



NO TURNING BACK

The **Cyclone** will give you a **scare** worth every penny it **shakes** from your pockets.

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PHOTOGRAPHY/
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**YOU MUST
BE THIS TALL ...**



O

n August 12, 1948, a 35-year-old coal miner from West Virginia named Emilio Franco was visiting Coney Island, New York, when his cousin persuaded him to take a ride on the Cyclone. Franco wasn't much different from any of the other thousands of visitors to

New York City's oceanfront amusement park, the Cyclone shares its turf with a clamorous assemblage of newer rides that whirl at its feet like wind-up toys. It is mostly wood, in noted contrast to modern metal coasters. It is free of strobe lights, blaring music, and other thrill-ride trappings. It is simple: a ribbon of track that spirals around the perimeter from the high center point, banking here and looping there like some giant, dropped segment of spaghetti.

To be sure, there are legions of coasters that are newer, longer, higher, faster, and far more technologically advanced than the Cyclone. At amusement parks the world over, you will find coasters that clamp you in like a chicken in a roaster and then turn you upside-down, corkcure you, or shoot you through pools of water at otherworldly speeds. The Cyclone, with its thick wooden struts and hard-bottomed-bench cars, will do none of those things.

But what it *will* do is the reason millions of visitors trek to this kinsely strip to wait in line before taking a coveted seat, preferably in the first car: The Cyclone will scare the living daylight out of you, more (some say) than any other roller coaster in the world.

Among coaster devotees, of course, there's fighin' words. But don't take this writer's word for it. For the record, some testimonials about the Cyclone. Charles Lindberg, first aviator to fly solo over the Atlantic

Camp Hale, Colorado, Franco had lost all ability to speak. He'd not uttered a sound for five years.

Franco and his cousin sat in the first car of the tiny wooden train as it crept to the crest of the first loop. At the top, the cars daltied a moment, then plunged headlong down the track.

Franco started screaming. Clatching his cousin, he continued to scream non-stop through the ride's bone-jarring, stomach-churning turns, twists, and falls. As he alighted, Franco uttered his first words since 1943: "I feel sick."

It is not much to look at, aesthetically speaking. Rising from the gray corner of West 10th Street and Surf Avenue in Brooklyn is a white-washed skeleton, bookended by heat-baked asphalt and the turpid Atlantic Ocean.

It has stood in this spot since 1927, though little else around it echoes that time. As the centrifuge of Astroland, a

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**IF YOU WANT THE
FRONT SEAT ...
YOU WILL HAVE TO
WAIT FOR IT!
MGMT.**

Cyclone was far and away the best of all roller coasters." And Edward I. Koch, mayor of New York City from 1978 to 1989, quipped, "The last time I rode the Cyclone I was about 8. The next day, I was 18."

So great is the coaster's centrifugal force that, for years, management handed out pre-addressed postcards so riders could conveniently reclaim all the hats, purses, wallets, and false teeth the ride routinely tore loose. Says Fran Phillips, a Brooklyn artist who's ridden her share of modern scare-machines:

"The Dragon Coaster at Rye Beach, New York, is taller. Space Mountain at Disney is scary, but anti-septic. The Cyclone has a raw edge. For 'Oh my God, we're going to die,' the Cyclone is it." Adds Terence Mulligan, a painter from Bloomsfield, New Jersey: "It is roaring, churning, dropping, body-freezing, politically incorrect, this-can't-be-happening horror. You scream. If you're thinking of jumping off a building, take the Cyclone firm." Wanna ride? Only five bucks.

How is it that this nondescript roller coaster, this pile of timber and bolts nudged into the neck of a ramshackle beachfront, has managed to coast accolades like these (plus countless more containing words that cannot be printed)?

The answer is part physics and part psychology. New York City land prices being what they've always been, the Cyclone's builders

crammed it into an extraordinarily small lot for a roller coaster, a patch of sandy ground 75 by 500 feet. Yet in this space, the coaster manages agonizing contortions. To wit: six 180-degree turns, 12 drops, 16 directional switches, 18 crossovers, and 27 changes in elevation—all at an average speed of 60 mph. The beauty of the Cyclone isn't so much that it's a wild ride; it's a wild ride inside a shoebox. It's the difference between doing 60 in a Cadillac and doing it in an MG.

Cozen, called it "a greater thrill than flying an airplane at top speed." Joseph Heller, author of *Catch 22*, said, "The

Wagon Wheel at Astroland, Astroland's manager. "You look at it, and you don't see fancy harnesses. It's old-fashioned."

Apart from the mechanized chain that pulls the cars to the crest of the first drop, the coaster is

THE TICKET

For more information on Brooklyn's Astroland Amusement Park and the Cyclone, visit astroland.com on the Web.



driven by gravity alone. Its timber and steel (two substances that don't do well in Coney's sultry air) require a full-time crew of carpenters, welders, and mechanics. Workers walk the track each morning, tightening bolts by hand.

