Walt Disney World News

Himalayan Village an Architectural Wonder That Welcomes Expedition Everest Adventurers

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Like mountain homes of the Himalayas, the rustic rammed-earth and stacked-stone buildings of the mythical village of Serka Zong sag and buckle under the weight of time. But time cannot erase the beauty of the structures' intricately carved window frames nor the significance of the symbolic earth-based colors layered upon walls to protect against perceived dark forces.

Situated on the Florida flatlands at Disney's Animal Kingdom, the mountain village anchoring the Expedition Everest attraction welcomes Walt Disney World guests with such architectural authenticity that those who've been to Nepal or Tibet will think they've returned to those Himalayan lands.

"One of our park ambassadors from Kathmandu was moved to tears because it took her right back to her grandmother's place," said Stefan Hellwig, senior concept designer for Expedition Everest and the village that surrounds the attraction.

With Expedition Everest, Disney Imagineers have gone to greater lengths than ever before to create an attraction rich in storytelling, authenticity and detail. The design, architecture, painting, materials and props have all been carefully and specifically chosen to create a unique environment that will immerse Disney guests in a setting unlike any they've experienced.

Stacked stones and rammed-earth blocks drizzled with "slurry," a plaster-like mud mix, rise from the rugged landscape, forming structures which are enhanced by ornamental window carvings of animal, floral and other traditional motifs. A traditional three-tiered temple known as a mandir boasts a crowning finial of hammered copper. And carved images of the mysterious fur-covered yeti — a mammoth, ape-like creature believed to guard the sacred mountain — materialize around every corner.

Hellwig and Joe Rohde, executive designer at Walt Disney Imagineering and lead designer of the park, traveled to Nepal to research the region's architecture and culture before completing the concept for Serka Zong, a cluster of adjoining buildings that sets the scene for a rousing mountain journey aboard a runaway train on Expedition Everest. The village includes Norbu and Bob's Himalayan Escapes booking office, Tashi's General Store and Bar, an old tea warehouse turned yeti museum, the elaborate wood and copper mandir, local homes and a towering monastery.

"It's a very convincing look at a Himalayan environment," said Rohde, whose photos of the region and its people hang in the village's "museum," seen by guests on their way to boarding the thrill ride. "The ritualized architecture encourages great harmony, and colors are used symbolically almost as if they had magical properties to protect you."

Just as the Chinese practice of arranging furniture based on feng shui is meant to create balance in the home, the earth-based red-black-white paint combinations of the Himalayas are ladled onto buildings for balance and protection, Rohde said. The yellow candle-drip effect over one village home signifies the residence of an old, well-established family, and firewood stacked on the roof indicates affluence.

The architectural style and cultural references of the village are a hybrid of Tibetan, Nepalese and other design traditions found throughout the Himalayas. Each building was reproduced with great care and attention to detail so

that structures appear to range in age from 50 to 300 years old. Imagineers sculpted concrete to re-create the look of the rammed-earth block (a technique where natives pound moistened earth with a mallet to create an adobe-like material) and stacked-stone buildings typically built to withstand rough Himalayan weather. Workers then sandblasted and physically distressed the structures with chainsaws, hammers, blowtorches and other tools to create uneven corners and sagging walls. Finally, artisans applied paints and stains to further the illusion of structural aging.

“We created an environment that immerses guests deep into the story of Expedition Everest so they feel transported to a different place and adventure,” said Rohde.

Wood — a scarce and highly valued commodity in the Himalayan region — is typically used only for architectural ornamentation during construction, so Imagineers commissioned Nepalese and Balinese craftsmen to carve more than 1,000 sal wood (a hardwood grown in the region) and teak pieces placed in and upon every village building. Pieces like window frames were thoroughly “tortured,” Rohde said, with corners broken and the frames tweaked into an almost-trapezoid shape “as if the weight of the sagging, buckling building had pushed it down.”

The three-story mandir, a pagoda-type building, was hand carved with 1,000 yeti images in Nepal, then shipped, aged and re-assembled at the Serka Zong site. A tall, brick-red block building with heavy wood doors and protective animal carvings represents a monastery similar to one Rohde and Hellwig visited in Nepal. A village entrance wall built of mani stones carved with auspicious symbols like the wheel of life, an endless knot and other representations portends good luck. Carved totems representing the Tibetan phurba — a triple-sided ritual stake or dagger — are driven into the ground to contain threatening elements.

“It’s a world in which everything has meaning,” Rohde says. “There’s a lot to be read into the environment, including the idea that this world is full of forces that have to be held in check, and our villagers are trying to keep them away.”

Other Himalayan traditions are represented by piles of firewood that rest on village roofs to avoid pilferage, bronze bells that dangle from buildings, and carvings of yaks, goats and horses represented on door knockers, masks and other building adornments. Rows of worn but colorful prayer flags with symbols like the snow lion and wind horse “add motion and visual delight to the environment,” Rohde said. The many yeti shrines and totems show how the creature is depicted differently based on each culture’s version of the mythology.

At least 8,000 props purchased mostly from Nepal add a lived-in look to the village and other areas of the Expedition Everest attraction. The authentic artifacts include a Mani Rimdu dance costume typically worn by a monk during a two-week festival, a 3-D yeti stamp from Bhutan, yeti dolls, a Nepalese coke bottle, antique Chinese ceramics and waterproof barrels designed for mountain treks.

Expedition Everest Project Manager Mike Lentz concludes, “When they see the village, our guests are going to say, ‘I’m not in Central Florida any longer.'”

About Expedition Everest

Expedition Everest, towering at nearly 200 feet high and occupying a 6.2-acre site, is located in the Asia section of the theme park. It is one of 18 mountain attractions created by Walt Disney Imagineering at Disney theme parks worldwide. Expedition Everest has a height restriction of 44 inches. Guests can reserve access to Expedition Everest with FastPass+ in advance of their visit to Walt Disney World Resort using MyDisneyExperience.com a component of MyMagic+.

About Disney’s Animal Kingdom

Disney’s Animal Kingdom is a 403-acre theme park where the exciting worlds of wild and whimsical creatures come

to life on an authentic African safari, in an Asian rain forest, on a trip back in time to the age of the dinosaurs and in other attractions and shows brimming with stories about animals and encounters with favorite Disney characters.

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