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Planning Your First Trip to a New Park: Tips From a Theme Park Veteran

by Bernie Edwards, PassPorter Guest Contributor

As a member of the Walt Disney World Moms Panel, I get asked a lot of questions about visiting Walt Disney World. Some of my favorites are from guests who call Disneyland their home resort and who have never been to Walt Disney World before. This article will look at planning a first-time visit to Walt Disney World from the perspective of a Disneyland veteran.

While the Disneyland Resort and the Walt Disney World Resort have many things in common, there are also some big differences. The first obvious difference is the mammoth size of Walt Disney World. It is the world's largest recreational resort at 47 square miles, which is slightly larger than San Francisco, California. It consists of four theme parks, two water parks, twenty-two Disney-owned themed resort hotels, several independently-owned hotels, a campground, four golf courses, two miniature golf courses, two health spas, a sports complex, and two entertainment and shopping districts.

Probably the first step in planning is to determine when to go and how long to stay. For a Disneyland Resort vacation, I usually recommend spending three full days in the parks. At Walt Disney World, you need at least five full days if you want to visit all four theme parks and actually experience the majority of the attractions, parades, shows, fireworks, etc. However, if your schedule and budget allows, then I recommend staying a whole week. A week will give you the opportunity to experience a lot of what's available at Walt Disney World, both inside and outside of the parks, without having to run around like a maniac.

Getting to Walt Disney World is very easy for guests staying on-site at a Disney owned resort. If you are a Disney resort guest, you can be transported from Orlando International Airport to Walt Disney World via the complimentary Disney's Magical Express service. You can bypass baggage claim, board a custom motor coach, and watch a video about Walt Disney World. Meanwhile, your luggage will be collected at the airport and later delivered directly to your room.

Unlike Disneyland, there is a large variety of on-site Disney-owned lodging at Walt Disney World. Disney hotels consist of twenty-two themed resort hotels distributed among the following categories: Value Resorts, Moderate Resorts, Deluxe Resorts, and Disney Deluxe Villas. Disney Deluxe Villas are really Disney Vacation Club properties, but guests can stay there without being a Disney Vacation Club member.

There is also Fort Wilderness, a themed camping resort with camp sites and cabins. Finally, there are independently owned and operated hotels on Disney property, such as the Downtown Disney Hilton and the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin hotels. While the most apparent difference between Value, Moderate, and Deluxe is price, there are also other differences such as room size, amenities, features at the pool (such as a water slide), and whether the rooms exit to an internal hallway or to the outside (like a typical motel).

If you have young children, consider staying at one of the monorail resorts: the Grand Floridian, Contemporary, or Polynesian. That's because if you have young children, you may be spending a lot of your time in the Magic Kingdom and the monorail provides easy access to that park, in addition to making it easy to return to your hotel room for a break or a nap. Another good choice for families with young children is the Animal Kingdom Lodge; it's a spectacular resort and most children enjoy watching the animals nearby. However, I generally only recommend staying at the Animal Kingdom Lodge if you have a car. My personal favorite is the Wilderness Lodge. It's has a fabulous theme and I especially enjoy taking the boat from the lodge to the Magic Kingdom, especially at night.

A great perk for on-site Disney resort guests is Extra Magic Hours. Each day, one park will open an hour early, similar to Magic Morning at Disneyland, or stay open three hours after closing to the general public. Evening Extra Magic Hours are especially enjoyable if they are very late, such as midnight to 3 am at the Magic Kingdom during the summer; I also enjoy evening Extra Magic Hours during the winter months at Disney's Animal Kingdom because that park is absolutely gorgeous at night but usually doesn't stay open late.

For a Disneyland veteran, a big difference in visiting Walt Disney World is the need to make advanced dining reservations. When visiting Disneyland in California, I've routinely walked in to the most popular table service restaurants without a reservation without any problems; if I'm really planning ahead, I might make a reservation a few days or a couple of weeks in advance. That strategy doesn't work very well at Walt Disney World, and in my opinion, doesn't work at all during the most popular times of the year. Advanced dining reservations can be made up to 180 days in advance and it's actually critical to do so for the most popular table service restaurants.

Just like at Disneyland, some of the best dining at Walt Disney World can be found in Downtown Disney or at the Disney resort hotels. Dining there also makes a great break from the parks. However, unlike Disneyland, you just can't walk to them (the Epcot area resorts are an

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exception) and thus getting to them is a lot harder. Generally speaking, Disney buses do not run from one resort hotel to another, making getting around a little tricky. The largest cluster of restaurants with easy access can be found at the monorail resorts in the Magic Kingdom area; the monorail makes getting from one resort to another resort very easily. The second largest cluster is at the Epcot area resorts, which circle Crescent Lake between Epcot and Disney's Hollywood Studios; you can easily walk from resort to resort and to those two theme parks as well. My personal favorite restaurants outside of the parks include 'Ohana in the Polynesian Resort, Boma in the Animal Kingdom Lodge, the Yachtsman Steakhouse in the Yacht Club, and Raglan Road in Downtown Disney. For a romantic dinner, I suggest Jiko in the Animal Kingdom Lodge, California Grill in the Contemporary, or Citricos in the Grand Floridian. There are also dinner shows for the whole family, including the very popular Hoop-Dee-Doo Musical Revue at Fort Wilderness.

When planning your trip, be sure to reserve at least a day in the middle for some "down time" away from the theme parks and water parks. Besides just sitting back and relaxing at your resort hotel pool, there are numerous outdoor activities to enjoy if you want an active day off. Boating, fishing, and water sports are available on the numerous lakes at Walt Disney World; you just can't swim in them. You can even go parasailing for a bird's eye view of the resort. There's also horseback riding at Fort Wilderness and golfing on one of several courses. For a nice break with the family, try miniature golf course; my favorite is the Winter Summerland course outside Blizzard Beach.

Downtown Disney is much larger at Walt Disney World than at Disneyland, with many more restaurant, shops, and even attractions. For something really unique, try La Nouba, a Cirque du Soleil show exclusive to the Walt Disney World Resort. It's performed in a special theater in Downtown Disney built specifically for Cirque du Soleil. The show's international cast of acrobats, athletes, and artists do an amazing job entertaining guests of all ages. La Nouba is very popular, so be sure to get tickets ahead of your visit! Also in Downtown Disney is DisneyQuest; Disney refers to DisneyQuest as an indoor interactive theme park. It is housed in a five-story building and contains numerous virtual reality attractions and both classic and new arcade games. My "must do" attractions in DisneyQuest include Pirates of the Caribbean, Cyber Space Mountain, and Buzz Lightyear's Astroblasters.

Walt Disney World is my favorite place to visit on Earth! Be sure to plan ahead and set aside enough time to enjoy your visit without having to run around. It's impossible to do everything in one trip. I've visited Walt Disney World over 100 times, and there are still things I have never

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experienced. If you have any questions, be sure to ask my friends at www.disneyworldmoms.com

About The Author: Bernie Edwards lives in Maryland with his wife and two children. He is an engineer for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and a member of the Walt Disney World Moms Panel. He enjoys visiting both Walt Disney World and Disneyland.

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