

Amusement Parks As Flagship Tourist Attractions. Development and Globalization.

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In the article, the author defines the term tourist attractions, including the so called flagship ones, among which he ranks theme/amusement parks. The latter ones attract over 200 million visitors worldwide. The author presents their development and rankings, according to the number of visitors in the year 2010 (Top 25) in the world, and (Top 20) in Europe. The analysis focuses on the developmental trends and the ongoing process of globalization. The process of creation and operation of amusement parks has been illustrated on the example of the Euro Disney Resort, whereas the process of globalization has been shown on the example of the operation of the world leader in the sphere of amusement parks – the Walt Disney corporation.

Key words: tourist attractions, amusement parks, attendance, rankings, globalization

Introduction

Tourist attractions constitute one of the main goals of tourist trips. The concept of “tourist attractions” was first introduced into specialist literature by E. Cohen (1972). Since then, many definitions of this term have been created. A review of the existing definitions (Kruczek 2006 p. 116) has served as the inspiration for the author to formulate his own view on the issue of defining tourist attractions. In my opinion, tourist attractions are “*all the component elements of a tourist product (aspects of the place and events, buildings and authentic products of higher culture), designated as special ones, and possessing the ability to attract tourists and making them choose a given area, rather than another one. Combined with tourist services, they create a tourist product*”. The above definition includes both the nature of the value of a tourist attraction as a special, worthwhile object, distinguished by the addition of a notation, and the ability of the attraction to create a tourist product. The term “flagship attraction” used in the title of the article is to be understood as the “best and most important” attraction (Weidenfeld A. 2010). The latter is associated with such features as the exceptional nature of the place, the international importance, considerable size and significant economic benefits (e.g. Euro Disney in France or Lego Land in Denmark).

At this point it is worth drawing our attention to the process of the creation of the so called “*tourist traps*” around tourist attractions - namely, places and activities whose goal is to extract as much money as possible from tourist (Kruczek 2010, p. 146). Side by side the recognized and acknowledged attractions, such as e.g. the Niagara Falls or the Monument Valley National Park, there arise a multitude of kitschy tourist traps – museums of wax figures, homes filled with representations of ghosts from well-known horror movies, places filled with dubious mementos, e.g. after Elvis Presley or characters from fairy-tales.

In Sworbrooke’s classification of tourist attractions (2002, p.5), among the four groups of attractions, we come across the category referred to as “places designed and built from scratch; an example of an attraction belonging to this group is the amusement park”. In the article, the author defines the term ‘amusement park’; he then goes on to describe its evolution and significance for the tourist industry. The contemporary amusement parks attract the greatest number of tourists worldwide. In the year 2010, they were visited by over 320 million visitors (Theme index 2011). An analysis of the attendance numbers allows one to select the most popular amusement parks in the world and in Europe; it also allows one to capture their most fundamental developmental trends. The creation and operation of an amusement park was shown on the example of the Euro Disney Resort.

The creation and development of theme parks

The precursor of the theme parks, also referred to as amusement parks¹, was the funfair with fascinating roller coaster trains and various interesting exhibits to be viewed by visitors. The main difference between the funfairs and the present-day parks was their scale. Theme parks extend over immense spaces; they often take up areas that are comparable to those of small cities (for these reasons, the majority of theme parks are situated in the countryside). In amusement parks, there are more attractions which are on the whole more exciting and technologically more advanced than in traditional funfairs.

An amusement park is a combination of various types of attractions which may be divided into several major categories: thrill rides, roller coaster rides, family rides, water attractions or rides in darkness in a covered train. Most of the revenue in amusement parks comes from the sale of entrance tickets. A standard entrance fee is between 30 and 70 dollars; there are discounts for children, students and senior citizens. The majority of parks also

¹ Economics Research Associates (ERA) defines an amusement park as a „public attraction comprising roller coaster trains and/or events belonging to the sphere of entertainment which offer its visitors tickets at a fixed price and which attract at least 500 thousand visitors annually” (ERA, 2007).

charge a fee for parking one's vehicle. An entrance fee does not include food and meals are anything but cheap. Nearly all amusement parks operate in accordance with two principles: "*Pay as you go*" (individual fee for every attraction) or "*Pay one price*" (a single entrance fee comprising all the attractions).

