

Landscape Architects Create Authentic Scenery to Heighten Storyline at Expedition Everest At Walt Disney World Resort

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — From tropical jungles and verdant forests to barren rock and frozen tundra, the mighty Himalayas reveal dramatic variations in climate and landscape. Disney Imagineers were challenged to re-create such a scene when designing Expedition Everest, the new mountain thrill attraction at Disney's Animal Kingdom theme park at Walt Disney World Resort.

The Imagineering team strived to create a believable place that enhanced the attraction's storyline about preserving nature and sacred lands, said Becky Bishop, landscape architect and Walt Disney Imagineering area development director.

"We built a landscape consistent with what trekkers might actually encounter on a pilgrimage to the botanically rich Everest region," she said. "It is natural looking and unkempt, like it has always been there."

The landscape was created specifically to emulate the lowlands surrounding Mount Everest. More than 900 bamboo plants, 10 species of trees and 110 species of shrubs were planted over areas of the 6.2-acre terrain. Disney landscape architects carefully selected plant varieties that would thrive in the Florida climate while capturing the look and feel of Asia.

From the Asia part of Disney's Animal Kingdom, rows of giant bamboos and white eucalyptus hug the pathway leading trekkers from a lush, tropical peninsula to Serka Zong, a mythical village at the base of the majestic mountain. As trekkers hike through the village toward the railway that will carry them into the mountain, the vegetation and climate conditions shift from dense tree lines to an arid landscape. Scruffy bushes, bottlebrush, camphor trees and yucca plants replicate the rugged terrain found at the foothills of the Himalayas.

"The environment is hard to duplicate, so we took the usual species and presented them in an unusual way — that would almost guarantee we would get the look we wanted," Bishop said. "For instance, we planted Hollywood juniper and then really chopped it up to look like the yaks had chewed on it."

When Bishop began researching the Himalayan landscape in 2002, she was struck by the horticultural contrasts of the region.

"We incorporated characteristics from Bhutan, Mustang and Kathmandu into the landscape design to capture its true diversity," Bishop said.

For two years, the team searched for unusually shaped trees and shrubs to enhance the rich architecture and authenticity of the village. And they found some treasures: a mulberry tree that had aged with a piece of wrought iron woven into its trunk, a Florida camphor tree that had grown wild with a palm tree soaring between its limbs, and a 100-year-old cactus. Additionally, a half-dozen big gnarled “hero” trees are prominently displayed, beckoning guests to gawk at the hideous shapes and rutted textures. In this region, tree limbs were harvested for fuel and for ornamentation on buildings, leaving only naked tree trunks in place.

Imagineers hunted for trees and bushes with shapes that snugly fit into corners of the buildings for a natural look like they had grown wild.

A variety of textured plants and bushes were used to distinguish shady wet regions from dryer conditions. A grassy ground cover fills a bamboo-filled courtyard, giving the impression that someone had once carefully tended the area. Near the mandir — an ornate shrine to the yeti — it feels grotto-like with greener, water-loving grasses and plantings situated around a dry streambed.

As guests board the runaway train destined for Mount Everest, they may notice the California sherrill (chaparral) plantings and overgrown remnants of an abandoned tea plantation that once sprawled through the valley.

To emphasize the forced perspective technique, Imagineers planted tall bamboo, pines and swaying reeds to blur the horizon of the mountain range — making it appear more distant. When the train plummets down the mountainside, the tracks seem to disappear into a wilderness filled with pine trees and moss-covered oaks, leaving onlookers wondering about the outcome of the journey.