

Award for Outstanding Achievement

Expedition Everest

IMMERSING GUESTS WITH AN IMAGINED MONSTER

by Brian Szaks

Disney's Animal Kingdom, which first opened its gates in April 1998, is an animal park with complementary rides. Many parks throughout the US, as well as overseas, have such a mix. But the public soon found, as they made their way past the Oasis and into Safari Village, that they were in a remarkable world unlike any other. Disney had completed a task that had yet to be accomplished anywhere else. Instead of bringing animals to their guests, they immersed their guests into the "animal kingdom."

Seven years later, that successful approach also holds true for the park's newest attraction, Expedition Everest – and adds another layer of immersion. This themed roller coaster experience transports guests from the safety of Animal Kingdom and thrusts them into the wild heart of the Himalayas.

Queue the Excitement

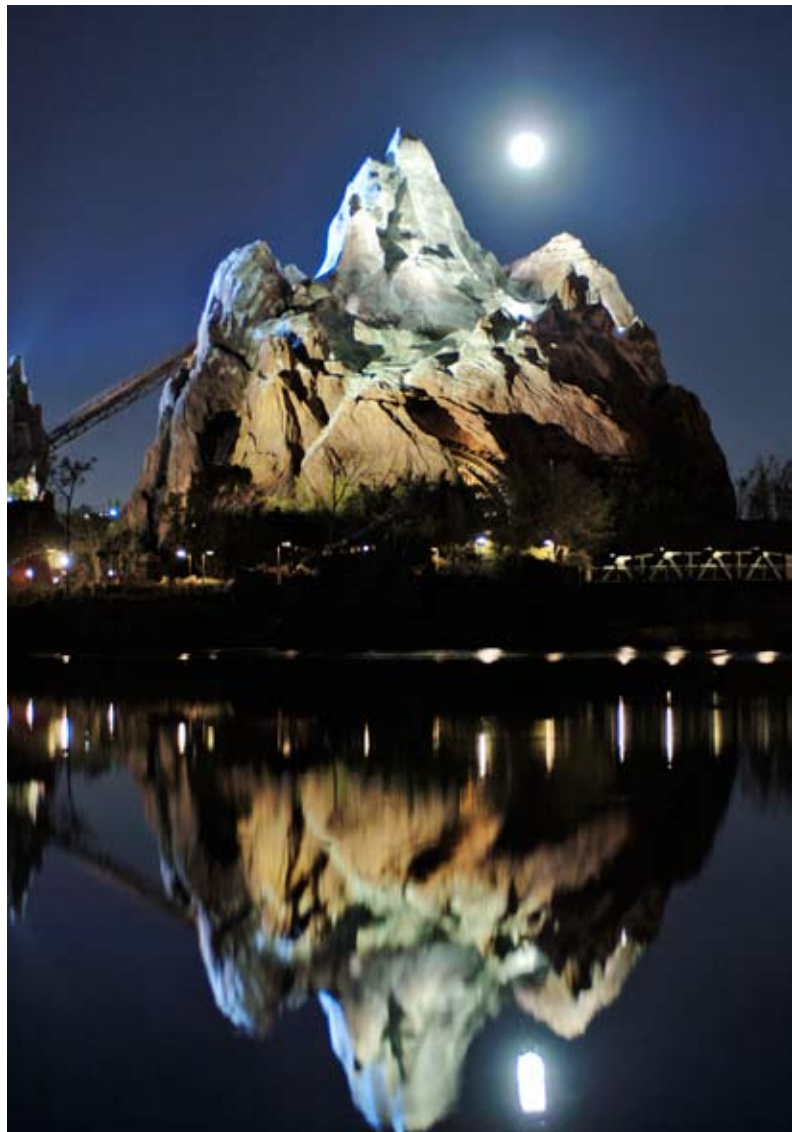
While the attraction is heavy with theming, the environment and story begin long before the guest embarks on the train. Upon entering the east end of Asia and the mythical Nepalese village of Serka Zong, guests begin to understand the importance the Yeti – commonly known as the Abominable Snowman (a large, mythical creature that protects the mountains) has for villagers. The area is scattered with subtle shrines to the Yeti and the great Himalayan mountain range looming in the distance.

