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Marco Polo Park: The Short-Lived Local Theme Park

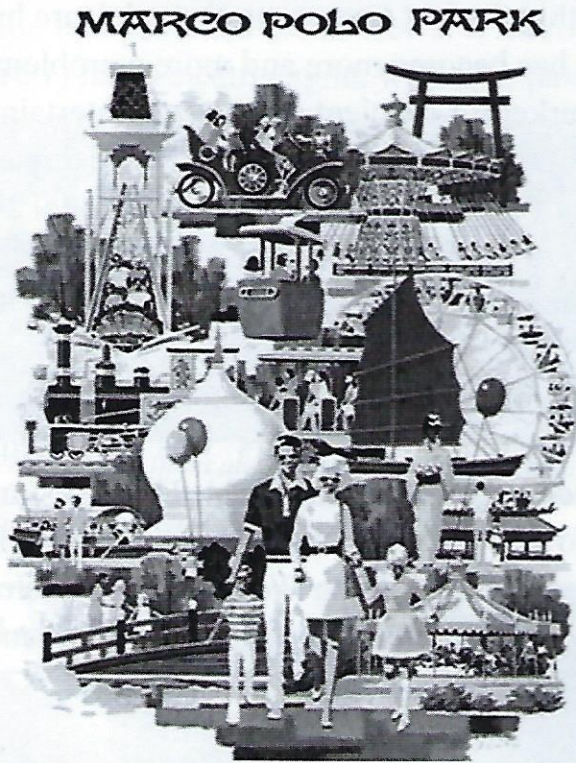
By Randy Jaye

During the 1970s, a fairly large theme park flourished on 5,000 acres that was located off of exit 278 of I-95 on the Flagler-Volusia County line in Bunnell called Marco Polo Park (Figure 1).

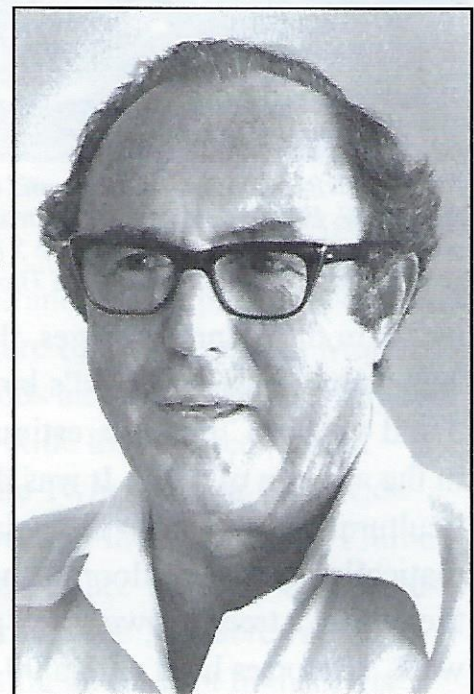
The park featured an Oriental theme based on the exotic travels of Marco Polo¹ from his native Venice through the lands of Turkey, India, China and Japan. The park featured various rides, puppet shows, movies, live music, internationally themed restaurants and other touristy entertainment. The park opened with sizeable ballyhoo including television commercials that promised “the greatest adventure of your life.” A brochure was available to visitors at the entrance that characterized the park’s imaginable mystic: “Like Marco Polo himself, you will be wonderstruck at the authentic Oriental splendor of your personal voyage of discovery as you journey into the exotic four worlds of the Far East — Turkey, India, China, Japan and beautiful Venice, your port of embarkation.” These promotions proved overblown and unsuccessful as the park was unprofitable and short lived.

The first phase of the park, the Japanese gardens, opened on December 28, 1970; the second phase, which opened in May 1972, included a petting zoo and the themed sections of Venice, Turkey, India, and China. The park temporarily closed in early 1975 after two suspicious fires caused severe damage. Later in 1975, the park reopened under the name “Passport to Fun World” with a similar world travel theme, but Marco Polo Park closed for good in 1976. While the park was open Old Dixie Highway’s name was changed to Marco Polo Boulevard in the park’s vicinity, but has since been changed back.

