



Why Boomers Need to Ride Roller Coasters

Feeling down? They'll take you to new heights, and then some!

By [John Stark](#) July 28, 2013

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The summer of 1984 marked the 100th anniversary of the roller coaster, which made its debut in 1884 at New York's Coney Island. I had just been hired at People magazine a few months before the centennial so I asked my editor if I could do a story about it. "I'd like to find the 10 best coasters in America."

"Call our travel department and book your flights," she told me. "Take your time. Come back when you're ready."

Three weeks later, my odyssey completed, I staggered back to New York. I visited two-dozen theme parks, from Massachusetts to California. I rode every roller coaster I could locate — several times. (*You can catch [Great Old Amusement Parks on PBS tonight, July 30. Check local listings for times.](#)*)

I crowned the [Texas Cyclone at AstroWorld](#) in Houston the nation's scariest. Built in 1976, this wooden, figure-eight coaster — a mirror image of the Coney Island Cyclone — is no more. Nor is Astroworld, which closed in 2005. The [Texas Cyclone was demolished](#) on March 9, 2006, between the hours of 7 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. It's a date and time that roller coaster aficionados will forever mourn.

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I was 35 when I wrote my roller coaster article, a few decades before "low testosterone" entered my vocabulary. I was not a roller coaster buff before the

assignment, but I came back one. There was no better three-minute thrill. After my story appeared, I closed the chapter on roller coasters. I could never find anyone who would go on them with me. Who wants to visit an amusement park alone? Then time moved on, almost as fast as a roller coaster. Age brought maturity and its sidekick, caution.

Could I do that roller coaster story again? I wondered at my age. I had not been on one in almost 30 years.

We're Not the Same Anymore

The world of roller coasters has changed since 1984. Most new ones are made of steel instead of wood. Called "hypercoasters," they're far more intense: They're higher, the first drops steeper, some do loops and most have doubled their speeds to more than 70 mph.

I've changed too. When I was younger I'd do anything for a story, like stunt flying in an open cockpit biplane over the Golden Gate Bridge. Still, I made a vow that before summer was over I was going to ride a roller coaster again. I had no excuse not to. I live close to a state-of-the-art amusement park called [Valleyfair](#), just south of Minneapolis in Shakopee, Minn. Its many attractions include two wood and two steel coasters.

"Don't do it," my friend, Carrie, warned me when I told her of my intentions. "I used to love roller coasters. I went to Valleyfair with my kids recently and had to come home after the first ride I was so sick. Our equilibriums change with age."

"No, no, and no," were the answers I got from friends who I asked to go with me. Their claims of being too old only made me more determined to prove I wasn't over the hill. I asked my friends' grandkids if they'd like to come with me, thinking they'd jump at the free invitation. But no, summer was half over. "Been there, done that," was the look on their faces.

Two's Company, Three's Even Better

In the end, my friend Chuck decided to join me. He reasoned I might get arrested for

weirdness if I went unaccompanied. Better yet, he said he'd bring his partner, James, who's too young to be a boomer and who likes adventurous activities. "You do know a woman in Texas was just killed on a coaster," Chuck said to me. I did know that. But worldwide, only two people die a year while riding them and it's usually not from equipment failure.

We couldn't have picked a better evening to go. There were no long lines to get on the rides because it was unseasonably cool. I insisted we head straight to the Wild Thing, Valleyfair's celebrated hypercoaster. I needed my answer right away: Could my 64-year-old body handle it? And even if it could, would I still find it a fun experience? Or had I moved on?

Here We Go, Ready or Not

The train pulled into the platform, the gates opened, and we took our seats in the rear car. Coaster lovers prefer either the front seat, which heightens one's sense of vertigo, or the backseat, which feels like you're at the tail end of a whip. Suddenly the lap bars clicked in place; I remembered that ominous sound from years ago. A few minutes later a loud buzzer rang, and the cars jerked forward. There was no getting off now. I felt the clickety clack of the lift chain grab hold and begin to pull us higher and higher.

OK, I was starting to freak. This coaster's first drop — 200 feet — is twice as high as any I'd been on. I'd developed over the years a fear of heights that made driving over bridges difficult. I closed my eyes until I felt the cars crest at the top of the hill. Then I opened them. The view was spectacular but dizzying. In a few seconds the first car pulled us over the top and into a nearly straight, 60-degree plunge. I felt like I was going over Niagara Falls, as per roller coaster science: potential energy transferring to kinetic.

My stomach was immediately in my throat. But roller coaster memory took over. I opened my mouth and took a deep breath as the train descended. By the time we reached bottom and began racing up the track to the next hill, my stomach felt fine. Fear-induced adrenalin coursed through my veins, making me feel alive and stimulated. As I screamed for joy, I began to laugh.

I had gone from being a nervous chicken to an empowered eagle — soaring, banking, diving, both of my arms in the air.

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Over and Out

The mile-long ride was over in no time. It was smooth going all the way, unlike the rickety wood coasters of my younger days. The train pulled into the platform and came to a stop. The lap bars snapped up.

I couldn't wait to go again.

Not so Chuck. He decided he'd rather get coffee. But James wasn't done yet either. We moved to the front car at his insistence for two more rides. He was right, with no one in front of us it was like flying. The most unnerving part was when we got to the top of the first hill. We couldn't see the tracks as we headed downward.

I sampled three other roller coasters at Valleyfair. I particularly enjoyed the wooden High Roller with its camelback hills. It was like flying over clouds on a winged horse.

I had my answer by the time I left the park: I loved roller coasters when I was young and I still do. Age had, however, brought a new perspective to the experience.

"Hey, look at me!" was the message I was sending to all the kids and young lovers as I climbed aboard the trains. I'm still here for the ride.



By [John Stark](#)

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