

Review: 10237 The Tower of Orthanc

By Jetro

Pictures by LEGO® System A/S

Set: The Tower of Orthanc

Set number: 10237

Parts: 2359

Contains: 5 minifigs and one eagle.

Happy as I was to see that the LOTR theme was continued into 2013, the line-up seemed to be missing something. The pirate ship is a really nice set, but it didn't quite feel like the flagship for a theme. So when the Tower of Orthanc was announced, the theme felt more complete and I was excited to see that what some had hinted at from an office pic with lots of sets in it that was "out there" last year actually came true: a large black tower in the LOTR theme.

A bit of background

For those of you who haven't seen the film (or read the book), the tower of Orthanc, in the centre of Isengard, is the abode of Saruman the White, head of the white council and immediate superior of Gandalf. It was not, however, Saruman who built it. The tower was carved out of the living rock by the Númenóreans of whom Aragorn and the people in Gondor are descendants. J.R.R. Tolkien described it as follows: "A peak and isle of rock it was, black and gleaming hard: four mighty piers of many-sided stone were welded into one, but near the summit they opened into gaping horns, their pinnacles sharp as the points of spears, keen-edged as knives. Between them was a narrow space, and there upon a floor of polished stone, written with strange signs, a man might stand five hundred feet above the plain."

The film version of Orthanc was based on the design of illustrator Alan Lee who has made many beautiful LOTR related illustrations over the years. This tower was one of the two referred to in the title of the second volume and second film of the trilogy "The Two Towers". Tolkien eventually decided the second tower was that of Minas Morgul the city of the king of the Nazgul, but Peter Jackson, director of the film, made it Barad Dûr, the abode of Sauron. Does that mean we can hope for a LEGO® version of that tower too? I doubt it, since none of the physical action in the films takes place there, but only time will tell.

The contents

The set contains 2359 pieces, and as indicated on the box, rises to a height of 73 cm with a base of 21cm. If the number doesn't help you to imagine it, the tower contains 6 lofty levels plus the pinnacle and roof. In addition to a large assortment of black pieces, some of which new like the arches used for the windows (also used in the Rivendel set in the same theme),



the set comes with a brick-built Ent – Treebeard – an eagle, and 5 minifigs. Other special elements include a zamor-sphere type ball, cast in two colours – yellow/green and black and a light brick to light it up.

Building the tower

According to the box, this set is aimed at ages 14+, but unless that is because if the length of the building process I cannot find any reason why the age should be so high. No very complicated building techniques are used. As a matter of fact, there is only a little sideways building, mainly to cover the base of the tower with the typical rocky profile as seen in the film and the four pinnacles.

The tower is (of course) built from bottom to top, and the first steps include several bright coloured bricks that are used to





reinforce the inner structure. Fortunately these are out of sight, or almost... There are a couple of orange 1x2 bricks that peep through the tolerances of the grey bricks that form the back of the bottom floor of the tower. You really have to know they are there to notice, but I know, so I changed them in order to be able to sleep again.

Since the tower is pretty tall, parts of the tower are built and then added to the whole. This means you can more or less work at table height instead of having to stand up to be able to reach. Initially I was hoping for some tiles to be used in order to make the tower modular, but the tower is built as one large construction, which is good for stability, but less so for easily storing it somewhere.

Back to the colour scheme. Fortunately, higher up no aberrant colours are used. There is some occasional Dark Bluish Gray for floors and some decorative elements, but the outside of the tower is mostly black. That takes me back to the base of the tower: the first two floors: dungeon and main floor. These are covered outside with plates, which in turn are covered by curved slopes to simulate the stony shape of the lower levels of the tower. The effect is very realistic. I would have preferred if in the underlying structure the 2x2 corner bricks had been black instead of DBG. Yes, they are mostly covered by plates, but in the inner corner opposite to the one that holds the stairs and door you can still see the DBG between the coverings. Again, you need to know what you are looking for, but since this type of brick is also used in black further up the tower, I feel extra sorry black wasn't used here as well.

So now I've got that off my chest, let me just say WOW! The overall effect of the tower is to leave you impressed and intimidated at the magnitude of the construction. There isn't a dull moment in all of the 73 cm of the tower: each level has its own specific decorative relieves and elements and even though it is (almost) completely black it is a feast for the eyes. Especially attractive are the four "horns" of the tower, which are built sideways and attached with hinge bricks. To add to their detail there are 3 small sculpted elements – built with slopes on hinge bricks – that enhance the base of each horn. The centre of the spire is built with panels, but this hasty building technique is almost completely masked by the majesty and size of the pinnacle. The platform at the roof of the tower is large enough to hold several minifigs and play out the scene in which Gandalf is rescued by an eagle or the one in which Saruman appears with Grima Wormtongue after Isengard is overthrown.