The biggest parks attract a dozen or so million visitors annually which may sometimes result in long queues to the individual attractions, especially at the peak of season. Some parks ensure additional entertainment, such as for instance live music, whose aim is to entertain visitors standing in a queue. Apart from the various attractions, the visitors are also tempted to buy souvenirs in numerous shops and taste local delicacies in the numerous snack-bars.

According to P.L. Pearce², "amusement parks are capital-intensive, highly developed, independent recreational areas which invariably charge an entrance fee from visitors. Entertainment, rides, special catering and amusement facilities are usually concentrated around parks or similar thematic complexes which allude to a particular period of history or to exceptional geographical features of the area. These themes/motifs are of key importance for the functioning of the parks; they create a feeling of unity with the surroundings which at the same time constitutes a stark contrast to the everyday life. However one should differentiate here between on the one hand, commercial amusement parks which are characterized by their dedication to a single theme and the above-mentioned entertainment elements and, on the other hand, museums and historical theme parks independent of museums, which are less commercial in their nature, but whose aim is likewise to preserve historical heritage and ensure public education.

The biggest network of amusement parks is made up of Disneyland parks designed by the Disney filmmaking company. The main attractions of these parks are the characters from Disney movies, various types of fairytale buildings and some forms of entertainment, such as for instance the roller coaster. The inspiration for the castle which is a symbol of every Disneyland park (except the one in Paris) was the Neuschwanstein castle. The first Disneyland park was set up near Anaheim in California in 1955. In order to keep up the attendance numbers in its parks, Disneyland continually adds new, ever more exciting attractions³. Naturally, due to the popularity of some of these attractions, the queues to them

² I quote after Jafari J. (2000), *Encyclopedia of Tourism*, Routledge, London/New York, p. 124-125.

³ Towards the end of the 20th century there appeared such attractions as Captain Eo and Star Tours. Captain Eo is played by Michael Jackson in a 3-dimensional musical movie which takes advantage of the very latest movie technology. The Star Tours are enacted in a pilot's cockpit, in a computer-controlled spacecraft, designed by Steven Spielberg. The viewers have the impression that they travel in a spaceship which got out of control and is ultimately lost in space.

become even longer. White knuckle rides belong to some of the most exciting attractions in the amusement parks, e.g. roller coaster rides or spacecraft rides.

It is widely assumed that an amusement park consists of a complex of technical devices, such as roller coaster or other amusement attractions whose aim is to amuse and entertain the visitors. An amusement park is more complex than a simple urban park or recreational area; it is often maintained in a single climate or else a few different climates (e.g. the American Far West or Pirates of the Caribbean). In Europe, the amusement parks originated from recreational gardens. The oldest still functioning amusement park in the world (operating since 1583) is the “Bakken” Park in Klampenborg in Copenhagen (De Groote P. 2009). During the industrial revolution there arose such amusement parks as: Vauxhall Gardens (1661) in London, Prater (1766) in Vienna. In 1894, Paul Boynton Water Chutes opened the first amusement park in the world which introduced charges for the rides. In 1895 he also built a park on Coney Island (New York) which is still operating today. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were already hundreds of amusement parks in the whole world. Their development was the result of an increase in people’s incomes and the gradual shortening of the working week. During the period of the Great Slump in the 30’s of the last century as well as during the Second World War, the popularity of the parks decreased (De Groote 2009).

