

Wet and Wild: Splashes, spins and screeches accompany thrills at Magic Springs

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

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It's about 1:30 p.m. on what was, minutes earlier, a cloudless Friday in late July. You're standing on a wooden landing, about 60 feet up, clutching a blue inflatable tube to your Spandex-clad body.

"Look," says Jax Parker of Benton, age 9. He points toward Indian Mountain, looming behind the water-slide portion of Magic Springs Water and Theme Park. The mountain is offset by a great swath of purple-bruise sky.

Jax arrived at Magic Springs, the state's largest amusement park, just past noon. His mom paid \$10 to park, \$8 for a locker and \$45 for Jax to get in (anyone over 48 inches tall is an adult, per park rules). Now he's been waiting in line 15 minutes for something people keep referring to as the "toilet bowls." They're among a cluster of artistically tangled, bright plastic piping, collectively known the Seven Falls Slide Tower. In another five minutes, he'll understand why they're so popular. (You place your tube in a swirling aqua tub and push off into a tunnel. There's an immediate dip that steals your stomach. You whip around curves and find yourself inside a gigantic bowl, where your frantic pace slows to a lazy float. You circle once, then twice, then start a third rotation. You lift your chin to gaze at the open sky, and wonder what next? Are you going to float here forever? Just as you decide that forever sounds great, you drop into a hole in the center of the bowl, the one that looks much too small for your inner tube. But you don't get stuck. You take some more curves before landing unceremoniously in a pool. You want to do it again, but a girl asks if you're done with your tube. You realize there aren't enough to go around and reluctantly relinquish yours.)

You hang poolside for a bit, watching people come off the steep purple slide that you naively chose first off. You weren't paying attention at the top and simply took the open option. You thought it was one of those winding, enclosed things. But no,

actually, it's one of those catch-air, fold-your-arms-behind-your-head-or-else, total-drop deals. Your face froze into Edvard Munch's *The Scream* as you shot down and water shot up, enema-style. Then you were at the bottom, frantically trying to reposition your swimsuit. This is what you're now watching others do. It's much more amusing from this end. But you want to try a winding slide as well, and you're about to head up when you spot an employee atop the tower making an X with his arms.

The lifeguard at the pool blows his whistle and shoos people from the water. Someone spotted lightning. It'll be at least half an hour before anyone is allowed to slide. Jax slurps a slushy (\$7), and you wipe chunks of salt off a warm, buttery pretzel (\$4). Jax's chair is defective. He rocks back and forth happily. "It's like a ride in itself," he says, and decides this bears repeating: "It's like a ride in itself." He winds up for a third go: "It's like a-," then cuts himself off. "Well, like I said."

It seems to be the only ride open, and Magic Springs doesn't offer rain checks. Luckily, Jax takes this in stride. You and Jax, his mom and another friend (who will spend the entire day in lounge chairs, wearing a dazed expression and saying things like, "This is really great because I've been watching lots of bad *Miami Vice* episodes recently") set off to find bumper cars, which are rumored to stay open in storms. Even though it isn't actually storming.

Instead you find the Crystal Grill, a burger and snack joint, which seems to be doing scant business. An employee leans against the counter, her chin propped glumly on her hand. "My drawer is jammed," Carmelita Chavez, 15, says. She has worked 35-hour weeks at Magic Springs, her first job, for four months now. She thinks of it as preparation for a future career as a labor and delivery nurse: "It's a good job to learn how to react and treat other people. Especially people who have been out in the hot sun and are tired and not very happy. Pregnant women are irritated and not very happy."

So far, only one scary thing has happened to her at work. A few months back, there was a tornado warning. As park visitors sought shelter, employees ran against the wind, collecting beach umbrellas that were tossing haphazardly. Luckily, this day is not going

to be a repeat of that day. Already the attractions have reopened, and Jax and his mom are bouncing in the wave pool.

