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**At Disney, Gloomy Realities Shadow a Fantasy World**

By [BROOKS BARNES](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/brooks_barnes/index.html)JUNE 21, 2016

Newly installed signs warn of alligators and snakes on a section of beach near a Walt Disney World hotel in Orlando, Fla. Credit Spencer Platt/Getty Images

LOS ANGELES — [Disney](http://www.nytimes.com/topic/company/walt-disney-company?inline=nyt-org) theme parks have always been about trading an imperfect world for a perfect one. There is no trash blowing down [Main Street, U.S.A.](https://disneyland.disney.go.com/au/disneyland/main-street-usa/) It’s nothing but happy trappers and singing bears over in Frontierland. Dream big, and the gleaming technology of Tomorrowland just might come true.

In case the castles are too subtle, Disney outright promises escape from the real world. The [welcome signs](http://www.disneyavenue.com/2015/08/bring-magic-kingdom-or-disneyland.html) at [Disneyland](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/d/disneyland/index.html?inline=nyt-org) in California and [Walt Disney World](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/d/d_disney_walt_world/index.html?inline=nyt-org) in Florida quote Walt Disney’s words from 1955, “Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy.”

Lately, however, it has become harder for Americans planning a Disney vacation to buy into the company’s utopian theme park concept. The horrific [mass shooting](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting.html) at a nightclub in Orlando, Fla., cast a shadow on nearby tourist destinations, including Disney World. Then word leaked that the gunman had also [scoped out a Disney shopping complex](http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/14/us/orlando-shooter-omar-mateen/). Next came an incident that was shocking enough to kick the nightclub carnage off some front pages: A toddler [was dragged](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/16/us/alligator-child-florida-orlando-disney.html) by an alligator into a Disney World lake and drowned.

“Is Disney’s Image Tarnished?” a headline on [an investment website](http://seekingalpha.com/article/3983128-disney-tarnish-pristine-family-friendly-image#alt1) asked on Monday, with the alligator attack — the first such accident in Disney’s 45-year history in Florida — as a particular source of concern. The funeral for Lane Graves, the 2-year-old victim, [was held](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/funeral-held-disney-alligator-attack-victim-lane-graves-article-1.2682259) Tuesday in Nebraska.

Whether last week’s events reverberate for Disney in a business sense (beyond a [possible lawsuit](http://www.foxnews.com/us/2016/06/16/gator-tragedy-leaves-disney-facing-legal-nightmare-say-experts.html) stemming from the alligator attack) is a question that will only be fully answered in the months to come, peak season for theme park vacations. If families cancel reservations or the pace of reservations noticeably slows, then the answer is yes. If they do not — as most analysts predict — then Disney will power forward, recovering from this spate of bad publicity as it has [from others](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2010-04-02/news/os-child-hit-bus-disney-20100401_1_bus-driver-kim-montes-fort-wilderness).

The company’s stock price is already improving, climbing about 3 percent since Thursday, when authorities discovered Lane Graves’s body. [Blockbuster results](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/movies/finding-dory-swims-to-top-of-box-office.html?_r=0) for “Finding Dory” at the box office helped, as did the opening of Shanghai Disneyland.

Theme parks, zoos and other tourist destinations have survived tragedies before. One-time incidents tend not to undermine well-run businesses, and Disney parks are definitely thriving.

But even without recent events, Disney was having to work harder to pull off its “not a worry in the world” magic trick. Record crowds have made the experience less joyful. So has technology: Never mind their cynical parents, American children, babysat by iPad from the time they were in diapers, are not as easily mesmerized by analog rides like It’s a Small World and Autopia, with its little cars putt-putting along a track.

More aggressive safety procedures have become a fixture of modern life; metal detectors are now routine at baseball stadiums, concert arenas and even some movie theaters. In response to increased security concerns, Disney, Universal and SeaWorld began [using metal detectors](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/18/business/media/disney-metal-detectors-theme-parks.html) in December, the first time the companies deployed such measures on a large scale.

But these measures, while appreciated by most tourists who might feel less safe without them, work against Disney’s singular efforts to create what it advertises as “the Happiest Place on Earth.” It’s awfully hard to forget the real world when you’re being wanded.

Shanghai Disneyland, [formally unveiled](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/business/international/disney-shanghai-opens.html) on Thursday, also has rows of metal detectors at its graceful front gates. But the mood at this newest Disney park — the first on the Chinese mainland — was utterly joyful last week, even as the grim news from Orlando made its way to visitors’ smartphones. Spending time in the park on four different days, three of them with paying guests, I was struck by how fully intact that classic Disney sense of wonder really seemed.

Without question, the excitement and pomp around the opening contributed to that feeling. But something else was happening at Shanghai Disneyland. I got the sense that this was what it must have felt like at the original Disneyland in the 1950s. Visitors were very obviously awe-struck — this fantastical place, smelling of fresh paint and new vinyl seat covers, was something they had never seen before. Chinese guests, having never confronted a 9/11 or repeated mass shootings, seemed free of the baggage that many Americans now carry to public gathering places. The spell seemed easier for Disney to cast.

Robert A. Iger, Disney’s chief executive, alluded to this fascination as we toured Shanghai Disneyland on June 11. “I grew up in the United States dreaming of going to Disneyland one day — unaffordable for us, by the way, and I didn’t go until I was a parent,” he said. “You now have that same dynamic here in China that existed in the ’50s and ’60s in the United States, as people started looking for more leisure activities. It’s palpable.”

In Shanghai, Disney’s rides are fully updated technological marvels — no more jerky animatronics in [Pirates of the Caribbean](http://www.theverge.com/2016/5/11/11656120/pirates-of-the-caribbean-shanghai-disneyland-video-tour), which is now fully digital, with boats controlled by underwater magnets and Imax-style screens with video. In another difference from Disney’s domestic parks, even rank-and-file cashiers and hotel maids seem thrilled to be there. When they waved and chirped, “Have a magical day!” they appeared to mean it, rather than just repeating a corporate mantra.

On an especially difficult week for Disney in the United States, Shanghai proved that the company’s pixie dust still works the same way it used to in a more innocent age. Even if you have to go to the other side of the world to find it.