

JOURNEYS

FLORIDIANA

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

EPIC EXPERIENCES ABOUND AT UNIVERSAL ORLANDO RESORT'S NEWEST THEME PARK

BY MARY MURRAY

As visitors approach the Chronos portal—the gateway to Universal Epic Universe—they're greeted with these words: "Beyond this gate find gardens green and epic worlds to fill your dreams." It's a big promise, but one that Epic Universe more than fulfills across dozens of attractions designed to inspire guests of all ages to write their own heroic tale.

Epic Universe opened May 22 and is Universal Orlando Resort's fourth official theme park, joining the ranks of Universal Studios, Islands of Adventure, and Volcano Bay. At its center is Celestial Park, a cosmos-inspired realm that possesses both the romantic aura of New York's Central Park and a new-age charm drawn from various astronomical, astrological, and mythological references. Its primary attraction is Stardust Racers, a thrilling dual-launch racing coaster that reaches speeds of 62 mph and heights of 133 feet.

As one of five "immersive worlds," Celestial Park serves as the nucleus of Epic Universe. From here, you must pass through four themed portals to access the others.



Those who grew up racing on Rainbow Road, battling Bowser, and exploring Peach's Castle should head straight for Super Nintendo World, where a variety of interactive elements span two lands (one being the first U.S. iteration of Donkey Kong Country). Purchase a Power-Up Band to fully engage with them all, including punching ? Blocks to collect digital coins. Everyone can become part of the action on Mario Kart: Bowser's Challenge, which uses augmented reality and projection mapping technology to put you on the track alongside Mario and his friends.

A different kind of magic awaits in The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Ministry of Magic. In this third installment of Universal's Harry Potter-themed lands, muggles can attend the trial of Dolores Umbridge in the Harry Potter and the Battle at the Ministry ride and travel back to the 1920s to stroll the streets of Place Cachée, a hidden shopping district in wiz-

arding Paris. Sample a Butterbeer Crêpe, catch a circus show featuring characters from the *Fantastic Beasts* films, or choose a wand and then use it to cast spells around Place Cachée.

There are plenty of fantastic beasts to discover at Epic's two other worlds: Dark Universe and How to Train Your Dragon – Isle of Berk. At the latter, walk among Vikings and spot dragons in their natural habitats. You can even meet—and pet—Toothless the Night Fury dragon.

In Dark Universe, an electrifying portal gives way to Darkmoor, a modern-day village whose progress has been stunted by its near-constant encounters with monsters. This world pays homage to Universal's pioneering role within the horror genre, so nods to such classic monsters as Dracula and Frankenstein can be seen everywhere—from the Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment ride to the Das Stakehaus restaurant.

Whether you're a lifelong gamer, a wizard in waiting, a dragon trainer, or a horror enthusiast, Epic Universe invites you to step into the story. And while one visit may not be enough to experience it all, this is one epic tale worth returning to again and again. (universalorlando.com) <<



COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL ORLANDO RESORT