Every five minutes, the lifeguards toss strange hand signals. They nod at each other, make a thumbs up and drag those thumbs in an arc across their bodies. Brianna Jackson, a college student and head lifeguard, has worked at the park for three summers. She explains a bottom scan: "It's the head guard's job to do five tweets. Then you stand up, scan the bottom of your pool, say bottoms clear [with your thumb], just to keep your mind active and your body moving." In other words, the bottom scan is to check for drowning victims.

Jackson wears a red fanny pack with what looks like a smushed plastic bottle inside. "It's called a Seal Easy ... it keeps our body away from their bodily fluids" in case mouth-to-mouth resuscitation is needed. "We practice all the time, but in three years, I've never had to do that."

This is how things work at Magic Springs: Each morning, employees get their station assignments for the day. New employees stay at the tops of slides until they complete their lifeguard certification. Lifeguards sometimes have to scold patrons, usually for trying to ride something that you're either too tall or too short for, or for misusing an inner tube in the wave pool. Or right now, if you're Jackson, for lifting a kid above your head and tossing him in the pool, or for wearing "water wings" (those blow-up arm floaties), which are not Coast Guard approved and therefore, not allowed in the pool. (Coast Guard-approved life-vests are provided to all guests, free of charge.)

Sometimes there are employee parties with relay races and Capture the Flag. Then the water-park season ends and you go back to high school or college, in Jackson's case, to pursue your dream of one day running the Smithsonian Institution.

Though Jax loves the wave pool, he is eager to check out Splash Island. This is the newest attraction, completed in May, where the Twist and Shout roller coaster used to be. Online, some people profess dismay over the razing of the Twist and Shout. But back in 2006, a woman fell out of the coaster about 11 feet up and later sued the park.

So it's likely that Magic Springs marketing people were glad to see the last of the thing, and anyway, Splash Island is "Awesome!" (exclaims Jax upon first glimpse), and this is why you've come.

It splays before you, a saturated wonderland of bubble-gum pink and butterscotch yellow. "It's like a Jon Burgerman drawing," says that friend who has been saying weird things all day. (Burgerman is a British doodle-artist whose work sometimes gets sold as Ikea prints.)

Splash Island is \$2.2 million worth of nets, waterfalls, slides, fountains, water-guns and buckets that fill, tip and dump. In particular, there is one massive 1,000-gallon bucket that takes about seven minutes to fill - Jax happens to scramble up the netting six minutes and 30 seconds in - and it flips with a force. Those in the know gather around to wait, and some hapless folks are merely caught in the fallout.

You screech, duck and squat against the concrete. The water pounds your head and shoulders. Wee kids topple over. Jax squeals in delight. "This is the coolest water park I've even been to," he pronounces.

You race through the structure, starting water wars with tiny tykes (the place is teeming) and vying for the bucket-tip. It doesn't matter that you're the oldest player by two decades - this is the most fun you've had all day. You clamber around giddily, until you're shivering from the icy spray and envying the lifeguards' raincoats, which they tell you they wear for warmth. "We'll do one more water ride, and then we'll come back to the bumper cars and do all the dry rides," you promise Jax.

Bumper cars are the only way you can get him to leave Splash Island, and you've had your sights on the Boogie Blast since morning, when you watched Russell Alvarez, an 18-year-old from Memphis, trick out on his board. He rode the everlasting, artificial wave upright, knees to boogie board or belly-down, shoving the board ahead and catching it when the water flung it back, then flipped his entire body - a complete, outstretched rotation midair - before landing, stomach flat against the board.

Alvarez discovered the Boogie Blast last summer. He has made the drive several times since then. "It's all I come for," he says. The Boogie Blast has the dubious distinction of being the ride most likely to strip you naked and/or make you cry. This morning you watched it fling a boy about Jax's size uphill into a rubber boundary wall with a resounding smack. That kid exited the Blast wailing.

As you approach this time, a tearful red-headed girl is coaxed by her mother to say where it hurts. She rubs her forehead and ducks her neck. The elementary-age girl currently on the wave nearly loses her bikini bottoms. She yanks them up and runs to bury her face in her mother's arms, probably crying more from embarrassment than pain.

