



Navigational assistance for your Disney adventure

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FOR THE INQUIRER

With a footprint the size of San Francisco, Orlando's Walt Disney World rivals the scope of any major city as a destination. It has six theme parks; myriad places to stay, including villas, hotels, and campgrounds; golf courses, a sports complex, a boardwalk, and a downtown; and a wide range of dining options. Factor in the crowds — WDW is home to four of the top eight most-visited amusement parks worldwide — and a visit to Disney World can be a little overwhelming. Consider these tips for navigating this vacation metropolis.

Research available attractions and experiences before your trip. With four full-scale amusement parks and two water parks, Walt Disney World offers too many options to absorb in a single glance of a park map when you walk through the gate. Study before you go. WDW is happy to school you via its website or free DVD. Worthwhile books include *The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World*, *Birnbaum's Walt Disney World*, and *Fodor's Walt Disney World With Kids*.

Use available intelligence and technology to plot a strategy. The vendor touringplans.com extensively researches, tracks, and predicts crowd levels on a 1-to-10 scale to help you determine what time of year to go and even which park will be the least crowded each day. Its experts have also developed field-tested touring plans (Dumbo-or-Die-in-a-Day plan is a favorite) that provide step-by-step guides for seeing as much as possible with a minimum of standing in line. Once you're there, touringplan.com subscribers can access the Lines application on their Web-enabled smartphones to see real-time information about current wait times. A \$10.95 investment buys superb time-management tools.

Limit your time in line with FastPass. FastPass is Disney's "ride reservation" system that allows you to bypass standing in line for its most popular attractions. Everyone who enters the park qualifies. Just visit a FastPass kiosk and insert your admission ticket if you want to make a reservation for the posted time. The kiosk will return a pass that allows you to return during the specified one-hour time window and go to the front of the line, even if other tourists are waiting 1 hour or longer in line.

Schedule a character meal to meet Mickey and friends without the wait. Over the last decade or so, Disney has put far more of its characters out on the streets of its theme parks, but waits can still be long. Consider reserving a table at one of the many restaurants in the parks and Disney hotels that offer character dining — check the guidebooks or the Disney website to see who appears where.

Plan far in advance if you want to dine with Cinderella or at any of Disney's table-service restaurants. To secure the best times and most desirable restaurants, stake your claim 180 days in advance of your dining date when reservations first open. Reservations can be made online (Disneyworld.disney.go.com/reservations/dining).

Investigate "perks" for which you might qualify. Certain AAA vacation packages make you eligible to reserve a spot at a special viewing area near Cinderella's castle that provides a view of the nightly fireworks extravaganza or for a special storytelling experience featuring a classic character like Snow White. Holders of a Disney Visa credit card can access a private character meet-and-greet in Epcot, with a complimentary 5-by-7 photo.

Arrive early or stay late to beat the

crowds. Disney park veterans know that being on hand for a park's opening means little or no waiting for the first hour or two. And parks often start to clear out toward closing or while others stake out spots to watch the evening parade or fireworks.

Stay on-property in a Disney hotel to maximize your experience. Vacationers can choose among 20 Disney hotels that range from luxury to budget accommodations. Staying at a Disney hotel offers several advantages. One is Mickey's Magical Express, a complimentary bus service directly from the Orlando airport to your hotel (and you can skip baggage claim — your luggage appears in your room about 3 hours after you land). Another is the "Extra Magic Hours" privilege — every day one of the theme parks is open earlier or later than its posted hours, exclusively for Disney hotel guests.

Use the "baby swap" program. While this won't let you to exchange your cranky child for a content one, it will allow you and another adult in your party to take turns waiting with children too young to experience certain attractions without standing in line twice.

Book a Fantasmic dining package to reserve a good seat for the big show. Many consider Fantasmic, the Hollywood Studios' fireworks, pyrotechnic, and water show, to be the best of Disney's nighttime spectacles. Since Fantasmic almost always attracts a "sellout" crowd to its 10,000-person stadium, competition for seats is fierce. Book a Fantasmic Dining Package for lunch or dinner at the Hollywood Brown Derby or Mama Melrose's Ristorante Italiano or for dinner at the Hollywood & Vine restaurant, and you'll receive a ticket that admits you to a special reserved seating area at the stadium.