In the 70’s of the twentieth century, we observe a considerable revival of the amusement industry in the effect of new financial projects. The majority of amusement parks were built in the 70’s and today they belong to big globalized amusement park complexes. In 1971, huge parks taking up the area of 43 square miles were built near Orlando on Florida. The above complex of the most frequently visited amusement parks in the world, consists of a few major sections. The biggest one is known as the “Magic Kingdom” which consists of over 40 attractions, 70 restaurants and shops. The second one is called “Epcot Centre” and it focuses on the presentation of the future. The main attractions here are the miracles of science and technology, the robot exhibition, the exhibits presenting the latest discoveries in the sphere of energy production, telecommunications and transport. The visitors can also be entertained by the “Disney Studios – MGM” and the park “Disney Animal Kingdom”. Among the parks which were built later one finds, among others: the park in Tokyo (1983), Disneyland Resort Paris (Marne-la-Vallée) (1992) and Hong Kong Disneyland (2005).

Analysis of Attendance in World and European Amusement Parks

Table 1 presents the total number of visitors in the 25 (Top 25) leading amusement parks in the world in the year 2010. For many years now, it is Disney's Magic Kingdom in Orlando that has been the most popular amusement park in the world; the total number of

Table 1. The most frequently visited amusement parks in the world in 2010.

No	Park name and localization	No of visitors	Changes 2009/2010
1	MAGIC KINGDOM at Walt Disney World Lake Buena Vista, FL, USA	16 972 000	-1,5 %
2	DISNEYLAND Anaheim, CA, USA	15 980 000	0,5%
3	TOKYO DISNEYLAND Tokyo, Japonia	14 452 000	5,9%
4	TOKYO DISNEYSEA Tokyo, Japonia	12 663 000	5,5%
5	EPCOT at Walt Disney World Lake Buena Vista, FL, USA	10 825 000	-1,5%
6	DISNEYLAND PARK at Disneyland Paris Marne-la-Vallee, Francja	10 500 000	-2,6%
7	DISNEY'S ANIMAL KINGDOM at Walt Disney World Lake Buena Vista, FL, USA	9 686 000	1,0%
8	DISNEY'S HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS at Walt Disney World Lake Buena Vista, FL, USA	9 603 000	-1,0%
9	UNIVERSAL STUDIOS JAPAN Osaka, Japonia	8 160 000	2,0%
10	EVERLAND Gyeonggi-Do, Korea Południowa	6 884 000	11,6%
11	DISNEY CALIFORNIA ADVENTURE Anaheim, CA, USA	6 278 000	3,0%
12	ISLANDS OF ADVENTURE at Universal Orlando Orlando, FL, USA	5 949 000	30,2%
13	UNIVERSAL STUDIOS at Universal Orlando Orlando, FL, USA	5 925 000	6,1%
14	LOTTE WORLD Seoul, Korea Południowa	5 551 000	22,4%
15	HONG KONG DISNEYLAND Hong Kong, SAR	5 200 000	13,0%
16	SEAWORLD FLORIDA Orlando, FL, USA	5 100 000	-12,1%
17	OCEAN PARK Hong Kong, SAR	5 100 000	6,3%
18	UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOLLYWOOD Universal City, CA, USA	5 040 000	26,0
19	WALT DISNEY STUDIOS at Disneyland Paris Marne-la-Vallee, Francja	4 500 000	-2,6%
20	NAGASHIMA SPA LAND Kuwana, Japonia	4 465 000	-5,0%
21	EUROPA PARK Rust, Niemcy	4 250 000	0,0%
22	BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY Tampa, FL, USA	4 200 000	2,4%
23	YOKOHAMA HAKKEIJIMA SEA PARADISE Yokohama, Japonia	4 023 000	-6,0%
24	DE EFTELING Kaatsheuvel, Holandia	4 000 000	0,0%
25	SEAWORLD CALIFORNIA San Diego, CA, USA	3 800 000	-9,5%

Source: Theme index: *The Global Attractions Attendance Report. 2011. TEA/AECOM, author's own analysis.*

visitors to this park amounts to 16.972 thousand. It outdistances the oldest Disneyland park in Anaheim, California whose attendance is at the level of 15.980 thousand visitors and Tokyo Disneyland (14.452 thousand visitors). Among the 10 most frequently visited amusement parks in the world, the first 8 are Disney parks⁴.

