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TODD L. CHAPPEL/Tribune photos

Above, Tampa Tribune reporter Dirk Lammers, second from right, flips over the Kumba at Busch Gardens Tuesday. Also among the first to ride the attraction were, from left, Brian Brewer of radio station WFLA, 970 AM, and American Coaster Enthusiast members Jerry Thurman and Rahla Heer, right. Below, actor Michael Richards holds on to his hat. The ride opens to the public today. More on the Kumba, BayLife-1

KUMBA-YAAAAAAAAAAAA!

No, that's not the refrain from a folk song. It's Tampa Tribune reporter Dirk Lammers' reaction as he rides the twists and turns of Busch Gardens' new roller coaster.

By DIRK LAMMERS
Tribune Staff Writer

NORTH TAMPA — The experts had a simple plan for tackling Kumba: Raise your hands and scream.

Following the advice of American Coaster Enthusiast (ACE) members Jerry Thurman and Rahla Heer — two of my newfound car-mates — I pulled the turquoise "horse collar" over my shoulders, cleared my throat and prepared to drown out the thunderous roar of Busch Gardens' newest ride.

A loud warning buzzer preceded our tug up the 143-foot-high lift. Workers laying concrete and sod Tuesday — one day before Kumba's official kickoff — faded to ants below as the clear day revealed a beautiful view of downtown Tampa, the Stroh's brewery, the University of South Florida ... aahhhhhhhhhhh!!!

Before I could identify another landmark, our yellow train was plummeting toward the ground at speeds nearing 60 mph before lifting us into a 108-foot loop — the first of seven aerial maneuvers during the nearly three-minute ride.

The distinct features of the multimillion-dollar roller coaster — the diving loop, the camelback, the cobra roll, the double corkscrew twist — blurred into one quick and continuous session of twisting and turning through 3,978 feet of turquoise steel track.

"What's different from this than the other coasters I've been on is it keeps you moving all the time," says Heer, a 39-year-old Orlando resident who recently joined ACE, which has 4,600 members worldwide.

"There's not a spot that really stops you

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Kumba clip

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Riders flip over Kumba

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once you come down from the initial lift."

Thurman, a member of the enthusiasts group for about four years, considers himself a traditionalist because of his love for the old-style, wooden roller coasters. But the 50-year-old Pinellas Park resident was impressed with Kumba and called it the best in Florida.

Caught up in the excitement, I had to ride it again.

Much to my delight, actor Michael Richards — who plays the lanky neighbor Kramer on the NBC-TV series "Seinfeld" — showed up a day before his scheduled appearance for an early ride.

Richards popped a circa-1930 brown leather pilot's cap over his unruly hair and jumped into the front seat. Being a "Seinfeld" fan, I jumped into the car behind him.

As our train peered over the lift and began the speedy 135-foot dive, Richards' hat flew from his head — right into my outstretched hand.

Since it was my second ride, I already knew the experts' secret — raise your hands and scream. But I never thought it would lead to a goalie-like save, to which I can forever brag to my friends, "I caught Kramer's hat."

Kumba jump

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