

THEME PARKS

# Six of the best

Splashy, spectacular, white-knuckle or wacky — however you like your thrills, **John Malathronas** knows just where to get them. Hold on tight...



## 1 Siam Park, Tenerife The wet one

**What to expect:** A Thai-themed waterpark in Tenerife shouldn't work, but it does. The curved ceilings and ornamental gables somehow match the twists and turns of the slides and the final effect is more *Raiders of the Lost Ark* than 'Carry On Up the Stupa'. Tackle the Lost City, where water guns spray unsuspecting kids; crash into 36 different types of waves in the Wave Palace pool; or brave the Mekong Rapids as you whizz down with your friends in one raft. Timid visitors might prefer a lazy trip down the Mai Thai River, and parents will appreciate the Sawasdee (Welcome) 'safe zone', where small children have a choice of four specially designed slides. This summer promises the arrival of the new Singha

attraction, a 200m-long bendy waterslide that will simulate the feel of a rollercoaster.

**Must-do:** Competitive types should grab a mat and race their mates down the Naga Racer in one of the six lanes, while thrill-seekers will get a year's dose of adrenaline by speeding down the frighteningly tall Tower of Power, which features a near-vertical 28m drop.

**Travel's tip:** You don't need your own wheels to reach the park. A free shuttle service runs every 30 minutes from eight pick-up points on the south of the island; check with your hotel which is your nearest (00 34 922 691429, [siampark.net](http://siampark.net); ages 12+ £24.50, 3-11£16.50).





## 2 Disneyland Park, California

The glitzy one

**What to expect:** With the arrival of other Disneylands it is easy to forget the granddaddy in Anaheim. Yet this California original is still the best, because it crams everything within a compact area and thus preserves a scale more human and much more personal than its giant, purpose-built sister sites. Donald Duck and Mickey mosey along Main Street with characters from *Toy Story* and *Star Wars*, while the original *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride has been upgraded in line with the blockbuster films (the ride came first, inspiring the movies). Regress into childhood at the Pixar characters' parade, gurgle with glee watching the musical in Aladdin's Oasis or sing along with Elsa to the tunes of *Frozen*. Beware, this year the park is celebrating its 60th

anniversary with special firework shows and assorted pageantry — expect bumper crowds.

**Must-do:** Stay on after dusk to watch *Fantasmic* in the open air, a 20-minute mash-up of Disney films, built around *Fantasia*. The sequence when the *Snow White* witch turns into a huge animatronic dragon spitting fire is the most spellbinding show climax ever.

**Travel's tip:** Keep queuing to a minimum by going on a weekday when California kids are at school and the weather is still warm (mid-September to mid-November). Most visitors tend to go right at the gates, so avoid crowds by tackling the park clockwise. 00 1714 781 4565, [disneyland.disney.go.com](http://disneyland.disney.go.com); ages 10+ £65, 3-9 £61.

## 3 Dreamworld, Australia

The white-knuckle one

**What to expect:** Australian John Longhurst single-handedly bulldozed his way through 85 hectares of swampy land in the mid-'70s to create his vision of a Disneyland Down-Under. And very successful it turned out to be, too, with two ex-world records under its belt. The Tower of Terror was once the tallest rollercoaster on the planet and the Giant Drop was the world's largest drop tower until US parks stole the crown. Then there's the whole Aussie theme to the place — from Ned Kelly's shooting gallery at Goldrush Country to the Corroboree celebration of aboriginal life. You are always immersed in emblematic Australiana, whether cuddling koalas, playing the didgeridoo or learning bush-survival techniques. To top it all,

WhiteWater World, with water slides celebrating Aussie beach culture, opened across from Dreamworld in 2006 — but don't attempt both in one day.

**Must-do:** Clamber aboard the BuzzSaw rollercoaster and be chain-lifted up 15 storeys before you're dropped through two 360° loops hitting five on the G-force scale. Sound scary? It is — you're strapped in with only a belt around your waist and nothing to cling to.