*Figure 2 – Photograph of O.L. “Jack” White
(source: Jack White [O.L. “Jack” White’s grandson]).*



*Figure 1 - A 1970s Marco Polo Park Poster
Highlighting the Family-Friendly and
Oriental Theme of the Park
(source: Florida-Backroads-Travel.com).*



The Vision and Planning of Marco Polo Park

In the late 1960s O.L. “Jack” White² (Figure 2) was president of the Daytona Regional Chamber of Commerce and later served as board of directors president for Marco Polo Park, Inc. White, along with 28 stockholders, began to plan for the development of a park with an adventure theme at an estimated cost of \$12 million. An executive report dated September 2, 1970,³ compiled for Marco Polo Park’s board of directors stated that “within the last two generations, leisure has ceased to be a problem of the affluent alone and has become more and more a problem of everyone...yet this very ambiguity creates a market for efficient supplies of entertainment such as never before been known.” It’s strange that the board considered leisure a problem. Nevertheless, this favorable prediction of Florida’s entertainment potential along with the new Disney World theme park steered investor interest in Marco Polo Park. These visionaries believed that travelers to Disney World on I-95 would likely stop at nearby Marco Polo Park to extend their vacations or satisfy their curiosities.

Theme park fever extended to Volusia County as well. Marco Polo Park investors were told that Roy Rogers⁴ was interested in building an amusement park near Daytona Beach called Western World. The investors brought the famous singer and actor to Florida to discuss investing in Marco Polo Park. Rogers turned down the offer, nor was he interested in building Western World. However, Rogers did propose lending his name to Marco Polo Park, but that idea never materialized either.

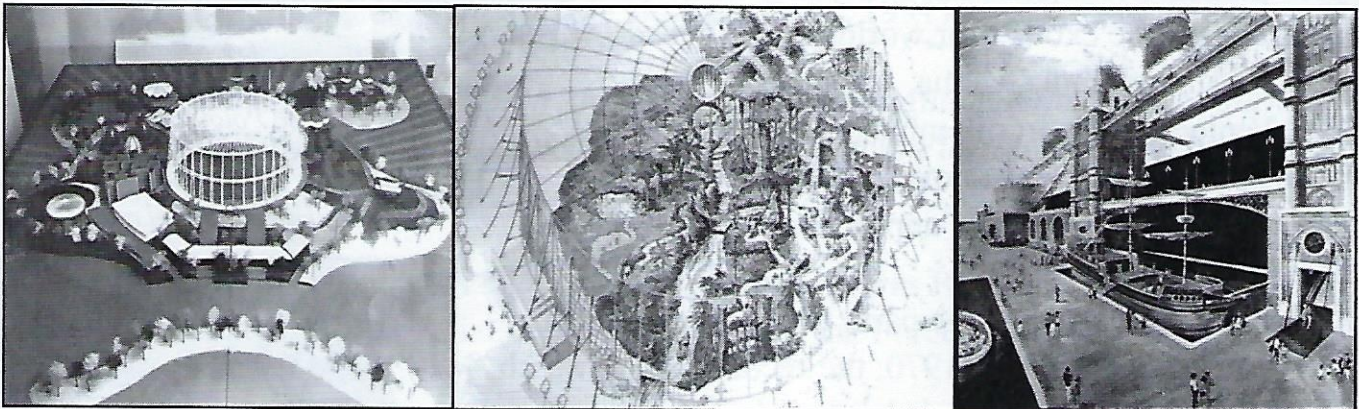


Figure 3 (left) – An original black and white photograph of the architectural model of the Climatron complex—circa 1967. Figure 4 (middle) – An artist’s conception of the Climatron with its various horticultural exhibits and waterways – circa 1967. Figure 5 (right) – An artist’s conception of a full-sized tall ship and luxury passenger liner exhibit (possibly the RMS Titanic) – circa 1967 (source: Flagler County Historical Society).

In the planning stages, the vision of the park had some lavish and expensive concepts, including the world’s largest conservatory complex called the Climatron (Figures 3 and 4). The Climatron, estimated to cost \$8 million to construct, was supposed to open in the autumn of 1968. It was designed to be a family recreation center with diverse horticultural exhibits from the polar regions to the tropics. Each exhibit would occupy a climatically controlled floor of the complex and would simulate the native environment of the region’s trees, flowers and plants. The circular complex was envisioned to have glass walls 12 stories high with a 90-foot waterfall and flowing waterways throughout.

Another exhibit idea, illustrated in an artist's conception drawing, included a life-sized facade of the *RMS Titanic*⁵ (Figure 5). However, the Climatron and its grandiose exhibits were never built, most likely due to their enormous construction and maintenance costs.

