

Backstage Magic Tour: Behind the Scenes at Walt Disney World

by Bernie Edwards, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Are you curious about how Disney makes the magic at Walt Disney World? Want to see some of what goes on backstage? If so, then I suggest taking a behind the scenes tour. My absolute favorite tour at Walt Disney World is the Backstage Magic Tour. Backstage Magic is about seven hours long, and takes you behind the scenes in several parks. On my tour last year, we visited Epcot, Disney's Hollywood Studios, and the Magic Kingdom. However, I understand tours today now include Disney's Animal Kingdom as well. I've had the privilege of visiting Walt Disney World over 100 times in my life and I still learned a lot of new things on the tour!

After meeting outside of Epcot early in the morning and getting our name tags, we were led to an air conditioned Disney Cruise Line bus and told that would be our transportation for the day. On board we were given bottles of cold water and told that we could get as much as we wanted throughout the day. We were immediately taken around the perimeter of Epcot to the back of the American Adventure pavilion.

At the American Adventure pavilion, we were led inside and shown the "scene changer," also known by some Disney fans as the "war wagon." It is an amazing piece of machinery that changes the detailed sets and audio-animatronics that appear on stage. Outside the pavilion, our guide told us the pavilion uses forced perspective, but instead of trying to make the building appear larger than it really is, such as how forced perspective is used with Cinderella Castle, it is used here to make the building appear smaller than it really is. Also be sure to look at the flag on top of the pavilion and count the number of stars and stripes!

Our next stop on the tour was the Epcot Cast building. We were shown a learning center, a break area, costuming, and a character make up area where we happened to see Princess Belle getting ready for her day! At the Costuming area we saw how Cast Members got new costumes and dropped off used costumes for cleaning; we were also shown some of the various costumes Mickey Mouse has available at Epcot. We were also shown a large area of personal lockers and asked if we could figure out why the floor was made up of little sections of different types of flooring, including tile and pieces of carpets. The answer is a lot of Cast Members walk through the area daily and it is a clever way for Disney to test various materials! After that we were off to Disney's Hollywood Studios.

At the Studios, we went backstage at the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror. There we got to look real close at a ride vehicle and learned how it could go forward and backward as well as up and down. As an engineer and fan of the attraction, I had to get on the floor and look up underneath the ride vehicle; our tour guide didn't mind and I loved seeing the "guts" of the vehicle! We also visited the Creative Costuming Department and learned how they've outfitted some performers for various parades and shows over the years. I especially enjoyed seeing how costumes were designed on computers and how computers controlled the various machines to cut the different pieces of cloth for the costumes. After that we headed to lunch, which is included in the cost of the tour.

On my tour we ate lunch at the Whispering Canyon Cafe inside Disney's Wilderness Lodge. Lunch was served family-style and the atmosphere was more subdued than at dinner when the restaurant is wild and crazy (one of my favorite places to dine with my family)! It was a great break in the day and everybody on my tour left full and refreshed. It also gave us an opportunity to learn a little bit about each other. After lunch we headed to the Magic Kingdom backstage area.

Our first stop was where laundry is done for the resort. We saw bags and bags of sheets, pillow cases, towels, etc. being carried overhead by an automatic conveyor system. It reminded me of the scene in the film *Monsters Inc.* where all of the doors are carried overhead. Our next stop was Central Shops. This is where some ride vehicles are built or refurbished. We saw work being done on various Jungle Cruise animals and on the ride vehicles for *Journey into Imagination*. We were even allowed to touch some of the animals to learn more about how they work. After that we were shown some audio-animatronic models that were being worked on, and even Bonnie Appetite from the extinct *Kitchen Kabaret* attraction. We also got to see various Walt Disney World signs that are made in Central Shops as well. In the paint shop, we saw a large mural of what the park looked like when it first opened in 1971. We then boarded our bus and were taken to the parking lot between Tomorrowland and Main Street for our final behind the scenes visit.

On my tour, they saved the best behind the scenes tour for last -- a visit to the world famous Utildoors "under" the Magic Kingdom. While they are commonly referred to as tunnels, the truth is the Utildoors are the first floor of the Magic Kingdom. After they were built, dirt was dug out to make the Seven Seas Lagoon and used to "bury" the Utildoors. When guests visit the park, they are really on the second floor! The Utildoors allow Cast Members to get from one end of the Magic Kingdom to the other end without being seen by guests when necessary; for example, you won't see a Cast Member dressed for Frontierland in

Tomorrowland! We also saw a break room, the PhotoPass center, and where Cast Members go to get new pins to trade with guests.

Our tour ended with us watching the afternoon Magic Kingdom parade from Town Square. However, I understand tours today end at the Animal Kingdom with guests learning how Mickey's Jammin' Jungle Parade comes together.

Backstage Magic is my favorite behind the scenes tour at Walt Disney World. It currently costs \$224 per guest, but theme park admission is not required. Guests must be at least 16 years old and tours are limited to 20 guests. While expensive, I think it is worth every penny. As I said in the beginning, I personally learned a lot on my tour and enjoyed every minute! However, if you're not sure a behind the scenes tour is right for you and your family, then I suggest trying the Keys to the Kingdom tour in the Magic Kingdom first. That tour is much shorter and only costs \$70 per guest, not including the admission to the Magic Kingdom. I suggest making a reservation for all tours as far in advance as you can; reservations can be made at (407) WDW-TOUR. When you call, be sure to ask about discounts. Generally, there are discounts available for Annual Passholders, Disney Vacation Club members, American Automobile Association members, and Disney Visa Cardholders.

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