

## Hong Kong Disneyland: A Review

by Sharon Lin, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Hong Kong Disneyland (HKDL) opened in September 2005, the fifth Disney resort in the world. From the start, the park was surrounded by controversies over problems with crowd control and cultural sensitivities. I decided to see the park for myself in March when I visited a friend who was studying in Hong Kong.

I arrived at Hong Kong International Airport (Chep Lap Kok) around 10:30 pm. Hong Kong Disneyland is located on Lantau Island, west of the more populous areas. There are three colors of taxis in Hong Kong, red, green, and blue, each color assigned to different parts of the city. We needed a blue Lantau taxi but at this late hour, all we saw were reds and greens. We convinced a green taxi driver to take us to Lantau and by midnight, we were in our room at the Hollywood Hotel. The Hollywood Hotel would be the equivalent of a moderate resort at Walt Disney World. The decor is Art Deco. There is a lot of wood and chrome -- very southern California! Amenities at the hotel include take-home Classic Mickey slippers for the whole family, toiletries (the bottles have Mickey ears!), stationery, and free bottled water. There were also robes in the closet to use during our stay. Your other option for lodging is the deluxe Hong Kong Disneyland Hotel, a copy of Disney's Grand Floridian Resort.

My hotel room rate was 1100HKD (\$142US) per night during Regular season for a standard Garden View room (the other choices are Sea View or Park View). You can purchase park admission at the hotel's reception desk. Unlike the American parks, there do not seem to be legitimate discount ticket brokers and there is no difference in price between advance purchase and gate price. There are three types of park tickets, Regular, Peak, and Special. We visited on Friday, a Regular day. Peak tickets are for weekends and school vacation periods. Special tickets are for specific dates, such as the one-week New Year's vacation, Golden Week, or Christmas. There are three levels of pricing - Adult (11-65), Child (3-11), and Seniors (65+). Our Regular Adult tickets were 295HKD (\$38US).

We woke early and shared a breakfast of chow mein and mango pudding (\$4US) at the Hollywood & Dine counter service restaurant. Afterwards, we walked around the grounds, checking out the pool, concessions, and playground, all of them retro-Southern California-themed. It was a bit chilly that morning (&lt;70&deg;F), but there were swimmers, probably just for the novelty of a pool. We left our bags with bell services and using park buses, we made it to the park

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before rope drop at 10:00 am.

The park is strikingly small. There are four lands: Main Street, USA (which is a truncated version of the American ones), Adventureland (looks familiar), Fantasyland (which is very small compared to Orlando's jam-packed area), and Tomorrowland (with the familiar Orbitron from Disneyland Paris and the imposing Space Mountain building). What's immediately obvious is what is NOT there. I kept saying things like, "What do you mean there's no It's a Small World? How can there not be a Pirates ride?" Sleeping Beauty Castle is, frankly, stubby in comparison to Cinderella Castle. It's surrounded by a moat, but there is nothing inside it. The two restaurants in Fantasyland (Royal Banquet Hall and Clopin's Festival of Foods inspired by "The Hunchback of Notre Dame") are actually located in side buildings behind the castle. To the right of the castle is Snow White Grotto, with its wishing well. It's pretty and different, but not much more than a quiet photo op.

As the park caters mainly to Asian tourists (particularly visitors from Mainland China), Disney planned lots of "photo op spots" throughout the park. Interestingly, outside some of the ride attractions, there were ride vehicles for photo ops so that you could get a clear picture without experiencing the ride itself.

We headed for Tomorrowland first. Although they do offer the FastPass system, there was no need for us to use it at all, the park was not crowded. The longest posted wait time was ten minutes. Space Mountain is currently the only thrill ride at the park. It is a smooth ride, really dark (couldn't see my hand in front of my face), and fast! There is also music that accompanies this ride that I found irritating after a while.

