

## 4 Roller Coasters That Put the Theme in Theme Park

By MEKADO MURPHY JUNE 16, 2016

It is a rare roller coaster that tries to give you an experience, not just a scare. Here are a handful that do.

When roller coasters made their way from Russia to France nearly 200 years ago, they quickly outshone the more routine amusements at park promenades. They are no less central to modern American theme parks, which by definition seek to unify the thrills under a setting or idea (or commercial brand). But do roller coasters ever stick to an actual theme?

Yes, you may see [a comic-book character's statue](#) at a ride's entrance. But when the safety harness lifts up afterward, you're left with an adrenaline rush instead of an experience that evokes the spirit or energy of that character. Other coasters incorporate some [element of science fiction](#) or fantasy. But they don't always pull you into that space as you scream your head off on the way down a steep hill. After all, it can be tricky to program a giant structure of steel and wood [into a story](#) that makes any sense.

As I travel the country visiting theme parks, I think about how true a ride stays to its mission of telling you a story while making your heart leap, and whether it even matters if it does. For some of my favorite coasters, the only point is the thrill.

But there is something memorable about a roller coaster with a story. These rides, done right, have equal commitment to theme and thrills. They're not so much character-driven coasters, more like coasters with character. They're often technically ambitious, immersive and some combination of thrilling and cinematic. Below, a guided tour to four standouts.

BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY

### Cheetah Hunt



Video by BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY on June 14, 2016

In a world where cheetahs hunt things, you are a cheetah on a hunt. The twist comes when you make a speedy vertical jump for your prey.

Want to feel what it's like to be a predator racing across the Serengeti? The thrilling coaster [Cheetah Hunt](#) does a bang-up job of getting you pretty close to it. Using a launch system that propels the train with motors, the coaster sends you speeding right out of the gate without a traditional lift hill.

Before you've had a chance to catch your breath, the second launch arrives, a 60 m.p.h. push up a hill 100 feet above ground, then into a pretzel-style piece of track before plunging you underground.

Cheetah Hunt leaps high and crouches low, exhibiting some of its predatory skills. The ride is smart about the way it slows down before another launch sends you speeding along again. And its detailed landscapes really do make you feel as if you're racing through the grasslands of Africa. A section of the track that moves just above and along a river, as well as through caverns, is inspired. Just when you think your hunt is nearly done, you get one more launch up a hill and down through a dale.

This ride seems as much a stand-in for a safari chase as any I've been on, mainly because of the element of surprise. You can't see what the entire ride looks like while waiting in line so you can't anticipate the hunt it takes you on. And with more than three-quarters of a mile of track, that hunt seems to go everywhere.