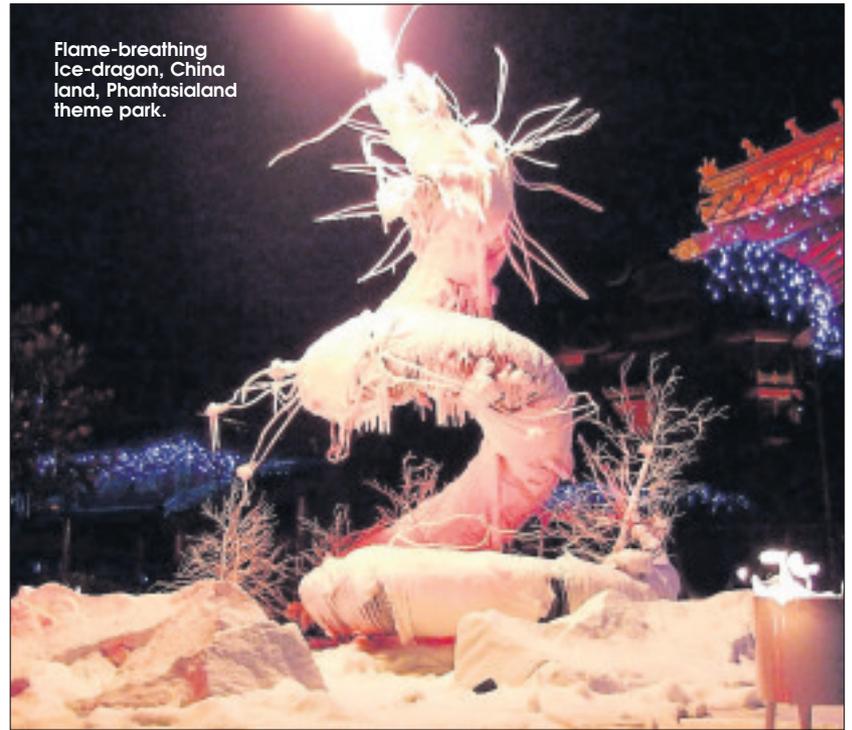


The view down main street of Alt Berlin, in Phantasialand.



Flame-breathing Ice-dragon, China land, Phantasialand theme park.

GERMANY is the land of fairytale winters, where the snow silently blankets the ground and the ice on the pine-branches twinkles in the moonlight. At least that is the theory; but sadly the weather does not always cooperate with the fantasy. When little Arthur and I arrived in Phantasialand, near Cologne, we found the remains of an earlier snowfall lying in large heaps of compacted slush, while rain fell steadily from a cold, grey sky. But you know what? It didn't matter. The artists in this Rhineland theme park were determined to recreate winter's magic, whatever the weather. Christmas carols floated from every loudspeaker, and red ribbons, golden balls and glittering lights garlanded the trees. Log fires burned in braziers along the pathways, woodsmoke drifted through the air, and daredevil kids whirled across the artificial ice-rink on madly flashing skates. It all looked wonderful.

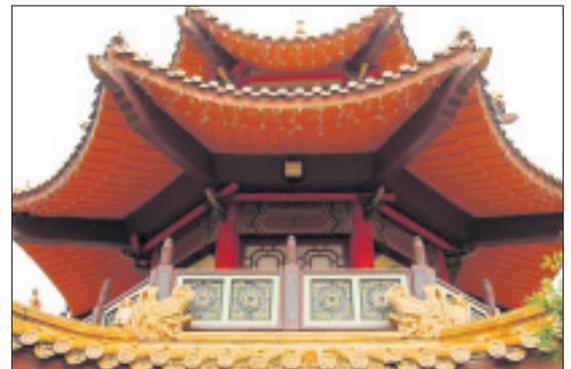
Phantasialand is one of the oldest German theme parks, originally opening as a younger children's park in 1967. There is still plenty for the youngest visitors to do, but now it caters for all ages with scary grown up rides like inverted roller coasters and a haunted castle bungee drop. The beautiful landscaping and meticulous attention to quality put it in the same class as Disney, although as a privately-owned park, it has a more individualistic, more European feel than Disney. It is divided into themed sections – Old Berlin, Mystery, Fantasy, Mexico, Wild West, Africa and China – each with their own landscaping, rides and restaurants. Arthur and I began with a visit to St. Nicholas and his handsome Elf, (both of them grandly outfitted in purple, green, silver and gold) who were hanging out in their Victorian-style "office" in Wild West Town.

