

Boardwalk THE GIANT DIPPER AT 85 55min 6 11-09

# Boardwalk's famous wooden coaster still delivering thrills

By Roger Sideman  
*Santa Cruz Sentinel*

You can label Santa Cruz a surf town, a university town or a liberal town. But to much of the outside world, Santa Cruz is simply the place with the roller coaster.

The Giant Dipper, the crown jewel of the Beach Boardwalk, has been ridden

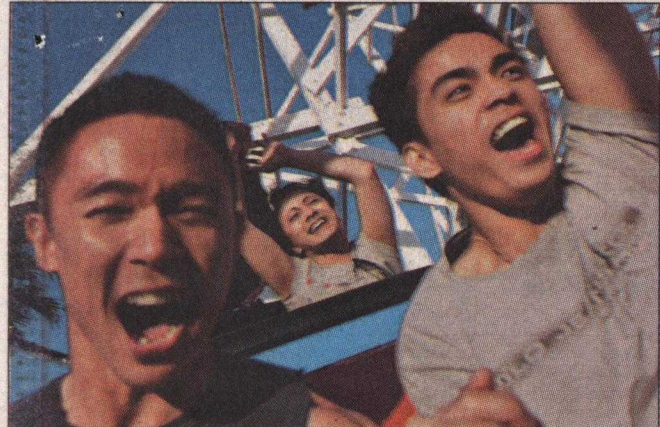
by generations of Californians on hot summer days, and it's perhaps the only spot in Santa Cruz where it's not uncommon to hear several foreign languages spoken on a given day.

More than just a draw for tourists, the Dipper is a connoisseur's roller coaster, its famous white-and-red track

still powered by the same electric motor that was running the day it debuted in the era of bootleggers, Babe Ruth and Charlie Chaplin.

The most twisted, hair-raising and scream-inducing landmark in Santa Cruz turns 85 years old this year,

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The Giant Dipper roller coaster is one of the most popular attractions at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.

## DIPPER | Old-school thrills

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an anniversary that will be commemorated with a fireworks show Saturday night.

Inside the Giant Dipper's subterranean wheel room, the motor powers the ride with only half the horsepower of a Volkswagen Beetle, and the thick leather belt connecting it to the coaster is state-of-the-art 1920s technology, still going strong.

It's plenty sufficient, because the Dipper needs power only to lift the trains up the first hill. As is the case with all true roller coasters, gravity does the rest.

The Giant Dipper isn't the fastest coaster around or the scariest. It doesn't flip its riders upside down or spin them in corkscrew patterns like its modern, steel counterparts. But roller coaster lovers wax romantic when talking about the Dipper's wooden structure and the clickety-clack sound it makes as the cars climb up the first 70-foot hill. For true coaster fans, the Giant Dipper will always be one of the best.

"In a world with so many fancy thrills where faster and bigger seems best, it is good that the Giant Dipper still provides a wholesome, old-school thrill," said 31-year-old Ramona Rubin.

In 2002, the Giant Dipper celebrated its 50 millionth rider, a milestone that's something of a misnomer, considering how many people have ridden it more than once.

Look at Gerry Watt, 52, of Sacramento, who has been riding the Dipper for 40 years.

"It's easily one of the best roller coaster rides anywhere on the planet," said Watt, who belongs to American Coaster Enthusiasts, an international group with more than 5,000 members. "There's a magic moment anytime I get to ride up it at sunset or at night with the lights ablaze beneath me on the Board-

walk and the breezes coming off the ocean."

Besides Watt, if anyone's qualified to speak with authority about the Giant Dipper, it's Tom Tutting, who plans to ride it this summer on his 85th birthday. The Santa Cruz resident first rode the Dipper around the beginning of World War II and remembers the mandatory nighttime blackouts when the coaster's flashing lights were shut off during operation in fear it would be an easy target for enemy planes.

Tutting rode it every day between 1952 and 1969 while working as general manager of the Santa Cruz Seaside Co., which runs the Boardwalk — a nice job perk.

"It's still a thrill when it drops you into the tunnel and pulls you up the first hill," said Tutting, who has no plans to quit after his birthday. "I still have a few years to go yet."

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— GERRY WATT,  
ROLLER COASTER ENTHUSIAST

The Giant Dipper debuted on May 17, 1924, instantly becoming a thrill-seeker's must-do and a Santa Cruz icon. The fare: 15 cents. A ride now costs \$4.50.

The oldest operating roller coaster on the West Coast, it belongs to an increasingly rare group of wood-track coasters.

"It's a working antique — like a Model T Ford," said Carl Henn, the Boardwalk's director of maintenance and development.

Santa Cruz resident Arthur Loeff built it, wanting riders to experience a "combination earthquake, balloon ascension and aeroplane drop."

It was constructed in just 47 days at a cost of \$50,000. An early firsthand account was published in the

Sentinel in 1924: "Believe us or not, there were about three minutes of more thrills packed under our epidermis than we got out of the San Francisco earthquake."

Loeff's love of amusement rides was hereditary. In 1911, four years after the Boardwalk opened, Loeff's father, Charles, delivered the popular merry-go-round with hand-carved horses. Both the Giant Dipper and the antique carousel were designated National Historic Landmarks by the National Park Service in 1987.

The Giant Dipper has starred in many movies, including "The Lost Boys," "The Sting II," "Dangerous Minds" and "Dirty Harry: Sudden Impact."

In real life, the Giant Dipper has never had a serious incident due to mechanical or structural failure. Boardwalk workers walk and inspect the Dipper's tracks every hour while it is operating. Four full-time Boardwalk mechanics check the ride each day and replace portions of the structure and track annually. None of the wood beams are original.

Still, there are mishaps.

The Dipper's jolts and G-forces are so brutal they once caused a man's glass eye to pop out of its socket, said Henn, park maintenance director. He and other ride operators recall the many occasions when they have had to retrieve dentures from underneath the coaster.

Charles Canfield, president of the Seaside Co., confirms this theory: the back car gives the wildest ride.

As a teenager, Canfield was a Giant Dipper ride operator. At 69, he still rides it and still insists that fellow passengers raise their arms for the first stomach-clenching drop. The coaster is something of a fountain of youth, he said.

"Everyone gets older and changes," he said, "but the screams and the yells, the kids and the excitement, are always the same."



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Fun-seekers shoot down one of the hills — with hands raised — on the Giant Dipper roller coaster at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. The popular roller coaster made its debut May 17, 1924.