

INTERVIEW



# BART DE BOER

**“W**hen Walt Disney came to Europe in 1954 to research attraction parks, he came here and was inspired by our park,” says Efteling’s CEO Bart de Boer. “Actually, that’s just a story,” he admits with a smile. “He may well have come, but there’s no proof of it. We like to say it though.”

The Netherlands’ oldest theme park is so revered in its home country that when it marketed Raveleijn – a medieval city-themed entertainment venue – as a “new town”, 70 per cent of the country’s mayors, resplendent in their chains of office, attended the opening ceremony in 2011.

Raveleijn also forms the backdrop to a tv show, book and online game. While investing in rides and entertainment to ensure guests have a great time is the main aim of Efteling, which is run by Efteling Nature Park Foundation, media has become a large part of the park’s offer. After producing several tv series, it premiered its first film, *Sprookjesboom* (*The Fairytale Tree*) in February and it went gold in March. “One park started with a mouse and became quite successful, so we’re working to that,” smiles de Boer.

## HISTORY

2012 marks the park’s 60th anniversary, which is being celebrated all year long.

**Inspiring Disney, defying the recession and expanding into film and tv are among Efteling’s achievements, as it celebrates its 60th birthday. CEO Bart de Boer tells us why the Netherlands’ oldest theme park is so successful**

KATHLEEN WHYMAN • MANAGING EDITOR • ATTRACTIONS MANAGEMENT

“It’s an important step,” acknowledges de Boer. “We’re part of history and we’re very careful with that history.”

The history started back in 1952 when Efteling opened as a family amusement park using attractions to tell 10 stories within a Fairytale Forest. The park was founded to bring employment into the region and to conserve nature. While that’s still the park’s aim, 60 years on, Efteling has evolved into a theme park with more than four million visitors each year, a variety of coasters, dark rides and experiences, theatre shows, a hotel, a holiday park, a golf course and its own tv series.

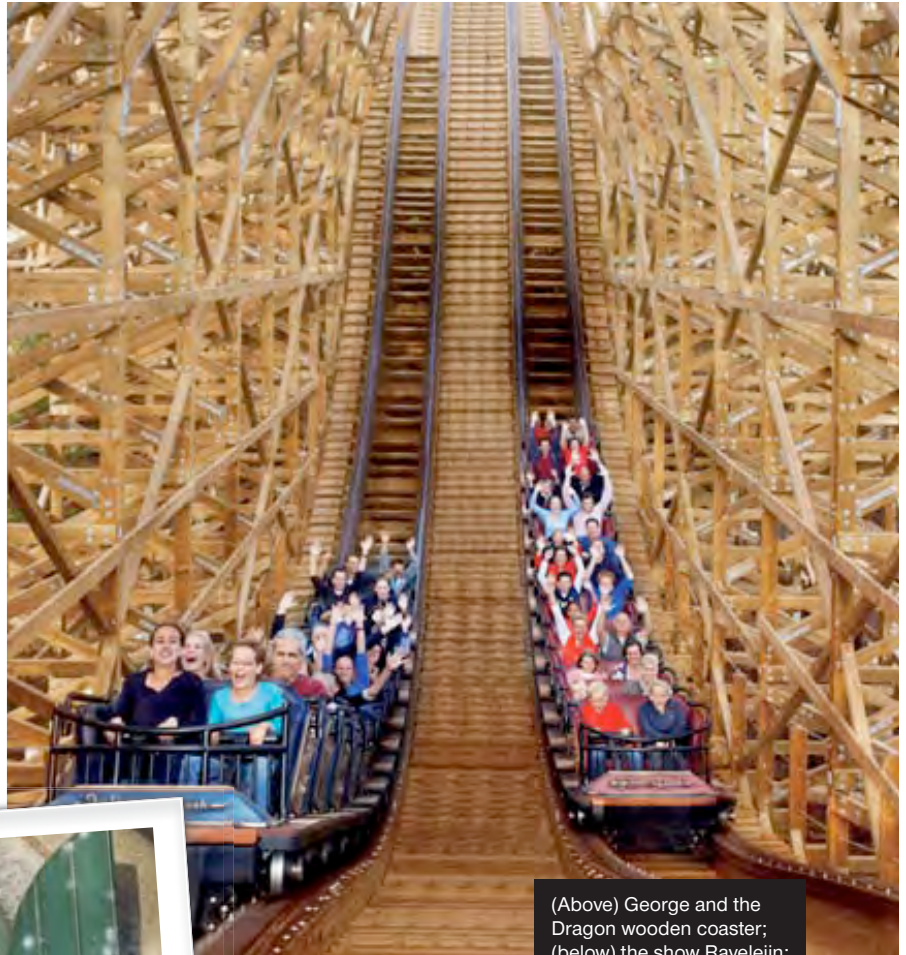
De Boer credits Efteling’s success to staying close to its Fairytale Forest roots. While the designers employed over the years have all left their imprint on the park, the original style, created by Anton Pieck, has continued to the extent that fairytale-related stories appearing in Dutch, and some German and Belgium, media are referred to as “Efteling-like”.

