

VIP Squared

Every year, my husband and I are very lucky to get a week-long break from being busy parents of 4 kids when Grandma takes the kids to her house for a week. For the past two years during this vacation, we traveled downstate to King's Island, an amusement park near Cincinnati. King's Island offers a VIP Tour, which means that for 9 hours, you get your own personal park employee to lead you around the park and to the **front of all the park rides of your choosing**, even holding your stuff if you really want him to! In case you're interested, a VIP Tour at King's Island also includes an all-you-can-eat lunch buffet, unlimited fountain drinks all day, a ride photo, an ice cream cone, a behind-the-scenes tour of The Beast, and \$25 in park souvenir money – which can be spent on carnival style games, buying more food (if you need it after the buffet!), or in the park's gift shops. While it may seem expensive up front, if you do the math, the VIP Tour ends up being a great deal all things considered, and we highly recommend it; especially if you're a coaster enthusiast!

Being able to walk to the front of any ride line of one's choosing is really cool – it's hard to imagine, until you ride coaster after coaster without pause!

We began our day on The Beast (only because the Diamondback was not functioning, but luckily our fears of it being broken for the entire day were dispelled and they were able to fix it before long). The Beast is an almost 5-minute long journey into the desolate forests of southern Ohio on a wooden roller coaster! As we learned from our behind the scenes tour (included with the VIP Tour as I said), prior to its unveiling in 1979, The Beast was built on-site and follows closely the terrain upon which it is built. It was not pre-ordered and shipped to the park in segments like many modern roller coasters.



The Beast follows
its native land's
terrain and
disappears into a
tunnel at the
bottom of its
first drop

After riding The Beast twice in a row (almost 10 minutes worth of roller coasters right there!!), we moved on to the Vortex, an old-school steel roller coaster with more than a few high speed inversions. I had printed out my blog post I had written about the VIP Tour a year before, and it served as a helpful guide for this year. And I have to say, everything was much more enjoyable this year – last year I had written in my blog that I didn't like the Vortex much and that the Backlot Stunt Coaster was lame, but this year both rides were much more fun than I had remembered – perhaps because I knew what to expect from the park, and so the element of surprise was minimized. I'm a person who likes to know what to expect rather than to be completely taken by surprise – I have 4 little kids, so I have enough surprises throughout my average day, thank you ☐

But whatever the case, whichever the reason, this year's VIP Tour was even more fun than last year's! All of the rides we rode were better than I had remembered they were, and the Whitewater Canyon water ride was even more fun when riding

with friends! Of course, I think it helped that this year's temperature was almost 90° instead of the unseasonal 70° we had during last year's tour – getting soaked last year left us near frozen! And I learned a little bit from last year's tour – no blisters from walking around in wet shoes for me! I brought a little bag and put a change of shoes in it. As much as it may have annoyed my co-VIPs (but then again, I was the only gal in a group of men), I changed into my flip-flops every time we got on a water ride. Not only did I save my feet from blistering, but I got to order our guide to carry my shoes around the park! Ok, so I actually felt pretty badly making the poor guy carry my shoes around, but it was kind of like being a queen for a day, and – carrying our stuff **was** his job after all...



The Diamondback
Roller Coaster

Being led around the park by a guide all day, slipping in front of the 'regular guests' to get to the front of the lines (and picking whatever spot you choose on all the rides! Note to self for next year: front car on The Beast rocks, back row on the Diamondback is sweet, and the back is ideal and technically the front for Firehawk...) gave us plenty of time for 'extras' in the park: things we don't normally do in theme parks, usually for lack of time like souvenir shopping, playing games and seeing shows. The show we chose to see this year – and it's strange, I know, that I keep promising myself a theater break but still I continue to find myself in a

theater audience – was called ‘Too Much TV’, and it was actually pretty fun! It began with a ‘host’ who went around the audience asking for them to ‘name that tune’ as different tv show theme songs were played. I thought I would be good at this kind of thing, but apparently my brain had been scrambled upon one (ok, a dozen) too many roller coasters earlier in the day because I couldn’t get any of the answers correct. But it’s ok, I didn’t raise my hand too high- unlike a fellow VIP who was called upon, but he answered correctly and won himself a Too Much TV button – way to go! Despite a fleeting regret in the beginning of the show (am I really watching yet another stage show?!?), I did enjoy myself. I recognized 100% of the show titles and about 80% of the lyrics since I used to be a huge tv fan and had watched many of the shows when I was a kid (many in reruns; I’m not THAT old!) The show included 6 dancer-singers, and it began with TV shows from the 50’s – 60’s (a few of these I watched like Patty Duke and Mary Tyler Moore – um, in reruns of course □ while the rest I just knew the themes since they were very famous like the Andy Griffith Show) and continued to shows from the 70s (3’s Company, Brady Bunch, Partridge Family, etc), 80’s-90’s (Full House, Perfect Strangers, Growing Pains, Friends, etc). LOTS of fun, especially for a former TV junkie like myself. The singers / dancers were pretty good, and I have to say that one of the highlights of the show was that during the Brady Bunch theme, they showed clips from the episode where the Brady’s actually visit King’s Island!! I had totally forgotten that episode (I used to be a huge Brady Bunch fan; I watched it every day in syndication after school, and I had the book / episode guide written by Mr. Greg Brady (Barry Williams) himself – I used to check off the episodes I had seen – ahem, NERD!!), but anyway, I will have to dig it up on youtube.com or somewhere and watch it again now!!

