portrayed by Johnny Depp, and his nemesis Barbossa, portrayed by Geoffrey Rush. A ghostly new villain from the new movie, Davy Jones, who is played by British character actor Bill Nighy, makes an ominous appearance near the start of the ride.

Disney also spent the past three months cleaning up the existing characters, adding new bling to the ride's treasure room, piping in some of the movies' music and sprucing up the story line, lighting and sound.

Disneyland reopened the ride in Anaheim two days after the star-studded premiere of "Dead Man's Chest" at the park, and almost immediately drew a big crowd.

But some of Disneyland's biggest fans decried the changes as the equivalent of defacing a great artwork.

"What next?" wrote one fan on a Pirates chat room. "A makeover for the Mona Lisa ... a new nose on the Great Sphinx ... arms and a dress on Venus de Milo?"

"The ride has been completely ruined for commercial interests," wrote another.

" 'The Movie Based on the Ride' and 'The Ride Based on the Movie,' " wrote a third commentator. "Whose brilliant idea was that?"

John McClintock, a Disney spokesman, said the company's "imagineers" came up with the idea to please younger guests.

"Suddenly, there was this enormously popular movie, and we were finding a whole new generation coming in and asking, 'If that is Pirates of the Caribbean, where is Jack Sparrow?' " McClintock said.

He said the imagineers tried to strike a "happy medium" between younger fans of the movie and older fans of the ride.

Still telling Walt's last tale

Younger fans helped boost the gross income for the first "Pirates" movie to \$653.9 million worldwide, while older fans have helped turn the Pirates of the Caribbean attraction into one of the most-riden rides in the world, according to Disney.

The ride has attracted more than 500 million people in California and Florida alone since the first version opened in 1967 in Anaheim.

Using what was then new robotic technology to create moving and "talking" figures, the ride took guests through a village under siege by marauding pirates.

As they have for 39 years, guests still board open boats at Lafitte's Landing in the park's New Orleans Square.

They travel along an 1,838-foot canal filled with 750,000 gallons of water, passing through a darkened lagoon illuminated by fireflies and into a tunnel.

At the tunnel's entrance, a talking skull and crossbones warns of the "plundering pirates" ahead and declares: "Dead men tell no tales."

The boat plunges down a waterfall, through a mysterious grotto and into a fierce battle between a pirate galleon and the Spanish village's fort.

Guests then travel past scenes of partying pirates selling women for brides, dunking a magistrate in a well, shooting at one another and burning up the town.

The Pirates of the Caribbean attraction doesn't have the thrills of a fast-paced roller coaster. But it's always had one of the fastest-moving lines at Disneyland, and it has the distinction of being the last attraction created under the personal supervision of Walt Disney, who did not live to see it open.

Many changes sneak up on you

Jeff Baham, a Silicon Valley graphic designer who hosts the www.tellnotales.com Web site dedicated to the ride, said Pirates of the Caribbean is one of the fans' most beloved attractions because of its history.

He said most of the aficionados who have posted messages on his Web site or contacted him since the ride reopened have raved about the changes.

"Everyone who has seen the ride and been on it, loved it," he said.

Disney changed its Pirates of the Caribbean rides only at its two American theme parks, where audiences were most likely to be familiar with the movies.

At Disneyland and Walt Disney World, Disney added only a handful of new figures to the cast of more than 120 animated humans and animal figures populating the pirates' world.

As a result, finding the "enhancements" during the 14½-minute ride at the Anaheim attraction became a sort of "Where's Waldo?" guessing game for The Bee's critics.

They easily spotted the surprisingly lifelike renditions of Sparrow, with his trademark black eyeliner and long dreadlocks. He leered from behind female forms in the scene in which pirates dunk the town's magistrate in a well. A second figure based on him rose from a barrel in another scene and sneaked a look at a treasure map held by a salty old sailor. Then the third Sparrow figure appeared alone, in a rocking chair, surrounded by the booty snagged, declaring there is "treasure enough for all."

"How they made Jack Sparrow was just, like, amazing," 8-year-old Grace said. "His face looked really real."

The other youngsters complained that the older figures' movements looked "jerky" in comparison to Sparrow.

The youngsters were wowed by the spectral appearance of the octopus-faced Davy Jones.

His ghastly visage materialized in what appeared to be a waterfall blocking the boat's path. Then the apparition disappeared as the boat passed through the cloud of mist creating the waterfall effect.

"That was pretty cool," Ryan said. "It looked like real water."

The adults on our boat overlooked Barbossa's starring turn commanding the Wicked Wench, the pirate ship bombarding the town's fort. The adults also missed the new story line, but 11-year-old Cole deemed it a "good plot."

Instead of the pirates pillaging the town for gold, the new story line has them searching for Sparrow, who's gone ahead of them to find the treasure.

The kids missed the updated scene in which pirates once chased the town's women. The adults didn't miss it because we knew about the minor uproar Disney sparked when it changed the scene in 1997. Fans accused Disney of trying to be politically correct by putting food and drink in the women's hands to imply that the pirates were gluttons rather than rapists.