St. Nicholas is the original Santa, and although the Wild West is perhaps not his spiritual home, the office had been transformed into a convincing grotto with the Christmas trees and festive dolls and toys, and the screams from

In a winter wonderland



Arthur in his bunk bed shaped like a sampan (chinese boat) at Ling Bao hotel, and top right, the front of the hotel.



Lego characters on display in the Lego shop in Cologne.

Jenny Woolf and her son Arthur enjoy a magical trip to Phantasialand in Cologne, Germany

the gigantic Colorado mine-train coaster nearby were effectively drowned by "Jingle Bells."

After much head-scratching over the park map – only available in German – we headed next for the Northwest of the property, to a big indoor play area called Wuze Town. This colourful and creative space is supposed to be inhabited by strange gnome-like creatures. It offers junior versions of the big rides, as well as enormous soft-play areas, and computers featuring baby versions of electronic games. I sneaked a go on the vertiginous Imax fantasy "Race for Atlantis" on the way there and found it well up to the standard of Disney's Star Tours. When the weather improved,

we moved on to Alt Berlin (Old Berlin), whose town square contains traditional fairground rides, including a double-decker carousel featuring every imaginable type of horse. There, Arthur bought a waffle as big as his own head and was enchanted as night fell and thousands of fairy lights in the bushes and trees began to glitter.

Evening was a good time to admire the Chinese section of the park, which features gorgeously tiled buildings with curly roofs, and, specially for winter, a romantic and stylised flame-blowing ice-dragon, lit with dainty lights like falling snow. This section of the park led through quiet oriental gardens directly to our hotel, the Ling Bao.

Since it was a theme-park hotel, I'd expected comical fibreglass figures, Sega games and chips with everything. True, Ling Bao had a great playground, with climbing frame and Wii, and a children's healthy breakfast buffet, but most guests were adults or teenagers. There's an ornamental swimming pool with a spouting dragon, a spa, sauna, and several good restaurants and

FACTFILE

- ☐ Jenny travelled to Germany with Germanwings, flying daily from London Stansted to Cologne/Bonn airport: www.germanwings.com
- ☐ Phantasialand's website is www.phantasialand.de
- ☐ Hotel Ling-Bao, Bergegeiststraße 31-41, 50321 Brühl, 0049 2232 3690410 hotel@phantasialand.de
- ☐ The trip was arranged with the help of the German tourist Board, www.germany-tourism.co.uk, consumer hotline: 020 7317 0908 Email: gnolon@d-z-t.com

bars, and even if you don't set foot in the theme-park, it's a perfect hotel for a family weekend.

However, it was surprisingly hard to find food for tots and I was in constant terror that energetic Arthur would wreak havoc amongst all the beautiful objects on display. Could I keep

him away from the life-sized sculptured warrior in the lobby? Would he knock over the potted orchids or fall into the carp-pond?

He adored his bunk bed, shaped like a sampan and enclosed in Willow-pattern style lattice-work, but in some ways I wondered if Matamba, Phantasialand's other themed hotel, might have been more relaxing, with its African background music, laid-back atmosphere and corridors lined with kid-sized jungle ropeways.

Still, Phantasialand really was an enchanted world. We spent two happy days there and were very sorry to leave. The weather was too bad to head for the nearby winter sports centre of Winterberg, where I'd spent many happy hours sledding in my youth, so it was lucky that

Cologne's attractions were beckoning. This pleasant, medium-sized city boasts an extraordinarily tall and pointy Gothic cathedral, a wonderful zoo, and even a chocolate museum giving away free chocolate. But these paled into insignificance beside the Lego Store in Hohestrasse. Here, you can play all day with masses of Lego, purchase the latest kits and accessories, even buy Lego socks and ice-cube makers.

The sound of cathedral bells could be heard faintly outside the shop. The rain continued falling, but still it didn't matter. Arthur was toiling away making Lego knights in armour, for even at five years old, he had absorbed the message that when you have grey, cold weather, fairytales are the way to go.