Miraculously, the rain held off until minutes after our guide was dismissed for the day – we had been watching the storms move in all day the day before our tour, hoping it wouldn’t

affect our trip. We had promised our guide an email depicting our thoughts on what riding The Beast was like in the dark, but as I said, it began to rain, and we were forced to take a break. That's when we realized just how tired we really were – too tired to wait for the rain to stop and the rides to re-open, so we'll have to experience The Beast at night next year. And I could not be looking forward to it more!!

On the way home, we found a White Castle (don't have them way up here in the bufu northwestern corner of Ohio), or at least that's what the sign said. But the White Castle location was connected to a gas station, and the sliders did not taste quite the same... I thought they were just old until I brought some home and re-heated them, and they STILL were a bit off... hmmm.... Normally these things reheat really well, and I'm sorry to tell the White Castle newbie in our group that he still hasn't really tried an authentic slider. They hit the spot at the time and had we taken the time to stop anywhere else, we would have gotten home even later than the 1 am-ish that we did and would have been even more exhausted. My bodily soreness from being beat up by various coasters all day was less than last year, but it also lasted a day or two longer than I remember. Oh well, more to tweak for next year! Maybe I will bring TWO pairs of shoes for Mr. Guide to carry around for me, haha!

And one final note... We have a running joke with a member of our group – we went to Disney World with him almost two years ago, and it seemed that every ride which he rode stalled; including rides that didn't usually stall. At King's Island, only one ride stalled while we were on it, but we got stuck in what I am sure is the most precarious position in which a person can get stuck at that park – flat on our backs, under the great blue sky on the Firehawk. Here is a picture of how we were stuck; note that these people are in the station, which would have been better since there were people around to help. We were stuck flat on our backs *outside* of the station

for about 10-15 minutes, and I couldn't help but notice how sympathetic the ride operator seemed during her announcements directing us to stay calm.



Also noticeable were the extremely red faces and disoriented nature of our fellow riders who were finally returned to an upright position and allowed to leave the ride with us. For the record, our park guide happened to be on the Firehawk with us (on the VIP Tour, you can also make your guide go on rides!) and said that he had never seen it stuck like that before. So yeah, while we were only stuck on a ride once during our day, what a place to be stuck!!!

And surely I don't want to leave you with a bad impression of the Firehawk, nor of King's Island, so here are some fun youtube videos from other riders:

Firehawk (you lie on your back and then are flipped after the lift onto your stomach. Like Superman, you fly thru a series of loops, inversions, and open track):

Next, not one of my favorite rides at King's Island, though still fun, the joy in Invertigo is watching the person's face who is sitting across from you. Ride with a friend sitting across from you, and experience the g-forces backwards first. Then watch your friend's face as they experience the same thing backwards you just did – It's priceless!!

And now for my favorites, The Beast (start watching at a minute and ten seconds into the video for the real action):

And the Diamondback:

All this watching the POV cams on the coasters makes me want to do it all over again... But unfortunately I have to wait... So until next year...

VIPs For A Day (part three of... well, I'll try to make this the last part)

If you've read my first two blog posts about our trip to King's Island, then you know that I've rambled and chronicled, and now I'm blue in the face and ready to move on. I would like to rate most of their rides though for those who are curious and/or contemplating a visit to the theme park. Somewhere there is a Discovery Channel show about the 10 Most Extreme Roller Coasters I'd like to see – I hear King's Island has 3 or more on the list! Going to hope that it's on youtube... If you haven't read my previous post, here is my ride experience scale: 1♦ = not so good, while 5 ♦ = awesome!

The Racer – 3♦. A wooden racing roller coaster that doesn't really race. According to our guide, people on the different racing trains would trash-talk each other so much that they built a wall to separate the two train colors. When we rode, the first time the blue train was not operating, and the second time, the trains did not go at the same time. Still a fun wooden coaster though!

