

Travel

How Legoland stacks up

Park adds another piece to vacation.

Interactive rides, creations celebrate imagination.

By Lori Johnston For the AJC

WINTER HAVEN, Fla. — The colorful welcome sign that greets visitors to Central Florida's newest theme park appears to be painted, but a more careful examination proves Legoland Florida will be a truly immersive experience.

The sign's letters are made from the iconic Lego bricks, and some kids, like our 5-year-old son, Ty, and 5-year-old niece, Alex, instantly crawl through the C and O of the WELCOME sign, unable to contain themselves from instant contact with the plastic bricks.

At Legoland Florida — the second theme park in the U.S. designed around the beloved toys (the other is in California) — the building blocks pop up in entertaining and unexpected ways.

Its interactive rides and wowing Lego creations of national treasures and cities celebrate imagination. There are opportunities for kids to play with those plastic bricks as much as they want, but parents may be relieved to know that Legoland Florida's activities are compelling enough to keep children too busy to beg for Lego sets from the gift shops.

The 150-acre park opened in October, and it is the largest Legoland in the world (they also are in Denmark, Germany and England). Its location at the former Cypress Gardens adds a sense of natural beauty to the sharp edges of the bricks. Legoland has retained the botanical gardens, moss-laden trees that offer some shade from the sun and a waterfall, where Lego deer and other animals gather.

The waterfall flows behind Miniland USA, a don't-miss area with amazing re-creations of cities and landmarks that is the setting for family photos. Atlanta will have its own version of Miniland when the Legoland Discovery Center opens in Phipps Plaza this spring.

In New York, for example, you'll find landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State



The Lego Technic Test Track is one of 50 rides and activities at Legoland Florida in Winter Haven, Fla. The interactive park opened in October. Photos by Chip Utterland



Legoland Florida's lakefront location is the setting for a water-stunt show featuring Lego characters throughout the day.

Building and the Guggenheim Museum as well as the interior of Grand Central Station. Las Vegas depicts the glamorous hotels on the famous Strip, along with a mini wedding chapel. Some of the unexpected touches include an actual Lego shipwreck in the pirate section and a collection of RVs joining the scene at the Daytona International Speedway.

Beyond the explosion of creations in Miniland, there are 50 rides and activities, a 4-D movie theater, special performances and characters, and a water show featuring Lego figures and soldiers on ships. We experienced brief waits on our Dec. 31 visit, with less than 15 minutes in line. (A park spokeswoman said we were there on a typical



A depiction of Albert Einstein is one of the many Lego creations at the new Legoland Florida.

day, in terms of crowd size.) Legoland bills itself as being geared toward ages 2 to 12. Roller coasters such as the Lego Technic Test Track and Flying School, a suspended ride, are daring to young-

sters, but may bore thrill seekers even as young as 10. More traditional rides include a two-story carousel.

Some of the older kids we spoke with at the park said the Aquazone Wave Racers, where riders at-

If you go
Legoland Florida is in Winter Haven, 45 minutes southwest of Orlando and 45 minutes from downtown Tampa.

Address: One Legoland Way, Winter Haven, FL 33884
Info: Florida.legoland.com, 877-350-5345

Hours: Open five days a week (closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays) and daily during holiday periods. 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. (hours are extended during spring break and holiday periods).

Prices: Adults 13-59: \$75 (one-day ticket), plus tax; child 3-12 or senior, 60+: \$45 (one-day ticket), plus tax; children under 2: free (parking is \$12)

Tips: Specially marked Lego packages in stores offer a coupon for a free child ticket with the purchase of an adult ticket (we used these to save the cost of both tickets). Park officials say these coupons are currently available in the packaging for Lego Harry Potter video games.

tempt to dodge water "explosions" while spinning in a circle in small pods shaped like boats, was among their favorites. One mom, with an 8-year-old son, in line at one ride, called Legoland their "reat day." In between visits to Universal's Islands of Adventure and Walt Disney World, many rides are constructed to give little ones

control, whether they're powering mini-boats, riding plastic horses through a medieval joust setting, shooting lasers at targets in the indoor Lost Kingdom Adventure ride or earning their official Legoland driver's license after steering Lego cars through a winding course.

Employees cheered on kids and adults as we tagged on the ropes to pull ourselves, in a seated position, up to the top of the Kid Power Towers, then let the rope go to "free fall" down. They encouraged competition among families as we pumped a lever to race pollen and fire vehicles before pumping water that put out a simulated fire. (Hint: If there's one car full of parents competing against one full of kids, they'll find a way to help you from finishing first.)

Legoland provides opportunities to escape the Florida heat. There are several showings of three 4-D movies at Fun Town Theater (it seats 700 people). The "Lego Racers" movie, which offered a 20-minute mid-afternoon break as the kids wound down, had so-so effects but provided a life lesson of being a team player. Also indoors: the Build & Test (planned for Atlanta's Legoland Discovery Center, too), which allows kids and their parents to sort through bins of blocks to create cars and test them on timed tracks.

There are constant reminders of the creativity that comes from Legos, such as a huge replica of Albert Einstein's head at the entrance to the Imagination Zone and a Lego tourist in shorts, a Hawaiian shirt and black socks sitting on a bench and snoring.

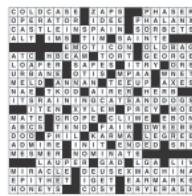
But there's not much time for snoring. We still couldn't fit in everything during our nine-hour visit, with breaks for lunch (an all-you-can-eat pizza, pasta and salad buffet, at \$10.99 per adult and \$4.99 per child, with drinks included) and an afternoon snack of ice cream and a tummy dessert made of fried apples and sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar.

If you time your trip with a holiday, you can get the extra benefits of Legoland's unique fireworks show, which was offered for New Year's Eve. With 3-D glasses, the fireworks turned into Lego blocks that exploded in the sky, ending the day with a final burst of creativity.

Puzzle solutions

Puzzles are on E16

New York Times



Los Angeles Times



Monster Sudoku



Jumble

JUMBLE

Answer:

AFFIRM UNRULY SPOTTY
GIBLET SPRAWL HARDER

Producers didn't want Sylvester Stallone to star in "Rocky," so he —

PUT UP A FIGHT

L.L. Bean to donate up to \$1 million to national parks

FREEMONT, Maine — L.L. Bean is giving up to \$1 million to the National Park Foundation with a goal of increasing family outdoor recreation and getting children to visit national parks.

The Maine-based outdoors retailer says the Million Moment Mission aims to get people to share stories, ideas and photos of outdoor experiences online. L.L. Bean will donate \$1 for each of them, up to \$1 million.

The announcement Wednesday follows a survey by L.L. Bean and the National Park Foundation that found that 59 percent of parents said busy schedules were an impediment to getting outdoors. L.L. Bean CEO Chris McCormick says the founder of the 100-year-old company felt that being outdoors was "fundamental to happiness" and that he'll continue to drive the company today.



Leon Leomwood Bean (left) believed that being outdoors was "fundamental to happiness." THE L.L. BEAN CO.

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