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Surfer's Cove, where Legoland is a parent's best friend

ANNE Z. COOKE Tribune News Service Jun 20, 2017 Updated Jun 20, 2017



A pirate ship, a castle, a dragon, 4,875 tiny Ninjago figures and several million Lego blocks welcome guests Legoland's Ninjago Hotel.

Steve Haggerty

Does Legoland California, on 126 rolling acres in San Diego County, Calif., really mean it when they say that Surfer's Cove, the newest addition to the theme park's Water Park area, opening on June 30, is for kids "ages 2 to 12?"

C'mon, get real. Who's going to drive the kids to the park and pay for an overnight stay at the television series-inspired Ninjago Hotel? That's going to be you. Who's going to put on a bathing suit and challenge your 8-year-old twins to a thrill-a-minute contest on the just-built Riptide Racers water slide? Who's going to sample the Wipe Out Lagoon ride? That's you, too, holding back just a little bit, so the kids can win.

Chances are you'll be the one who buys lunch at Beach Street Tacos, then retreats to a chaise in the shade to beat the heat. The one who's oblivious to what some people might call chaos: kindergarten kids splashing in the Joker Soaker pool, moms pushing toddlers in strollers, 3-year-olds playing in the Splash Zoo and an endless chorus of happy shrieks as dozens of parents and grandparents suspend the notion of grown-up rules and — like everyone visiting Legoland does — relax and let their kids be kids.

Legoland California is probably not on your bucket list. It certainly wasn't on mine. But after my own overnight in the Ninjago Hotel — among dozens of fantasy sculptures built out of hundreds of thousands of Lego blocks and dozens of excited, chattering kids and parents — I've been enlightened.

Legoland isn't the usual theme park, laid out with nine themed areas connected by landscaping and paths to 60 attractions ranging from thrill rides to learning exhibits and restaurants, all built out of the world's best-known plastic toy, rectangular blocks so famous they've inspired films, YouTube videos and fans. And it isn't just for kids.

Legoland is, actually, a parent's best friend.

What other public entertainment venue can you name that promotes itself to adults but is geared up for kids? A place where mom and dad don't have to say, "don't run," or "sit still," or "stop yelling; it's bothering those people," because "those people" are parents, too?

In the Ninjago Hotel, kids rushed into the elevators, ran down the corridors and pointed out every famous Lego block representation of Kai, Nya, Jay and Skylor. They chose their own food at the child-height buffet and went back for seconds. Dropped spaghetti and spilled milk attracted no attention, other than a smile from the waitress who mopped it up and offered to bring seconds.

In fact, the atmosphere felt so open and tolerant that it encouraged camaraderie. In lines, on rides and in the hotel, couples said hello, exchanged names and asked each other's children's ages. Dads talked about building swing sets and buying bicycles and moms compared neighborhoods, pre-schools and piano lessons. Families who discovered they lived near each other made plans to meet again.

Perhaps it's no surprise that Lego blocks began with the same mind-set. In 1934, Ole Christiansen, a Danish carpenter, began to make wooden toys and blocks, which he sold under the name Lego, a word derived from "leg godt," (meaning play well). By 1949, he was experimenting with plastic blocks, and in 1958 he opened a factory making the plastic blocks still sold today.

When the Lego block sculptures displayed at the factory (and sold as kits) attracted so many sightseers there wasn't room to hold them all, Ole decided to build a park to exhibit examples of what Lego blocks could build, opening it in 1968 near Copenhagen.

As Lego's popularity grew, sales spread worldwide. By 1980, when the first of the millennials were born, Lego blocks could be found in almost every American home. Which is why a visit to Legoland California is like a homecoming for those same millennials, now raising children of their own.

To the moms and dads that I met at the Ninjago Hotel, a riot of visual images made of thousands of multicolored shiny blocks, Legoland evokes fond memories of Lego kits tucked under long-ago Christmas trees and weekend afternoons building battleships and mini-doll houses. Those favorite childhood toys stick with you. And it's the leading reason that Legoland, like Disneyland, has found such a ready audience.

Since there's so many ways to enjoy Legoland California's Water Park, from cooling down on a hot August day at Surfers' Cove to the existing attractions, you'll probably want to spend an entire day. In that case, consider buying a separate Water Park ticket.

Start with Surfers' Cove, then sample the rest of the Water Park attractions, some of which permit or require parent participation, and have various height and weight restrictions. Four of these start near the 45-foot tall Tower, built in the middle of a large wading pool.

These include the Orange Rush, a family-size slide down a curving track, large enough for four, either adults or children in combination; the Twin Chasers, two side-by-side, 130-foot long tube slides that end in the pool; the Splash Out, a single 240-foot long body-slide ride into the pool; and the Splash Zoo, where toddlers ages 1 to 3 can play sprinkled by little fountains and sprays, either on a teeter totter or with funny fat animals, including a lion, a giraffe and a zebra.

Kids can build a raft and float down a short river. Or play on or under the Joker Soaker platform, where they can shoot water cannons (very small ones) at each other or hang out under the inevitable Big Splash, erupting at intervals. And there's the Imagination Station, where the kids can use DUPLO bricks to build dams, bridges, and test water flow patterns.

The next time somebody asks me why I went to a park built for toddlers I plan to tell them that is where I made a couple of new friends and how they can do the same. Yes, really.

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