

# Amazing Amusement Parks

Great fun for kids of all ages

By Apryl Chapman Thomas  
Photos courtesy those featured



CEDAR POINT IN SANDUSKY, OHIO

They come in all shapes and sizes, and some are better known than others. One thing is for certain: amusement and theme parks are as much of a piece of Americana as movie theatres and diners; and an absolute staple of many family vacations. Not only do they offer something for everyone – rides, entertainment, and food that you don't normally eat at home – but time spent at parks can create memories that will last forever.

While there is no exact count of parks in the U.S., it is safe to say that you have a plethora of choices. The following are some that are driving distance from the Lowcountry and should be on every park aficionado's list.

## Florida

Walt Disney was reportedly not happy with the way the city of Anaheim, CA seemed to build itself right up to Disneyland's main gate and decided that this would not happen again. Purchasing 27,000 acres of swamp land ensured that his new park would be somewhat of its own place. Today, there are four theme parks that make up **Walt Disney World** (407-824-4321; <http://disney.go.com>). Magic Kingdom is where it all begins. Home to Cinderella's Castle, you'll find old rides mixed in with new. The big silver ball you see in about every Epcot picture is Spaceship Earth.

**Epcot** has two distinct parts: World Showcase and Future World. Future

World offers realistic rides such as Honey, I Shrunk the Audience and Test Track. **MGM-Disney** is somewhat of a replica of old Hollywood done the Disney way. For thrill seekers, two of the not-to-miss rides are Tower of Terror and Rock 'n Roller Coaster, featuring Aerosmith music. **Animal Kingdom**, the newest addition, features over 1,700 animals representing 250 different species. If you only have time for one ride, do the guided safari.

**Busch Gardens Tampa** (888-800-5447; [www.buschgardens.com](http://www.buschgardens.com)) features a rich African theme. Different from its sister in Virginia, the park is known for its animals, and a lot of them. In fact, Busch Gardens Tampa is the largest zoo in Florida. You can meet the Budweiser Clydesdales, and take a walking tour through animal habitats. And there are plenty of thrills to be had on Gwazi, the park's double wooden roller coaster with 7,000 feet of track. Then, cool off next door at Adventure Island with its ample pools and waterslides. Another member of the Anheuser-Busch park family in Orlando is **Sea World Orlando** (800-327-2424; [www.seaworld.com](http://www.seaworld.com)), known more for its sea life shows than rides. The newest attraction in the area is Discovery Cove (877-4DISCOVERY; [www.discoverycove.com](http://www.discoverycove.com)). Here you can actually swim with dolphins along the coral reef.

**Universal Studios** (800-711-0080; [www.universalorlando.com](http://www.universalorlando.com)) answers the question "why just watch the movie, when you can experience it?" You'll find rides such as Back to the Future, Twister, and Men In



CINDERELLA'S CASTLE AT WALT DISNEY WORLD



SEA WORLD ORLANDO



MGM'S TOWER OF TERROR



SKULL ISLAND AT SIX FLAGS OVER GEORGIA



SIX FLAGS OVER GEORGIA



ISLANDS OF ADVENTURE'S SPIDER MAN RIDE



DISNEY'S ANIMAL KINGDOM



WILD ADVENTURES IN VALDOSTA

Black Alien Attack. There are also rides and adventures geared toward the younger crowd. **Islands of Adventure** includes five different islands, with rides, attractions, and restaurants geared around those themes. Young children will enjoy Seuss Landing. Marvel Super Hero Island is home to the 3-D super adventure The Amazing Adventures of Spider Man.

### Georgia

Less than thirty minutes from downtown Atlanta is **Six Flags Over Georgia** (770-948-9290; [www.sixflags.com](http://www.sixflags.com)). As with other Six Flags parks, you will find typical amusement park rides, as well as rides unique to Six Flags. There is the classic Mind Bender, and the newer ones that test your heart rate, such as Ninja, which turns upside down five times; or Acrophobia, a coaster complete with drops and twists.

Six Flags' latest addition opened May 2005, just in time for the hot and humid weather. Skull Island, a Caribbean pirate-themed water park, has three giant water dumping towers, six water slides, and more. *Editor's note: I recently visited Six Flags and was impressed with its friendly and helpful staff. The park also featured a lot of fun rides my 6-year-old and I could enjoy separately or together. Tip: spend a few extra bucks and spring for the "Q-Bot." It works like a pager, summoning you when it's time to ride ("your coaster is ready..."), and will literally save you hours waiting in lines!*

You'll find rides, attractions, and over 500 wild animals at **Wild Adventures** (229-219-7080; <http://wildadventures.net>) in Valdosta. Take a jeep safari ride to view the animals, or try rides such as Double Shot, a surprising free fall of sorts, or Boomerang, with vertical loops and inversions. There's also kiddie rides, and Splash Island, a water park.

## North Carolina

Similar to its counterparts in Ohio and Virginia, **Paramount's Carowinds** (800-888-4386; [www.carowinds.com](http://www.carowinds.com)) brings a little Hollywood to the theme park. Children will love the Nickelodeon TV area complete with character rides. Coaster fans will enjoy BORG Assimilator, Carolinas' first flying coaster, and Thunder Road, dual racing roller coasters that take riders back and forth between North and South Carolina. The water park, WaterWorks, features an 80-foot-high body water slide among other water activities.

