

# Test of family fun at Busch Gardens

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## **Kids and parents get one of the first rides on the tot-friendly Air Grover coaster at Sesame Streets Safari of Fun, which opened recently at Busch Gardens in Tampa, Fla. (Photo courtesy of Busch Gardens)**

FLORIDA - It's 10 a.m. on a sunny, mid-March morning and we're chugging slowly across the Serengeti Plain. Our train - the one our family boarded in the midst of a Nairobi desert - is snaking dangerously close to some fierce and hungry-looking lions. But all is well. My three-year-old daughter is delighted by the pink of the very pink flamingos. And somehow the sight of giraffes ripping leaves off trees strikes my seven-year-old son as extremely funny.

No, we're not in Africa. We're in Florida, at Busch Gardens. Or, as my kids call it, Beach Gardens.

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Tagging along are various members of my extended family: My brother, his teenagers, his girlfriend and her two children. We're 10 in total, with kids ranging in age from three to 15 - an excellent test of the family fun at Tampa Bay's African-themed attraction.

Our journey across the Serengeti rolls to an end at the Stanleyville Station, directly beneath an intimidating roller coaster called SheiKra. Without hesitation, the teenaged boys and men of our group head directly for the coaster. We watch as they climb 60 metres or so, pause for a nail-biting four seconds at the edge of a 90-degree drop ... then plunge. Straight down. At 113 km/h. After rifling through an Immelmann loop, a second vertical dive and an underground tunnel, the boys emerge looking dazed, dizzy and notably shaken.

"Was it good?" I ask my 15-year-old nephew.

"Yeah," he says. "It was good. There's nothing like that at Canada's Wonderland." Teenage translation: "Awesome!"

I note that while the teens are game, the dads aren't quite as keen to sample the remaining coasters at Busch Gardens. But they give them the old macho try, and ultimately offer the Congo's Kumba coaster a two-thumbs-up - and not much else. Kumba renders most of its shaken riders speechless.

While Busch Gardens is known for its intimidating coasters, there's actually more of interest at the park for kids aged six to nine. The two seven-year-olds in our party get the most out of the day. They love losing themselves in the multi-level rope mazes, crawl tubes, bridges and climbing nets of Jungala, one of Busch's most recent - and most worthy - additions. They relish bumping into the adults of our party in the bumper cars. They giggle, then holler, then giggle again on the more moderate, kid-friendly Scorpion coaster. And they're thrilled to get soaked on Busch's water rides - particularly Stanley Falls Flume and Tanganyika Tidal Wave.

Surprisingly, my three-year-old does not respond as well to Busch Gardens as she did a year ago to Disney's Magic Kingdom. While there are tot-friendly rides in Jungala and Timbuktu, there aren't enough child-size, animated attractions

and characters to capture her complete attention. Not yet, anyway. The addition of Sesame Street's Safari of Fun at Busch Gardens, which was scheduled to open shortly after our visit, is the park's recognition of its need for more kiddie-size rides and slides. I am given a tour of the attraction under construction, spotting the Air Grover roller coaster built for parents and kids to ride together, Elmo's Safari Go-Round carousel, a 4-D theatre and a series of climbing and slide combinations with nooks and crannies my toddler will love.

Busch is also implementing its specialty into Safari of Fun: Waterplay. Oscar's Swamp Stomp and Bert & Ernie's Water Hole include bubblers, geysers and dumping buckets ideal for a hot Florida day.

Enroute to the final ride of the day, I make a note to self: Next time we visit Busch I'll pack bathing suits, towels and extra dry clothes. While not a waterpark (sister Adventure Island waterpark is next door), Busch Gardens is a very wet place. Exhilarating rides, including the don't-miss Congo River Rapids, will soak you - guaranteed.

Animals are another Busch high-five. The nine-year-old girl in our party keenly visits the park's plethora of exotic African animals, including Bengal tigers, orangutans, lemurs and flying foxes.

But it's that final ride of the day that guarantees our future return. Rhino Rally features a robust 4WD vehicle steering us back into the wilds of Nairobi. Our driver - a Robin Williams wannabe - makes us howl as we climb ditches, splash through mud and navigate rivers, all with ugly rhinos and enormous elephants wondering what the heck we find so funny.

"That was the best!" my kids say as we end the day. "Can we come back to Beach Gardens, Mom?"

"Sure," I answer. Only next time we'll be wearing bathing suits.

For more information on Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, visit [BuschGardens.com](http://BuschGardens.com).

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