⁴ Walt Disney functions as a corporation which owns and manages entertainment companies throughout the whole world. The section *Media Networks* comprises Internet networks, cellular phone networks, as well as radio and television. The *Parks and Resorts* section controls Disney centers the world over, among which there are parks, hotels, restaurants, amusement and sports centers, conference centers, water parks as well as other recreational facilities. It also manages *Disney Cruise Lines*, *Disney Resort Paris* (1992), *Hong Kong Disneyland* (2005), and *Tokyo Disney Resort* (1983). The section *Studio Entertainment* produces, purchases and releases animations, musical recordings, home entertainment, videos; it possesses both paid and free television (De Groot 2009).

The biggest number of amusement parks are to be found in North America (the USA and Canada). As regards the number of visitors to the parks, we observe that the second continent after North America is Asia, due to the high position of Japan among the most powerful world economies and the spectacular development of Chinese economy which has led to the creation of a powerful middle class in this country. On the “Top 25” list, one can find the names of 4 European parks: Disneyland Park and Walt Disney Studio near Paris as well as Europa Park in Germany and De Efteling in Holland.

The number of visitors to the “Top 25” parks reached the figure of 123.6 million in 2010 and it increased by 1.9% in comparison to the year 2009. The greatest dynamic of growth occurred in the Asian parks (7.5%) and on the territory of Mexico and Latin America (8.9%). Whereas in the European parks a small decrease in the number of visitors was observed in the same period (-1.8%). A similar tendency was observed in the water parks which recorded a 25% increase in the years 2006-2010.

One of the most successful ideas which contributed to an increase of attendance in amusement parks in the year 2010, was the show entitled the “Magic World of Harry Potter” (which was shown in the Studio in Orlando; the show was visited by 1.7 million viewers). Other innovative realizations included the “World of Color” in Disney California Adventure and the “Ferrari World” in Abu Dhabi.

Table 2 illustrates the attendance figures in European amusement parks in the year 2010 as well as the dynamic of changes in comparison to the year 2009. Apart from the amusement parks which were already mentioned in the table TOP 25, one should also mention Park Tivoli in Copenhagen (nearly 4 million visitors), Port Aventura in Salou, Liseberg in Gothenburg, Gardaland in Castelnuovo del Garda, and the biggest park in Great Britain – Alton Towers in Staffordshire.

Only four out of twenty European parks recorded an increase in the number of visitors in 2010; the biggest increase – 7.4% was recorded in the Futuroscope Park (France), the second biggest – 3.8% was observed in the British parks Alton Towers and Thorpe Park – 3.4% and the third biggest in the Spanish park Port Adventure – 1.7%. Whereas the greatest drop was observed in the Madrid Parque Atracciones (-10.2%) and in the French Parc Asterix (-8.6%). In all likelihood, the decreases were associated with the decrease of foreign travel in Europe due to a financial slump and disturbances in air traffic caused by the explosion of a volcano in Iceland.

The European amusement parks are going through the process of lengthening of the season (time of functioning) which to some extent is linked to the Christmas and Easter holidays. The Tivoli Gardens amusement park in Copenhagen is the leading center in Europe as regards the gradual lengthening of the season, thanks to celebrating Halloween from October right up to Christmas. Both these holidays considerably increase the number of visitors as well as the park revenues. The European amusement parks have a relatively stable

