



## MISTER MCGUIRE WAS RIGHT: CONFESSIONS OF A LEGOLAND CONVERT

The top item on any good list of what to look for when you visit LEGOLAND should be Imeleta who works in Brick Brothers, the souvenir shop next door to the Adventure Club. This sainted woman earned her position at the top of my list when she cheerfully gave me several sheets of paper on which to take notes for this article when I was stupid enough to leave home without a notebook.

She would have lent me her pen, too, but I felt honor bound to buy *something* and her shop only carries “floater” pens. You know, the ones you tilt to see a little picture of a LEGO jeep slide past a little picture of a LEGO plant. And then tilt the other way to see it slide backwards. Whee. My husband buys five of these things any time he sees them because apparently he’s under the impression that there’s going to be a shortage.

So I bought a floater pen and Imeleta kindly gave me a bag big enough to hold it *and* the paper, the net result being that my visit probably actually cost the shop money. Which is why I’m asking all decent-heart-

ed people who were planning on being in the LEGOLAND neighborhood to stop by. Go in say hello to Imeleta. Buy something nice. Don’t stint yourself. You deserve it.

I have to admit that going to LEGOLAND — AKA “The Place Where All the Nerds You Refused to Date in High School Got Cushy Jobs Which Pay Way More Money Than Your So-Called Career Ha Ha Ha Ha” — was not my idea. I did, in fact, have to be rather seriously coerced to go there. I admit this in the same sentence I admit to being the parent of a four-year-old (to whom the park is LLLLLLLEGOLAND), which I realize means that someone is going to call child protective services on me, especially when I add that I have an ironclad rule against admitting so much as a single Raffi- or Barney-related item into my home.

Fine. Shoot me. But my philosophy of child raising has always been that *I* was the one who gave birth to the child in question, and having done that without benefit of anesthetic or even a good stiff drink, I think

I can say I’ve already endured enough pain on his behalf. So LEGOLAND pretty much wasn’t on my list of places I’d be going willingly any time soon. But we were in San Diego anyway, plus my husband promised to tell me as soon as we got back where exactly he’d hidden all the dark chocolate, so I figured what the hell.

LEGOLAND, it turns out, wasn’t the nail-bitingly tedious exercise in parent torture I’d expected it to be. In fact, it’s really not such a bad place. For one thing, it’s not as commercial as I’d expected. I had steeled myself for neon souvenir stands every thirteen feet, like they have at the San Diego Zoo (motto: “Why Go All the Way to Las Vegas When You Can Blow Your Retirement Fund Right Here?”). I expected endless advertisements and hot and cold running LEGO in the restrooms (which by the way are notable because someone on the architectural team got the shrewd idea that people might just be coming here *with kids* and so actually fitted the stalls with walls that come almost all the way down to the floor, which really dis-



courages those small, bright-eyed tykes who like to do a little extra sight seeing in public lavatories).

LEGOLAND was actually pretty low key. The tone there is kind of like: Hey, we noticed that our brand name is *in the name of the actual park*, so we're not going to go out of our way to beat you to death with the whole product-placement thing too much. Yes, there are LEGO constructions everywhere. You will see a full-size LEGO elephant who not only looks pretty good, all things considered, but who can also raise his trunk and squirt water out of it — something which held my son mesmerized for several minutes as he clearly thought it was in violation of some law of physics.

You will see a real phone booth with several life-sized LEGO people standing patiently in line to make a phone call. If you are a feminist, you may cheer the fact that the fire fighter in line is clearly a woman. If you are a really, *really* hard-core feminist, you may bemoan the fact that the reason one can discern that she's a woman is that she's applying LEGO lipstick. Do not attempt to slap this out of her delicate LEGO hand. You will hurt yourself.

