



Bumper cars at The Little Big Club. Left: Sanrio Hello Kitty Town. Right: The Comaroffs chug through Legoland.

LITTLE STEPS IN WONDERLAND

At three new theme parks in Malaysia, some young friends help MELANIE LEE recapture the magic of childhood.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DARREN SOH

Four-year-old Mila Comaroff is breathless. She's been running in circles at the Legoland ticket line excitedly admiring the primary-color castle towering over us, so that before we've even begun our day at the theme park, I'm exhausted simply from watching her. "Is this, like, real Lego?" Mila asks her mother, Ker-Shing, who nods yes. At that, Mila and her younger brother, Leo, charge forward towards Miniland, where they let out a series of "Wows!" at the 17 down-sized Asian landmarks, from the Great Wall of China to Angkor Wat to the Petronas Twin Towers, recreated with 30 million Lego bricks.

My own childhood idea of heaven involved the land of make-believe come to life, where my favorite cartoon characters and toys roamed freely and the trolley seats and ice cream cones were small and the signs spoke directly to

me: "No one taller than yeah-high may ride." (So beat it, parents!) In the sacred confines of theme parks, magic was legitimate, and it was possible to live happily ever after in—what else but?—a shimmery castle. Some of my fondest memories are based in theme parks—waving at dolls frolicking to "It's a Small World" in Disneyland, California; or half-laughing, half-screaming on my first roller coaster ride, the Corkscrew, at Alton Towers in England.

But for most of my youth, I lived in Singapore, so visiting a theme park meant traveling far afield. These days, kids in Southeast Asia have it good: there's Disneyland in Hong Kong, Universal Studios in Singapore and Ocean Park Water Adventure in Jakarta. And now making a bid for theme park central is Iskandar, a half-hour drive into Malaysia from Singapore, which boasts Legoland, Sanrio Hello Kitty Town



and The Little Big Club (home to Bob the Builder, Thomas the Tank Engine and other popular TV cartoon characters).

Just seven years ago, the 2,217-square-kilometer area now marked out as Iskandar—a special economic zone in southern Johor Bahru—was all palm-oil plantations and mangrove swamps. Today, it is a metropolis attracting foreign investors with property developments, a buzzing education hub and a range of business and medical facilities. The place's utopian aura is highlighted by the brand-name theme parks—this is the first Hello Kitty Town outside of Japan and the first Legoland in Asia, with a Legoland hotel slated for a 2014 opening. Iskandar, it seems, has aspirations of becoming the Orlando of the Orient.

Boy, this is going to be intense,” says Mila and Leo’s dad, Josh, trotting behind the kids, trying to catch up, wiping beads of perspiration from his forehead. The sweltering heat and Katy Perry blasting over the sound system are already giving me a migraine.

It was my brilliant plan to do some reconnaissance with other people’s children before bringing my own son, now a toddler just starting to walk. On this day, the big questions are what to ride, and when. For example, should the Comaroffs take the Legoland Express train that tours the entire 31-hectare theme park, or go on the revolving Observation Tower to get a bird’s eye view of Iskandar?

Mom’s pushing for the latter, but two-year-old Leo asserts, “We go on the train now or we’re going to miss it and we are going to be stuck here.”

Ah, the wisdom of youth. Mila and Leo get sidetracked by The Shipyard, a massive adventure playground with a four-level Titanic-like centerpiece where small kids can climb and crawl freely. The parents catch their breath, and are able to take in the surroundings. As landscape architects, Josh and Ker-Shing appreciate the scale and ergonomics of this playground, which they describe as “superb.”

Josh gets nostalgic as he watches his kids shimmy through the tunnels. “When I was growing up in the U.S.,

theme parks were a big annual tradition and something I always looked forward to,” he says. “It’s important for young kids to visit a place of total fantasy—no matter how commercial or contrived—because these are environments that have been designed exclusively for them to enjoy.”

The kids take the wheel at Boating School, steering battery-powered Lego-brick dinghies around obstacles that include animals squirting fountains of water. “It’s fun getting peed on by a rat,” Mila says.

Four rides, two playgrounds and two rounds through Miniland later, exhaustion and dehydration set in for Mila and Leo, and they both seek shade in the pram, guzzling bottles of water with drooping eyes. Their parents tell us they are going to come back in a year or two, when the trees have grown out to provide more shade, and both children will be big enough for more rides. “Hopefully,” says Josh, “they’ll love roller coasters as much as me.”

As we bid farewell to the Comaroffs, Mila is quick to defend her fatigued state. “I really love this place, but it’s just too hot,” she says with a little sigh. “My eyeballs hurt.”

Our next trip to Iskandar is in a blessedly milder environment: the air-conditioned, four-story Puteri Harbour Family Theme Park housing Sanrio Hello Kitty Town and The Little Big Club.