The Sections of Marco Polo Park

There were five sections to Marco Polo Park: Venice, Turkey, India, China, and Japan. A suspended gondola system called the Sky Ride (Figure 6) connected the park's sections and served as an overhead passenger ride that provided aerial views. A narrow gauge railroad called The Orient Express (Figure 7) had a steam engine with four pas-



Figure 6 (left) - Marco Polo Park 1970s postcard - Marco Polo leaving India aboard the Sky Ride to China. Figure 7 (middle) - Marco Polo Park 1970s postcard - The Oriental Express takes guests through all five countries visited by Marco Polo. Figure 8 (right) - Marco Polo Park 1970s postcard - Marco Polo greeting guests at entrance plaza (source: Author's personal collection).

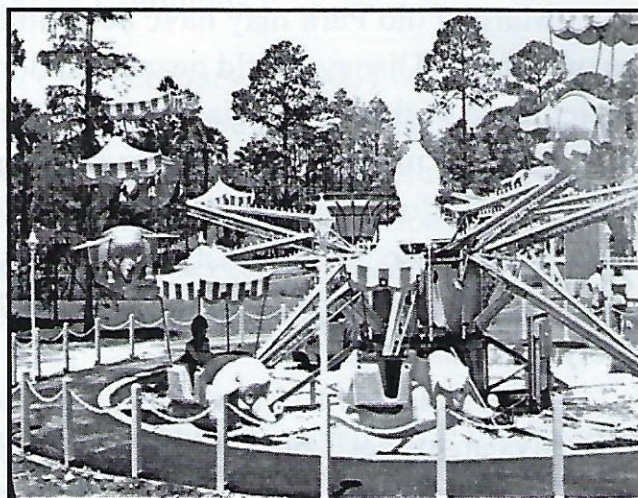
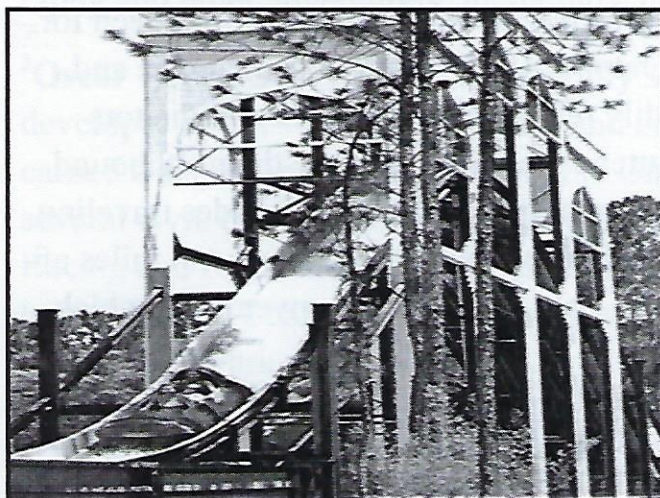


Figure 9 (left) - Marco Polo Park 1970s postcard - The exciting Bamboo Chute in the India section. Figure 10 (right) - Marco Polo Park 1970s postcard - The Flying Elephant Ride was a favorite with children.

senger cars that traveled the park's perimeter. The main entrance to the park was at the Venice section through a Venetian-style entrance arch (Figure 8). Small replica Model T cars on a guided track provided rides through Venice's woods and trails. The Turkey section included the Flying Chairs Ride, the Spinning Turban Ride that rotated at high speeds that generated considerable centrifugal force, and the Twin Bumper Cars Ride (one was for adults and the other for children). The India section included a Log Flume (Bamboo Chute) ride (Figure 9) and a Flying Elephant ride (Figure 10). The China section included a Spinning Tea Cup ride and a Chinese boat ride. The 500-acre Japan attraction was the most elaborate section in the park, containing an 82-foot high Ferris

Wheel with spinning gondolas (Figure 11), a lagoon, a replica of a Japanese fishing village, Japanese botanical gardens, and a mile-long waterway with several ornate Oriental bridges. Eighteen teakwood sampans⁶ were imported from Japan to transport patrons along the waterways, and entertainers from Japan performed at various shows. Visitors could dine at the two Japanese restaurants serving tempura-style food, and purchase Japanese and Oriental-themed items at the souvenir shops.

The Demise of Marco Polo Park

Several factors led to the closing of Marco Polo Park including inflation (especially rising gasoline prices), an economic recession, the location of the southbound exit off of I-95, Disney World competition, and two suspicious and devastating fires. In 1970 the U.S. suffered its worst inflationary year since the Korean War, and prices for food, services, and construction rose even higher in 1971. In October 1973, the Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) announced an oil embargo against the U.S. in response to U.S. military aid to Israel during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War (the Yom Kippur War). The embargo prompted gasoline shortages and skyrocketing prices, thereby restricting family vacations. The embargo also triggered an economic recession from late 1973 through early 1975. The combination of inflation and recession caused attendance at Marco Polo Park to decline.

