

**Freitag, Florian, and Carol Southall. “Interview: New Universal Theme Park Set to Open in UK.” *Matt Chorley: Leila Nathoo Sits In*. BBC Radio 5 (April 9, 2025).
Transcript by Sophie Karkowski and Alexander B. Wolf.**

Leila Nathoo: Universal Studios are planning to build their first European theme park here in Britain. It’s going to be in Bedfordshire, a big investment the government is touting, and it’s going to be the biggest theme park in the whole of Europe. [...] We’ve heard earlier in the program lots of clips of politicians having a little dabble in rollercoasters over the years. Let’s talk to two people who know about theme parks very well: Florian Freitag, Professor of American Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany. He is a former employee of Disneyland Paris and co-wrote *Key Concepts in Theme Park Studies*. Thanks so much for being on the program. It sounds like you’re the ideal person to talk to about this. Also with us is Carol Southall, another brilliant guest on this issue, head of the Business School at the University of Staffordshire, who’s worked with Alton Towers in the development of the UK’s first visitor attraction and resort management degree. Hello to both of you, thanks so much for being with us. [...] Okay, Florian, let’s start with you. You worked at Disneyland Paris—what did you do?

Florian Freitag: Depending on whom you ask, I was either a pirate or a cashier at one of the souvenir shops.

Leila Nathoo: You’re joking. You were in costume?

Florian Freitag: Yes, I was.

Leila Nathoo: How long was this for?

Florian Freitag: This was for a year. But this was 25 years ago, so a long time ago.

Leila Nathoo: Did this start your love for theme parks?

Florian Freitag: In a way, it did because it offered me a chance to take a look behind the scenes. So, on the one hand, I sort of discovered how these places are operated, how these places run. And on the other hand, I also discovered, discussing with visitors, what kind of impact these places have on visitors. [...] These places get people very emotional [...]. A lot of people often think of theme parks as very fun, trivial places, but in fact, they cut deep to the heart of some people.

Leila Nathoo: One of the MPs we spoke to earlier talked about theme parks as places to make memories. They’re places you usually go with your whole family and they do really stick in the mind. They’re kind of like a big expedition, aren’t they?

Florian Freitag: Yes, absolutely. And theme parks use that. They promote a certain model of visiting theme parks: going there once a year, with your family, turning it into a ritual: taking your kids, your grandkids, and passing on the tradition.

Leila Nathoo: So they’re basically a reliable investment then, because they’re so popular? You here hear the government touting this as a massive win for Britain to get Universal Studios to build it here rather than elsewhere in Europe. There was a bit of desire when

Disneyland Paris was built to build elsewhere, but France came out the winner. So, is it a win for Britain to have this?

Florian Freitag: I won't commit myself to a specific answer, but it's exciting to see Europe at the focus of the theme park industry. Over the past decade, China was considered the market of the future. All major investments were located in Asia. It's very exciting, very interesting to see Europe in the focus for such a big project. We're talking not about a regional park here, we're talking about what is sometimes called a destination park with a supranational reach, not only targeting visitors from the UK but also elsewhere. So, this is very exciting, indeed.

[...]

Leila Nathoo: Interesting text we've just had in from Andy in Blackpool saying: "Look, people can only spend their money once. This new attraction will just take people from another attraction, like the Pleasure Beach in Blackpool. Any new attractions will do nothing for the UK as a whole." If you look at the kind of theme park ecosystem, we do have some massive and very popular ones in the UK. Florian, I wonder what you make of that?

Florian Freitag: Well, I think that the distinction between regional theme parks and destination theme parks is really important there. Because it is about inbound tourism, so it's not going to just take away from other theme parks. It may for a season or two when the park is new. But then they're clearly going for an international market—a European market, and maybe even beyond. So it's also going to bring in people from elsewhere, from outside of the UK.

Leila Nathoo: What do you make of the figures that the government's putting out there in terms of the kind of boost to the economy, they're saying 50 billion pounds boosts the economy. It sounds massive, and 28,000 jobs are gonna be created. I mean, obviously gives you a kind of idea of the scale of this proposal. Does that ring true to you, that kind of boost it can provide?

Florian Freitag: Well, I was somehow reminded of the figures that were put out when the Euro Disney Convention was signed back in 1987. They were working with similar numbers. They projected about 30,000 jobs for the creation and the operation of the resort. Now, Disneyland Paris was a bit larger than the one they're planning now because they've got a theme park, but they also have five hotels, whereas this one is, I think, projected to have one hotel for starters. But the projected visitor numbers and employment numbers can be compared to what was projected for Disneyland Paris at the time.

[...]

Leila Nathoo: And I have to ask you [...] before you go: What's your favorite theme park? What's your favorite ride? Florian, surely it must be something in Disneyland Paris. Come on. It must be back to those good old days.

Florian Freitag: How could I say anything but Pirate of the Caribbean at Disneyland Paris? This is a place where I made my memories, so, yes, absolutely.

[...]

Leila Nathoo: [...] Brilliant to get your input, Florian Freitag, professor of American Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen [...] talking us through the politics of Theme Park.