Breathing Medieval Air at Kryal Castle

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Long long ago, the newly reopened Kryal Castle doubled as both medieval fantasy park and pill-poppin’, foot-shufflin’, overdose inducing rave centre. Fair maidens and brave knights from across Victoria came to visit the land of Kryal to dance within the castle walls, as big name DJ’s like Paul van Dyk pounded sound across the Ballarat countryside.

Alas, this is no longer the case. Raves have since been banned from the site and ownership has changed hands. After crossing some murky ground involving a Brunswick brothel owner and a collection of harlots, Kryal Castle has been renovated for the 21st century by a more corporate outfit. Last time I visited the castle I remember my dad’s enthusiasm as he showed me the torture museum and weapon displays, but even as a child I noticed the parks mildly run-down nature. The actors were goofy, every display had a thin layer of dust covering it and the entire park looked hand-made out of wood, iron and stone. It felt authentically Dark Ages. The Kryal Castle of 2013 is much more Renaissance.

I arrived at Kryal near on the 11th hour of the morn to a very empty parking lot. The castle itself is located on a hill that overlooks a massive expanse of the greater Ballarat area. From the parking lot you can look out upon vast meadows of green hillside, expansive farms and in the distance, Ballarat itself. As I made the turn from that view to the castle entry and heard some medieval folk music leaking through the castle walls, I really did feel like medieval Europe was coming back to life. Or at least what film, television and books had trained me to think what medieval Europe should feel like.

You walk up the stone staircase, across the drawbridge over a water channel and through the castle’s arch, where you are quickly greeted by impressive suits of armour and... a large, animatronic dragon. In that moment you can feel the influence of Walt Disney’s ghost upon the theme park game. This is not the educational experience nearby Sovereign Hill markets itself as, nor the shabby-rave days of old. This is entertainment.

After buying my ticket, I was quickly whisked off to the entrance of what’s known as the ‘Dragon’s Labyrinth’. Here I met my first in-character employee of Kryal. Draped in a hood masking his face, my greeter asked if sire was ready to enter the park, and if I had any “ye olde heart conditions”. I quickly laughed and told him I didn’t (a lie, I sort of do) and he let me enter the forbidden cave. Flashing lights, loud noises and more animatronic dragons shocked and scared me as I made my way through the cave, finally making it to the exit where a holographic projection of King Arlen permitted me to enter the realm of Kryal in peace. I suppose there was a story to all of this, but I could not tell you in the slightest what it was. And I don’t think it matters. By now those who have exited the cave have dropped their guard and suspended their disbelief. Time for some sword fightin!

Most of the castle can be seen within an hour, hour and a half. But the castle keeps you on its toes, constantly managing your time, as each half hour there is a brand new show to see. You can see the jesters putting on a show for the royal audience, watch the Knights of The Round Table argue over
ale and make your way through the torture chamber. A personal favourite is the Wizards Workshop, where I first thought I had discovered another animatronic character, only for the wizard to stand up, talk and shoot fireballs out of his hands. Anytime you get to interact with a breathing, reacting character is a real thrill, as the staff do a great job of going back and forth. This is the real magic of Kryal Castle, much greater than the Disney-esque stuff we’ve all seen. No amount of decoration, technology or music can substitute for this human spontaneity, especially when they have to interact with morons like myself.

However, there is no better way to end our day than with THE JOUST. Sovereign Hill has nothing that can touch this spectacle, outside of a high noon shootout that would undoubtedly be too violent. When the knights make their swopping entrance, they look spectacular on their large draught horses, their armour glistening in the sunlight. Apparently there was some point-based game to be won in the jousting, but for me this was irrelevant. When the knights begin their straight lines to each other, poles out ready to splinter the opponent, shields ready to buckle, you are supremely in the moment. And it is in moments like these that you are no longer in Kryal Castle, you are breathing the air of King Arthur’s realm.