## A Little Further Away... Tennessee

It is safe to say with the large number of theme and amusement parks in the United States, there are always a handful celebrating some type of anniversary each year. **Dollywood** (865-428-9488; [www.dollywood.com](http://www.dollywood.com)), in the Smoky Mountains, turned 20 years old this April. Unique to the theme park is that all the rides have some sort of mountain theme, including the thrill rides, like the Tennessee Tornado. After a day in the park with the heat and humidity, head over to Dollywood's Splash Country to cool off.

Just think, you can tell everyone that you rode Elvis' favorite roller coaster, the Zippin' Pippin, the second oldest wooden coaster in the U.S. at **Libertyland** (901-274-1776; [www.libertyland.com](http://www.libertyland.com)) in Memphis. It is also happens to be the park's 30th anniversary. Oh, and yes, Elvis has left the roller coaster.

## Virginia

**Busch Gardens Williamsburg** (800-343-7946; [www.buschgardens.com](http://www.buschgardens.com)) is known more for its European-themed gardens and roller coasters than animals, but you will find Jack Hanna's Wild Reserve. Coaster fans will enjoy rides such as The Big Bad Wolf, a suspended roller coaster. Thrill seekers may have met their match with the new thrill ride Curse of DarkKastle.

At **Paramount's Kings Dominion** (804-876-5000; [www.kingsdominion.com](http://www.kingsdominion.com)) you'll find the Drop Zone Stunt Tower, the largest drop ride in North America, and the HyperSonic XLC, the only compressed-air launch coaster in the U.S. Relax after a day in the park and splash around at their 19-acre water park, WaterWorks.



## Trip Planning Tips

1. Read. Go online and check the park's Web site. Sign up for the e-newsletter or e-lets to be informed about changes or specials. Read visitors' reviews at [www.themeparkadventure.com](http://www.themeparkadventure.com), [www.thrillnetwork.com](http://www.thrillnetwork.com), and [www.themeparkin-sider.com](http://www.themeparkin-sider.com). Peruse guidebooks.
2. Look for deals in the Sunday travel section, or on the park's Web site. For Disneyworld and Disneyland, check out [www.alllearnsnet.com](http://www.alllearnsnet.com) and [www.mousesavers.com](http://www.mousesavers.com). Sometimes the state's tourism Web site has deals listed.
3. It's okay not to go during high season. Going in the fall or early spring can be quite pleasurable.
4. Be prepared. Parks are crowded during the summer and holiday breaks so avoid this time or get to the park early so you can beat the crowds. Wear comfortable shoes, drink plenty of water, and don't be surprised if there is a small, mid-late afternoon passing shower in Florida.
5. Have fun!

## Pennsylvania

A park made out of chocolate? Now that is the best of both worlds. Well, **HersheyPark** (800-HERSHEY; [www.hersheypa.com/attractions/hersheypark](http://www.hersheypa.com/attractions/hersheypark)) is not really made out of chocolate, but you can tour Hershey's Chocolate World in Chocolate Town USA to see the chocolate-making process. The park offers rides and ZooAmerica, which was once Milton S. Hershey's personal zoo.

Preschool-aged children will love **Sesame Place** (215-752-7070; [www.sesameplace.com](http://www.sesameplace.com)) Who wouldn't love to see Big Bird and Elmo in person? Located 30 minutes from Philadelphia, the park is also celebrating its 25th birthday.

**Dorney Park** (610-395-3724; [www.dorneypark.com](http://www.dorneypark.com)) is owned by the same company that owns Knott's Berry Farm. The most interesting feature of the park is its carousels – the 1921 Dentzel is said to be haunted.

**Kennywood** (412-461-0500; [www.kennywood.com](http://www.kennywood.com)) is like a walk through Pennsylvania's history. The park, which opened in 1898, is a national and state landmark. Located outside of Pittsburgh, the park has rides for everyone, from the coaster fans – 3 wooden roller coasters – to more subdued kiddie rides.

## Ohio

Built along the banks of Lake Erie, **Cedar Point Amusement Park** (419-627-2350; [www.cedar-point.com](http://www.cedar-point.com)) is one of the oldest parks in the United States. Opened in 1870 in Sandusky, the park is still going strong 135 years later. Known for its plethora of rides – 68, 16 of those are unique roller coasters. The Millenium Force and Top Thrill Dragster are two of the tallest and fastest steel coasters in the world. There is also an on-site Soak City water park, and Challenge Park, where families can play mini-golf or race stock cars.

At **Paramount's King Island** (800-288-0808; [www.pki.com](http://www.pki.com)), a part of Viacom, you'll find twinges of Hollywood among the rides, such as Scooby-Doo and the Haunted Castle. At their Boomerang Water Park, plan to spend at least a day exploring the park's 30 waterslides. Their coasters are not to be missed either. The Beast is the longest wooden roller coaster in the world, and its offspring, Son of Beast, is the tallest and fastest wooden roller coaster in the world. □