

UNIVERSALLY APPEALING

Six hours from Phoenix, a universe of fantasy worlds awaits
 Story and photos by Jan Wagner - © Auto Matters and More

For over 50 years, Universal Studios Hollywood has been bringing images from the silver screen to life, stimulating all of the senses in ways that only being there can, enabling conversations with the characters, experiencing familiar adventures and creating brand new ones. These transcend mere words and images, expanding boundaries and adding to the narrative.

One of the best and most enduring attractions is the Studio Tour. Guided trams take you through the backlot, so you can experience firsthand some of the magic of Hollywood. Since this is a working studio, while you are on the tour you might be asked by your tour guide to be quiet while you observe actual productions that are underway.

Hold on tight as you watch the battle between King Kong and a towering dinosaur (in 3D), because your tram will be shoved around. Elsewhere

on the Studio Tour, you'll experience a sudden rainstorm and flash flood in old Mexico; a calamitous earthquake, fire and flood in an underground subway station (this is California, after all); and if you do not get wet there, perhaps you will in Amity Village, as a large great white shark, its jaws wide open, leaps out of the water right beside your tram!

As technology has continued to evolve, and popular new movies and TV shows have claimed their rightful places in the current popular culture, some of the older attractions on the Studio Tour have been replaced.

"Fast & Furious Supercharged" is the latest major addition to the Studio Tour. Located in a purpose-built 65,000-square-foot building on the backlot, and serving as the tour's finale, the tram drives along beside a star-studded, action-packed

car chase, while you watch it all unfold in 3D.

"Jurassic Park—The Ride" begins with a deceptively tranquil boat ride past docile dinosaurs. Without warning, other aggressive dinosaurs attack the jungle compound, and it gets very dark—too dark to see or to prepare yourself for what is about to happen next. Suddenly your boat drops out from under you, and you plummet down in a steep, terrifying, freefall drop until your boat splash lands in the water below.

On selected evenings you can take a nighttime Studio Tour, complete with dramatic studio lighting and sound effects (see the website for dates).

Universal Studio's long-running "WaterWorld" stage show is arguably one of the most popular theme park attractions of all time. The audience is seated in a stadium that faces a bleak, post-apocalyptic vision of the future, where the polar ice caps have melted and water covers the land, forcing people to live on floating islands made of rusting scrap metal and the derelict remains of ships. Most of the "stage" is a large body of water. This action-packed show features fiery explosions, speeding boats and Jet Skis, fights, stunt falls

from great heights—and even some golf. A surprise in the finale will leave you speechless and amazed.

Dining at Universal Studios Hollywood is an entertaining experience, too. In addition to the "Three Broomsticks" in Hogwarts (see sidebar), check out the new choices in "Springfield," home of the "The Simpsons." The spacious, two-story addition to the park accurately captures—with numerous authentic details—the heart and soul of the animated TV series. Head upstairs, where you can actually dine on a pool table. Familiar landmarks include the nuclear power plant, Duff Brewery Beer Garden, Springfield prison—with a jailbreak in progress, and Springfield Elementary School. Enjoy a Lard Lad donut, pose for a photo with the Simpsons and ride "The Simpsons Ride," where the waiting area is half the fun.

With so much to see and do, Universal Studios Hollywood is an incredible entertainment value in the heart of Southern California. Add to everything else a variety of restaurants and shops in the adjoining Universal CityWalk, easy freeway access, plenty of parking and a great location, and you'll see why Universal Studios Hollywood is billed as "The Entertainment Capital of LA." For details, visit universalstudioshollywood.com. ■

THE WIZARDING WORLD OF HARRY POTTER OPENS AT UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOLLYWOOD

More than five years in the making, the wonderful, magical "Wizarding World of Harry Potter" at Universal Studios Hollywood is now welcoming guests from around the world. Hogsmeade is a quaint, bustling, snow-capped village, where the steaming Hogwarts Express locomotive waits in the station at the village entrance.

Incredibly detailed rooms and corridors inside the massive, dark and imposing Hogwarts castle lead to the most intense ride we have ever experienced. "Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey" is a technological and creative tour de force—the state of the art in robotic ride systems—with frightening creatures, thrilling 3D action film sequences, sound effects and narration. You will speed along on your broomstick, forward and backwards, banking, soaring, diving and even turning upside down as you follow Harry Potter and dodge obstacles in your path.

Sip a refreshing frozen Butterbeer as you explore fascinating shops and themed dining. At Ollivanders, you might be chosen by an interactive wand, whose spells bring life to the magical shop windows. For lunch in the traditional British "Three Broomsticks" tavern, we recommend the hearty beef, lamb and Guinness stew, served in a bread bowl.

Enjoy the talented performers in the Frog Choir and the Triwizard Spirit Rally, and take a ride on the "Flight of the Hippogriff"—the park's first outdoor roller coaster.

"The Wizarding World of Harry Potter" stimulates and challenges the imagination, and bridges the generation gap. Children who grew up devouring the books have carried their enthusiasm and love for them into adulthood. This colossal new undertaking is built upon over 50 years of Universal Studios' talent, passion, imagination, attention to detail, whimsy, exceptional execution and a top-to-bottom, sincere dedication to a welcoming guest experience. ■