Flight Deck – 1♦. Formerly called Top Gun, but whatever you call it, we did not like it. It's a roller coaster whose car is suspended from the track above the car, which basically amounted to a lot of swinging. Ok for me, not my favorite, but it made my husband sick.

Vortex – $\frac{1}{4}\blacklozenge$ – This one only gets a quarter star to put it on the map – my map key didn't exactly contain a zero, so let's give it a quarter star just because it's a coaster. But otherwise, yuck. Jerky, but without any real thrills. Reminds me of the Shockwave they used to have at Six Flags Great America in Gurnee Illinois. Funny how I used to ride that over and over, especially near park closing when it would empty out. We would just stay on Shockwave until they kicked us off! But as an adult, the ride type doesn't work for me.

Invertigo – $3\blacklozenge$. I need to go back on this one when it isn't lunch time! I think the Flight Deck/Invertigo/haven't had lunch yet combo did me in as I felt a bit queasy after this one. Basically, you go up and through a loop, and do the same thing backwards. The cool thing about this one is that you face other riders, which I actually don't know if that's a cool thing or not – our guide recommended we try sitting on either the front or back of this one so we didn't have to face strangers on the coaster. I did enjoy how this one whizzed through the station though, and like I said, I will have to try it again on a full stomach.

Sponge Bob 3D Ride – $4\frac{1}{2}\blacklozenge$. I really liked this one! A lot of fun, and much more movement than its counterpart at Universal Studios, the Jimmy Neutron ride. It's a 3D Sponge Bob movie where the seats move as you move about Sponge Bob's world. The scenery is great, and not only is it 3D, but the rider actually gets to move along with the movie. As a bonus, the movie is very funny, and I loved the story!

Whitewater Canyon – $4\frac{1}{2}\blacklozenge$. You know the type – a large round boat makes it way down a "river", complete with rapids, drops, and waterfalls. I always love this type of ride and much of the fun is riding it with your friends or even strangers trying to see who is going to get the most wet! The day we went, it was an unseasonal 70°, and getting wet wasn't quite as enjoyable as usual. This is actually one of the smaller versions of this type of ride that I've been on, and the boat

seated 6 people instead of the usual 8, 10, or 12 as I've seen before. But this version has an added element of fun – friends, family, and people who have ridden the ride can take revenge on riders by putting in a quarter for a chance to launch a water cannon at passing boats. This part is lots of fun, although they need to get the change machine working so more people can squirt! We went on with some kids who didn't get wet enough in their opinion, so they rode again while we kept watch at the water cannons and succeeded in getting them SOAKED!

Backlot Stunt Coaster – 2♦. Lameness. But remember, I'm used to Universal Studios since we try to trek to Orlando yearly. This has nothing on Universal. But I suppose for younger kids, it could instill a feeling of bravery as they race past exploding police cars. It goes kind of fast up a winding track, which is kind of different, but other than that, the excitement kind of fizzled, and the ride isn't all that long. The brightly colored cars you ride in are super-cute, but does that really matter?

Adventure Express – 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ ♦. This is also kind of lame, which is alright, not every coaster has to be top thrill. But this one is like Big Thunder Mountain Railroad at Disney, but that is bigger and faster. Adventure Express was going alright until the rider finds himself in a climatic tunnel, climbing a lift past moving robots and everything. Then when you reach the top – nothing. Nada. Literally – the ride ends here. What the ?

Scooby Doo and the Haunted Castle – 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ ♦. You ride through scenes of Scooby Doo trying to shoot the bad guys with a laser gun attached to your car – cool! Even better, I actually beat my husband on this one! This ride is a lot like Buzz Lightyear at Disney, and I can never even get close to Hubby's score on that one. He must have had an off-ride though, cuz the second time we rode he beat me silly again. Oh well, this ride is awesomely themed. They remembered quite a few of the

bad guys from the old Scooby Doo tv show, and there were sound bites galore. The castle looks awesome from the outside, and we even drove a Mystery Machine:



Other fun rides at this park that deserve at least an honorable mention are the railroad (just a standard train ride, but oh-so-relaxing after a huge day of coaster riding!), the Wild Thornberry's River Adventure (kind of a lame log-flume type ride, but still lots of fun), the Eiffel tower (we didn't ride it, but it was gorgeous to look at), and Dodgem (plain ole bumper cars, but when is the last time hubby and I got to ride 'n bump kid-free? I don't even remember!). Because we splurged and got the guided tour, we even had time to catch some shows – an ice show and an 80's review. The ice skaters were pretty good; especially one guy who even did a triple axle! The 80's show was fun, even though many of the performers were incapable of both singing and dancing at the same time. There was a special Michael Jackson tribute, even though he had passed away only a week before our visit. But there were afros, mullets, big bangs, leg warmers, bright colors, even giant Rubik's cubes, and it was fun to sing along to the rockin' 80's tunes. One did get the feeling however, that not one member of the show had any idea of what the '80's was actually like...

