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Harry's world comes alive in Orlando

By Kristen Manieri

UNTIL RECENTLY, the seven magical stories that have chronicled the triumphs and troubles of a humble boy wizard known as Harry Potter have existed only on page and screen.

But on June 18, fans stepped inside Harry's enchanted existence as the Wizarding World of Harry Potter flung open its gates at Universal Orlando Resort, in Orlando, Florida. Joining thousands of other Muggles, I thoroughly absorbed every inch of this painstakingly accurate 20-acre sorcerous space, from frosty mugs of butterbeer to the Hogwarts Express parked at the entrance to the snowcapped roofs of Hogsmeade village, which includes such beloved locales as Honeydukes, the Three Broomsticks and Ollivanders wand shop. Towering over it all is the majestic Hogwarts Castle.

The Wizarding World offers three rides, the most compelling of which is at Hogwarts: Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey. To reach it, I made my way through Hogwarts, looping through the lamp-lit corridors and devouring hundreds of details, such as the

Sorting Hat and the Fat Lady who guards Gryffindor's common room.

The Forbidden Journey is a knock-your-socks-off experience. From my magical bench, I was whisked into a free-flight frenzy that had me speeding inside and outside Hogwarts alongside Harry Potter himself. I chased the Golden Snitch in a Quidditch match, narrowly escaped the chilly grasp of a Dementor and barely missed a close-call collision with a dragon that bathed me in its hot, steamy breath. Using ultra-secret and groundbreaking movement and visual technology, this ride delivers an experience rumored to be unmatched in the theme-park industry thus far.

The word that best describes the Wizarding World is "immersive," which was precisely the intention of Thierry Coup, the park's designer and vice president of creative development. "In order to take you into this world and ensure that you're completely plunged, it was essential that, no matter where you looked, there would be nothing to distract you or take you away from being inside the story," he tells *The Connection*. "Nothing was left untouched or unfinished; every inch was completed and true to the visuals from the films."

Coup admits that pleasing an incredibly dedicated fan base was the ultimate pressure. But after nearly five years of creation and construction, numerous visits to Scotland to consult and collaborate with Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, and a rumored price tag of more than \$200 million, the result is something that has impressed fans beyond their wildest expectations, including me. I can't wait to return, even for just another sip of butterbeer. [M]

Kristen Manieri is an Orlando-based freelance writer with an appetite for adventure, memorable moments and good desserts.



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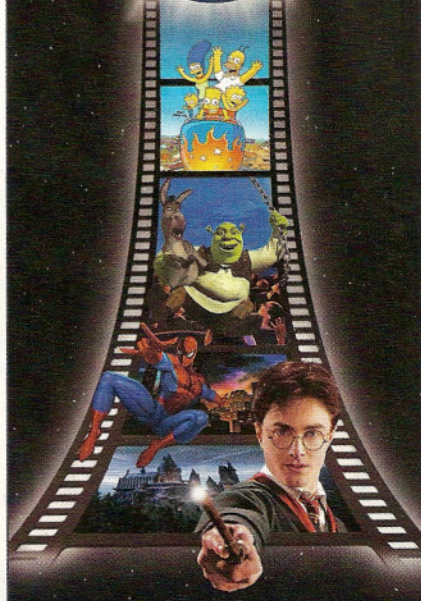
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