



The dragon at wooden rollercoaster George and the Dragon PICTURE: Efteling

World of wonder

Will a fairytale-inspired theme park be enough to keep an 11-year-old entertained on a short family escape? **Stephanie Krah**n finds out

A self-playing piano, a 7.5m-tall chandelier made of 'magical' golden keys, and two immaculate bellboys who whisk our bags out of the car before we even ask – what a welcome to the Efteling Grand Hotel.

As we walk into the lobby, my 11-year-old son Noah is enthralled by the sparkling centrepiece, which is constructed from nearly 200 keys – each representing the start of a new journey – and is the first nod to the fables, fantasies and fairytales that are woven throughout Efteling theme park.

Design experience manager Sander de Bruijn says: "For me, a key is very much associated with an arrival and symbolises the beginning of a story. In this case, it's the beginning of your stay at the Efteling Grand Hotel – this is where your journey to the world of wonders begins."

The hotel opened in August 2025 and is the first property inside the Dutch theme park. After a swift check-in via the app, we're keen to see if this storybook-inspired attraction will be a suitable short break for parents and a hard-to-please tween.

STORIED SCENES

With direct access from the hotel, we head straight into the park to an idyllic scene: the sun is shining as we walk past a huge lake with *The Frog Prince* fountains at each corner, the birds are singing, children are playing and people are eating ice cream, yet the faint sound of screams can be heard in the distance. Efteling has all the white-knuckle rides you would expect of any good theme park, but it also has something different.

Jack van de Vliert, marketing and international sales manager, says: "Rather than being built around individual attractions, the park is designed as a complete world where fairytales, legends and folklore come to life within a natural setting. Not only do our green surroundings create a sense of calm, but there's also something new to discover around every turn. We cherish our nature and work hard to have it in the spotlight all year round."

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There are five 'magical realms', each centred around classic fairytales and Dutch folklore. We check the app and are delighted to see ride queueing times are just 10-40 minutes.

Noah chooses *Droomvlucht* (dream flight) in *Marerijk* (Fairy Realm), where we board a suspended carriage for a flight through a dream-like world, then royal palace *Symbolica* where we explore the rooms in a rotating carriage, followed by nightly show *Aquanura*. This impressive musical water ballet features 200 fountains, thousands of lights and projections set to music, bringing Efteling's fairytales to life. ➤

DESTINATIONS

FAMILY HOLIDAYS | EFTELING



EFTELING GRAND HOTEL

This 140-room property opened to much fanfare last August as the first hotel within the park. Our Premium Deluxe Room overlooked the park entrance and had a double bed, bunk bed and trundle, suitable for a family of five. The bathroom had a double sink, rainfall shower and amenities from luxury brand Zenology. Breakfast at Brasserie 7 is included, with buffet and à la carte dishes, but catering to food intolerances was limited, with a long wait for my dairy-free breakfast. From €1,525 for two nights in a Premium Deluxe Room.



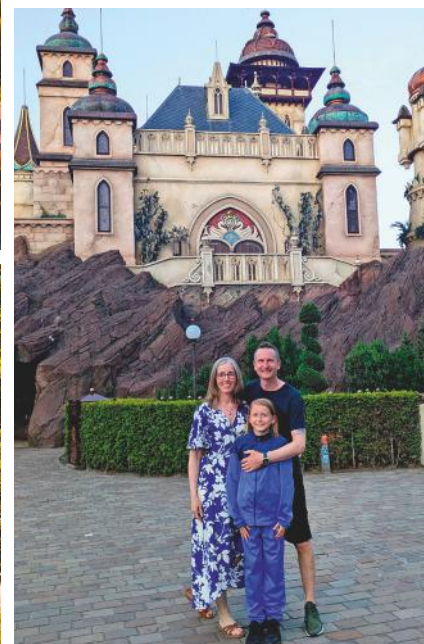
EFTELING WONDER HOTEL

Just beyond the park entrance, this impressive building appears to float. Guests enter through the ground-floor 'engine room', where 'dream steam' lifts the castle into the sky each night. There are 124 rooms and suites, including themed options. At Restaurant Saga, park folklore inspires a tapas-style menu served in 'chapters' rather than courses. From €1,197 for a two-night stay in a Premium Room. *Both prices are based on a family of four sharing, including breakfast and park entry.*



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The entrance at Efteling and Efteling Grand Hotel; writer Stephanie, with partner Martin and Noah in front of Symbolica; water ride Piraña

PICTURES: Efteling; Stephanie Krahn



SEVENTH HEAVEN

We return to the Efteling Grand Hotel for dinner at Brasserie 7, which has a menu of seven starters, mains and desserts. The number is linked to fairytales including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Tom Thumb*, one of seven sons – so it's no coincidence the hotel's 140 rooms and suites are set across seven floors.

Noah is excited to learn there is a pool in the hotel and requests a visit after dinner. Even at 9pm, it's busier than I expected, but there's space to splash around and flit between the whirlpool, steam bath and sauna.

We take advantage of early park entry the next morning – hotel guests can enter half an hour before the public – and head for the Gondoletta boat ride around the lake. While Noah marvels at the huge koi carp, I appreciate the calm surroundings, albeit punctuated by shrieks coming from the rollercoasters in the Adventure Realm. These include Baron 1898 with its 37m vertical free-fall drop; double-loop steel rollercoaster Python; and duelling wooden ride Joris en de Draak (George and the Dragon). New 50mph suspended 'launch coaster' Missie Luminar will also be added in 2029.

While in Reizenrijk (Travel Realm), we try dark rollercoaster Vogel Rock – terrifying! – then 'flying' Thai temple Pagode, where we get a bird's-eye view of the park and Noah excitedly points out all the rides and hotels we can see. But our standout favourite is river rapids ride Piraña, full of twists, turns, swirling rapids and waterfalls. In the heat of the day, a water ride is just the ticket and it doesn't disappoint.

FAIRYTALE FUN

On our final morning, we enter Marerijk via the private entrance for hotel guests, to explore the place where Efteling began more than 70 years ago. We follow a winding woodland path to find 30 classic fairytales brought to life with animatronics, lighting and music, from familiar tales of *Cinderella*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Emperor's New Clothes* to some that are new to us.

The biggest highlight for Noah is the coin-pooing donkey from a lesser-known Brothers Grimm tale. For a nominal 50 cents, the animatronic donkey brays, lifts its tail and shoots out a gold coin – testing Noah's goalkeeping skills as he tries to catch the flying coins.

There is something new to uncover at every turn in Efteling, with numerous places to eat, attractions, shows and rides for old and young alike. So, was it a hit? I ask Noah and get a resounding: "Yes". The answer is short and sweet, but that's about the best you can hope for from a tween. **TW**

BOOK IT

Fred Holidays offers a short break to Efteling for two adults and two children, from £2,899 in total. The price includes three nights with breakfast at Efteling Grand Hotel, return Eurostar from London to Rotterdam with onward rail travel to Tilburg and transfers to Efteling theme park, plus four days' unlimited park entry, departing February 16, 2027. fredholidays.co.uk