

Fort Wilderness Resort Camping: Roughing It at Disney

by Jennifer and Dave Marx, Authors of [PassPorter Travel Guidebooks](#)

Years ago, we took Dave's then 7-year-old daughter Allie on a surprise Walt Disney World trip. In order to maintain the surprise, we told her we were going camping. She just assumed we were camping in Michigan, but instead we drove all the way down to Florida to camp at Disney's Fort Wilderness Resort and Campground! We encountered some interesting obstacles in tent camping at Fort Wilderness, so we thought we'd pass along our experiences and tips to you!

CHALLENGES WE FACED

Driving down to Florida. We always fly -- it's just too far from Michigan. But in order to go tent camping, we had to bring our camping gear with us and it wasn't going to fit in our luggage. Yet our car was too small for three people and all our gear. So we rented a mid-size car with a big trunk. We also split our 20-hour drive into two parts, stopping for the night at Dave's brother's house in Atlanta. We carried along a copy of Dave Hunter's invaluable guidebook *Along Interstate 75* (Mile Oak Publishing) and at the author's request, noted any changes we encountered along the way.

Concealing the surprise.

Keeping an anxious 7-year-old in the dark isn't easy, but we did it. She didn't figure out that we weren't camping in Michigan until she spied a road sign. "We're in Georgia???? My cousins live in Georgia!" Dave had bet Jennifer that Allie would notice something was up within five hours. Of course, the Georgia border was more like nine hours from Ann Arbor. Fortunately for Dave (unfortunately for Jennifer), there was no money riding on the outcome. To keep Allie distracted along the way, we brought new books and games that were given to her periodically for good behavior. To keep everyone distracted we packed audio CDs of several Harry Potter books.

Keeping up with our e-mail.

We have a commitment to check our e-mail daily, regardless of where we are. So we did some advance planning and purchased a special modem for our laptop that worked with our cellphone. [Update: High-speed Internet access is now available at select campsites for an extra charge -- inquire when you make your reservation if this is important to you.]

Staying cool in the Florida heat.

We KNEW that Florida would be very hot at this time of the year. To prepare, we purchased a battery-operated fan to use inside the tent. We discarded another idea -- bringing a portable air conditioner -- as being too expensive and bulky. A larger, plug-in fan might have been a good compromise.

Getting around the "World."

Having stayed at Fort Wilderness before (in the Wilderness Homes), we knew that getting around was challenging. We hoped that the car would help alleviate that a bit.

WHAT TO PACK

You'll need virtually everything you'd take on a regular tent camping expedition. Here's an inventory of what we brought: Large three-room tent, small "play" tent, dining tent, groundcloths, outdoor mat, sleeping bags, air mattress, camp chairs, camp table, flashlights, portable fan, lanterns, table cloth, extension cords, clothesline, clothespins, bug repellent, broom and dustpan, trashbags, towels, toiletries, clothes, rain gear, laundry supplies, a roll of quarters, snacks, laptop computer, and cellphone. We did not intend to cook at our campsite, so we left our propane stove and kitchen stuff at home. Everything we brought fit in the truck of a mid-size car, and we used everything we brought.

The dining tent may seem like a luxury to some, but we found it very helpful when it rained (which it did on our second and third days). And remember rain isn't unusual for Florida. Coat your tent seams with sealant before you go, or you may be bailing, just as we were!

The portable fan was priceless in the stifling August heat. The battery-operated fan wasn't large, but it put out a good breeze. We also bought fan misters at the parks and used those to cool ourselves off at night. If we go tent camping at Fort Wilderness again (which we hope to), we WILL NOT go in August if we can help it. It's just too hot.

Among the snacks we brought were marshmallows and S'mores fixin's -- though there are no fires allowed at the campsites, a big, central campfire with Chip and Dale is held nightly. You can buy the marshmallow sticks and snacks at the campfire, but it is cheaper to bring them from home. The only problem is that the Florida heat melted our chocolate! Eeewy gooey! So if you plan to eat S'mores , keep the fixin's in a cooler, or just buy them when you need 'em.

We used the laptop and cellphone to keep up with our e-mail while we were camping. The connections were slow and spotty, but it did work for e-mail. Web browsing was another matter, though. Having a 100 foot extension cord for the laptop and phone charger helped greatly,

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too. Note: There are some phone jacks at the Reception Outpost (check-in center) which you could use if you are in a similar situation. We used them once, but found it more work to drive up there and plug in than to wrestle with the slow cellphone connections back at the site.

WHAT WE DID

Tent campers can stay in the partial hookup sites (just water and electricity), but we chose a full hookup site so we'd be a bit closer to transportation (a huge help!). Full hookup adds sewer, which we didn't need of course. We specifically requested a site close to the Comfort Station in loop 800 (Jack Rabbit Run), and our request was granted. We liked loop 800 quite a bit as it was within reasonable walking distance of all the important things: boat transportation, bus transportation, the Trading Post, and the campfire circle. We used the map in PassPorter to choose our loop.

Because we were in a full hookup loop, most of our campground neighbors were in medium to large trailers. As a result, we found that the Comfort Stations (restroom/laundry facilities) weren't overcrowded. And if we visited them at off-hours, we usually had them to ourselves. We found it helpful to keep our resort ID cards and flashlights with us at all times -- the resort ID cards because the Comfort Stations were locked at night and you needed the card to get in, and the flashlights because it was pretty dark around the campground after sunset.

We loved the nightly campfire, singalong, and movie. It was well worth the time. We also took a canoe trip (we loved it, Allie was a little squeamish). At the last minute, we decided to try for a table at the Hoop-Dee-Doo Revue -- we were able to get same-day reservations and we had a WONDERFUL time. Our table was right next to the stage (we must have gotten someone's cancelled table).

One thing we never did was use the car once we arrived. It was parked in our campsite the entire time. Why not? We simply forgot to use it; it was just too easy to hop on the bus or boat. Besides, driving around Walt Disney World just isn't as magical as letting someone else do the driving.

WHAT WE WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME

Just one thing: we'd camp in cooler weather. Other than the heat, we thoroughly enjoyed our Fort Wilderness camping experience, and we're eager to do it again when the temperature is more moderate.

Be sure to also check out our article on [Wilderness Cabins!](#)

Tip: To learn more about Fort Wilderness, visit Jeff Spencer's informative site at http://home.hiwaay.net/~jlsponce/faq_fw.htm

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About The Authors: [Jennifer and Dave Marx](#) are the founders of PassPorter Travel Press/MediaMarx, Inc. and the authors of dozens of bestselling books. They live in Ann Arbor, Michigan and frequently travel within the U.S. and abroad.

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