

Best new theme park rides: Virtual reality, interactivity

May 26 2016, by Terrance Harris



In this undated photo provided by Six Flags New England, visitors ride the new Superman The Ride Virtual Reality Coaster at the park in Agawam, Mass. (Six Flags New England via AP)

You're flying alongside Superman, seeing the world as the Man of Steel views it, thanks to virtual reality headsets on a roller coaster at Six Flags New England.

Or you're feeling the fear as you come face to face with King Kong, 30 feet tall, at Universal Orlando's new Skull Island attraction.

These are a few examples of the heightened experiences awaiting visitors at theme parks across the country this summer. Park-goers are no longer just sitting back to enjoy the ride. Thanks to virtual reality, interactive features and other new technology, they're playing roles and experiencing rides as never before.

"In terms of virtual reality, this has the chance to revolutionize the [roller coaster](#) experience," said Colleen Mangone, director of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions. "The guests physically ride the roller coaster while wearing the [virtual reality](#) headsets. So their visual line follows a story line or they could be accompanying a superhero. They are flying next to the superhero and as the superhero dives down, the coaster is diving down."

This season will also be about thrills and speed as several exciting roller coasters open across the country. Mako, a new shark-themed attraction at SeaWorld, is being billed as the tallest and fastest coaster in Orlando when it opens in June.



This undated image provided by Universal Orlando Resort shows the Florida theme park's new Skull Island: Reign of Kong attraction's Great Wall, which opens this summer. The King Kong-themed adventure is one of the most anticipated new attractions of the season, bringing visitors face to face with a 30-foot-tall incarnation of the legendary beast. (Daniel LeClair/Universal Orlando via AP)

In Los Angeles, Universal Studios Hollywood is buzzing about a new Walking Dead attraction coming in July, along with The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, which opened in April. In Tennessee, Dollywood's Lightning Rod is sure to thrill wooden coaster enthusiasts.

"It's going to be a great year," said Arthur Levine, a theme park expert for About.com. "For a while there the economy tanked and parks kind of retreated. We weren't really seeing a lot of new things happening at parks. Now they are re-investing and they are opening up new attractions and new roller coasters so that there really are types of exciting things to talk about."

Here's a look at some of the best new theme park attractions this season.



This undated photo provided by Cedar Point Amusement Park shows the Valravn, the new roller coaster that opened this year at Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio. The roller coaster has already broken records. It's now recognized as the tallest, fastest and longest dive coaster. (Jordan Sternberg/Cedar Point Amusement Park via AP)

FLORIDA

Universal Orlando will debut one of the most anticipated rides in the country when Skull Island: Reign of Kong opens in July. Visitors will explore the jungle home of the legendary beast. The 30-foot-tall, 18-foot-wide Kong will be brought to life by 3-D technology and animatronics. The ride opens to the public following a June 23 preview event.

SeaWorld Orlando's shark-themed Mako, opening June 10, will hit speeds of up to 73 mph with the highest point at 200 feet covering nearly a mile of track. It's a hypercoaster, which means speed, tight turns and a weightless feeling.

At Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, the dark ride Frozen Ever After is scheduled to open in late June in Epcot's Norway Pavilion. A boat takes riders into the kingdom of Arendelle during the winter festival, where they'll encounter characters from the megahit "Frozen" while hearing music from the movie and voices of the original cast. At Disney World's Animal Kingdom, night safaris launch Memorial Day weekend, allowing guests to see nocturnal animals and observe their habits.



In this April 7, 2016 photo provided by Universal Studios Hollywood, crowds gather at the opening gates of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios Hollywood in Universal City, Calif. It includes an immersive 3-D ride called Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, along with an outdoor family coaster, Flight of the Hippogriff. (Michael Owen Baker/Universal Studios Hollywood via AP)

Also at Disney, the new shopping, dining and entertainment center at Disney Springs offers four neighborhoods: The Landing, Marketplace, West Side and Town Center. Disney Springs is also hosting a Cirque du Soleil show.

CALIFORNIA

On July 4, Universal Studios Hollywood is slated to open The Walking

Dead, based on the hit AMC show. Few details have been released but riders should expect a maze of horror.



This undated image provided by SeaWorld Orlando shows the new Mako roller coaster, which opens June 10 at the theme park in Orlando, Florida. The shark-themed ride has track that's nearly a mile long, rising 200 feet at its highest point and reaching speeds up to 73 mph. (Chad Baumer/SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment via AP)

Also at Universal Studios Hollywood, fans can immerse themselves in the recently opened Wizarding World of Harry Potter. It's similar to the original Potter land at Universal Orlando, but the marquee ride, Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, has added some unique 3-D technology.

Legoland California in Carlsbad joined the interactive fray when it

debuted Ninjago in early May. Riders actually influence the outcome of the battle by using hand gestures to shoot, rather than laser guns, to help fight off evil during the experience.

At Six Flags Discovery Kingdom in Vallejo, The Joker, a hybrid steel and wooden coaster, will leave riders a little twisted—but in a good way—when it debuts May 29. The park has added steel tracks to the wooden frame of the Roar coaster, built in 1999, to create the hybrid experience. The 3,200-foot-long Joker will also include inversions, which the park says is a first for a wooden roller coaster, and will feature 15 moments of what the park is calling "extreme" airtime.



In this Tuesday, April 19, 2016 photo, a giraffe roams on the Savannah during a

nighttime safari tour at Disney's Animal Kingdom, in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. At Animal Kingdom, night safaris launch Memorial Day weekend, allowing guests to see nocturnal animals and observe their habits. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

MASSACHUSETTS

Six Flags New England in Agawam debuts Superman: The Ride Virtual Reality Coaster on June 11. Riders will wear wireless headsets providing high-resolution imagery and 360-degree views synchronized to the coaster.

OHIO



In this Monday, April 18, 2016 photo customers relax at the airplane themed Hangar Bar at Disney Springs, in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

Cedar Point in Sandusky opened Valravn in early May. It's being called the world's tallest, fastest and longest dive coaster. Riders will hang over the edge of the first hill, 20 stories high, for four seconds before dropping at a 90-degree angle, 75 mph.

TENNESSEE

Dollywood has unveiled its hot rod-themed Lightning Rod ride. It's billed as the world's first launched wooden coaster and fastest wooden coaster, capable of reaching speeds of up to 73 mph.



In this April 19, 2016 photo, lights create various images on the water during the River of Light show at Disney's Animal Kngdom, in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

GEORGIA

Six Flags Over Georgia in Austell debuts a DC Super Friends kids area in time for Memorial Day weekend with five family experiences themed on superheroes and villains: a Superman Tower of Power, Batcopters, Wonder Woman Flight School, Harley Quinn Games and The Joker Funhouse Coaster.



In this April 18, 2016 photo, aerial artists perform in a new act at the Cirque du Soleil show at Disney Springs, in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

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