You flash a panicked smile at Jax's mom, both grateful to be in one-pieces. Jax hikes up his shorts and tightens the lace to where he can barely breathe. We've seen enough of the Blast to know that it strips everyone indiscriminately.

Alvarez is still there, right where you left him five hours earlier. He attempts and misses a flip. Two female lifeguards exchange bemused glances. Alvarez tries again and makes it, then maneuvers his board to direct a strong spray at Jax, who shrieks and hops back. Alvarez grins and soaks Jax again, then rolls off the board, stands up, points to one of the lifeguards and says, "She's way better than me. She taught me everything I know."

On your turn, the lifeguard is preoccupied with another patron's bloody elbow, so you go in blind, grasping the board and flopping belly-first into the wave, the way you've seen others do. But instead of being shot into the wall as you'd feared, you slide all the way down, scraping ground at the bottom. "Pull your elbows in and drag your feet," Alvarez instructs.

You try again with the same outcome. After a few more tries, you give up and pass the board on, glad to still be wearing your swimsuit. You don cover-ups (a requirement for the dry attractions) and head toward the bumper cars and fair rides. Most rides are geared for Jax's demographic, but there is a horrifying thing called the X-Coaster that every employee you've spoken with claims as a favorite. Riders climb 90 degrees for

150 feet, are inverted over the park for a moment and barrel down 350 or so feet of curving steel ribbon. Jax's mom is jazzed. You, however, are petrified. "C'mon," she urges. "Don't you want that tummy feeling?"

You do want that tummy feeling. But you don't know if you want that head-first-dangling-150-feet-above-the-ground feeling. It's nearly 7 p.m. The next day you will learn that, at roughly the same time, a woman at Six Flags Over Texas plummeted 150 feet from a roller-coaster and couldn't be revived. You will also learn that five years ago, on this very X-Coaster, people were stuck upside-down, 150-feet up, for half an hour when the park's power failed, and that this ride was closed all of 2009, reopened in 2010 and was supposed to be removed from the park at the end of 2012 to make way for more water rides.

But you don't know any of this yet. You only know that the X-Coaster is there, you are on it, and you are nauseated with adrenaline. You take the seat next to Jax's mom, and she sweetly offers to hold your hand. You decide you'd rather clutch the safety bar. "Has anyone ever died on this ride?" you ask an employee as she checks your bar.

Your car begins to climb slowly, giving you time to contemplate your impending fate. You jerk around the L-shape, briefly take in the ground as sky, the miniature park as chandelier and a verdant ceiling of trees. Then you whip into a tight loop and another, and come racing down, rocking a few times in a deep arc. And then it's over. Your knees are gelatinous. You are drained and oddly elated, bolstered by a sense of accomplishment. You've had nothing but an egg and a pretzel all day, yet you feel dreamy and drunk. But Jax's mom is disappointed: "It didn't have the tummy feeling."

You move on to Dr. Dean's Rocket Machine, a series of simple lifts and free-falls. It's only about half as tall as the X-Coaster, but it has a straightforward motion that guarantees stomach suspension. You consider and dismiss The Gauntlet, which is a more traditional, oft-inverted roller-coaster. It looks fun, but it's late, and you're hungry. Jax hits a few more rides, and then, on the way out, you spot the carousel.

There are mirrors and gold poles. There's a centaur, a rooster and a mermaid. It appears ancient, as all carousels should, and absolutely charming. Earlier your friend compared Magic Springs to "summer in the '70s." (He's right. You've heard The Grateful Dead, Pete Seeger, Led Zeppelin and Heart. You haven't heard Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, Rihanna or Bruno Mars.) Now the sun is low, filtering hazily through the trees. It's the end of a day steeped not only in nostalgia, but in immediate, visceral sensations. That is, it's the end of a fantastic day. You choose a mount and ride into the sunset.