Table 2. The most frequented European amusement parks in 2010

No	Name of park and its localization	No of visitors	Changes 2009/2010
1	DISNEYLAND PARK at Disneyland Paris Marne-la-Vallee, Francja	10 500 000	-2,6%
2	WALT DISNEY STUDIOS at Disneyland Paris Marne-la-Vallee, Francja	4 500 000	-2,6%
3	EUROPA PARK Rust, Niemcy	4 250 000	0,0%
4	DE EFTELING Kaatsheuvel, Holandia	4 000 000	0,0%
5	TIVOLI GARDENS Kopenhaga, Dania	3 690 000	-4,5%
6	PORT AVENTURA Salou, Hiszpania	3 050 000	1,7%
7	LISEBERG Gothenberg, Szwecja	2 900 000	-7,9%
8	GARDALAND Castelnuovo del Granda, Włochy	2 800 000	-3,4
9	ALTON TOWERS Staffordshire, Wielka Brytania	2 750 000	3,8%
10	LEGOLAND WINDSOR Windsor, Wielka Brytania	1 900 000	0,0%
11	THORPE PARK Chertsey, Wielka Brytania	1 850 000	3,4%
12	PHANTASIALAND Brühl, Niemcy	1 850 000	-5,1%
13	FUTUROSCOPE Jaunay-Clan, Francja	1 825 000	7,4%
14	PARC ASTERIX Plailly, Francja	1 663 000	-8,6%
15	LEGOLAND BILLUND Billund, Niemcy	1 650 000	0,0%
16	MIRABILANDIA Savio, Włochy	1 505 000	-7,3%
17	SLAGHAREN Hardenberg, Holandia	1 464 000	-6,9%
18	FLAMINGOLAND Malton, Wielka Brytania	1 400 000	-1,3%
19	HEIDE PARK Soltau, Niemcy	1 350 000	-3,6
20	PARQUE DE ATRACCIONES Madryt, Hiszpania	1 347 000	-10,2

Source: Theme index. The Global Attractions Attendance Report. 2011. TEA/AECOM, author's own analysis.

position in comparison to the American or Asian parks. The list of the most frequented parks (Top 20) generally does not change. The main factors which exert an influence on the functioning of European parks are geographical conditionings and their strong national

character. One may illustrate this with an interesting case study concerning the Euro Disney Resort in Paris.

Case Study: Euro Disney Resort

Disney had been planning the construction of a complex of Disneyland centers and parks ever since the early 80's; the investment was begun in 1988 and the park was opened on the 12 April 1992. The name had been changed to Euro Disney Resort⁵ in 1994, so as to match the Romantic image associated with Paris, and also due to the bad reputation which was associated with the old brand name. The complex is situated on the outskirts of Paris in a place called Marne-la-Vallée – some 30 km to the east of the city center. It is managed by the company Euro Disney SCA, in which the Walt Disney Company has shares.

The opening of the park encountered considerable opposition from some of the French people who feared that the American amusement park might do harm to their native traditions and local values. When Disneyland was opened in 1992, it turned out that it enjoyed the kind of interest that was originally expected. The board of directors of the park came to the conclusion that Europeans differ from Americans in respect of their taste and preferences: for example, they want a greater number of restaurants with places to sit and more sheltered walking paths. Among the causes of poor attendance and considerable financial losses (in the course of the first two years of its activity, Euro Disney had lost nearly 1.03 billion dollars) was also recession in Europe and a drop in the GNP as well as a relative impoverishment of many French people. In the light of the French law, since 1995 the Euro Disney Group SCA has become a Société en Commandite par Actions which manages and administers the park. The Disney Corporation is the biggest shareholder in Euro Disney, holding as much as 39.8% of the shares. 10% of the shares belong to Prince Alwaleed (a nephew of the Saudi King Abdullah, the greatest Muslim businessman in Saudi Arabia) as well as to his family. The remaining shareholders own 50.2% of the shares. From the 1 November 2005, the shares of Euro Disney SCA are listed on the Paris Stock Exchange (De Groot 2009).

Following the introduction of certain changes, the Paris Disneyland began to be visited by ever bigger numbers of visitors. The color scheme of the buildings had been changed; instead of the sharp bright colors, the management introduced more toned-down, pastel hues. The Mont-Saint-Michel abbey became a model for the centrally situated fairy-tale castle.

⁵ Out of a number of different propositions, Disney chose the surroundings of Paris for the localization of the park, bearing in mind the convenience of access to the place for tourists not only from France, but also from Germany, the Benelux countries and Great Britain.