The park offer now includes coasters, but the core business hasn’t changed. “We never wanted the fastest, highest or most dangerous rides; we always have the extended family in mind,” explains de Boer. “The park is very large and is beautifully landscaped. Visitor feedback shows that they like the way they can wander around and enjoy being a part of nature.”

## REALMS

Efteling is divided into four realms – Ruigrijk (Adventure), Reizenrijk (Travel), Marerijk (Fairy) and Anderrijk (Alternative). Each are tailored to different members of a family. The Fairytale Forest and shows are for everyone. Older children and adults will enjoy the coasters and dark rides while their younger siblings spend time in the playground. Carnival Festival, which takes visitors on an eight-minute journey past 15 different countries and 270 different animatronics, is popular with all ages. The ride is currently being refurbished to mark

Roller coaster De Vliegende Hollander – The Flying Dutchman



(Above) George and the Dragon wooden coaster; (below) the show Raveleijn; (left) Mother Holle



Efteling's anniversary. It's rumoured that Carnival Festival was the inspiration for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts' It's a Small World musical boat ride. "There are photos of Disney executives looking at Carnival Festival and It's a Small World is similar – visitors travel through countries while a song plays throughout," says de Boer.

The update may mean the park can expect another visit from Disney executives in the future. "We sent about 1,000 of our 2,200 employees to Disneyland Paris in batches of 200 in March to celebrate our Diamond Jubilee," he says. "Hopefully they will send all theirs to Efteling!"

**CELEBRATIONS**

All well as the employees, all visitors to Efteling are invited to be a part of the year-long anniversary celebrations. They started on the 31st December 2011 and 10,000

visitors attended. Events will be held throughout the year but the big attraction is Aquanura, a spectacular show using water, fire and light. "The park's birthday is the 31st May and we'll have a big show on that day culminating with Aquanura, which is just amazing," says de Boer.

Also new is a themed pancake restaurant, Polle's Kitchen, which is the first phase of a new Fantasy Realm. Costing €42.5m (£35.3m, \$55.4m), and with an estimated opening date of 2015, the realm will be Efteling's biggest and most expensive expansion to date and will include a dramatic dark ride.

De Boer has spent the last five years focusing on content. These include a double wooden speeding coaster which spins visitors around a fire-breathing dragon and Raveleijn, the medieval city that provides the setting for a spectacular

park show for up to 1,200 people. The 20-minute show details the adventures of five children who become knights and is performed up to five times a day. It features horses, ravens, an owl, a falcon, actors and a five-headed dragon.

**VISITORS**

Almost every Dutch child visits Efteling, as it's the most popular destination for Dutch school trips. "They come here as a child, then a parent and a grandparent," says de Boer. "Most Dutch people will come to Efteling several times during their lifetime."

Efteling received 4.1 million visitors in 2011 and de Boer anticipates another 200,000 visitors this year. "The anniversary helps, but we'd expect an increase anyway, as the visitor numbers are growing every year," he says. "We predict that by 2020 we'll be up to five million visitors each year." ▶

## INTERVIEW



### ABOUT Bart de Boer

#### What are your hobbies?

I had a private pilot's licence but I had to quit flying when I started working here so I fly in a coaster instead now. I also like cooking and photography

#### What's your favourite food?

I'm a bit of a foodie. I've visited Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck in the UK. I'm desperate to eat at Noma in Copenhagen, but it's hard to get in – if anyone's reading this, who can get me in, please let me know

#### Favourite film?

It'd be a bit cheap to say *The Fairytale Tree!* I don't have a favourite film, but I love the Swedish thriller tv series *The Bridge*. It's excellent and I'd love to be able to produce a programme like that

#### How do you spend your spare time?

With this job there isn't too much spare time – there's always something to do. I live a 45-minute drive from the park, which is good or I'd always be here.

I like reading, walking the dogs and cooking nice meals to try and entice the kids back home

#### What drives you?

I'm not a caretaker. When I'm somewhere I want change and growth and results. But at Efteling I'm building on a lot of history. This combination makes it a very interesting job

#### How would you describe yourself?

I like to make a presence

#### How would others describe you?

As a motivator

#### What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

I once read: "You have to realise when you're happy." In other words, we should appreciate what we have while we actually have it.

Another piece of advice is: "Relax." That's from my wife!