But anyway, what I meant to say, back when I was hung up on the whole topic-sentence thing, was that the omnipresent LEGOness never goes over the line into

oppressive. It's just kind of chipper and fun. Except over at Fairy Tale Brook, which my family and I wisely avoided after reading the sign at the entrance: "Come and see your favorite fairy tales come to life!" Frankly the last thing in the world I want is for *any* fairy tale to come to life. Especially not my favorite from the brothers Grimm, "The Juniper Tree," which involves an evil stepmother whacking her stepson's head off and then setting things up so her own daughter appears (even to the daughter herself) to be guilty of the act. (The stepmother redeems herself by covering for her "guilty" child and discreetly chopping the offending stepson into that night's dinner. Don't expect this to be a Disney cartoon anytime soon.)

So give the Fairy Tale Brook a miss. But by all means check out the play area, which has way better stuff to climb on than they ever had when you were a kid.

You also won't want to miss the Enchanted Walk, you will spy some genuinely clever and inventive LEGO creatures along this path. Of particular note are the LEGO leafcutter ants, a LEGO hive with bees, and LEGO ducks and deer peeping out at you in lieu of real ones (which you can always see at some lesser, more "realistic" attraction park). But enough of that. Time for apple fries.

Granny's Apple Fries, the recipe for which I hope to high heaven never falls into enemy hands, should probably be a controlled substance. Instead of maiming innocent potatoes, the blessed apple-fries chef juliennes and flash fries Granny Smith apples, which are sour enough to deserve whatever happens to them. The slices are then rolled in cinnamon sugar and nestled next to a generous dollop of vanilla dipping sauce. This is LEGOLAND's thoughtful way of insuring that any calories you happen to burn off wandering from LEGO to LEGO will be more than replaced.

Despite the apple fries, LEGOLAND falls a little short of perfect in some areas. They obviously took some cleanliness cues from Disneyland — I wore white pants and didn't regret it by the end of the day — but I wish they'd borrowed some of the big D's efficiency expertise as well. When measuring line lengths against your remaining powers of endurance, for instance, you should be sure to at least triple in your mind the number of people actually standing in front of you, because the queues are slow enough to make waiting in line at the post office seem like a quick sprint in a nitro-burning funny car by comparison. The reason: each ride had only one person who's simultaneously helping people into



the ride vehicle, helping the people who have finished riding *out* of the vehicle, checking off on an official-looking piece of paper that said vehicles still haven't maimed anyone all day (or whatever), starting the ride up, stopping it, and making the safety announcements.

If I could send a message to corporate LEGOLAND, it would be this: Cut costs somewhere else, okay, guys? Any of you who think that there are just plain enough people working your park obviously haven't stood in any of those lines recently, and in fact I think you should periodically be forced to stand in those lines as

Quibbling aside, LEGOLAND is a good time. It's a park you can actually cover in one day, which gives you a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. Plus there's a LEGO guy on a park bench who's "asleep" and you can sit next to him, listen to him snoring and imagine the park all empty and dark at night with that guy still sitting there, snoring with no one there to hear him. It's kind of creepy and cool in an "if a tree falls in the forest" sort of way.

The sleeping guy is across a walkway from a nice old LEGO lady wearing a fatuous smile, feeding LEGO birds, and carrying, behind her back, a book entitled



part of your employment contract. I mean, we went *off-season*, for heaven's sake.

Also, the LEGO "factory tour" is so dangerously close to cheesy you could hear the mice. It's not worth the three minutes out of your life it takes unless your child is so young he still gapes in wonder every time you open the broom closet. I suppose it wouldn't have been too bad if any of the machines had been working. But they weren't. Which kind of blows the whole "factory" aspect of the thing. There was a sign stating that the action of some machines had been slowed down for demonstration purposes. Perhaps some maintenance worker just took this concept to its logical extreme. In any case, it didn't make for much in the way of exciting demonstration.

"Pigeon Recipes."

So go to LEGOLAND. Look at the tiny-scale LEGO reproductions of American cities and think about how long they took to build and who the hell applied for the job and what they put down as experience on the application and how they're probably making more money than you are. Enjoy another order of fries. (Hey, they're apples; they're good for you.) Just don't visit any of the LEGO shops less than an hour before closing time, because at that point they contain all the surging, desperate energy of Cuba moments after it nationalized, and none of its charm.

But do stop by Brick Brothers. And tell Imeleta I say Hi. ~

—Deborah Markus