Marco Polo Park may have been able to weather the recession had it not been for the opening of Disney World near Orlando in October 1971. The spectacular size and convenience of this world-class attraction steadily redirected many potential visitors away from the park. Another factor curtailing attendance was that only the northbound exit off I-95 afforded potential visitors easy access to the park. The multitudes traveling south on the interstate to vacation at Disney World would have to drive several miles after exiting I-95 if they wished to patronize Marco Polo Park—an inconvenience which surely hurt business.

The final blow to Marco Polo Park occurred in February 1975 when two fires, just eight days apart, destroyed the Japanese Village. It's possible that bats roosting in the electrical house caused wiring shorts that ignited the fires. However, arson is more likely the culprit since a suspect who fired two shots in the direction of a security guard was seen fleeing from the area at the same time as one of the fires started. After the fires, the park was sold to the owners of an Arkansas theme park, Ozarks Dogpatch USA. The new owners replaced the Japanese Village with an American-themed bandstand and added a new 40-horse carousel ride. Later in 1975, the park reopened with a new name: "Passport to Fun World." Despite being under new management and having a new name, the park remained unprofitable and closed permanently in 1976. Most of the park's property was auctioned off and relocated in 1978. The remaining buildings, tracks, and other structures were demolished to make way for the Plantation Bay Golf and Country Club community which now occupies the site. No trace of Marco Polo Park or Passport to Fun World exists today.

Conclusion

Marco Polo Park/Passport to Fun World was not the only Florida theme park to go out of business in the 1970s. Several others vanished as well, including Wonderland Park in Titusville (closed in 1973), Pirates World in Dania (closed in 1975), and The Aquarium (also known as Shark World) in St. Pete Beach (closed in 1977). Some of these theme parks might have survived the economic challenges of the 1970s, but Disney World simply presented too much competition for the smaller parks to overcome. Jack White succinctly summed up what Florida's theme parks were up against: "...I learned one important lesson—you can't compete with the mouse..."

End Notes

¹**Marco Polo** (1254-1324) was a Venetian merchant and traveler who in 1269, along with his father Niccolo and uncle Maffeo, embarked on a 24-year journey throughout Asia. When they returned to Venice Marco was imprisoned. While in prison Marco dictated his stories to cellmate Rustichello da Pisa. In 1300, one year after Marco Polo's release from prison, da Pisa published these stories in *The Travels of Marco Polo*. This book introduced Europeans to Central Asia and China, and influenced European cartography and other adventurers, including Christopher Columbus.

²**Oscar Leron O.L. "Jack" White** (July 30, 1915 – February 3, 2003) was a real estate developer responsible for 40 motels and condominiums in the Daytona Beach area. He earned a degree in agriculture from the University of Tennessee, and was involved in several civic organizations including the Daytona Beach Civil Service Board and the Racing and Recreational Facilities Commission. He also served as president of the Daytona Regional Chamber of Commerce and the chairman of the board of directors for Marco Polo Park, Inc.

³ The report contains background information of the recreation industry and the Florida tourism trade of the 1960s into early 1970, and contained favorable projections for a profitable and popular Marco Polo Park (source: Flagler County Historical Society).

⁴**Roy Rogers** (November 5, 1911 – July 6, 1998) was born Leonard Franklin Slye. An American singer and cowboy actor who became known as the "King of the Cowboys," Rogers appeared in over 100 movies and on numerous radio and television shows.

⁵ The **RMS *Titanic*** was a British passenger liner that was the largest ship afloat when it departed on its maiden voyage on April 10, 1912. It collided with an iceberg and sank on April 15, 1912 in the North Atlantic Ocean causing the death of more than 1,500 of its 2,224 passengers. It was one of the deadliest, and probably the most famous, of all commercial peacetime maritime disasters in modern history.

⁶ The **sampan** is a relatively flat bottomed wooden boat that originated in the Far East. It is used for transportation in coastal areas and on rivers, and sometimes for fishing and permanent habitation. The sampan is still used today in rural areas of Southeast Asia, mainly in Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), and Vietnam.

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Figure 11 - Marco Polo Park 1970s postcard - Beautiful lagoon and Oriental Gardens in the Japan section (source: Author's personal collection).

