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2 of 12



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3 of

OFF DUTY TRAVEL

The Theme of This Fun-Park: Charm

Instead of long lines and movie tie-ins, Dutch amusement park Efteling offers up life-size carousels and affordable treats

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By GISELA WILLIAMS

Updated Jan. 30, 2014 12:39 p.m. ET



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THE RIDE STUFF | Efteling's Pagode, which rises to some 150 feet above the ground then slowly revolves.
Tjeerd Knier

ONLY WHEN I became a parent could I fully appreciate how cruel grocery stores are to display a wall of candy at checkout, just when you're at your most vulnerable—tired and distracted, with no other way out with the kids.

Though I haven't visited any of the [Disney](#) DIS -0.83% theme parks with my children, I imagined it would be like the candy trap times a thousand. Endless temptation. Little negotiating space. A marathon of rejection and guilt. "No, I will not buy you another Ariel figure. No, you may not eat a third cupcake at the princess breakfast."

Our two girls, 6-year-old Cosima and 4-year-old Paloma, have been begging to go to Disneyland since my mother planted the seed about a year ago. I am not a total killjoy—eventually, we'll go. But last fall, we tried an alternative that promised a more old-fashioned, less commercial

experience: Efteling, a historic 160-acre fun-park about an hour south of Amsterdam.

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3

I learned about Efteling, which made its debut in 1952, from friends who visited the park with their two boys and were enchanted. They described a place filled not with princess boutiques and endless lines, but old trees, fire-breathing mechanical dragons, whimsical mushroom sculptures and interactive fairy-tale displays.

One brisk evening, we pulled into the lot at the Efteling Hotel. Our first impression of the park's only inn was less than magical—the four-story hotel was next to a highway; despite its four lighted turrets, it looked more like a '90s Days Inn than a fairy-tale castle.

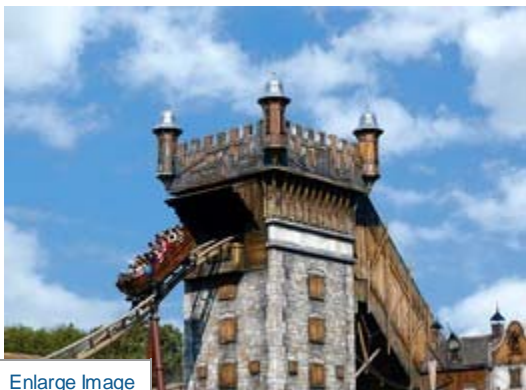
“ *Instead of high-tech frills, the sets offered old-fashioned charm.* ”

Matters quickly improved after check-in. The hotel has several themed quarters, including the Snow White suite, with seven child-size "dwarf" beds, and the Cinderella suite, with an extra room-cum-diorama featuring an enormous pumpkin sculpture. We'd opted for a basic family room, \$100 a night less. It was newly renovated, with some delightful touches. A dancing shoe from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" was tucked in a closet for the kids to find, and a faux mouse hole, complete with mouse figurine, was set into a baseboard between the two queen-size beds. We had dinner in the hotel restaurant, where guests could reserve a table surrounded by thrones. A nearby playroom let kids climb and slide as they waited for their meals. Our children considered the food (sausages and pasta) the height of deliciousness; we adults, who could choose from a mix of international dishes, not so much.



[Enlarge Image](#)

The talking Fairytale Tree



[Enlarge Image](#)

The next morning, we looked out the window to see a pagoda-esque ride rising over the trees, as well as the tops of several roller coasters. A quick walk from the hotel down a tree-lined avenue brought us to a side entrance to the park.

Like a slow-working enchantment, Efteling revealed itself at a leisurely pace. At first, it seemed as though we were strolling through a meticulously landscaped European park from the past. (As it was a weekday in October, we also had the place almost to ourselves.) On one side of the path was a lake straight out of a Seurat painting, and an expansive lawn where visitors could picnic. On the other side was a large square with several old-fashioned merry-go-rounds and a bunch of quaint wooden stands selling French fries and

**Missouri
Entrepre
Stitches'
Quilting**

**4 Peyton M
Mr. Anno**

**5 The Viol
Wars Bel
Bowl Gu**

VIDEO

**1 Super Bc
GoDaddy**

**2 Award-V
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Seymour
Found D**

**3 Afghanis
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The Flying Dutchman water ride

poffertje, Dutch-style pancakes. A little monorail called Funny Folk made for a compelling first ride: The cars glided over and through thatched-roof homes straight out of a Peter Jackson film, and afterward, the girls spent almost 30 minutes exploring the buildings from the ground, discovering slides and net bridges, mechanical hobbit bakers and a water mill.

"Pap-peer here! Pap-peer here!" a voice trilled as we wandered back through the square. Set into a wall was a giant,

cherubic fiberglass face with a round mouth—a clever enticement to recycle. A boy ran over and held up a crumpled bag; it was immediately sucked into the vacuum-powered mouth. Amazed, our girls started to hunt around for garbage to feed the paper gobbler.

Ninety percent of Efteling is given over to gardens, forests and sand dunes. The park also includes many contemporary features, such as water rides and roller coasters. But the girls were impatient to enter the Fairytale Forest, the heart of Efteling. The 12-acre maze of beautifully detailed dioramas was designed by one of the country's most beloved painters and illustrators, Anton Pieck, and engineered by Peter Reijnders, a famous Dutch film director and inventor. In American terms, it's a little bit as if Norman Rockwell had teamed up with Tim Burton.

