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Dream Island: Both Open For Business and 'Coming Soon'

By Anna Belokur

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Creator Amiran Mutsoev cites Moscow's GUM shopping center and Stalin-era architecture - not Disney - as the inspiration behind the park's castles. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

During his 1959 visit to the United States, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was famously denied a visit to Disneyland. Upon returning home, he vowed that the Soviet Union would have its own theme park, and set about designing an elaborate fantasy kingdom large enough to compete with Disneyland. The plan was abandoned after Khrushchev's ouster, and Russia's quest for a large-scale theme park wouldn't be realized for another 60 years, until "Dream Island'' opened this month in Moscow. The Moscow Times' Anna Belokur spent an afternoon determining whether the park, whose creation budget rivals that of Dubai's Burj Khalifa skyscraper, has lived up to Khrushchev's dreams.

In both Russian and foreign media, comparisons between Dream Island and Disneyland have been constant. Dream Island itself can't seem to make up its mind about whether Disneyland is the idol or the enemy, at times drawing directly on its American counterpart while at others

declaring itself to be the sole product of Russian innovation with no need for foreign influences. Russian characters (including the Snow Queen and a Soviet-sourced Mowgli) coexist alongside expat Smurfs and Ninja Turtles. Both parks pump vanilla-scented air throughout the premises, but you'd never find so much horseradish and dill in a Disney restaurant. When asked about the Disney-like castles that grace the park's facade and interior, creator Amiran Mutsoev claims that the architecture was inspired by iconic Moscow buildings like the GUM and TSUM shopping centers and the gothic towers of the Stalin era. In short, Dream Island has made real Khrushchev's desire to create a Russian Disneyland - without actually invoking the name of Walt Disney.

Children's responses to the park were seemingly enthusiastic. A small girl pointed to a dinosaur and screamed "It's real!" while another gave a shy hug to a Smurf. Parents, however, were a bit harder to please. After her seat failed to deploy upwards on a ride, an irate mother was allowed to bypass the long line for a second turn, while a skeptical father tested the structural integrity of one of the haunted house's gargoyles by rapping it firmly on the head. Many, however, seemed to take the park's flaws in stride. A father and son duo who were exploring the Snow Queen's (mostly-empty) palace treated the illogical design as entertainment in itself ("Is there anything down there?" "Nope, just another locked door.")

At this stage, it's fair to say that the park is still a work in progress, and rules of conduct have yet to be firmly enforced. Children lounge on roped-off bits of grass, teenagers budge forward in line, and grandmothers accidentally enter mislabeled bathrooms. Extension cords are exposed, animatronic dinosaurs bear marks of recent assembly, elaborate corridors lead to dead ends, and large expanses of space lie empty. Several of the main rides and attractions remain under construction, although it's not immediately clear to what extent. Despite the many flaws, however, there is something endearing about the whole setup. And hey, a little extra horseradish never killed anyone.

If you — or more to the point, your children — are looking for cutting-edge rides, this isn't the place for you. If you're looking for beloved characters brought to life, this isn't the place for you. But if you don't mind taking things as they come (or don't come), and you're willing to wander down a few dead ends, Dream Island does deliver some theme park magic with a uniquely Russian feel.

It might, however, be best to wait a few months.

To learn more, visit the park's official site here. The park operates from 12:00-22:00 on weekdays and from 10:00-22:00 on weekends. Tickets start at roughly $26, with various Fast Pass options available.

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