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Convention In Orlando Showcases Latest Rides, Technology At Amusement Parks

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ORLANDO, Fla. -- Gino De-Gol introduced last year what he thought was an amusement park innovation: An extreme ride that combines the low-tech thrill of a roller coaster with the high-tech enjoyment of a darkened simulator.

The trouble was the ride could only take several dozen people an hour. So this year, De-Gol and his associates came back with a tweaked version of the ride called the Robocoaster that can accommodate as many as 2,000 people an hour

Robocoaster made its debut this month, along with almost 300 other products, at the annual convention of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, a meeting that takes the business of fun seriously.

The ride, costing \$8 million to \$10 million, begins on a roller coaster track and moves into a theater where the 22-foot-tall, flexible robotic arm, bolted to the ground, lifts up passengers in the air and swings them around 360 degrees.

"It's like a simulator ride on a roller coaster," said De-Gol, managing director of Robocoaster. "It heightens the sensation enormously."

The annual trade show is the showcase for new rides, technologies, food products and concessions for the world's \$20 billion theme and amusement park industry. It is a place where adults walk around wearing Spider-Man face paint, colored-fountains dance to a Christina Aguilera song and dozens of rides twirl, beep and spin in an indoor exhibit hall that resembles a state fair's midway.

Most of this year's new offerings at the trade show were improvements on previous ideas in an industry that has suffered attendance declines in recent years. There were few innovative new products, although some new rides making their debut, like a 75-foot-tall launch coaster from Interactive Rides, were sure to elicit gasps for its 50-mile-per-hour launch and 70-degree drop.

"You're looking at very solid, steady products, but what we're seeing is kind of a new twist on each one of those things," said Beth Robertson, vice president of communications for IAAPA.

Many of the most popular new products were food items.

Baha Sidani grabbed a tiny cup of shaved ice from the vendor at a concession booth in the exhibit hall but instead of letting the vendor top it with flavored syrup, Sidani turned around to a kiosk and squirted on the lemon-lime flavor himself.

"This is neat," said Sidani, pier operations manager at the Daytona Beach Pier, as he nodded to the kiosk with five spigots offering flavors lemon-lime, strawberry fresh, sour grape, blue raspberry and wild cherry.

Carl Rupp, owner of Salt Lake City-based Snowie, which makes the shaved ice products, said people liked the interactivity of the snack.

"They like to do it themselves," he said

But Sidani, who considered purchasing the shaved-ice kiosk for the pier noted the risk of allowing customers to take as much as they want. "If you attract a lot of kids, this is suicide. You might as well pour it in the ocean," he said.

Mini Melts ice cream pellets were another popular food product making a convention debut. The ice cream is "flash-frozen" by liquid nitrogen into tiny popcorn-size pieces and must be stored at 40 degrees Fahrenheit below zero. Mini Melts already are sold at Wet 'n Wild in Orlando, the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium and Lake Compounce in Bristol, Conn.

Precision Dynamics Corp. introduced a wristband upon which money can be added for purchases of souvenirs, food or rides using radio frequency identification technology.

California-based SafeTzone expanded on a child locating system it introduced several years ago for parks. The original system used a wristwatch-like device that emitted a radio frequency to keep track of a child. The improved system also allows money to be put electronically on the wristwatch-device for cashless purchases. SafeTzone also added to the system personal digital assistants that can be rented at parks so patrons can get information electronically about showtimes, bathroom locations and other park information. The PDAs also keep track of family members who are wearing the wristwatch devices.

"With PDAs, instead of going to get information, now we deliver information to the guest," said Timothy Giralдин, the company's CEO and chairman.

Giralдин said the company had signed a nonbinding memorandum of understanding to have the system installed at Universal Orlando's two theme parks. But Gerard Brick, director of park operations at Lake Compounce, said he thought the PDAs would be too cumbersome at most amusement parks.

"People will drop them off rides," Brick said.

One of the most popular new exhibits had a decidedly quirky flavor - drivable, racing bathtubs. The \$4,000 battery-powered plastic bathtubs, with a shower head protruding upward and pedals located behind the steering wheel, were popular with small, family entertainment parks. Their New Zealand-based makers, Evento Co., previously sold battery-powered racing toilets for parks.

"Some people think we have a bathroom fetish," said Diana Kirkland, an Evento spokeswoman. "But it's good, clean fun."

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