We walked through an entry gate set in an almost impenetrable wall of greenery and followed a narrow, shaded path lined with knee-high polka-dotted mushrooms piping out a Bach minuet. First stop: Sleeping Beauty, a stone castle the size of a two-story house, covered in ferns and climbing vines. The girls ran up the stairs, past a life-size, snoozing mechanical guard and found the princess dreaming on a bed behind a window.

The Lowdown: Efteling, the Netherlands



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What the dioramas lacked in high-tech frills, they made up for in old-fashioned charm. Some, like the Hansel and Gretel cottage, where a witch with a pinched face opened a window and threatened onlookers, reminded me of the Christmas windows my parents used to take me to see in New York. Others seemed almost alive. The talking Fairytale Tree fascinated the girls with its realistic movements, animatronic inhabitants—including a woodpecker and a spider—and tales (despite the fact that it spoke Dutch, of which my kids understand not a word). Our girls eagerly ran from one set to the next,

Getting There: Multiple airlines fly direct from the U.S. to Amsterdam. From there, take a train to 's-Hertogenbosch, then a taxi 30 minutes to Efteling. Or, rent a car at the airport and drive about 65 miles south.

Staying There: The park offers two lodging options. The Efteling Hotel has 122 rooms, including 22 fairytale-themed suites, and is best for stays of one or two nights (*from about \$540 a night, including park entry and breakfast for four, efteling.com*). Efteling Village Bosrijk is a recently built complex of cottages with kitchenettes that makes sense for big families and longer visits (*from \$620 for a minimum two-night stay*).

Visiting the Park: Efteling is open all year round, though hours are shorter in winter (from July 1 through August it is open until 8 p.m.) Admission for the over-4 set is \$44 when purchased online.

Eating There: More than a dozen restaurants are scattered throughout the park. Some of the best are a new pancake spot, Polles Keuken; the Italian-focused Octopus; and Welkom, which serves a selection of organic dishes. Don't miss the *poffertje* (tiny Dutch-style pancakes) sold at snack cottages.

exploring every nook. Even my husband marveled at a turbaned mystic that floated over a moat on a magic carpet.

Though the girls knew the figures weren't real, one installation did induce tears (at least from my 4-year-old)—Snow White, where the visage of a scary witch was projected onto a mirror. Of the 28 fairy tales depicted in Efteling, 15 are from the Brothers Grimm; the others are from Hans Christian Andersen and more obscure sources. The modern versions of stories have been scoured of blood, beasts and fangs, and we sometimes forget how gruesome some of the originals were. I'm game for offering children a little creepiness, even if it means doing some explaining. Besides, what's a few tears? At

Efteling there were no crowds; I barely noticed a souvenir shop. We gasped at our lunch bill—not because it was so expensive, but because sandwiches and apples in a charming cafeteria cost less than \$20.

There was an unpleasant side to Efteling: The way dark-skinned people were depicted. At a carousel-like ride called Monsieur Cannibale, for instance, an enormous figure wore a chef's hat on his head and a spoon through his nostrils—a racist throwback to the days of the Dutch East India Company that made for more explaining.

We finished our day with a dinner of heart-shape pancakes and an elaborate water show, complete with lasers and fire, at a lake near the park entrance. It was about as Disney as Efteling got. In more than eight hours we had only covered a fourth of the park, but that just means we have more to explore next time. Six months later my daughters are still clamoring to return to "Fairyländ." "My favorite thing was everything!" the oldest recently announced. Even my husband has been talking it up. Next time we'll book one of Efteling's sweet-looking holiday cottages instead of a hotel room, and come for three or four days. And steer clear of Monsieur Cannibale.

More Alternatives to the Mouse

Elaborate re-enactments, oversize waterslides and archeological adventures make for kid-friendly escapes around the world

Eco-Entertainment in Mexico



[Enlarge Image](#)

Kids can see everything from tropical fish



Eco-Entertainment in Mexico

to Mayan temples at Xcaret, a nature- and culture-themed park in the Riviera Maya, about 45 minutes from Cancun. Bring walking shoes as well as a swimsuit —activities include exploring archeological sites, floating down an underground river, visiting a butterfly pavilion and watching a high-flying Voladores de Papantla ritual, in which men swing from a totem-like tower

(\$90 a day for adults, \$45 for children when purchased online, xcaret.com).

A Spectacle for the Ages in France

Who needs roller coasters when you can watch live sword fights and chariot races? Puy du Fou in western France is all about live-action shows—elaborate 30- to 40-minute performances that take guests back to the times of Vikings, knights and gladiators. (Visitors can rent translation headsets for shows.) Cinéscénie, a nearly two-hour extravaganza staged on summer evenings, dramatizes the story of the region's history using thousands of actors, hundreds of horses and fireworks. Each of the park's hotels represents a specific historical period, including Clovis Island, a Merovingian-inspired collection of stilt cottages (about \$40 a day for adults, \$27 for children, puydufou.com).

Living History in New England



Living History in New England Steve Davey

It bills itself as an "outdoor museum," but go ahead—tell the kids that Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts is a theme park. Set on 200 acres of woodlands, the village is a recreation of a small New England town from 1790 to 1840. It has more than 40 original buildings, including a working farm, craft shops and a school, all populated by costumed staff (\$24 a day for adults, \$8 for children, osv.org).

A World of Wet in Wisconsin

Noah's Ark in Wisconsin Dells claims to be the largest water park in the U.S., with more than 60 attractions spread over 70 acres. For the big kids there is a ¼-mile-long water coaster and a 10-story-high waterslide. Highlights for the little ones include the two wave pools and Tadpole Bay, designed to make it easy to keep an eye on tots while they splash. The park is closed for the season, but re-opens at the end of May (\$33 a day for adults, \$29 for children, noahsarkwaterpark.com).

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