

# Thrills and spills

Laura French takes the plunge at Universal Orlando Resort's three fun-packed parks

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**“T**hree, two, one,” goes the countdown, then BANG – the floor drops away. I plunge almost vertically down a sheer-drop tube, water spluttering in my face, screams bouncing off the walls, facial expression akin to a chimpanzee.

A few seconds later, I shoot out into the open air, plopping into the water below with an almighty splash – only to realise I’ve lost half my bikini (fear not, I found it swirling round the water like a lost fish, after some awkward scrabbling). But it’s all worth it when I embrace my adrenaline high, and I’m soon climbing back up to the 125ft-high platform to do it all over again, dignity a little more intact this time.

I’m trying out the Ko’okiri Body Plunge, the steepest of three

trap-door slides at Volcano Bay, Universal’s Hawaii-themed water park, which opened in May 2017. The huge tube is the tallest of its kind in the US, beginning with an enclosed capsule that looks as if it’s about to shoot off into space and ending with – well, we’ve already been there.

It’s one of the more extreme attractions on the palm-dotted, beach-style complex, which sits a short shuttle bus away from the main parks and stands out with its extravagant centrepiece – a soaring, artificial volcano bellowing out jets of water at intervals, surrounded by wave pools and sand.

I soon discover there are plenty of softer attractions on hand to



## TOP TIP

Universal’s 600-room Aventura Hotel is set to open in August, bringing the second ‘Prime Value’ option to its portfolio



RIGHT:

Kala  
Serpentine  
Body Slide

FAR RIGHT:

Race Through  
New York Starring  
Jimmy Fallon



➔ wind me down: mat slides that send me gliding head-first on a sort of magic carpet; an aqua coaster that has me twisting and turning through the volcano in a four-person canoe; and the 'fearless river', where I bob along in a lifejacket with flowing rapids, bubbling jets, gentle waves and changeable currents pulling me happily along.

But my favourite has to be Honu. Shaped like a gigantic blue bowl filled with swashing water, it shoots you up to the very tip in a five-seater raft before you plummet back down while spinning round in rapid twirls, so that you feel like you're surfing a giant wave. It turns out to be scarier than it looks, but I'm left smiling from ear to ear afterwards, breaking in to hysterical cackles that remind me



**I'm left smiling from ear to ear, breaking in to hysterical cackles that remind me why water parks aren't just for kids**

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The best part is I don't have to stand in queues all day long to enjoy the slides thanks to a Tapu Tapu wearable that lets me tap in to an attraction and wait to be called up rather than having to stand in a queue. Waiting times can be long – I'm there in high season, so

some are up to two hours – but I make the most of it by doing the rounds on the lazy river, swimming in the tropical pools, lazing around on a sunbed and sipping a cocktail. When in Hawaii...

## UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

After all this adrenaline, I'm after something a little calmer, and Universal Studios does the job nicely thanks to its collection of immersive 4D attractions that have me feeling as if I'm riding a rollercoaster without leaving the comfort of a nicely cushioned chair.

The newest addition to the simulator experiences is Race Through New York Starring Jimmy Fallon, which opened last spring and centres on *The Tonight Show* host. Set in a TV studio, it's immersive from the get-go, with a live barbershop quartet in candy-coloured pinstripes entertaining the queue by belting out wonderfully cheesy pop mishmashes with oh-so-American enthusiasm.

From there, you're led into the main 'studio' to sit in rows in front of a huge screen, and the effects are impressive – crystal-clear 3D visuals plus gushes of wind and spray combine to make you feel as if you're actually whizzing along the streets of NYC, then swooping underwater, flying through the sky, and embarking on a host of other outlandish adventures, with humorous characters from the show greeting you along the way.

But even more impressive is Harry Potter and the Escape from Gringotts. Half rollercoaster, half virtual simulator, this gentle, surprisingly thrilling ride sends passengers off in a big cart on a track with video screens, character



LEFT:  
Harry Potter  
and the Escape  
from Gringotts



A Universal three-park Explorer ticket costs from £256 per adult and £247 per child aged three to nine with **Do Something Different.**

It offers 14 days' unlimited access to Universal Studios, Islands of Adventure and Volcano Bay. [dosomethingdifferent.com](http://dosomethingdifferent.com)

Virgin Atlantic flies up to six times daily to Orlando from Gatwick, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast, with fares from £401. [virginatlantic.com](http://virginatlantic.com)

→ appearances and various 4D effects – think dragons blasting out hot fire, Bellatrix Lestrange shooting bolts of lightning and a snake pouncing out from the pitch-black as you soar up, down and round.

As with the Jimmy Fallon ride, the fun starts during the queue, with pointy-nosed, Gringotts-style bankers framing an ornate hall, where a huge, glittering chandelier dangles overhead, so that you feel as if you’ve been plonked straight into the film.