So there you have it. I've reviewed and rated the rides I rode and found worth a mention. If you are thinking of visiting, you should know that King's Island also has a huge

kids area, and many more rides I didn't mention. We tried to stay away from any rides with a lot of spinning or anything that looked too crazy (especially this one called Delirium):



It looked a little too crazy/dizzy for me; maybe if you go to King's Island, you can try it and let me know what it's like in the comments!

VIPs For A Day (part one of more parts)

On Thursday, my husband's brilliant ability to find awesome entertainment deals on the internet paid off once again. He booked us a VIP tour at [King's Island \(click for a view of the rides and attractions!\)](#) near Cincinnati Ohio, and we spent the entire day at this awesome amusement park! The VIP tour included our own personal guide; a park employee who followed us around all day leading us up the exits of every ride so that we got to bypass the line and ride without waiting – *in the seat of our own choosing*. We also got to wear lanyards with VIP passes on them (think of the movie Wayne's World when Wayne and Garth get backstage passes to see Alice Cooper. They wear them around their necks and proudly display their

lanyards, flashing them into the faces of nearly everyone they encounter, hilarious!) – and tempting to reenact, but there were some people in line who were upset that we got to board without waiting in line; I wouldn't want to rub it in. But I would recommend the VIP tour to anyone who wants to go to King's Island – it includes a guide (you can even make him do things, like hold your stuff and go on rides, haha!), no lines (sometimes a minimal 5 minute wait at the gate while the ride operators find a place to stick you in, not really an issue at all – there is plenty to watch for those 5 minutes), an all-you-can-eat buffet for lunch, unlimited fountain drinks throughout the day, ice cream, a backstage tour of The Beast (the longest wooden roller coaster in the world!), and 2 ride pictures. A great deal, especially if you want to sit through my following narrative to see if it's a place you'd want to visit:

The lady on the phone told us to get to the park at 8:30 am, so we were actually early and had to wait in a car line to get in. When we got to the park, we got shuffled around and had to wait a bit more – it seems that this part of the tour could be tweaked a little bit. We didn't get our guide and get on rides until about 9:45. Still early (park opens to the general public at 10), but we had about an extra hour of doing nothing at the park (could have slept an hour longer!), so perhaps they should tweak this part of the tour to make it run more smoothly for the guest – everything else about the tour is really great though! So anyway, our guide comes to meet us, and we gave him our list of rides and follow him around the park. Actually, since it was before 10, only the park's brand new showcase ride and The Beast were open. So we began with the Diamondback – which I had named as the ride that scared me the most on the way over. But I loved it! It was so smooth and all those fast drops were so fun in the cool open air. The Beast was another story. I liked it, but it was very rattly and jerky. Going back on The Beast later in the day and sitting in the front row changed the experience

for me, however, and we ended up riding it a lot! Once we discovered the front car of The Beast and I switched sides of the train with hubby, I enjoyed the ride immensely. It's a **4 minute, 50 second** ride through the forest on a wooden roller coaster at speeds of over 60 mph. The subtle sound of chirping birds accompanied by the naturalistic scents of the surrounding forest and the wooden tunnels where the coaster whizzes is indescribable. A comment on themeparkinsider.com says about The Beast, *"Running through the thick forest at 65 mph on an intense wooden coaster...about as close to riding a real beast as you can get. Classic ride that always delivers."* – I have to agree. They built another wooden coaster at King's Island called Son of the Beast, but it closed in June when people complained it was too rough. From the printed King's Island info, I learned that Son of the Beast was a *looping* wooden coaster – interesting. Oh well, maybe it'll open some day for me to try. But back to the backstage tour of The Beast – very cool. We watched some trains descend the first large drop which actually leads directly underground into a tunnel. We walked further into the forest (noticed some long-gone riders' possessions along the way: broken sunglasses, coins, hats, etc. Didn't see any cell phones, but then again, we saw the lost cell phone display they have in the Diamondback area – a big clear box FULL of cell phones, ipods, Blackberries, PDAs, etc.), and we learned some interesting facts while watching riders fly past us – and boy, were they surprised to see us walking around back there in the forest!! As for the facts – the entire coaster was built from scratch on site; unlike many of today's coasters which are shipped into the parks in segments. The Beast was built around and including the existing rolling terrain of the Miami River valley in lower Ohio, and as I mentioned, it goes underground. It has speed monitors built into parts of the track, so if a train is going too fast, it will automatically break to slow itself down. I gratefully noticed this while riding, and it helped calm my concerns of flying off the track. This coaster goes so fast into those tunnels – WOW!