**Travel's tip:** The park now offers a smartphone virtual-queuing system for the 13 most popular rides, whereby you don't need to be physically present in the queue. It costs £8pp (00 6175 5881111, [dreamworld.com.au](http://dreamworld.com.au); ages 14+ from £57, 3-13 £47). >



## 4 Europa Park, Germany

### The classy one

**What to expect:** Germany's best-kept holiday secret actually started out as a showroom for the Mack family rollercoaster firm. Now a park, it has a strong European theme — and a two-star Michelin restaurant. You can wander around mock-ups of 13 European countries, from a Russian space station to an Icelandic salmon smokery; or watch one of 17 different shows that range from a West End-style musical to an ice-skating extravaganza. But what most people really come for are the ground-breaking, quality rides — the Mack company's forte. The 73m-high Silver Star, positioned firmly among Europe's hypercoasters with its angled 68.5° drop, shares the title of the

scariest ride in the park with nearby Eurosat, where your car peaks, plunges and pirouettes in total darkness.

**Must-do:** This year's addition is unmissable: a hanging-seat rollercoaster that's based on Luc Besson's children's fantasy film *Arthur and the Minimoys*. It darts its way through a series of outlandish scenes straight out of a Terry Gilliam mindwarp.

**Travel's tip:** If you stay overnight in one of the five resort hotels, you can kick off half an hour earlier and stay on after the crowds have departed for an evening stroll in the Spanish area until 11pm (00 49 782 277 6697, europapark.de; ages 12+ £31, 4–11 £27). ▶





## 5 Haw Par Villa, Singapore

The wacky one

**What to expect:** Two eccentric Chinese-Burmese millionaire brothers built a mansion here in 1937, among lawned terraces decorated with freaky statues and tableaux of Taoist legends. The mansion has long gone but the bizarre park remains. Some scenes are fascinating; some are gaudily over-the-top (such as a bloody battle between rats, rabbits and lemmings); but some are plain jaw-dropping — one tableau depicts how, during a famine, a woman starves her children and instead suckles her mother-in-law to show her filial piety. Yet despite — or maybe because of — the creepy masks and baffling allegories, this is a window upon a traditional Chinese past that seems to fade more with every iGeneration. It's

certainly a novel way to spend an afternoon on your stopover.

**Must-do:** You have to see the cave housing the Ten Courts of Hell, where every sin is preposterously punished and depicted in demonic detail. Some exhibits are quite violent so parental guidance is necessary. Walk among a world of sculptures where con men are boiled alive; tax evaders are satisfyingly pounded by a large stone mallet; and those who waste food have their bodies sawn in half.

**Travel's tip:** Don't leave the park without a stop by the giant Laughing Buddha — the one with the jovial countenance and orange robes — to touch his belly for luck, wealth and success (Pasir Panjang Road; free).

## 6 Warner Bros Studio Tour, UK

The wizarding one

**What to expect:** Potterheads, take a deep breath: these are the actual *Harry Potter* movie studios, so fans can get up close and personal with props, costumes and film sets. Small groups enter through the gates to Hogwarts Great Hall in staggered sessions, but once inside you can wander at will. It's got the lot: dusty Diagon Alley, Hagrid's hut, Dumbledore's office — even the Gryffindor common room and the potions lab with its bewitched apparatus. Look out for the 2015 addition — a reconstruction of Kings Cross's platform 9¾ complete with the *Hogwarts Express*. It's not a ride but groupies seem happy enough to pose with a luggage trolley on the platform as the train 'disappears' through the station's brick wall. Out in the studio yard (or

Backlot) you can also see the Knight Bus, Privet Drive and Hogwarts Bridge — this section alone is worth the entrance fee.

**Must-do:** If you're not filmed riding a Nimbus racing broom, you may as well not go. Fly over villages, spires and rolling green hills, with the help of some nifty CGI (£40 for a DVD and four photos). And don't forget to order a mug of Butterbeer (£2.95) in the Backlot cafe.

**Travel's tip:** Tour buses converge on the studios in the morning, so avoid the long queues by visiting after 2.30pm. Oh, and if it's your birthday, let the reps know, as you could be chosen to open the gates to the Hogwarts Great Hall (0845 084 0900, [wbstudiotour.co.uk](http://wbstudiotour.co.uk); children £25.50, ages 16+ £33). ■