Next we headed to the Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters, which we did at least three times. We stopped for lunch at Comet Cafe in Tomorrowland. We had spareribs, which came with rice, steamed vegetables, and tea. There are plenty of places to get food, both counter and table service. Most feature Chinese food from different regions, but the Starliner Diner is Hong Kong's answer to Cosmic Ray's. Also located in Tomorrowland, it has the usual burgers and chicken.

Hong Kong Disneyland is more show-oriented than ride-oriented. The shows are more elaborate than in the US and are performed in English with Cantonese and some Mandarin (People in Hong Kong speak English and Cantonese, but with so many Mainland Chinese guests, they also use Mandarin at the park.) Festival of the Lion King was in a big theater, and while the acrobatics and music were the same, two performers dressed as animals gave quick plot explanations in

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Cantonese. The other show is the Golden Mickeys, imported from the Disney Cruise Line. It's a red-carpet awards presentation for the Disney movies we all know and love.

In Adventureland, we only went on the Jungle River Cruise and skipped Tarzan's Treehouse. I enjoyed seeing the updated Animatronics and slightly different landscaping.

Finally, we hit Fantasyland. We went on Dumbo; it was nice to see this ride all shiny and new. Then we went on the Many Adventures of Winnie-the-Pooh. Riding through Owl's house, I did look to the left to see the tribute to Mr. Toad. We finished Fantasyland with a visit to Mickey's PhilharMagic.

Believe it or not, that was it for Fantasyland. Before going back to Tomorrowland and doing more Space Mountain and Buzz, we had our pictures taken with Minnie in Fantasy Gardens (character meet and greets in Chinese pavilions with very cute Mushu the Dragon detailing.) We also saw Chip and Dale dressed in Chinese clothing!

Hong Kong is famous for its shopping, and Hong Kong Disneyland does not disappoint. In the stores, they push the "Big 5" pretty heavily and there's practically no mention of Princesses. They are also promoting the "Cuties" heavily. I was disappointed there was so little merchandise with Chinese writing on them, but I guess most guests don't want that. I looked everywhere, but there are no postcards or antenna toppers for sale. A Disney tradition I started with my parents was to get a personalized souvenir. It used to be a caricature, and then I moved on to the cut silhouettes. At Hong Kong Disneyland, I got a silhouette cut - it's me facing a silhouette of Mickey (130HKD = \$17US). Paper cutting is a traditional Chinese art, so the quality was wonderful.

The parade at 3:00 pm is short and the music isn't very memorable. Although the energy from the cast members is high, the crowd response is not what it is in the States. I recognized some elements from the Share a Dream Come True parade, for instance the sketch artists on bikes, and there were some cool new elements, like the jellyfish dancers. Unlike the Walt Disney World parades, we went at starting time and got seats right on the curb. I sent my friend to hunt for Mickey bars but she came back empty-handed. There's not a whole lot of ice cream for sale, but they do have Chinese sweets. The fireworks are at 8:00 pm and I really would have liked to see them but we had literally done everything by 3:00 pm and were quite tired. The only rides that I am disappointed to have missed are the Orbitron in Tomorrowland and the railroad around the park. (They have the spinning teacups but I don't do teacups!)

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After reclaiming our bags from bell services at our hotel, we took the special Hong Kong Disneyland train to town (part of the municipal transit system). I took pictures of the classic station and the Mickey train with Mickey hand grips and wishing star-papered ceilings. I wonder if Walt Disney, who loved trains, ever imagined that one day there would be a dedicated Mickey Mouse high-speed train in China. He would have loved this.

In summary, if you are going to be in Hong Kong or mainland China, Disneyland is worth a visit. Hong Kong is a gateway city for travel in Asia. With its centuries of British influence mixed with Chinese culture, it is a good transition point before stepping into territories and tastes more unfamiliar to most Westerners. For us Disney fans, it will be interesting to see how this park grows and changes.

*About The Author: Sharon Lin has been to Walt Disney World 10 times and is looking forward to her next trip in October 2006.*

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