

Surviving 'The Drive' to Walt Disney World: A Walt Disney World Planning Article

by Shaun Turner, PassPorter Guest Contributor

999 miles, 18 hours, each direction.

Such was the challenge set before my wife and I ahead of our most recent family trip to Walt Disney World. The decision to drive did not come easily, but the experience taught us much about ourselves, our children, our finances, and our love of Disney. I have little doubt that reading about our experience and our insights will prove valuable for anyone considering "the drive."

Why drive to Walt Disney World? For us, the decision to drive was largely financial. For my family of four, flights alone would have cost roughly \$1200, while gas for our minivan cost us \$240. For anyone looking to do the math, determine the overall mileage of your trip, divide it by your vehicle's miles per gallon statistic and then multiply that by the current cost of gas. For us this was 2000 miles divided by 25 mpg times \$3 a gallon, which equaled \$240. We did get our minivan serviced both before and after our trip, but factoring in those costs, we still saved roughly \$800 by driving. Additionally, since this particular trip was going to be a penny-pinching affair, having our own car enabled us to stay at a non-Disney hotel. While we did need to pay for parking each day that we visited the theme parks, that cost (\$15 a day times 5 days), was easily offset by both a free continental breakfast and the significantly reduced room rates that come from staying off-site. We easily saved an additional \$700 dollars by staying off-site, bringing our total savings to roughly \$2000.

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□The Plan: Our goal for the drive south was ambitious: At 12:00 noon we were to pick up my son after his last day of school and then drive through the night until we reached the front gates of Magic Kingdom at 8:30 am to witness the opening of the park. The goal for our drive back home was to spend our last day at Magic Kingdom and then begin driving home some time between lunch and dinner. We would arrive home whenever we made it, likely first thing the next morning.

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□The Strategy: Planning for two 18-hours drives took quite a bit of work. Obviously we needed to choose a route, but we also needed to find ways to keep our children busy, to determine who would drive when and for how long, and how the awake driver would in fact stay awake.

The Route: Directions were as simple as using Google Maps, however I would encourage anyone considering the drive to project possible traffic issues they might encounter. When debating between three paths, we knew that while slightly longer, one route would avoid several notoriously bad rush hour spots five hours into our trip.

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□The Schedule: In determining the driving schedule, rather than set specific times we would trade off, my wife and I simply switched when we needed to. Staying awake did not prove to be difficult for us, since we made sure to get several good nights worth of sleep before the trip. Being well rested was by far the best way to ensure we would stay awake, however let me share briefly some other techniques that helped us as well: audio books, energy drinks, sunflower seeds, keeping the windows down, and talking to one another.

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□The Kids: Keeping children busy during any long driver can be challenging, and it certainly was during this trip. We did however have a number of ideas that might prove helpful to others. 1. We did not tell them we were going to Walt Disney World, only that we were going for a drive. As a result, we got through the first 2-3 hours without any "are we there yet" issues, since they didn't know how long we would even be in the car. Once we finally told them it would be a long trip, we only said we were going to Florida, so they had no idea we were headed to Disney and as a result they were never overly hyper or impatient. 2. While driving through the night was taxing on my wife and I physically, the kids consequently slept through half of the trip, which in turn made the remaining time they were awake much more pleasant. 3. Having a variety of activities, books, movies, audio books, toys, and crafts kept them busy the majority of the time they were awake.

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□The Experience: Growing up I heard stories of my grandparents driving to Florida with my father and his brothers and always considered the trek some type of parental rite of passage, and rite of passage it did turn out to be. Truly, the drive down was not bad at all. We hit little traffic, only drove through one bad storm, and consequently made great time. We made such great time that we actually arrived in Orlando at 6:00 am and needed to kill time until the parking lots opened. I drove from 12 pm to 9 pm (with gas and food breaks), my wife then drove from 9 pm to 2 am (while I slept), and I then finished the drive down from 2 am to 6 am. Only when we were sitting in a local restaurant eating breakfast did we tell the kids when we were two miles from Disney World.

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□While the drive down was pleasant, the journey back home several days later was far from enjoyable. First, we decided to depart, not around lunch time as planned, but until after Wishes was over at 10 pm.

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As a result, I was beyond exhausted during the overnight portion of the trip and I consider us lucky to have not had an accident or any other issues. If you make a plan for when you will begin driving home, don't get sucked into the magic of Disney and alter your schedule! I drove from 11 pm to 7 am, and then my wife handled the remainder of the trip. Bad weather, cranky children, and raw emotions made this drive nearly unbearable as we did not arrive home until dinner time. Once we arrived home it took at least three or four days to fully recover from not only an incredible time at Disney, but the drive itself.

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□Takeaways: Considering how easy our drive down was, how tough the drive back home turned out to be, and then weighing the significant financial savings (over \$1900), it is challenging for me to objectively assess if it was all worth it. We knew from the beginning this particular trip would be rather "low budget" and driving not only helped us save on gas, but also on food, hotel costs, and time while in Florida (no waiting for buses or shuttles). At the same time, driving proved to be a both physically and mentally challenging endeavor, though most of our challenges took place after we left Disney.

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□At the end of the day I would encourage others to consider driving if a) it is the only way you can afford to visit Disney World and b) you are willing to pay the emotional and physical costs associated with the drive. If both these criteria apply to you, by all means drive. If however you do not financially need to drive, or you are even the least bit uncertain about your family's ability to survive that much time in the car I would strongly recommend you consider flying, taking a train, or holding off until you can afford to do so.

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