It’s located in Diagon Alley, the Harry Potter-themed section of the park which opened in 2014. Accessed by a gap in the wall, it’s an eerie-looking section that feels like a hidden secret, with rustic pubs offering butterbeer and Harry Potter-themed shops selling everything from Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans to Hogwarts uniforms. Waving a wand in the interactive shopfronts yields ‘magical’ effects, and a Weasley-themed shop complete with a higgledy-



**Rustic pubs offer butterbeer and Harry Potter-themed shops sell Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans and Hogwarts uniforms**

**RIGHT:**  
The Incredible Hulk Coaster



piggledy collection of brightly coloured toys adds to the effect. If you’re sending clients here, this needs to be on the list.

There’s plenty more to please beyond it, though. Direct thrill-seekers to Revenge of the Mummy, an indoor rollercoaster where you whizz forwards and

backwards through the darkness with flashes of light, clouds of smoke, bursts of hot fire and mummy-inspired black bugs (on the screen, fear not) as companions. Or send them to Hollywood Rip Ride Rockit, an outdoor rollercoaster that starts with a fully vertical ascent and has you bumping, looping and corkscrewing along the track to a song of your choice. I opted for *I Will Survive*, which seemed to do the trick.

#### ISLANDS OF ADVENTURE

Over at Islands of Adventure, it’s Skull Island: Reign of Kong that’s had people talking since its opening last year. Combining immersive visuals with moving vehicles, the ride takes you on a 4x4 through the jungle to track down the mighty beast, with spectacular 4D touches along the way, from bats swooping right up in your face to Kong overturning your vehicle.

Exhilarating in a different way is The Incredible Hulk Coaster, a mammoth green track that starts with a rapid, face-sucking acceleration and follows with some intense surprises at lightning speed (up to 67mph).

It’s not just the newer stuff that helps sell this one, though. Among my highlights in the park, I discover Jurassic Park River Adventure, a towering log flume

that takes you gliding along rippling waters with dinosaurs rising up from the depths, before you go speeding down multiple slides, with a wall of froth gushing up from all angles that drenches you from head to toe.

It’s matched by Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, another simulator ride where you fly around on a broomstick over Hogwarts, with screens and convincing live effects.

The latter is part of Hogsmeade, the other half of Universal’s Harry Potter land, complete with a castle, wand shops and muggles drinking butterbeer (myself included) and accessible via a novel Hogwarts Express ride that transports you over from Diagon Alley.

And how do we manage to see so much in so little time? We’re whizzed round with zero queues thanks to a VIP guide who takes us to all the best spots and gives us the insider lowdown. At \$189 per person per day (in addition to the standard park ticket) it doesn’t come cheap. For those willing to splash the cash and see everything in minimal time, it’s something of a godsend – and about as close to Harry Potter magic as you can get without having to actually cast a spell or don an invisibility cloak. Who needs ‘wingardium leviosa’, anyway? [TW](#)



**LEFT:**  
Revenge of the Mummy



## Universal THE BEST BITS



Clients still hungry for more? **Laura French** rounds up the best of the rest, to help you capitalise on the boost in sales driven by the finale of *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway*, which was filmed live at CityWalk in April

### VOODOO DOUGHNUT, CITYWALK

This new, funky doughnut shop serves weird-and-wonderful flavours such as 'Bacon Maple Bar', 'Dirt Doughnut' and 'Memphis Mafia Fritter' – a delicious fusion of peanut butter, banana and cinnamon inspired by Elvis – in an artsy, all-pink interior complete with edgy murals and rock music. Voodoo Doughnut started its whacky life in Portland and this is the only shop on the US East Coast.



PICTURE: KEVIN KOCZYNSKI

### RISING STAR KARAOKE, CITYWALK

If you've got some wannabe popstars on your hands, there's only one thing for it – Rising Star. This sizeable karaoke bar features everything from R Kelly to the Spice Girls on its cheese-tastic song menu (we excelled in both) with a decent stage to perform on and a live band to accompany you – getting up there is as terrifying as braving The Incredible Hulk, but you won't regret it.



### FAST & FURIOUS SUPERCHARGED, UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

This new simulator-style ride features props and cars from the film plus crystal-clear visuals, autonomous vehicles and a queue where team members interact with characters from the film. It also features a Virtual Line system, so guests can select a time and come back later.



### THE TOOTHsome CHOCOLATE EMPORIUM, CITYWALK

Overloaded milkshakes bursting with whole cupcakes, brownies, chocolate chunks and various other toppings are the order of the day at this Willy Wonka-style restaurant, while exotic creations such as chocolate bread feature on the rest of the menu.



### LOEWS SAPPHIRE FALLS RESORT

Stepping into Loews Sapphire Falls Resort is like stumbling upon a Caribbean paradise, framed with palm trees, set by the water and boasting a huge, family-friendly pool as well as a gym, coffee house and two restaurants – including an excellent tapas joint serving everything from Caribbean curried goat to southern fried chicken. It boasts 1,000 rooms and suites plus a handy location, with water taxis to shuttle you over to CityWalk.



### NIGHT-TIME LIGHTS AT HOGWARTS CASTLE, ISLANDS OF ADVENTURE

Powerful music, bright lights and colourful projections illuminate the majestic Hogwarts Castle at Islands of Adventure on certain evenings, creating a mesmerising spectacle and an appropriately magical end to the day – for parents as much as kids.

