

The fright fantastic

From haunted houses to scary shows, Universal Orlando's Halloween Horror Nights are a multisensory shock-fest, finds **Laura French** at this year's opening night

I'm in my grave – that's the premise – as earthy smells swirl around, bloody intestines hang from the ceiling and muddy, worm-covered walls enclose me.

I follow the trail, descending deeper into the cemetery as slimy, skeletal 'flesh-eaters' jump out, their strangled, rasping noises half-masked by my own screams. Flashing red lights disorientate me as I move through the darkness, adrenaline pulsing – if this isn't a cure for jet lag, I don't know what is.

Welcome to Halloween Horror Nights, the highly anticipated horror-themed extravaganza that

descends on Universal Orlando Resort every year from late August until early November.

It's now in its 34th year and I'm here for the start of the 2025 event. Between 10 immersive, exclusively designed houses, striking live shows, a DJ and multiple 'scare zones', I find myself squealing until my voice is a shred of its former self – as am I.

Eerily convincing actors, atmospheric smells, strobe lights and dazzling sets add to the drama, making it the most impressive Halloween event I've experienced – so much so, I forget it's only the end of August as I explore the event's opening night. ➤

DESTINATIONS

THE US | ORLANDO

UNIVERSAL *Orlando* RESORT

Universal Orlando Resort comprises four parks. Here's the lowdown.

EPIC UNIVERSE: Five zones make up this new park, which opened in May. Among its 11 rides is the intense Stardust Racers, which soars along a huge, twisting track at a speedy 62mph. I was most wowed by Harry Potter and the Battle at the Ministry, where the queueing area is one of the most spectacular theme park creations I've seen.

ISLANDS OF ADVENTURE: Hogsmeade and Jurassic Park are among the eight 'lands' here, and Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure (which opened in 2019) is one of the most exhilarating rides I've ever been on. The Jurassic World VelociCoaster here is Universal's fastest rollercoaster, reaching 70mph.

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS FLORIDA: The original park has never lost its charm. Harry Potter: Escape from Gringotts is the standout ride with its groundbreaking tech, while the original E.T. Adventure from 1990 is charmingly nostalgic.

VOLCANO BAY:

Universal's tropical-inspired water park is just as fun-filled as those on dry land, with multiple slides, a lazy river and Krakatau – a half-coaster, half-slide, where you whizz along in a raft with plenty of twists and turns. Three sheer-drop, trap-door slides add extra adrenaline and I screamed my way down one of them in terror.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Universal Epic Universe; Halloween-themed food and drink; haunted manor house El Artista

PICTURES: Universal Orlando Resort



HOUSE RULES

If the Grave of Flesh house had me feeling like I'd been cursed (and doing a little cursing of my own along the way), the nine others were just as intense. Half have been inspired by films and franchises, while the other half were dreamed up by Universal's creative team.

Standouts for me included Terrifier, where a crazed, laughing Art the Clown hacked away at a series of gory bodies and I came out drenched in 'blood' (thankfully just water); and El Artista, a beautifully designed manor house where opulent statues, paintings, a cool breeze and floral scents transported us into the 19th-century Spanish home and garden of a tortured artist.

Other house encounters ranged from possessed dolls to a 6ft-tall beast, masked WWE wrestlers to a slew of legendary horror film characters – not least the machete-wielding, serial killer Jason from *Friday the 13th*, and the creepy animatronic bear robots from the more recent *Five Nights at Freddy's*.

The sets were genuinely amazing, and the actors certainly succeeded in scaring the living daylight out of me and my fellow companions.

SCARE ZONES

Beyond the houses, I wandered through four mystical outdoor 'scare zones', where more actors paraded around with stirring special effects. At a 'Masquerade Dance with Death', I rubbed shoulders with elaborately masked 'vampires', as ethereal violet lights dappled the street and funereal music played in the background.

In another zone, giant, blood-spattered cats surrounded me while characters wielding various dismembered body parts hobbled by on skates to a soundtrack of chainsaws. It was quite surreal, offsetting the horror with the wow factor that comes with a production of such ambitious scale and creativity.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The themes and sets change every year, according to Lora Sauls, assistant director of creative development and show direction for art, design and entertainment at Universal Orlando. But the level of detail is consistent, and the result of more than a year's worth of planning.

"Our process for creating, developing, designing, building, casting and rehearsing for Halloween Horror Nights is over 18 months," she says. "Our teams start with a creative brainstorm session in April for the following year's event."

She explains how the event has grown from just one house in 1991 to 10 houses today, with visitors coming back again and again to experience the ever-changing creations and to enjoy attractions designed to suit different tastes.

"We make sure we have a diverse slate of content so we feature all aspects of horror," she adds. "That ranges from the blood, guts and gore to the more haunting scares, so we have something for everyone. Our fans tell us they love the movie-quality scenery, the amazing characters and the fact they get a good scream and a laugh – it's an amazing atmosphere and I love working on it." ➤

FROM FAR LEFT: Dolls in the Let's Play Dead house; Art the Clown; Mr Cupcake; Jason from *Friday the 13th*; haunted house El Artista

PICTURES: Universal Orlando Resort; Kilby Photo



body in ways I didn't know were humanly possible. It might have been the eeriest thing I saw all night – which is saying something after having been buried in a grave.

While I still sound like one of the rasping flesh-eaters that pursued me in the tomb – searching for my voice

after all that screaming – I don't regret a thing. I'm already intrigued to see what 2026 has in store since the scare house themes change from year to year. If you've got clients who are as up for a laugh as they are for a fright, then this is most definitely all treat and no trick. **TW**

BOOK IT

Universal Orlando Resort's Halloween Horror Nights runs on select days from 6.30pm-2am, until November 2. Tickets cost from £85. [universalorlando.com](https://www.universalorlando.com)

Do Something Different offers a Universal Orlando 3 Park Explorer plus 1-Day Universal Epic Universe ticket from £465, valid for up to 14 consecutive days. dosomethingtdifferent.com

Virgin Atlantic flies direct from Heathrow to Orlando with return fares from £393. virginatlantic.com



Visit audleytravel.com/agents

AUDLEY TRAVEL

The USA, in the most meaningful way

From sailing past the emerald cliffs of Hawaii's Nāpali Coast to walking Boston's Freedom Trail with a private guide, we'll introduce your clients to the USA's true character, wherever their passions lie.

Call our trade
Global Travel Team on
01993 462 054