



Rudy's Rapid Transit
at Santa's Village

Old-Fashioned Fun

BY ARTHUR LEVINE

Small, family-owned amusement parks offer down-home charm for the whole family

Hear the words “theme park” and you think ... the Florida mega-resort Walt Disney World, or California’s Disneyland. Perhaps instead you zeroed in on Universal Studios or one of the other major parks in Orlando or Southern California. There are other places, however, that may be under the radar but warrant your consideration as you plan warm-weather getaways.

They are generally smaller, lack the star power of Mickey Mouse or Harry Potter and can’t match the gee-whiz effects of their big-budget counterparts. But they are loaded with down-home charm and they reflect the doting attention of the families that own and operate them. “It’s so refreshing to visit one of the dwindling number of the country’s privately owned amusement parks,” says *Roller Coaster* author Robert Coker. “Places that radiate idiosyncratic charm and whimsical personality. They are living pieces of American history.” And they are filled with a gentler, simpler notion of fun.

Take **Santa’s Village** (www.santasvillage.com) in Jefferson, NH, for example. If the breathtaking views of the area’s White Mountains don’t overwhelm you, the enchanting circa-1952 park will transport you and your companions to an



Against the backdrop of the White Mountains in New Hampshire, Santa’s Village is enchanting.





Clockwise: Santa's Village's "Ho Ho H2O" water park. Holiday World's The Voyage, one of the world's most beloved wooden roller coasters. Knoebels' The Phoenix roller coaster and vintage bumper cars. Mammoth, the world's longest water coaster at Holiday World's Splashin' Safari.

idealized vision of Christmas, open from May through December. Predating Disneyland, Santa's Village helped pioneer the theme park concept by using traditional rides to tell stories and create a sense of place.

Geared to the 12-and-under set—though adults bask in the park's warm glow of nostalgia—the park draws kids through the star power of Santa and his North Pole friends. Instead of a typical roller coaster, visitors can board Rudy's Rapid Transit, which is guided by a glowing red-nosed reindeer, or get splashed on the Yule Log flume. In addition to child-friendly rides, there is an emphasis on interactive fun such as making holiday ornaments, cookie decorating and scoring a personal audience with the jolly, red-suited gentleman.

The prices are reasonable (\$27 per person), and parking, strollers and pet

kennels are included in admission. "We understand young families," says Elaine Gainer, president, explaining the pricing policies. Her father started the park, and as she nears retirement, her children are carrying on the tradition. For the 2013 season, the park has expanded its popular "Ho Ho H2O" water park attractions. Apparently Santa and his pals enjoy cooling down in the summer.

The merry chap is also featured at **Holiday World** (www.holidayworld.com), a wonderful park that was originally known as Santa Claus Land when it opened in 1946 and is located in—where else?—Santa Claus, IN.



While Christmas remains an important theme, the park has grown to include lands devoted to Halloween, Fourth of July and Thanksgiving. It also offers Splashin' Safari, an enormous water park that is among the industry's best and is included in admission. Like Santa's Village, Holiday World offers incredible value and provides



complimentary parking, sunscreen and—get this—unlimited soft drinks.

The park doesn't skimp on the rides, however. While it is not focused on teen-skewing thrills, Holiday World does feature three of the world's most beloved wooden coasters, including *The Voyage*. The massive ride drops an adrenaline-pumping 154 feet and

What's Up with Mickey?

Throughout 2013, the Disney parks are presenting *Limited Time Magic*, an ongoing series of short-lived special events. There will always be something happening—such as Independence Week, a seven-day celebration of the Fourth of July, and *Long Lost Friends Week*, which will give lesser-known Disney characters such as Clarabelle Cow and Remy (from *Ratatouille*) a chance to shine in the spotlight.

► Disney California Adventure

(www.disneyland.com), the second park at the Disneyland Resort in California, completed a five-year \$1.1 billion expansion in 2012 and opened *Cars Land*, a wildly popular, richly detailed representation of the Pixar film *Cars*.

► Across the country, the Magic Kingdom

(www.disneyworld.com) at Walt Disney World in Florida is in the middle of a major expansion to its fairy tale-themed Fantasyland. In late 2012, it debuted a *Little Mermaid* ride and a new land based on *Beauty and the Beast*, including an interactive *Enchanted Tales with Belle* attraction and an elegant *Be Our Guest Restaurant* that serves fine food. A *Seven Dwarfs Mine Train* coaster is planned for 2014.



Radiator Springs Racers in Cars Land

delivers a record 24 seconds of “airtime,” the out-of-your-seat sensation that coaster fans adore. Other attractions include a turkey hunting-themed ride and the world's longest water coaster.

While its rides may be cutting-edge, its standards are something of a welcome throwback. “We’re a little bit old-fashioned,” says Pat Koch, the highly visible, self-styled “director of values” and 81-year-old matriarch of the family that operates the park. Mickey’s got nothing on her. “One Pat is

worth a million mice,” says daughter Natalie Koch, vice president. With the hands-on owners setting the tone, Holiday World is impeccably clean and has, perhaps, the industry’s friendliest employees. It has added a major water slide complex for 2013.