**"I APPLIED FOR THIS JOB IN 2008. BACK THEN THEY SAID I WASN'T QUALIFIED SO TO LATER BE APPROACHED FOR THE ROLE IS SWEET REVENGE!"**

- The majority of Efteling's visitors are from the Netherlands with about 10 per cent from Germany and another 10 per cent from Belgium. "We do have visitors from Spain, Israel and the UK, but it's not as accessible," says de Boer.

Ten per cent of visitors stay at Efteling's 122-room hotel or in one of the 203 accommodations in the holiday park Efteling Village Bosrijk. Both the hotel and resort are constantly fully booked. "Many resorts in the Netherlands are having a difficult time, but we're not and are thinking of expanding," says de Boer. "I think we're the equivalent of the movie theatres in the 1930s – we give a day away from all the troubles. People need to have money to pay for it of course, so if things get worse it'll start to impact, but up til now we haven't been affected at all."

Efteling's employees are as loyal as its visitors. "Many stay here for years and we have whole families who have worked for us across generations. Everyone is very involved, which is wonderful," says de Boer. "But this can result in the organisation being a bit slow to react to suggestions because so many people are involved. I have to try and hurry things along without disturbing that very special Efteling feeling. That's my biggest challenge here."

Efteling won a Brass Ring Award in HR Excellence in 2010 with its internal program *Betovering* (Enchantment). "Key to this program is that our employees are told they can make the difference between a normal day in an attraction park or an exceptional experience," adds de Boer.

#### MEDIA

To add to this exceptional experience, the media side of Efteling is expanding rapidly. "Efteling Radio, featuring children's news and a fairytale of the day, started four years ago," says de Boer. "Broadcast to most of the Netherlands, it's one of the most listened to children's stations. We also produce and broadcast two hours of children's television every day through commercial station RTL84. It's shown in the Netherlands and in Belgium and we're expanding that. Our series *Raveleijn* has five million viewers, *Pardoes the Tovenaar* has already been seen by a million people



and our daily show *De Schatkamer* has about 100,000 viewers a day.

"Efteling worked with famous Dutch children's writer Paul van Loon to create a book called *Raveleijn*," he continues. "We produced the television series, set up *Hyyes* (a Dutch Facebook-type site for children) for the different characters, launched an Internet game and created the show here in the park, so we do the whole range. The aim is to bring Efteling closer to people and doing it through tv works."

Efteling's Facebook page was set up a few months ago. It received 50,000 followers within two weeks of launching and is now up to 100,000. "I tweet to make Efteling reachable and we try to react actively to questions people raise on Facebook and Twitter," adds de Boer.

(Clockwise from top left) Piraña water ride; the Fairytale Tree; Polle's Kitchen; one of the park's golf courses; Donkey lift your tail; The wolf and the seven little kids



Polle's Kitchen opened this year and is the first part of Fantasy realm – Efteling's most expensive expansion

### ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY

Despite embracing technology, Efteling is still very aware of its environmental policies, although de Boer points out that they have quite a mixed approach. "Of course we use as many environmental systems as we can," he explains. "We purify sewer water from the community of Kaatsheuvel with our own helophyte filter.

This water is used for watering Efteling's parks and greenery, the Efteling Golf Park and for Efteling's lakes and water-based attractions as well as the lake in Efteling Village Bosrijk. We've been doing that for 10 years so were very advanced in that area. However, we offer people a day away from everything and don't want them to be worrying about how they can save the environment – we want them to relax.

### CAREER HISTORY

De Boer was approached for the role of CEO in 2008, but had officially applied for the appointment a decade before. "Back then they said I wasn't qualified, so to later be approached for the role is sweet revenge," he laughs.

Prior to Efteling, de Boer worked at a company which is now part of Center Parcs, for film distributor Filmnet and then for Eindhoven Airport. Efteling's product and its broadness appealed to de Boer. "How many jobs involve making a tv series, expanding a resort and choosing a new dragon?" he asks. "Yes, the job involves managing 2,200 staff and we have to make a profit and big investments, but it's a job with a very intriguing product and I have the ability to expand it, which makes it

wonderful. And everyone loves Efteling," he adds. "The name always brings a smile to people's faces."

De Boer is actively involved with IAAPA and is president of the European Advisory Board. "The contacts at IAAPA are very good," he remarks. "In just three years I got to know many people in the attractions industry and that's remarkable."

De Boer is keeping quiet about future developments for Efteling. "We have growth plans and know exactly what we want to do, but I'm not going to tell you what they are," he laughs. One thing's for sure, he'll be involved in ensuring those plans come to fruition. "I'm 61, but I'm not even thinking about quitting – I like it here much too much," he says. "As long as they want me here, I'll stay." ●