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THE LAST GHOST TRAINS

Geisterbahnen are a dying breed, but some still give you goose bumps in the Prater

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The forerunners of rides popularised by Disneyland, the Prater's ghost trains, like the *Geisterschloss*, offer cheap thrills

Photo: Nicholas K. Smith

The Prater amusement park's three remaining *Geisterbahnen* offer chills of a bygone age

The Twilight of the Ghost Trains

by Nicholas K. Smith

It's easily been a couple of decades since I've felt I had to close my eyes on an amusement park ride. I'm not afraid of heights or the dark on their own, but when my tiny metal car started its climb along a darkened, kerchunking track in one of the Prater's *Geisterbahnen*, or ghost trains, the urge was nearly overwhelming. So forgive me a little childhood regression. After all, what can you expect from a ride that features a goblin smoking a cigarette while flipping you the bird?

Historic goose bumps

The ghost trains have a storied history in this venerable amusement park that the Viennese refer to as the *Wurstelprater*, at the near end of the former Imperial hunting grounds. They can trace their lineage back to the Prater's "Walfisch-Grotto-bahn", the first electric *Grotto-bahn* in Europe. The first ghost ride opened in 1932 and a *Geisterschloss*, or ghost castle, debuted a year later, according to Ursula Storch of the Wien Museum.

"From the 1930s, *Grotto-bahnen* showed mainly scenes from fairy tales in contrast to the *Geisterbahnen*, which showed horrible scenes with ghosts and monsters for the grown-ups," she said. "Instead of the trains in the *Grotto-bahn*, they had small wagons for only two people. Moving figures, sudden light and thunder and even men disguised as monsters or ghosts were there to frighten people."

Today's historic *Geisterbahnen* follow the same pattern. You ride in a two-person car, weaving your way upstairs, outside and back down again to where you started. None of the rides will set you back more than €3.50 and all have a relatively low scare-per-Euro ratio. Most people ride them for the cheap thrills, the loud noises and the threadbare ghosts, goblins and other assorted meanies being thrust, swung or otherwise catapulted towards you to the haphazard sounds of recorded screams.

But there's a problem: They're slowly disappearing. One of the Prater's rides, "Zombies", was torn down last year, to be replaced by dumpy-looking trampolines. There aren't many statistics out there tracking the twilight of the *Geisterbahnen*, but it's a safe bet that there will be fewer of them in 10 years time.

The dwindling real deal

Since going to Disneyland was always the default summer vacation in my family, I was interested in seeing the distant, Old World cousins of the "Haunted Mansion".

As I walked up to the first ride, "Geisterbahn zum roten Adler" (Ghost Train of the Red Eagle) I passed a kid using a piece of paper to hit one of the statues in the crotch. Once the ride started and I opened my eyes, I was a little disappointed to discover I had been scared for nothing. Most of the "chills" came from loud

air horns and flashing lights. As the car rounded the last curve, a hammer repeatedly hit underneath the car's seat, giving my nether regions a jolt.

The second ride, simply called "Geisterbahn", was easily the most threadbare of the three. The chicken wire is visible in some of the creatures sitting on the exterior and some of the monsters were so charmingly unspooky that you wanted the ride to move just a little slower so you could get a better look at them. A breakaway, fluorescent green bridge, though, provided the neatest effect I saw that day.

But it was the last one, the "Geisterschloss" (Haunted Castle), that was the *crème-de-la-crème* of the genre. Gone were the obnoxiously loud clanging doors and papier-mâché monsters. The things jumping out at you were more coordinated with the sounds. There was even a monster barfing into a garbage can near the end, so there's that.

As you exit, there's a framed picture of none other than James Bond himself, Timothy Dalton, no doubt taking a break from filming 1987's *The Living Daylights*. Next to the Dalton photos are several of Shakira, and other celebrities whose photos were too far away to recognise.

It's comforting to see the celebrity pics. They add a tacit approval, one that suggests that some things, no matter how cheesy, shouldn't be allowed to disappear. ◇