Now the women are chasing the pirates who are carrying treasure, a change made to go with the new story line.

While we recognized these changes, none of us realized the treasure room had shiny new gold booty. We also couldn't tell that the treasure chest prominently displayed there was an actual prop from the first movie.

But none of us missed the louder bombardment of the fort or the enhanced sound and lighting throughout.

A salty old friend

Even with all the new features, the dominant theme remains that standard sung by Boy Scouts everywhere: "Yo Ho (A Pirate's Life for Me)."

The pirates are still hoisting their bottles of grog and portraying lives of complete dissipation.

For our group, the Pirates of the Caribbean's rollicking good-time ambiance seemed virtually unchanged.

"That's the genius of Disney," my husband, Cary Walker, insisted. "They always manage to retain the character of every great attraction, even as they enhance the experience and bring it up to date. All the essential elements -- the characters, the visual effects -- are the same."

But for kids, who grew up dueling with lightsabers instead of swords for galaxywide domination rather than gold, that's not enough.

Even with its updates, the swashbuckling "wildest crew to ever sack the Spanish Main" can't compete with the thrills and chills of Space Mountain, Big Thunder Mountain or the Matterhorn.

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Pssst! Avast there!

Pirates of the Caribbean, one of Disneyland's most popular attractions, reopened Monday after a three-month revamp Disney is calling "enhancement" and some critics are calling plunder. What ride aficionados can expect:

* The story line has been tweaked. Now, instead of pirates merely sacking a Spanish fortress in search of treasure, the pirates are out to find Capt. Jack Sparrow, the Johnny Depp character in "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl" and its sequel, "Dead Man's Chest," which opens in theaters Friday. Sparrow, who has taken off on his own to seek the treasure, appears three times along the ride's route.

* Movie characters Barbossa (Sparrow's nemesis) and Davy Jones also make appearances - Barbossa as captain of the pirate ship Wicked Wench and Davy Jones as an apparition in a new waterfall effect.

* The treasure cache scene has been replaced with more than 400,000 glittery gold coins and set pieces, plus the Aztec treasure chest and other props from "Curse of the Black Pearl."

* The original analog audio tracks have been digitally remastered, and music from the "Pirates" movies has been edited into selected scenes.

* More than 200 speakers have been replaced with ones delivering crisper sound.

* Lighting and sound effects in the battle scene have been beefed up to heighten the sense of drama.

* A controversial scene changed a decade ago in a bow to political correctness has been changed again: Now, instead of pirates chasing "wenches," the "wenches" are chasing the pirates.

-- Janet Fullwood

Pirates has changed little from what Walt Disney envisioned

- Pirates of the Caribbean was the last Disneyland ride personally designed by Walt Disney. It originally was envisioned as a walk-through attraction with a Pirate Wax Museum housed in a 70-foot-deep basement. Disney died three months before the attraction opened on March 18, 1967, by which time the concept had morphed into a flume-style "dark ride" with the basement serving as a grotto area.

- The attraction was loosely inspired by Hollywood films including Disney's "Treasure Island," "Kidnapped" and "Swiss Family Robinson." The new "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies were in turn inspired by the ride.

- Real human skulls and skeletons were used as props during the early days, before the advent of plastics that could be molded into lifelike forms.

- Bones weren't the only part of the attraction that would be considered politically incorrect today. In 1997, a bawdy-house auction scene depicting drunken pirates chasing "wenches" in circles was altered because of escalating complaints. The PC version depicted hungry pirates pursuing women carrying platters of food. Now it's been changed again, to tie in better with the "Pirates of the Caribbean" cinematic story lines. In the new version, the "wenches" are chasing the pirates, who are carrying armfuls of treasure.

- Evidently, Disney loves wenches: The attraction's pirate ship is called the Wicked Wench.

- The New Orleans Square section of Disneyland cost \$18 million to build -- the same as the cost of the Louisiana Purchase. About \$8 million of that went to create the Pirates ride.

- The attraction's audio-animatronics cast includes 68 humans and 54 animals.

- Pirates is the longest ride at Disneyland, lasting 14 1/2 minutes. The Disney World version in Florida (which also is getting a movie-related revamp) lasts only 8 1/2 minutes. Disneyland Paris and Tokyo Disneyland also have Pirates attractions. The new Hong Kong park will be getting one soon.

- While lines at some Disneyland rides can seem intolerably slow, the line for Pirates moves relatively fast. That's because it can handle about 3,400 riders per hour.

- More than 500 million people have experienced the "Yo ho" treatment in California and Florida alone.

- Aaargh! At least a dozen security cameras keep an eye on passengers floating through the attraction. Crew members hidden in cubby holes along the ride's route are poised to pop out in case of emergency. Best advice: Do as the soundtrack says and "keep yer ruddy hands in board."

-- Janet Fullwood

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