

## Big Thunder Ranch Festival Arena: A Disneyland Parks Review

by Randy Crane, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Disneyland's Big Thunder Ranch Festival Arena, located along the path between Frontierland and Fantasyland, has long been one of the hidden gems of the park.

Formerly the home of stage shows like the Hunchback of Notre Dame "Festival of Fools" show, it's now receiving more of the attention it deserves, as it's been turned into a wonderful seasonally-themed area. Of course, Disney celebrates all the holidays you'd expect there -- including Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and Independence Day -- but I've also been there to experience Lunar New Year, Cinco de Mayo, and in 2013 some Limited Time Magic events like Long Lost Friends Week. (OK, Limited Time Magic isn't technically a holiday, I know.)

For any season, guests would expect decorations, and they can be found in abundance here. Wreaths, ribbons, and bows are all around at Christmas. Halloween is well-represented with not only decorations but pumpkin carvers as well. The Lunar New Year this year had lanterns of course, but they also had information about the various animals that represent each year and about how Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese families celebrate the holiday. All the holidays celebrated have their own special festive adorning of the Arena, with touches unique to each one.

□ Billy Hill and the Hillbillies often make their way over from the Golden Horseshoe to perform on the Festival Arena stage. In each case, a portion of their show is similar to what they do in the Golden Horseshoe, but the other part is themed to the season (whenever they can, anyway). For example, they play patriotic songs during the Independence Day celebrations, Christmas songs at Christmas, and "spooky" songs at Halloween -- all with a bluegrass/hillbilly twist! Because the Disneyland Railroad passes by the Festival Arena, they've even incorporated that into the show. (I won't tell you how, though. I'd hate to ruin the surprise!) (Editor's Note: Billy Hill and the Hillbillies are being retired as of January 6, 2014.)

□ These guys aren't the only entertainment, though. When Disneyland holds Magic Music Days in the summer, the bands perform here on this stage. During the Lunar New Year celebration they have children performing traditional dances, with their teacher explaining the history or meaning behind the dance. Other school groups perform here as

well.

So far this may all sound very passive, and some of it is, but other activities in this area are far from it, and they can be summarized with two words: characters and games.

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□Mickey and Minnie (and friends) can frequently be found here, always dressed in keeping with the celebration -- red, white, & blue outfits for Independence Day, wintery apparel for Christmas, Halloween costumes for that time of year, and Hispanic and Asian attire for those events. You generally won't find these characters in these clothes anywhere else, so if you want a unique photo with Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Goofy, Daisy, Chip and Dale, and others including the Country Bears, the Three Caballeros, Mushu & Mulan, Disney villains, and more, this is the perfect spot! Even better, since this area is still not usually as busy as the more traditional character greeting locations, you can anticipate shorter waits and longer interactions.

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□And speaking of interactions, that leads well into the games, because I've seen Donald wait in line to do a bean bag toss, the Country Bears play tag with young guests, and Minnie Mouse learn to twirl a rope like a cowgirl. All of these games and crafts have been out for kids and adults to participate in (at no extra cost), and the waits for them are very short, if there is a wait at all. They've also had supplies for decorating paper Halloween masks, and for coloring.

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□The coloring exemplifies more than anything else what makes this area special. During the Christmas season last year, my wife and I ate lunch at one of the tables in this area. While we were eating, Mickey came over to greet us, and sat with us for a couple of minutes. Then he got up and went over to a table to color a picture. When I finished eating, I went over to color a picture myself, and joined Dale, who was happily drawing a Christmas tree.

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□We colored together for several minutes, and "talked" (I talked, he gestured and communicated through the character attendant) about his favorite thing about Christmas, whether Clarice and Gadget know about each other, hat colors I should use for my picture, and the details of what he was drawing. Meanwhile, Big Al (from the Country Bears) kept dumping the crayons out on the table and blaming Dale for it. It was unlike any experience I've ever had with a character. When it was time for them to all go backstage, Dale finished up his picture, wrote his name on it, and gave it to me. I carry that picture in my camera bag even now.

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□Now, the Big Thunder Ranch Festival Arena is more popular today

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than it was then, but the same kind of interactions and experiences can still be found there, if you're open to them. During the time I was coloring and playing, I saw at least three families walk up to Mickey (still coloring) or Dale, ask him to stand up and pose for a picture, and then leave. They missed out on what could have been an unforgettable experience in favor of a simple photo op.

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□ If you're looking for a place at Disneyland to have some great times with characters, play games, sit in a shaded area and listen to fun and talented musicians, learn about other cultures and events, and generally have fun in a way you can't find anywhere else at the Disneyland Resort, make a point to visit the Festival Arena. You'll be glad you did.

*About The Author: Randy Crane is a Travel Consultant affiliated with CruisingCo. & MouseEarVacations.com, and lives with his wife in Southern California. He is also the host of the [Stories of the Magic](#) Disney podcast and the author of two Disneyland-related books to improve your daily life -- [Once Upon YOUR Time](#), and [Faith and the Magic Kingdom](#). Along with his many Disney trips, he makes multiple trips to the San Diego area and loves to help people plan not only Disney trips, but Southern California vacations to all its amazing destinations. Contact him by email at [RandyC@cruisingco.com](mailto:RandyC@cruisingco.com) to book your next incredible vacation!*

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