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Top Amusement Parks Up 4.2 Percent

ORLANDO, Florida (AP) -- Powered by strong investment in new rides, the 50th anniversary of Disneyland and hurricanes that spared the theme park capital of Orlando, attendance at North America's 50 most popular amusement parks rose 4.2 percent in 2005.

An estimated 176 million visitors went to North America's most popular parks, according to an annual survey released Monday by the trade publication Amusement Business and the research firm Economics Research Associates.

Worldwide, amusement park attendance increased 2.2 percent to 253 million visitors in 2005.

The \$10 billion North American industry had the benefit of momentum from 2004, the first year attendance had increased since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

Parks that acquired new rides in 2005 saw their investments pay off while most parks that didn't make big capital investments experienced attendance dips, said James Zoltak, editor of Amusement Business.

Universal's two parks in Orlando, Universal Studios and Islands of Adventures, each declined 8 1/2 percent, while Universal Studios Hollywood had an attendance dip of 6 percent. All three parks came off strong attendance increases in 2004.

Tom Schroder, a Universal spokesman, said 2004's highflying attendance was a tough act to follow.

"The bar was raised so incredibly high for us by spectacular attendance in 2004, combined with a very competitive environment to higher gas prices," Schroder said. "2005 was just slightly less great than 2004."

Amusement Business also said the worldwide marketing campaign for the 50th anniversary of Disneyland at Disney's parks may have siphoned off some attendance at the Universal parks.

Disney's four parks in Florida and two parks in California benefited from the celebration with new rides, stage shows and parades. The Florida parks had attendance increases of 5 percent to 6 1/2 percent, while Disneyland and Disney's California Adventure in Anaheim, Calif. respectively saw growth of 8 1/2 percent and 3.6 percent.

The Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World in Orlando, with 16.1 million visitors, and Disneyland in California, with 14.5 million visitors, were the best-attended parks in the world. The next top 5 spots in North America were Disney's other Florida parks: Epcot, Disney-MGM Studios and Animal Kingdom.

Worldwide, Disney parks in the United States, Japan and France took up the top eight spots in attendance.

Six Flags Inc., which invested \$135 million in new rides around the nation for the 2005 season, was rewarded with a 5.7 percent increase across the chain, according to Amusement Business.

Anheuser Busch parks also had sharp increases at locations with new thrill rides.