The park is situated on a 57 hectare plot of land. Its territory is divided into 5 “lands”. The entire park has at its disposal 53 attractions maintained in the style of Disneyland parks; apart from that, it plays home to Walt Disney Studios Park which gives presentations of various film productions. The complex contains an amusement park known as the *Disneyland Paris Theme Park*, a few thematic hotels, a number of conference centers, and a *Disney Village* entertainment center which contains 15 cinemas, a number of 3D natural screens and a golf instruction and training center.

In 2010 the Paris Disneyland Park was visited by 10.5 million visitors; in this way, it has become the most frequently visited tourist attraction in Europe and as regards the number of clients, it is the biggest French tour operator. More than half of its visitors (51%) are French, 12% are British, and the same percentage come from the Benelux countries, 9% are Spanish, 4% come from Italy and only 2% from Germany. The entire park generates 56 thousand work places, including 14.5 thousand employees who are employed directly in the park. Table 3 contains information regarding the 10 biggest amusement park chains (corporations). In 2010 the greatest number of people – 120 million – visited the parks belonging to the Walt Disney group. The second biggest park owner – Merlin Entertainments Group recorded a number which is 3 times smaller (41 million). The two above-mentioned chains contain 50% of the world attendance in amusement parks. The biggest amusement park chains mentioned in the table record a joint attendance at the level of 320 million visitors. The majority of the chains show a growing tendency; the biggest growth was recorded in Oct Parks China in 2010 (22.2%), and the only place where attendance figures fell sharply in 2010 was in Campaigne des Alpes – drop of 9.1%. The above data suggests that in the coming years one can expect a further increase in the number of visitors to amusement parks.

Table 3. Attendance in the 10 biggest amusement park chains in the world in the year 2010.

No	Name of (corporation) chain	No of visitors	Changes 2009/2010
1.	Walt Disney	120.6	1.3
2	Merlin Entertainments Group	41.0	6.5
3	Universal Studios Recreation Group	26.3	11.0
4	Parques Reunidos	25.6	4.0
5	Six Flags	24.3	2.1
6	Cedar Fair Entertainments Group	22.8	8.1
7	Bush Entertainments	22.4	4.9
8	Oct Parks China	19.3	22.2
9	Herschend Entertainment	9.6	New open
10	Campaigne des Alpes	9.0	- 9.1

Source: Theme index. *The Global Attractions Attendance Report. 2011.* TEA/AECOM, author's own analysis.

Summing Up

All over the world amusement parks are an example of progressing globalization of the entertainment industry. Wherever they happen to be in the world, they have a similar form, similar themes, equipment and system of organization. In every Disneyland, we come across e.g. the “Borderland”, the “Adventure World”, or the “World of the Future”. We can expect a similar arrangement of space, a similar localization of services and a similar way of catering to the visitors’ needs. However, in spite of this standardization, the success of the project sometimes depends on variety. As is proved by the example of the Euro Disney Resort, the creators of parks must pay attention to the specific needs of the visitors which are often associated with the local culture, a different system of values or even the purchasing power of the local currency. This forces the management of parks to having to continually monitor attendance as well as to an analysis of visitors’ needs by resorting to various marketing tools. Even climatic conditions may exert an influence on the investments implemented in the entertainment industry. For example, in Abu Dhabi, the investors had to construct the biggest roof in the world over the “Ferrari World” Park at the cost of 1.2 billion dollars, due to a hot desert climate.

The Disney corporation is a world tycoon in the area of entertainment industry. Its strength is largely associated with the vast experience in the entertainment business as well as with its low cost strategy. What is more, in the course of the 80 years of its operation, the company created and developed a strong and well-known brand. In recent years, the corporation laid emphasis on amusement parks in its strategy, creating them outside the United States, in Europe and in Asia. The corporation employs innovative staff who in the course of the last few years have created many new products. In today’s aggressive entertainment business, each corporation which lacks new ideas, soon falls into difficulties. The company controls expenses while preserving the high quality of its products and services. Through a division of preliminary investment costs among a large number of outside investors, the financial risk of the company has been considerably reduced.

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