Still, these explanations are little comfort once you've read all the warning signs about heart ailments and wound your way to the boarding platform. A tiny train screeches in, disgorging 24 riders whose facial expressions suggest that they've just been to Heaven, its neighbor below—or both.

As you take your seat, you'll notice a steel bar bolted to the car's front just

above your knees. It is strongly suggested that you hold onto it. A man on a stool yanks out the brake, and the train slides down a banked curve where the "Bull Wheel" (the name given to the menacing chain-driving gear) snarls the undercarriage in its teeth, and the train begins

**LAST WARNING
REMAIN SEATED AND HOLD!
HAND BARS AT ALL TIMES!**



**FOR HATS
WIGS
& JEWELRY!
SECURE**



Veterans' Administration hospital. Since keeling over during basic training at



its rattling ascent to the top of the first hill, 85 feet up. Empty, serpentine tracks crest and fall around you. In moments, you will be hurled through all 2,640 feet of them. It will take 130 seconds. Hug your neighbor. Hag yourself. There is no turning back.

"The Cyclone is the heart and soul of Coney Island," says Astroland's co-owner Carol Albert. "It's a real piece of Americana." Which is to say, it's a survivor. Coney Island was once the premiere amusement area in America. At the turn of the last century, it boasted no fewer than three giant amusement parks. The hot dog was born at Coney, as was the world's first modern roller coaster, L.A. Thompson's Switchback Railway, which rose



in 1894 on the very spot where the Cyclone stands now. But the good times wouldn't last. Fires in 1911 and 1944 claimed two of the parks; the automobile and burgeoning suburbs bankrupted the third by 1964, the same year Astroland opened its doors to the dwindling crowd.

But the roller coaster named for the cyclonic terrors that customers had so gleefully paid to experience remained. And it survived more than Coney's abandonment.

It's survived two world wars, the Great Depression, merciless Atlantic swimmers, and a venomous campaign by its neighbor, the New York Aquarium, to tear it down in 1972 ("It's a clear choice between bunky-munky and culture," sniffed its director). The city had purchased the aging ride by then, and in 1975, Astroland founder and impresario Dewey Albert (the father of Carol Albert's husband, Jerry) bid on the lease, which he won. The Alberts have since spent a fortune on bringing the coaster back. "It's running better now than it ever has," Carol says.

Their efforts helped bring the people back, too—so many that the Cyclone has since transcended its status as a ride and become nothing short of a pop-culture icon. It's a New York City Landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It has been copied and rebuilt in parks across the world. It has also attracted its share of, well, enthusiasts. Albert recalls seeing a newlywed couple posing for their wedding picture in front of the Cyclone, which may seem strange until you learn that other couples have cho-



sen to get married aboard the Cyclone. And then there are those in pursuit of the coveted title of Most Consecutive Rides on the Cyclone. In 1975, a young man from Trenton rode it 1,000 times in a row. His record stood until Richard Rodríguez ("The Coaster King") showed up two summers later. The 19-year-old climbed aboard the Cyclone and stayed aboard for 103 hours and 55 minutes. Don't trouble with the math. He rode the Cyclone 2,361 times.

You, however, will most likely conclude that once is enough. At the top of the hill, the cars lean nauseatingly to the right before dropping you, nose-down at a 58.1-degree angle, the distance of a seven-story building. Your heels dig into the wood floor as your fancy, devoid of gravity, floats off the seat. Screaming might feel better—if only there were time. You hit the trough fast

as though it's happening to somebody else, until your stomach reminds you otherwise. The train drags you into a dip-hump combo as you dance with the demons. It's climb turn drop, climb turn drop—so suddenly that one second you're rocketing out over the Atlantic, the next hurtling straight toward kids standing at the fence, eating cotton candy. Later,

you'll recall strange details: A cloud shaped like a duck, a chip of paint on your knee, your belt that's one hole too tight. Hurling you like a tempestuous god down the

RIDE AGAIN..

\$4.00

CYCLONE

enough to trip a speed gun on I-95 and rocket to the peak of another hill, which knocks hats and glasses loose as the cars bank the turn. Now breathe, curse the person who persuaded you to do this—and down you plummet again. Go ahead and scream now. Everyone else is. In another few seconds, the ride will begin to meld into a dreamlike, sensory mélange: The agonizing shouts from behind, the roaring wheels hammering the guide rail, and the washboard whines of cars thrumming over a sea of timber slats, all meld into an electric ether that swallows your head. It seems like slow motion, then a lurch to light speed. It's an ebullient rise, then a ramb-knuckled dive. It feels

undulating tracks, whipping you through its caves of wooden crossbars, the Cyclone cows you with its mechanics, and makes you bow down to wood: Its throaty creaks make you miss loved ones, and every bump, swing, and jolt registers in your tailbone. The final plummet puts what's left of your stomach in your mouth, and suddenly with a whoosh back into the loading platform, the ride is over.

Wanna go

again? Only four bucks. ★

ROBERT KLARA loves all things old in his home base, New York City.