After entering the queue through a booking office, guests are welcomed to a tranquil area that houses a Mandir, a Hindu house of worship. Here, Tellingas (prayer bells) hang from trees, eaves and rooftops. This temple is the starting place for guests' forthcoming journey into the unknown. It provides a chance to make a prayer for safety and well-being. This area is just one example of the blood, sweat, tears and great lengths that Joe Rhode and his team of Imagineers went through to detail the storyline. Singularities hidden within this area may only be seen by

those who research at great lengths.

After exiting the Mandir, guests are treated to a quick glimpse of the forbidding mountain range one last time before entering a merchandise shop set – as the story goes, their last chance to stock up on rations before the expedition. Here, the tension and

excitement start to build. Further on, a museum has been created. Pathways close in and paraphernalia is littered everywhere. Posters warn guests of the perils and mysteries within the mountain. No area of the walls is left uncovered. Blurred photos, incident forms and newspaper clippings along with authentic Yeti artifacts (recovered from Asia by



Expedition Everest takes the theme park coaster concept to new heights.



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Rhode and his team) fill the room. Torn tents and broken camping equipment foreshadow danger ahead.

Just as their minds fill with fear of what's to come, guests next find themselves in a nearly empty hallway. Sparsely decorated with just a few pictures of Sherpas on one side and windows on the other, this area overlooks the load station and provides some mental breathing space just prior to the start of the ride-journey - a simple, psychological calm before the storm.

Riding the Rails

Once guests are on board the 17-row train, designed to look like an authentic steam train complete with real steam in the station, winds its way through a bamboo forest and begins its trek up the mountain. To further the illusion, the typical sounds from anti-rollbackers are absent. The design team employed a magnetic system to keep the ascent free of mechanical noise.

After cresting the main lift, the train smoothly and rapidly weaves in and out of the mountain on the Vekoma BV track, moving forward and back with the help of two special switch tracks that complete the task in only six seconds. Riders' attention is drawn to two unique show scenes that appear on top and deep within the mountain during this segment. In the first scene, scattered track, fallen snow and a Yeti cry begin the backwards segment. Then, shadows of the Yeti and the mayhem he causes appear and the train is thrust forward again. After weaving in and out of the mountain, the train bolts through an enormous cavern. Then the Yeti shows up. The 25-ft.-tall, audio-animatronic monster makes a brief but impressionable appearance, attempting to reach for passengers as they narrowly escape before exiting the mountain and returning to safety.

The Mountain and the Creature Within

The creation of the audio-animatronic Yeti deserves large recognition. The figure has 19 separate points of motion and is so enormous, a boom must support it from behind as the entire unit moves two feet vertically, and five horizontally. This amazing feat of engineering is one of the largest audio-animatronics undertakings in Disney's history.

At almost 200 feet high – and thanks to deft use of forced perspective, seeming many times higher - the mountain itself was no simple task to create. After creating numerous clay and foam models, the team scanned the entire mountain into CAD to complete the design/engineering process with computer modeling. The system placed every detail including track, wiring and air condition ducts.

Unlike a typical building where vertical surfaces are flat, the mountain had a rough jagged form. As support beams were fixed in place, an extra five feet extended out from the mountain. This allowed workers to attach walkways around the surface for construction. Once completed, the extra beam was cut off, and the task of detailing the mountain began. Since delicate detail was needed to create the intricate texture, the track's supports could not touch any part of the mountain's skin, as vibrations from the trains would ruin the faux surface. To accomplish this task, imagineers created 3,000 panels of mountain facade that were hung off the framework. Prior to attachment, each panel had a predetermined location on the mountain and was skillfully crafted to resemble parts of the rocky crag.

After hours of testing and months of final preparations, the monolithic attraction opened its doors to worldwide attention, rave reviews, screams of delight and healthy attendance numbers, proving once again that Disney can conquer any mountain – large or small.

