

A Brief History of the Roller Coaster

The history of roller coasters is much longer than most people would expect it to be. In fact, the first coasters were being ridden in the seventeenth century by Russian aristocrats. These rides were essentially large slides made of ice, but they relied on principles of momentum and inertia to work, so we can classify them as roller coasters.

After these thrill-oriented slides were initially developed, a movement towards relaxing enjoyment took hold. “Scenic railways” became popular in Europe by the middle of the nineteenth century. These railways focused more heavily on the view than the ride, though it was still a thrilling experience to ride them.

Another development made in the mid-nineteenth century was the “Centrifugal Railway”. Built in Paris, this groundbreaking ride took passengers around a vertical loop in one-person carts. At this point, the teardrop loop design had not been developed so the Centrifugal Railway was extremely risky, but that didn’t stop adrenaline junkies from paying the fee to ride.

Now, these early roller coasters were certainly exciting, but things really took off at the turn of the twentieth century. Olentangy Park, Atlantic City, and Coney Island all showcased innovative new track designs and daring new loops that the public had never seen before. Passengers often suffered whiplash, and in some cases death, at the hands of these clumsily built contraptions, but their designers gained valuable experience from their failures and continued improving design and safety precautions throughout their careers.

Finally, in 1959, the modern roller coaster was born. When Disneyland introduced the first-ever tubular steel track to their park guests, an entire frontier of thrilling developments was

opened to coaster designers. Steel tracks were far superior to their wooden predecessors because the steel was stronger, smoother, and it could be twisted to handle high-velocity twists and turns with ease. In the past fifty years, an untold number of shockingly daring new designs have been built, and we have only just begun to unlock the potential of the roller coaster.