

The Cave Train's maw yawns wide once again

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Boardwalk
✓ **SANTA CRUZ** — Slow as molasses and cornier than Iowa, the Cave Train has long been the butt of Beach Boardwalk jokes, a thrill ride without thrills.

But the poor old cave got its day in the sun Friday during a gala re-opening, complete with cave cake and visitors pounding each other with souvenir inflatable clubs.

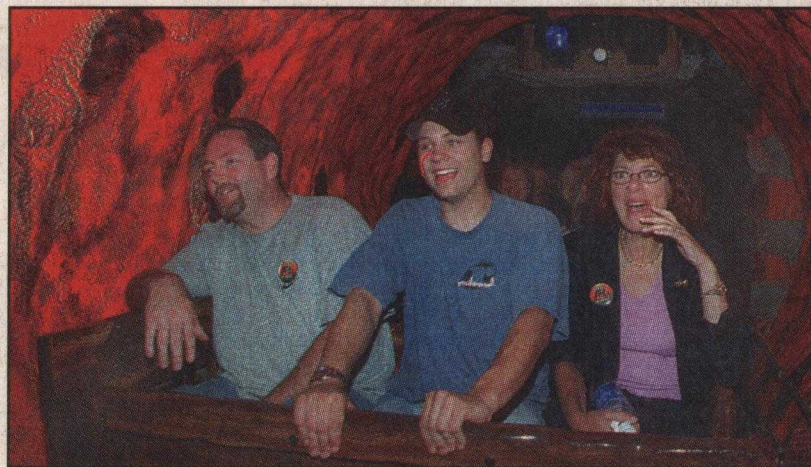
The beefed-up ride has endured a few humiliations since opening in

1961. Mean people laughed at it. Some regarded it as a tunnel of love without privacy, 30 fake Neanderthals looking on.

Mother Nature laughed, too. The Loma Prieta quake damaged it nearly 11 years ago. Later, El Niño flooded it out.

Three years ago it closed during Boardwalk renovations. After all the indignities, it deserved a makeover.

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

In the past, the Cave Train ride never got much respect, but it earned a place in the hearts of Boardwalk regulars.

Cave Train

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More than 200 invited guests lined up Friday for the five-minute-ride spiffed up with a \$1 million upgrade. Changes include smoke-pumping volcanoes, mist, more critters and better sound effects.

Santa Cruzans have an strange, protective love for the cave train, which is near the Sea Dragons and the Kiddie Speed Boats. They protested when the Boardwalk put the attraction on ice three years ago.

Many worried the Cave Train would be torn out and replaced with some slick new thrill ride.

"I think the Cave Train symbolizes what's best about the Boardwalk," Boardwalk spokeswoman Ann Parker said during the re-opening ceremonies. She said the Cave Train is uniquely Santa Cruz. "You're not going to see this ride anywhere else."

During a trial run, the train had difficulty negotiating one curve, but the glitch was fixed. Just to be on the safe side, Friday's first load of riders were Boardwalk staff members, many wearing fake fur togas.

Anticipation tinged with anxiety ran through the crowd. "Did you hear they're still fixing the brakes?" said one woman.

Then it was time for the guests to get on. The train entered a dark tunnel, and through a spinning chamber of lava. Softly thumping cave music started.

Then came the goofy cavemen. Riders agreed the music and effects were better than before, and that the vignettes had improved.

Cave people boogie stiffly to the sounds of a jazz band. A cave man nurses a martini, while another, apparently drunk, mumbles something unintelligible.

A huge bear looks like it's about to maul a cave dad from behind. A shocking pink dinosaur growls at the train while a cave boy threatens to clobber it with a rock.

"It was an itty bit scary because of the dinosaurs," 3½-year-old Ben Dorfman said after it was all over.

"I like the dancing cave people," said rider Melody Pahel.

Some things haven't changed. The train still moves at a glacial speed.

But this time there was a slight atmosphere of menace. Signs warned riders about a "sharkosaurus" lurking in the waters nearby.

The warning signs may be the scariest part of the ride. Not to worry. When the sharkosaurus finally shows up, he's more whimsical than scary, and he's quiet as a guppy.