While Holiday World is tucked away in the cornfields of Indiana, **Knoebels**

(www.knoebels.com) is located roughly in the middle of nowhere—rural Elysburg, PA, to be exact. And if Santa’s Village and Holiday World offer great value, Knoebels does them one better: It’s free. Instead of a pay-one-price admission policy, visitors pay per ride. “The sprawling, un-gated Knoebels is easily the most unpretentious, un-corporate park you’ll ever visit,” says Coker. “It also happens to have one of the best wooden roller coasters [The Phoenix] in the world.”

With old-school attractions such as vintage bumper cars, a Fascination parlor and an early 1900s carousel, the park has an agreeable retro vibe. Unlike Disney’s same-named ride, the Haunted Mansion at Knoebels is a traditional gotcha, gag-filled attraction that harks back to classic “dark” rides. The park is also highly regarded for its tasty and moderately priced food, including Polish specialties, bison burgers and seriously sour pickles served on a stick.



At Dollywood's Splash Country, a plunge down one of the Butterfly's extreme slides ends in the Butterfly pool, a landing zone with wings. Quassy's Wooden Warrior roller coaster.

With the intoxicating smells of meals simmering in giant skillets, BBQ and other Southern dishes wafting through the park, **Dollywood** (www.dollywood.com) in Pigeon Forge, TN, is renowned for its food as well as its fun. It is also known for its lively shows, ambitious festivals, craft demonstrations, gorgeous Smoky Mountains location, Appalachian culture exhibits and, of course, its namesake, Dolly Parton.

Over the last few years, Dollywood has been adding an impressive array of roller coasters, including a “winged” coaster (see sidebar), Wild Eagle and other notable rides. Its (separate-admission) Splash Country water park is a standout.

It may seem anomalous to include Dollywood among family-owned parks. It is larger, flashier, better known and, technically, a corporate-owned park that is part of a chain. But Parton (who, interestingly, is too chicken to ride her coasters) is actively involved and takes Dollywood to heart. “I am so blessed to have such a great team of people who know the theme park world,” she says. “We are a family and [to me] this is a family-owned business.” Despite its size and stature, Dollywood does have a welcoming aura and the feel of a family-run park.

When it comes to longevity, **Quassy** (www.quassy.com) in Middlebury, CT, trumps the others. Once called Lake Quassapaug Amusement Park, it dates back to 1908 and is one of the country's few remaining trolley parks—so named



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Going Loopy Over Coasters

A longtime staple, roller coasters remain the kings of the midways at amusement parks, though they've become more sophisticated and often incorporate a wide variety of innovations. Among the wacky thrill machines opening in 2013:

- **Outlaw Run at Silver Dollar City** (www.silverdollarcity.com) in Branson, MO—The wooden coaster will be outfitted with steel “topper” track that will allow it to feature three upside-down moments, which will make it one of two “woodies” to include inversions. (The other one will be Iron Rattler, a wood/steel hybrid ride debuting at **Six Flags Fiesta Texas** [www.sixflags.com] in San Antonio.) The aggressive ride will reach 68 mph and drop 162 feet at a perilously steep 81 degrees (a record for a wooden coaster).
- **Full Throttle at Six Flags Magic Mountain** (www.sixflags.com) in Valencia, CA—The unique coaster will feature a 160-foot loop (the world's tallest) and will use a magnetic launch system to propel riders through the loop—upside down mind you—at a bone-crushing 70 mph. Another launch will hurl passengers over the outside of the loop.
- **GateKeeper at Cedar Point** (www.cedarpoint.com) in Sandusky, OH—The \$30 million “winged” coaster will place passengers to the left and right of the track on the “wings” of the trains. It will drop 164 feet and reach 67 mph, but the highlight will be two “keyhole” elements during which the extra-wide trains will race recklessly toward two towers with impossibly narrow openings. Just as certain doom seems imminent (twice!), the trains will rotate 90 degrees and—barely—make it through the towers.



Outlaw Run



Full Throttle



GateKeeper



because streetcar companies owned them and placed them at the end of their lines to boost weekend ridership. Located on a lovely lake, the tiny free-admission park (\$3.50 per ride) is oozing with charm and seems almost frozen in time.

It has some lovingly maintained, decades-old rides such as helicopters and Jet Fighters, but its featured attraction is decidedly contemporary. To the casual visitor, Wooden Warrior may seem like a typical coaster, but it is the second in the world (and the only one in North America) to use a unique

train that offers a remarkably smooth, yet potent ride. In addition to offering swimming in its lake, Quassy has a water park, “Saturation Station,” that has expanded in 2013.

If you visit Quassy, chances are good that owner and president Eric Anderson will greet you. That's the kind of personal attention the bigger parks just can't match. And it's part of what makes seeking out less heralded parks such a delight. ■

At Quassy's “Saturation Station,” the Bucket Dump drenches guests with more than 300 gallons of water.