This time, our young companions are three-year-old twins Ashley and Kieran Lim, along with their parents Michael and Cami. The shy kids generally remain silent when my husband and I are around, but this time, Darren and I are surprised to hear high-pitched joyful squeaks emanating from them as we reach the heart-shaped, pink-lit entrance of Hello Kitty Town. The indecipherable, chirpy Japanese songs sustain the twins’ upbeat mood, and they explore the indoor park with a skip in their steps.

Cami is a little more critical as she scans the place, which takes up the first level of the Puteri Harbour Family Theme Park building. There’s a Tea Cups ride, Hello Kitty’s House, a stage where Hello Kitty and Dear Daniel perform and an

interactive castle. The rest of Hello Kitty Town revolves around activities such as jewelry-making, photo-taking and decorating Hello Kitty cookies. “This doesn’t feel like a theme park,” she says a little indignantly.

In fact, the biggest hit with the twins here is the Nail Salon. “Look at my nails, Mummy!” Kieran shrieks about his lacquered fingertips, innocently oblivious to gender stereotypes. Ashley bashfully spreads her fingers out in front of my face, and though I coo in appreciation, Cami mutters, “I could have easily done this at home... with better quality nail polish.” Her friends who’d been here before had enthusiastically told her they’d spent “one whole day” with their kids, and Cami’s wondering what she is missing.

“Maybe,” she says, “I’d expected it to be Disneyland.” We get into bad dream territory at Black Wonder, a dark castle maze where kids have to solve a series of puzzles in order to save Hello Kitty and Dear Daniel, who have been kidnapped by Kuromi, a Goth rabbit. The sight of their cartoon pals in cages sends Kieran and Ashley over the edge. There is bawling. Lots of bawling. The twins are carried out of the castle by their parents.

Happy screeching resumes, though, at The Little Big Club, where the twins ride on Thomas the Tank Engine, meander through giant tunnels of the Bob the Builder Play Structure and take a spin on Harold’s Helitours Ride. “OK,” Cami concedes, “at least now, this part feels like a mini theme park.”

As we witness the unadulterated glee Ashley and Kieran display at shaking hands with Angelina Ballerina, I recall Mila and Leo boogying down to the snake dance tune played at the Miniland Taj Mahal, back in Legoland. It’s these simple things, I think, that are magic.

So, while Cami and Michael are skeptical of making a repeat visit to Puteri, the twins are already pestering them about wanting to return. “I guess at the end of the day, it’s all about our children having fun,” Cami says, “even if we grown-ups don’t get it sometimes.” ✚

T+L Guide

Getting There

From Singapore (30 mins): Cross the border to Malaysia via Tuas Checkpoint. After the tollbooth, take Exit 312 right. Follow signs to Legoland and/or Puteri Harbour. WTS Travel (65/6467-8588; legoland.wts.travel.com.sg) runs five to seven round-trips to Iskandar daily. From Kuala Lumpur (five hours): Take the North South Plus highway, exit 253 to Senai Airport/Tuas, then Exit 311 to Kota Iskandar. Follow signs to Legoland and/or Puteri Harbour. Or, take a 30-minute flight to Singapore and drive from there.



DO

LEGOLAND Malaysia requires at least a full day’s exploration with more than 40 rides, shows and attractions. Besides bringing lots of water, hats and sunblock, warn your kids that they’ll have to take regular rest in cooled areas before heading out to new parts of the park. 7 Jln. Legoland, Bandar Medini, Nusajaya; 60-7/597-8888; legoland.com.my; RM140 per adult, RM110 for children three to 11, free admission for children under three.

The Puteri Harbour Family Theme Park Inside a nondescript office-type building, there’s **Hello Kitty Town**, on the first floor—a small place with activities similar

to kid programs offered by shopping malls during festive periods. **The Little Big Club** takes up the second and third floors, and is suitable for kids three and under who may not be able to take the scorching sun at Legoland, but love rides and running around in huge playgrounds. *Persiaran Puteri Selatan, Puteri Harbour, Nusajaya*; 60-3/2203-9668; playtime.com.my; RM110 for a combined pass to both parks, free admission for children under three.

EAT AND DRINK

Food in these theme parks is functional at best. Fortunately, there’s the **Mall of Medini**

nearby, with a wide range of decent outlets such as Absolute Thai, Manhattan Fish Market and Secret Recipe. 4 *Lebu Medini Utara*; 60-7/509-9493.

STAY

Pulai Springs Resort 20 Km *Jln. Pontian Lama, Johor Bahru*; 60-7/521-2121; pulaisprings.com; doubles from RM330.

Traders Hotel Puteri Harbour *Persiaran Puteri Selatan, Puteri Harbour, Nusajaya*; 60-7/560-8888; shangri-la.com; doubles from RM300.

Thistle Johor Bahru *Jln. Sungai Chat, Johor Bahru*; 60-7/222-9234; thistle.com; doubles from RM259.



Above: Legoland’s Putra Mosque. Right: Hello Kitty Town draws big kids. Opposite: Deep in play at The Little Big Club.