For all these reasons and more, it's a coaster like NO other! Here's a pic – looks like something I'll have to try in the fall; the forest looks beautiful during peak season for color-changing leaves:



Ironically, the exact opposite thing happened with the Diamondback – I loved it the first time, and then I tried the front row which was absolutely terrifying! I won't be riding the front of the Diamondback again. Careening down that first 74° drop (!) practically face-down at over 80 mph with only a red thing between my legs to keep me from plummeting to the earth made me feel like I was going to die for sure.



And not in a good way, which is ironically enough sometimes the reason why lots of crazy people like to ride coasters. Being in the front seat on Diamondback makes it look like the the track disappears beneath you, then before you know it, you're flying in the air getting lift out of your seat and you have nothing on either side nor in front of you – yikes! I've grown too old to feel invincible, so I put a cap on my thrill-seeking. I enjoy a good coaster, but I also have my limits.

If you are a thrill-seeker roller coaster enthusiast who just can't get enough, try the front car on Diamondback! And a side note, the guy who gave us the behind the scenes tour of The Beast is the guy who thought of the name for Diamondback; it was an interesting experience to have something like that come up during a conversation.

I think I'll stop there for now... it was a big day, and I'd like to write up more and get more pictures up – and yes, I do have those free ride pictures we got of Chris and I on The Beast and Diamondback. Am I willing to post them on the internet? Maybe you'll have to read my other King's Island posts to find out!

Down And Out In The Magic Kingdom

I was doing a search in the library's database, and I came across the title *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* by Cory Doctorow. Further investigation showed it to be a science fiction book about Walt Disney World in the future. Not usually my type of novel (and I strongly prefer to read non-fiction anyway), but since we're Disney affectionados, I couldn't resist the read. It took me over a month to read it, and that's not even solely because I'm so busy. The book is difficult to read – author Doctorow does a nice job at placing the reader in the characters' futuristic universe, but it's almost too much – he neglects to provide an explanation of certain things. For instance, the characters all have "Whuffie" and "HUDs", and these concepts are constantly revisited throughout the story, but it's never explained exactly what these things are! My interpretation is that

Whuffie refers to a meter in one's body that measures a person's positive characteristics, experiences, and emotions – and others can see your Whuffie level. A person with low Whuffie is shunned in society, and sometimes even denied entrance to Disney World. HUDs seem to be a person's computer – it almost seems to be a part of their brain. They can look up stuff and send things to each other instantly with their HUDs like directions to places. It seems to be kind of like today's internet, yet it's built right into people's brains. So, yeah, you can see why it was slow reading as the reader had to get around all of these unfamiliar concepts. But onto the story itself...

In the future when *Down and Out...* is set – and I don't know what year that is, he never specifically says – Disney World is now a retro-park; something that is preserved only because it's an example of the great works of our current time. The main character, Julius and his girlfriend Lil (who was raised in the Magic Kingdom) are on a mission to save the Magic Kingdom and keep the attractions as they are: old-fashioned rides through vintage dioramas. There is a group of people trying to "rehab" all the rides and give them a futuristic makeover, and they do get ahold of the Hall of Presidents – they make it so that the guests can actually see what it *feels* like to be Abraham Lincoln and the rest of the former Presidents. It is the goal of Julius, Lil, and their friend Dan to keep the rest of Liberty Square (a section of the Magic Kingdom), especially the Haunted Mansion, away from the "ad-hocs" as the rehabbing group is called. Throw in Julius' murder (don't worry, he's been "backed up" and can reclaim his life in a clone) and the fact that he now has to find out who killed him and keep it from happening again, and that's how the plot thickens.

Overall, it was a very interesting read, but probably not something I'd re-read. It was worth stepping out of my usual non-fiction genre for the experience to read a science-fiction

tale, but it wasn't anything stupendous. The story was interesting, and the author did a great job of detailing life in the future, even if it was at times confusing to the reader. I kept feeling like I was coming in on a sequel having missed the first part. I thought there'd be more details about the Magic Kingdom, and in that respect, I was disappointed. But if you like sci-fi books and you've been to Disney World, I recommend this book only if you read a lot and have lots of spare time. On a grading scale, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* gets a C- from me. Up next for me is *My Lobotomy* by Howard Dully- a non-fiction book about a guy who was involuntarily given an "ice-pick" lobotomy as a 12-year old.