

My Journey from White-Knuckled Coward to Thrill Ride Junkie: A Walt Disney World Planning Article

by Amy Jones, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Picture it. Sicily. 1983.

Well, not Sicily, exactly--more like a traveling fair in Mayfield, Kentucky. I was six years old and in wide-eyed awe of every swirl of cotton candy, every pop-the-balloon game, and, of course, every ride. The Tilt-O-Whirl was great. The swing carousel was awesome. But the ride that I absolutely had to try was the dragon ride--the one that pendulums back and forth, higher and higher, until the riders are at 11 o'clock, then at 1 o'clock, across the sky.

I rode it. I still don't see how I survived the experience. My hands are sweating, even as I type, 32 years later. I'm not sure if that's exactly when my fear of rides began, but the seeds were certainly planted that evening.

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□ From that moment on, at fairs and theme parks, I squirmed away from anything that remotely resembled a thrill ride. I was the one who, as a teenager, roamed the parks looking for air-conditioned shows, airbrushed T-shirt stands, and food.

Fast forward a couple of decades to my family's (almost) very first trip to Walt Disney World in November of 2015. Truth be told, my husband and I had been blessed with one awesome day at Magic Kingdom in 2002, and I had gritted my teeth long enough to survive Splash Mountain. But now it was 2015, I hadn't ridden anything in 13 years, and the old fear was back.

Our two little girls had already earmarked (from the Disney planning video) the rides they wanted to try, and they had the same wide-eyed awe that I had with that dragon ride at age six. Still, the last thing I wanted to do was to project any of my fears onto them.

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□ I had to prepare myself somehow.

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□ The first thing I did was to research. I looked up how fast each ride was and how high each drop. I watched a video by Disney Imagineers that explained about G-forces and gravity and what happens during a ride. I read forums and blogs with advice by people who were coaster-phobic and yet loved Disney's rides.

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□After my initial research, I began to study even further. YouTube was an invaluable tool. I watched every YouTube video I could, over and over, of the rides that I was dreading the most, until I knew every turn and every drop. It may sound silly to you to ruin the surprises of a ride by knowing what to expect, but for me it was necessary. I was marching into battle, and I had to study the terrain into which I would soldier forth.

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□Still, there were nights that I actually lost sleep, in dread of what was to come. While my girls were counting down the days until our vacation, I was trying harder and harder to drum up courage.

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□Then, the day came. We were at Epcot, and my 7-year-old wanted to do The Sum of All Thrills (a ride that allows you to design your own roller coaster and ride it virtual-reality style, while a robotic arm moves you around). So, I quietly let her design the ride, then climbed into the simulator.

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□It was awesome! The ride (like most, I found, at Disney) was over in a jiffy and she and I emerged from it giggling.

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□Next, Test Track. This was another that I had been dreading because, not only had I been scared of rides for the last three decades, but I'd also developed a rather annoying phobia about highways and the perils thereof. Again, I loved it. The speed was awesome, as were all the hazards that the car swerves to miss. We rode it twice.

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□Then came Hollywood Studios, and with it, the two rides I'd been dreading the most: Rock 'n' Roller Coaster Starring Aerosmith, and the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror. I had scheduled these two first to get them over with and for crowd purposes.

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□I got on Rock 'n' Roller Coaster like a trooper, I'm proud to say. We found out at the last minute that our 5-year-old was, in fact, tall enough to ride, so into the "stretch limo" we all climbed. True, the initial blast off is a little intense, but short-lived, but I absolutely LOVED the ride. I was laughing and shouting "Whoo-hoo, I love this!" the entire time. I'd ride it this morning if I weren't 12 hours away!

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□So, I reasoned that my adrenaline rush from Rock 'n' Roller Coaster would carry me through the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror, and I was right. I love both the Twilight Zone and the 1930's, so I really didn't want to miss this one. Even though I knew that this ride was controlled by random programming so that each experience is different, I felt prepared. I knew exactly what would happen before the drops, and the

moments the drops would begin. And you know what? I loved the drops! They're really not bad. I thought they felt like the feeling on a swing set, right before you go back down. You feel weightless--in fact you come up off your seat. I had a goofy smile in every picture as I giggled with delight.

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□I could go on and on, and am tempted to. All in all, I rode Expedition Everest three times, Tower of Terror and Rock 'n' Roller Coaster twice each, and a smattering of others, often by myself!

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□My children, however, are making their own decisions right now as to whether rides are for them. My 7-year-old was willing to try everything at least once, whereas her little sister started out with enthusiasm, and even rode Rock 'n' Roller Coaster twice, but turned down the volume considerably as the week went on. She even asked "Does this ride go fast?" as we approached our booth at Sci-Fi Drive-In (shaped like a classic car). I've decided not to push them past anything they want to do.

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□But I learned something about myself this trip, if you haven't guessed it yet. I love thrill rides (or at least thrill rides, Disney-style)! I'm not sure I could do the dragon ride again, should we visit another traveling fair, but now I know that I can go to Walt Disney World, get on just about anything, and have a ball. I love the speed, the themes, and listening to other people scream while I placidly enjoy the wind on my face.

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□Maybe it's because I was so well prepared that I'm now a Disney ride junkie. Maybe it's part of approaching my 40's, like putting Tabasco sauce all over everything (I mean, where did that come from?!).

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□But, I think the biggest thrill of all came from overcoming an almost lifelong fear. Every time I ride a ride, a victory is further sealed over a fear that controlled me for way too long.

About The Author: Amy Jones lives in Kentucky with her husband and two daughters (one princess and one pirate empress), and has been a Disney fan since the days of LP records. She is counting the days until her family's next Walt Disney World vacation in May of 2016. - See more at:

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