

# Epic tales

New Orlando theme park Universal Epic Universe opens on May 22 – Andrew McQuarrie gets a sneak peek

What's the naughtiest word you know? OK, maybe not that one – but one you probably wouldn't say in front of your mother. Well, I doubt any of the family-friendly movies in the *How to Train Your Dragon* franchise include this four-letter word, yet it was on my lips more than once as I negotiated *How to Train Your Dragon* – Isle of Berk and the other four worlds at new Orlando theme park Universal Epic Universe.

Sometimes that word was blurted out loud, such as during the *Stardust Racers* rollercoaster in Celestial Park, which reaches a top speed of 62mph; at other times it was silently mouthed in wonder at the feats of technology being displayed, such as during the *Harry Potter and the Battle at the Ministry* ride in *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Ministry of Magic*.

In the rare moments when I wasn't dealing in profanities, I was pinching myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Having never been on

a rollercoaster in my life before flying to Orlando this month, it was a privilege to be among a small group of UK journalists invited to a preview of the world's most hotly anticipated new theme park.

## PULSE-RACING DRAMA

"You're now stepping into 1920s Paris," says Grace Kucharski, our VIP tour guide, as we waltz through the entrance of *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Ministry of Magic*.

We find ourselves walking along the whitewashed corridors of the French capital's metro system of yesteryear, before rounding a corner and being hit by a remarkable sight – looming right ahead is the spitting image of the *Arc de Triomphe*. Beyond it, we are transported into the bustling *Rue Cachée* and a series of retro shop facades.

This was only the beginning. As we progress, we witness an ever-increasing attention to detail ➤

Fountain of Magical  
Brethren in *The Wizarding  
World of Harry Potter –  
Ministry of Magic*

PICTURE: Universal Orlando Resort





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: How to Train Your Dragon – Isle of Berk; Dracula in Dark Universe; Celestial Park entrance

PICTURES: Universal Orlando Resort

until we reach the pinnacle of this particular project. We step onto the Harry Potter and the Battle at the Ministry ride with very little idea of what to expect and are immediately placed at the heart of a pulse-racing drama. This simulator-style ride offers quite the adrenaline boost, and when we are finally released back into the real world, we struggle to find the words to describe the journey. It feels like a new standard has been set for other parks to follow.

### MIXED AUDIENCES

When the body requires a break from the more physical rides, there are plenty of gentler variants as well as numerous live shows with high production values.

In How to Train Your Dragon – Isle of Berk, some in the audience are brought to tears by the sweetness of the Untrainable Dragon, while I'm blown away by the artistry of the staging and stunts. Cirque Arcanus, the live show in The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Ministry of Magic, is pitched to a marginally older audience and also offers air-conditioned entertainment, which visitors are sure to welcome in the Orlando heat.

But the most spine-tingling storylines are reserved for Dark Universe, where the imposing Frankenstein Manor offers a base from which the mad scientist's great-great-granddaughter, Dr Victoria Frankenstein, can carry on the family legacy.

I find myself wondering why the Frankenstein clan can't just for once try their hand at a more pedestrian form of science, or at least something that involves slightly

less terror. While there aren't any live shows in Dark Universe, Victoria makes up for it by introducing us to her life's work in a rather theatrical manner. And we become more closely acquainted with her output aboard Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment, a dark ride through the twists and turns of subterranean catacombs.

Universal bosses are confident Universal Epic Universe will appeal to those outside the family market, and this ride – combined with the rest of Dark Universe – will surely be a vital element of that aspiration.

### THRILLS APLENTY

I may never have set foot on a rollercoaster until reaching Universal Orlando Resort, but I quickly become accustomed to clutching the metal bar tight and sending love to my nearest and dearest.

Sometimes it is the most unassumingly named rides that end up being the most hair-raising – and Stardust Racers is a shining example. I clamber into my seat feeling every inch the battle-hardened veteran of thrills with nearly two days of rollercoaster experience under my belt, but it takes only a few seconds for my confidence to desert me once more. To my embarrassment, I hear myself screaming as we rise and fall, twist and turn, stutter and shoot.

This final ride at Universal Epic Universe is the highlight of a hugely memorable day – even if it does reduce me to jelly for the following half-hour.

On leaving Universal Orlando Resort's landmark new park, emblazoned upon my brain is the most fitting of four-letter words: Epic. **TW**



### UNIVERSAL EPIC UNIVERSE

• Encourage clients to stay on site for early park admission – up to an hour prior to opening.

• Make the most of the dedicated park entrance when staying at Helios Grand Hotel – a first for any Universal Orlando Resort hotel.

• Share details of the 2026 Universal Orlando Resort 'All Parks' ticket, which allows customers to move freely between all four Universal Orlando parks for 14 days.

• Encourage customers to download the Universal Orlando Resort app after they book to help them plan their route around the parks.

• Allow seven days to fully experience Universal Orlando Resort as there is so much to see, with more than 50 new attractions and experiences in Universal Epic Universe alone.

**Alison Montague**  
vice-president of  
international sales and  
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### BOOK IT

#### Do Something Different

offers a one-day Universal Epic Universe Express Pass from £147 per person, based on a visit in September. A 3 Park Explorer Plus 1-Day Universal Epic Universe ticket costs from £475, for visits in November or December. [dosomethingdifferent.com](https://dosomethingdifferent.com)