

Kennedy Space Center: A Day Out of Time and In To Space!

by Sue Kulick, PassPorter Featured Columnist

If you'd like to try something different during your next Walt Disney World trip, why not spend a day (or two) at Kennedy Space Center (KSC)?

An easy drive from Walt Disney World, KSC offers a day that is both fun and educational!

I grew up in the 1960's and 1970's, when I watched the Space Program grow from its infancy to the full-fledged program it is today. I grieved for the astronauts of Apollo 1, and listened as Jim Lovell offered his Christmas Eve prayer from Apollo 8 in 1968. I celebrated the triumph of Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon from Apollo 11, and held my breath with the rest of the world as a wounded Apollo 13 limped her way back to earth. I kept a scrapbook of the Apollo-Soyuz mission, and watched each Space Shuttle mission without a thought that this would ever become "routine."

So when my husband Steve and I got the opportunity to spend a day at KSC, my space-geek heart jumped at the chance!

We got to KSC about an hour or so after opening. I had bought the tickets in advance, taking advantage of a significant AAA discount. Crowds were light, and the weather was beautiful. While waiting in line, we noticed that in addition to the regular KSC bus tour included with admission, there were several specialty tours available for an additional charge. We had our choice of "Cape Canaveral, Then and Now" or "NASA, Close-up." We chose "NASA, Close-up."

Tickets in hand, we walked through security. I had my bag searched, and we walked through a metal detector (very similar to the ones at the airport). I made it through, but Steve's belt beeped. A quick wave of the security wand, and he was cleared, too.

We headed first to Information Central. There we picked up maps and brochures, not only for our day, but for my scrapbook! From there, we headed over to the gift shop, appropriately called "The Space Shop." We wanted to pick up a few things here, and we wanted to get it out of the way early. We gathered our things and paid, and the generous people there offered to hold our purchases until our day was done.

From there, we walked through NASA Central. We headed out past the

Constellation Sphere and strolled back to the Astronaut Memorial. The Space Mirror Memorial, as it is called, is a wall of highly polished black granite engraved with the names of all those who have given their lives in the pursuit of space exploration. Flags fly in the background and reflect in the wall. It is very quiet and serene here, a contrast to the bustling Space Center surrounding you. We spent quite a bit of time there, just reflecting on the memories.

We walked back to the Space Shuttle Plaza, an area dedicated to the Space Shuttle program. We explored the area. For the intrepid (not me, however!) there is The Shuttle Launch Experience, which takes travelers on a virtual launch and orbit in a Space Shuttle.

Our bus time was drawing near, so we walked over to the bus loading area. Soon our bus arrived, with our driver, George, and our tour guide, Anne. Anne gave out pamphlets with information about what we were going to see (more space-geek scrapbooking stuff!) and soon we were on the tour.

We started out down the causeway, and came to a stop just south of the Banana River. From here, you could see across to where the Space Shuttle Endeavor sat on the launch pad in preparation for her upcoming launch! To the left of our stop was a viewing area reserved for visiting dignitaries and relatives of the astronauts to watch a launch. It wasn't exactly luxury viewing…it looked more like high school football bleachers!

From there, we headed back down the causeway, while Anne explained the various buildings to us. We passed Headquarters, which is the nerve center of the spaceport. We passed Operations and Checkout, which is where the astronauts train and stay when they are preparing for a mission. There was also a building that housed the International Space Station assembly center. This is a stop on the regular KSC tour, and it is open to the public. We did not have enough time to come back to it, but it's on the list for the future.

Our tour now took us past the massive Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB). This familiar landmark with its huge NASA logo and American flag on it housed two separate doors: a very tall one for the old Saturn rockets to pass through and a smaller door that the more compact shuttles fit through!

We were next dropped off at what looked like a large platform in the middle of nowhere, called the LC-39 Observation Gantry. Anne told us that we had 30 minutes to enjoy the area, and that there was food available for sale. We walked across the small courtyard. You could

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either take the steps or the elevator up to the top. We chose the steps and were enjoying the various memorabilia from past shuttle missions that were set up on every level. And did I mention that this was no ordinary gantry? We looked out across a short section of marshland to see Endeavour sitting proudly on Launch Pad A, less than $\frac{1}{4}$ mile away! Right behind her, on Launch Pad B, sat Atlantis, getting readied for takeoff in case there were problems with Endeavour. OK, so this pretty much sent the space-geek in me into overdrive! It's a good thing I had a digital camera, because I probably would have blown through four rolls of film just on that sight alone!

The 30 minutes passed quickly. We grabbed a (very pricey) snack and headed back to the bus. We were let out at the Vehicle Assembly Building for some photo ops, and then, we drove on what looked like an ordinary road, but in actuality was part of the runway that the shuttle lands on if she touches down in Florida!

Our tour was drawing to a close. We returned to the Apollo/Saturn V Center to end our tour and continue our day. We were escorted into a theater-type room which was built just like the real Mission Control. In there, we watched a film narrated by Jim Lovell, commander of Apollo 13, about mankind's missions to the moon. After the show, we went into the Apollo/Saturn V center, where each Apollo mission is highlighted. I wandered around and got so engrossed that I actually lost Steve and had to text him to find him!

From there, we took the regular bus back to the Visitor Complex. Our next stop was the IMAX Theater. Again, we had a choice of two films. The IMAX theater is included in the price of your admission, and you could see both if you'd like. The choices were "Space Station 3-D" and "Magnificent Desolation: Walking on the Moon." We chose "Magnificent Desolation," partly because of the topic and partly because Tom Hanks was narrating it. The film was great, but no spoilers here!

By now it was getting late and we were getting tired. We went into the gift shop and retrieved our purchases, and left KSC and all its magic behind. There were more things that we didn't get to see: The Rocket Garden, The Mad Mission to Mars, and the Early Space Exploration Center. For us, KSC is a two-day trip.

Admission is \$38/adults, \$28/child (3-11). AAA gave a \$6 discount off the adult admission. Your admission includes all the exhibits mentioned above, the basic tour and admission to the Astronauts Hall of Fame, right down the road from KSC. The tickets are good for two days. They don't need to be consecutive days, but they need to be used within a week. The specialty tours are \$21/adult and \$15/child. There are

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additional programs available, including Lunch with an Astronaut (\$22.99/adult and \$15.99/child) and the Astronaut Training Experience (price varies).

The Center is open daily, except for Christmas Day, from 9 till 5:30. The Astronaut Hall of Fame is open from 9:00 am till 6:30 pm. The Center may not be open, or all areas may not be accessible on launch days. Regular tours begin at 10:00 AM and run till about 2:15 every 15 minutes. Plan on devoting at least 2 hours to the tour. If you have an interest in space exploration, or just want to have a day of fun, try [Kennedy Space Center!](#)

About The Author: Sue Kulick is a resident of the Pocono Mountains and an avid Disney fan. She and her husband, Steve, live in a log home with their Golden Retrievers, Cody and Belle and their cat Tigger.

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