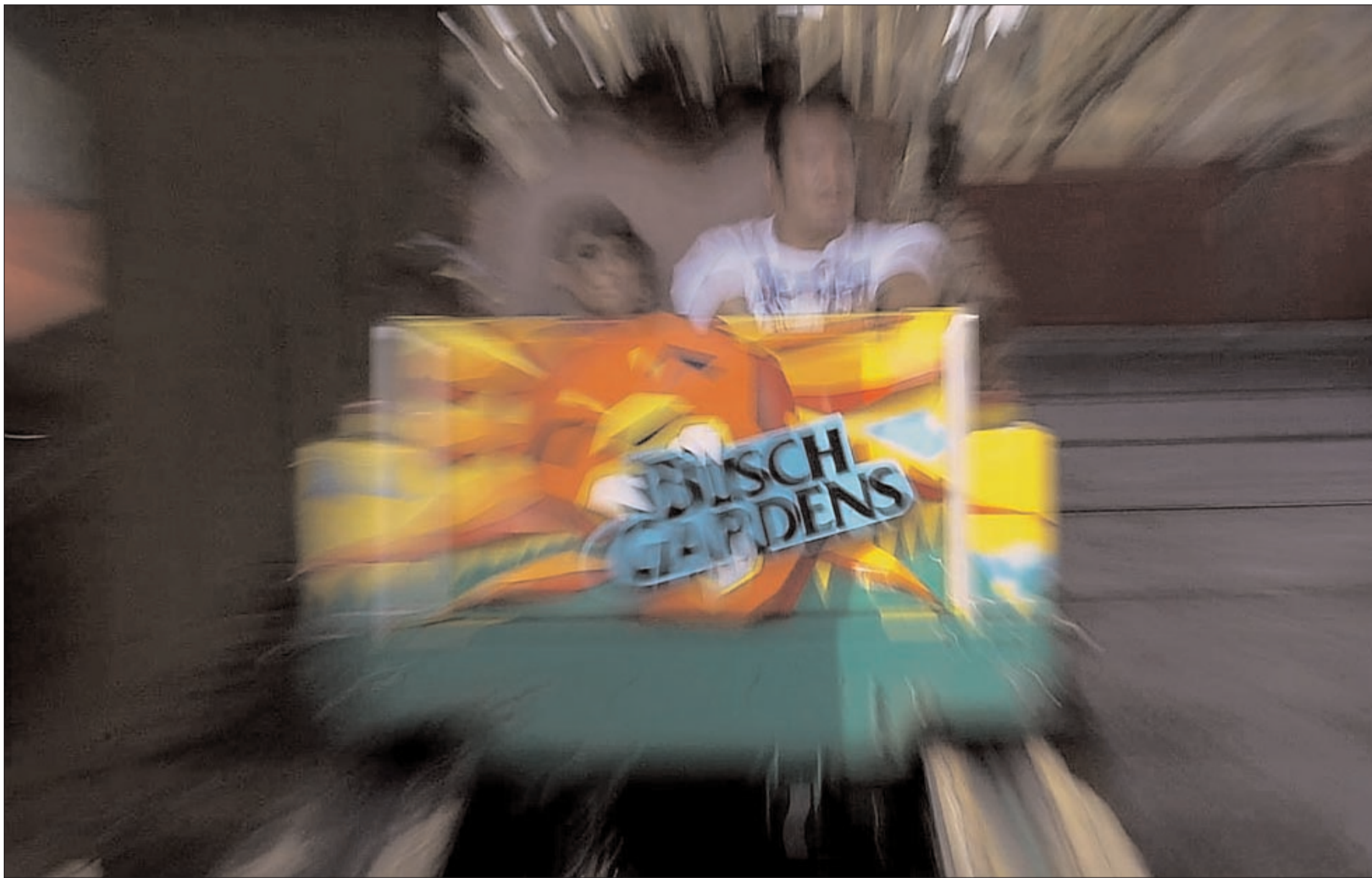


POINT OF NO RETURN

Multiple flybys, 3.5 G-forces, with combined speeds reaching more than 100 MPH are just some of the exhilarating moments when riding the Gwazi. (right)



Gwazi



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS /NIKON D-1

Dual coasters rumble in Tampa's wooden jungle



EXCITED FEAR Eight-year-old Christopher Jones from New York waits with apprehension before his first ride on the Gwazi.



MAYBE NEXT YEAR Disappointed that he was too short to ride the roller coaster, Anthony Reo, 6, of New Jersey seeks comfort from his mother.

Story and Photographs by **ROBERT CROCKETT**

Design by **MYLES CULLEN and AMANDA INSCORE**

It's going to be a great day for eight-year-old Christopher Jones. The first grader is going for his first ride on a roller coaster. With his dad, Charles Sr., strapped and buckled by his side, Christopher feels safe.

The Jones family, including wife Karen and 14-year-old Ryan, are vacationing from New York City and saw Busch Garden's newest attraction for the southeast's largest double wooden roller coaster on morning TV.

Gwazi is named after the fabled animal with a lion's body and tiger's head. Brave hearts enter through an 8-acre village plaza, which reflects the domain of these powerful predators. The lion theme includes an African desert atmosphere while the tiger region reflects the lush landscapes and cool streams of Asia. Riders choose between the animal kingdom's two fiercest beasts.

Christopher is a little guy. With eyes unusually wide, he searches around for other young boys going on their first coaster ride, then he looks to his right. Dad smiles.

Both coasters feature steep drops and high banks with six flybys reaching a combined speed when passing of nearly 100 mph. As if that isn't enough, riders experience nearly 3.5 G forces from a height of 90 feet.

Christopher cracks a nervous smile. He's unsure, maybe a little frightened. He hides his fear by looking away. Dad smiles.

Gwazi's Lion and Tiger trains each hold 24 riders, with an hourly capacity of more than 1,400 passengers. Central to Gwazi's appeal is its wooden frame. Enthusiasts say there is a difference between metal and lumber construction. On nearly 7,000 feet of track built on 1.25 million board feet of lumber, makes for a rockier, more riveting 2-1/2 minute ride.

And then it's over. The Lion train comes creeping into the passenger loading area.

Christopher sits a little higher in his chair, eyes wider and smile even broader. He's done it. He can tell his friends back in New York that he rode the Gwazi and he emerged a conqueror of the Serengeti.

He won't, however, ride again.

"It was fun. I want to do something else now," he said.

"It's excellent," said Naomi and Zoe Coad—ages 10 and 11—of England after their first ride on Gwazi. Their sister, Kirsty, 8, added, "I left my seat a few times, and it makes your face go funny."



OH MY ...! Gwazi, Busch Gardens' newest thrill ride, exposes riders to nearly 7,000 feet of track built on 1.25 million feet of lumber.