

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

★ Christmas Fantasy at the Magic Kingdom

“Sometimes it takes a change of scenery to have a change of heart.”

– From *A Good Year's* movie poster

I make no apologies for my love affair with all things Disney, having spent many happy childhood years memorising song lyrics and dialogues from *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Bambi*, *The Aristocats* and *Peter Pan*, just to name a few. So when an opportunity to visit Disneyland presented itself, I did the necessary research and prepared myself for a spectacular day ahead.

It took a 45-minute subway ride and a couple of mildly confusing station changes before we finally arrived at the Magic Kingdom's gates. The first thing that hit me was the music: a festive rendition of “Deck The Halls”, blaring from strategically placed speakers scattered along a sprawling walkway which ultimately led to the attraction's main entrance. As it was Japan's Labour Thanksgiving holiday, an enormous crowd had already gathered by 9 am. However, I was immensely relieved that all the stories I had heard about the famous Japanese discipline and courtesy turned out to be true, as everyone patiently waited their turn, with minimal shoving and zero confrontation throughout the day despite sardine-can situations in certain areas.

Our stroll to the entrance alone proved to be an emotional experience for me. “Deck The Halls” was followed in quick succession by a variety of renowned, upbeat Disney tunes; and as the magnificent towers of Cinderella's Castle came into view in the distance, I found myself fighting back tears as childhood memories flooded my senses, and I realised how much I had aged – both physically and mentally.

After purchasing our tickets (a whopping S\$80 for an adult), we entered the front driveway/garden and were greeted by Goofy and other Disney characters, mingling with delighted children and mugging for the cameras. After posing with an especially playful cat in baggy overalls, we stepped into the World Bazaar, which literally took my breath away.

A perfect replica of early 20th century small-town America, the streets are lined by a mind-boggling array of Victorian-style shops (Main Street Daily, Grand Emporium, New Century Clock Shop, The Toy Kingdom, Pastry Palace, Great American Waffle Co.), with its crowning glory – a magnificently decorated giant Christmas tree – as the centerpiece.

But we could not stop yet! Armed with knowledge gained from poring over maps provided by friends prior to the trip, we made a beeline for Fantasyland, home of must-not-miss rides *It's A Small World* and *Haunted Mansion*. I had been advised to utilise the Fastpass option as often as possible, so queuing time was effectively minimised.

It's A Small World certainly lived up to its reputation as “the happiest cruise that ever sailed”. This dazzling display of state-of-the-art animatronics had already gotten into an early Christmas spirit, with all its multi-ethnic child characters dressed in festive, glittering outfits, dancing around grandly decorated Christmas trees. Even its theme song was infused with sleigh bells, sounding a joyous refrain each time we entered a new tunnel. Every continent was



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Band performance.

represented, but the displays of Europe and Asia were definitely the best of the lot. Cue lacrimal ducts overdrive (*haha*).

Pirates of the Caribbean at Adventureland entailed a 45-minute wait (read the fine print on your Fastpass), but the animatronics did not disappoint. No Captain Jack Sparrow in sight, but the attention to detail was especially evident in the animal characters (a pig rolling in the mud, a parrot flapping its wings while yakking away, a cat with raised hackles and blazing eyes) and the splendid depiction of a full-scale battle at sea.

Haunted Mansion (back at Fantasyland) was no less entertaining, again boasting a prominent Christmas theme, albeit with a Tim Burton twist. This ride featured – wait for it – characters from *The Corpse Bride* and *Nightmare Before Christmas*, which I found extremely amusing. The best bit: an aerial view of a haunted ballroom, inhabited by eerily realistic holograms of waltzing spirits (*wow*).

Shortly after lunch, we were treated to Disney's Christmas Dreams on Parade: a gorgeous performance with colourful floats featuring Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Sleeping Beauty, Buzz Lightyear and Woody the Cowboy from *Toy Story*, Lilo and Stitch, and of course, Santa Claus. We also stumbled upon a few other shows along the way, one of which required a lot of patience. Puzzled by a substantial crowd gathered at the rear of Cinderella's Castle (many already aiming video cameras), we decided to wait with them and were treated to an 'unscheduled' appearance by Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Goofy and Pluto, decked out in white Christmas finery, waving and dancing from the castle balcony. I stole a quick look at those around me – everyone had a grin as huge as mine.

Our last stop for the day was at the Mickey Mouse Revue, an unexpected surprise which features an adorable display of "audio-animatronics". Mickey conducted an orchestra, Snow White sang with the seven Dwarves,

and Alice shared the stage with a chorus of gigantic flowers from Wonderland. Nevermind that everything was in Japanese (quite an experience!). We were completely blown away by the intricate details and vivid colours.

Shopping proved impossible, as even the usually polite Japanese had to resort to jostling one another to navigate the stores. I started to develop a headache after five minutes but gamely pushed on, strangely quite enjoying myself. So this is what Christmas shopping insanity is all about, I could not help thinking with a laugh.



Parade float one: Buzz Lightyear and Woody the Cowboy from *Toy Story*.



It's a small world.

As night descended, we caught a beautiful lighting ceremony titled Twinkling Holiday Moment, located in the Castle forecourt. Mickey and friends performed a medley of Christmas favourites before the festive lights came on. A loud "Aaaaaaaah" of admiration emanated from the large audience, and my Disneyland experience was complete.

Cold weather and fatigue prevented us from staying for the night parade and fireworks display, but I intend to return to the Magic Kingdom someday soon, preferably during the warmer months, perhaps with a few young relatives in tow.

But for now, I bid Tokyo Disneyland a fond farewell, and leave with wonderful memories of one of the best Christmas experiences I may ever have. ■