Of course all these characters are included in the set. Before starting to build the tower, the 1st of the 4 instruction booklets shows you how to assemble Treebeard. Although I am not a big fan of the family of bricks modified with ball/receptacle etc. in this case they are the perfect solution for a realistic Ent action figure. The ent has nicely detailed fingers (four on each hand) and its right arm has a mechanism that allows it to throw... an orc, or anything else you fancy. The size is perfect compared to that of the minifigs. When I built the Ent, the Technic builder in me gritted his teeth upon seeing the amount of friction the gears for the arm had, but after completing the Ent I realised that this is the only way to create an arm that will stay up and not be dragged down simply by gravity.

The minifigs in this set – 5 in total – of course include Saruman, for whom we get a robe and a pair of legs, Gandalf the grey, Grima Wormtongue, an Uruk Hai and an Orc. Another character that comes with the set is Gwaihir, the eagle who rescues Gandalf. Whereas the Ent is brick-built, the eagle is a moulded piece with hinges for the wings. These are very



nicely detailed with dark brown flight feathers on the brown wings, but as far as size is concerned the eagle is a bit of a disappointment. If you have seen the film you will remember he bears away Gandalf with his claws, but the LEGO® version neither has claws nor is big enough to carry Gandalf (or Frodo) in such a way. I found an easy solution to this problem in the 31004 Fierce Flyers set. Curiously the scale of that eagle is very close to what we are shown in the films, but of course that does come at a cost: 166 pieces and longish legs.

Moving on to the interior of the tower of Orthanc, there are 6 decorated levels and they are full of details. The tower starts with some kind of dungeon. Since the front part of the tower is taken up by the construction that holds the stairs in place, it only makes sense that it is covered with a large panel. And this is where the stickers come in. Now I'm not going to give you the usual rant on stickers; yes, there are many and yes some are large, and of course I would have preferred printed parts, but that always comes at a price. The stickers included in the set some make sense (the pack of wargs in the dungeons is a nice touch). It is a pity there are only two stickers for Saruman's banner, since the set includes a third banner (partially hidden) behind his throne. It is a little funny to find pictures of all 5 wizards on the 5th level – I didn't take Saruman to be the type to hang a picture of himself on the wall – and the picture of Barad Dûr on the 6th level, including the eye, is definitely weird, but the maps, book and rug certainly help making the tower a little more homely.



In addition to two banners, the entrance level hold a statue (a microfig) and a chandelier which is connected to the mechanism for the light brick. This chandelier hangs from an axle that is inserted into the light brick and a bush is used to keep it in place. Given the level of detail and attention that is given to this set, I was surprised to see the bush was Light Bluish Gray, when Black would have been so much more appropriate as well as less visible. There is also a trap door that opens up the floor to the dungeon, and of course the entrance to the tower.

Aside from the fact that it is on the 3rd level of the tower, the elements of Saruman's throne room are very similar to those in 79005 – The Wizard Battle, except for the fact that the Wizard Battle is an action set and the Palantir in the tower is absolutely perfect, especially when illuminated with the light brick. The balcony is essentially an exterior element, but is also on this level.

The next level (with the barred windows) holds a lab for creating the explosive device that was used in the battle of Helm's Deep. It also holds the third mechanism in the tower: a kind of cauldron or melting pot on a moving pedestal. The 5th level holds Saruman's study, with maps, the pictures of the five wizards I mentioned earlier (which are stuck on the inside of the slopes that make up the wall) and a book are the main features. Hidden behind the lectern that holds the book are another two of the five skulls in this set.

Level 6 is accessed by a trap door in the ceiling with a foldable ladder, the last mechanism in the tower. In this "hidden" attic you can find the staffs of the remaining three wizards and two keys ... for the two towers, in clear reference to the dialogue



between Saruman and Gandalf in the film. It also contains a full set of armour for an Uruk Hai (except the breastplate).

The verdict

The tower of Orthanc is a great play set, mainly because the tower is really iconic (and well replicated) and the rooms are very detailed. The mechanisms add to the playability, as do the minifigs (and maxifig) that come with the set. Each level is different, both inside and outside, but while this prevents the set from becoming boring, there is also an internal harmony between the parts of the tower. The build is quite enjoyable and the set is an absolute must-have for die-hard fans of the theme.

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