



Have a stress-free Disney World vacation

Slideshow



Magical kingdoms

Disneyland has delivered smiles and thrills since it opened in 1955, and its success has spawned parks across the globe.

By Brad Tuttle

Budget Travel

updated 9:52 a.m. CT, Thurs., June 25, 2009

I want my kids to get the most out of their visit—and I want the most out of my money. So what's the perfect age for our first Disney trip?

To an infant, a trip to Target is as exciting as riding on It's a Small World. That is to say, some kids are just too young to fully appreciate the [Disney](#) experience. Even toddlers are amazed by simpler things—a petting zoo, the county fair, a bug on a stick. Go when your kids will be capable of walking (and walking and walking); when they understand that the payoff for a 75-minute line just might be worth it; when they won't be freaked out by enormous cartoon characters who have come to life and want to give them hugs; and, perhaps most important, when they'll remember both the trip and what wonderful parents you were for taking them there. Cut to the chase: The perfect age for the trip is 8.

Should we go with a package or book all the components of our trip separately?

Unfortunately, the only way to figure out whether a "deal" is a deal is to research what each component would cost separately, tally up the total, and compare that with the package price. A few tips:

- 1.** There are no freebies. Promotions claiming to include "free" airfare, meals, or admissions are deceptively alluring. Remember that what matters is the package's overall cost.
- 2.** Many packages are good values compared to paying à la carte—but only if you're actually interested in everything in the package. Chances are you won't want admission tickets on your arrival and departure days, for example, and you may be ready for a day off from the parks in the middle of your trip. But many packages automatically include the maximum number of passes for a trip's duration.
- 3.** Disney's Web site is, well, difficult—not least because it pushes extras and never lays out all the options and details you need to make an informed decision (actual prices, anyone?). Calling a Disney agent is better (407/939-6244).

What sort of tickets should we get? One-day or multiday? Park Hopper or one park only?

People 10 and up pay \$75 for a one-day pass, but the average daily cost goes down sharply on multi-day tickets. A seven-day pass, for example, averages out to \$32 a day. There are many add-ons, too, including the popular Park Hopper feature, which lets you visit more than one park in a day. The feature tacks a flat \$50 onto an adult multi-day ticket, so ask yourself if you really have it in you to do that much in one day. Finally, don't wait until you get to Disney to decide on a pass. Buy in advance, either as part of your [vacation package](#) or through a discounter like [Undercover Tourist](#) (800/846-1302), which can save you several dollars per day.

Should we stay inside the park or outside?

Disney has made it hard to argue for staying outside the park, even though it's way cheaper. Among other perks, [Disney hotel](#) guests enjoy extra hours in the parks and complimentary airport transfers via the Magical Express bus. As for where to stay inside Disney, ease is as much a factor as price. We like the Contemporary Resort (the only hotel within walking distance of the Magic Kingdom); Fort Wilderness Resort (the faux-rustic cabins fit six comfortably); and the All-Star Movies Resort (rooms are small but cheap, from \$82). If Disney's value resorts are booked, the only other options on-site

may run \$300 a night or more. Outside the park, you'll find tons of hotels at a quarter of that rate—and there are always house rentals. While three-bedroom units at vacation rental site vrbo.com go for about \$150 a night, the equivalent inside Disney would easily cost \$700.

Are the meal plans worth it?

Basically, they're only worth it if you eat a lot (the portions tend to be hefty) and if you were going to have the bulk of your meals in the parks anyway. Note that the pricier plans include sit-down meals that'll take up a lot of time—time that might be better spent riding rides or enjoying laser shows. Better to stick with the two most basic plans (Quick-Service or the standard Dining plan, which cost \$30 to \$40 per day per adult and about \$10 per day per kid). Or just forget the meal plan and do the following:

- 1.** Get a fridge in your hotel room. Disney charges \$10 a day at some properties, but it's worth it.
- 2.** Have groceries delivered ahead of time from gardengrocer.com (866/855-4350).
- 3.** Have breakfast in your room every morning.
- 4.** Bring snacks and a picnic lunch like everybody else. Disney allows small coolers, but no glass, in the parks. Freeze juice boxes ahead of time so they'll still be cold for lunch; they'll also keep sandwiches cool and fruit fresh. 5) Figure on buying some hot dogs and mouse-ear-shaped ice cream here and there, and expect to pay inflated, ballpark-level prices.

Do we need a stroller? Should we bring one or rent one?

Yes, you need a stroller. Heck, a lot of adults wish they could have someone wheeling their tired bones around. Bring your own stroller, preferably a sturdy umbrella type that folds up easily and quickly. Disney's strollers can't be taken outside the park gates, and chances are good that you're going to wish you had one in the parking lots or at the hotel or airport. And Disney's rentals are pricey: \$15 a day for a single or \$31 for a double, with a small discount (\$2 to \$4 off) for multi-day use.

How do we pack in all of the things we want to see and do?

You don't. You can get up early, rush around, and strategize to beat the crowds all you want, but remember: You're on vacation. Relax. And assume that you'll be back.

Suprisingly free stuff

Make a race car

Outside the Lego Imagination Center in Downtown [Disney](#) is a 3,000-square-foot area with bins and bins of Legos. Kids can build whatever they want—like race cars that speed along a sloping track. Huge Lego sculptures, including a dinosaur, a robot, and a dragon emerging from a lake, are the work of professionals.

Learn to use the force

At [Hollywood](#) Studios, there's a stage that several times a day hosts a Jedi Training Academy, in which two dozen or so kids are picked to learn the Jedi arts from a full-fledged master. It's worth showing up early to make sure your child gets picked.

Gather 'round the campfire

Be sure to catch the nightly sing-along and outdoor movies at Fort Wilderness Resort. Bring marshmallows for toasting or purchase a s'mores kit at the nearby Meadow Trading Post.

Captain the monorail

Before boarding, ask a cast member (a.k.a. a Disney employee) if your child can ride with the driver. Four people are allowed per trip.

Walk right in

Throughout 2009, get in free on your birthday. Register in advance at disneyparks.com and bring ID.

ResourcesOur favorite Disney guidebook is "The Unofficial Guide to Walt [Disney World](#) 2009" (Wiley, \$20). The 850-page tome is loaded with practical advice and info you won't find anywhere else, plus quotes from real Disney visitors who weigh in with their opinions and tips.

The following independent Web sites are also obsessively detailed and helpful: wdwinfo.com, mousesavers.com, allears.net, themeparkinsider.com, and wdwplanner.com.

Princess time!

Get up close and personal with your kids' heroes at "character meals" around the parks.

What you pay varies based on whom you dine with, and when. (Starting prices for all characters based on kids 10 and up.)

- **Goofy** \$14, breakfast at Vero Beach Resort
- **Mickey Mouse** \$19, breakfast at Animal Kingdom
- **Jasmine** \$29, breakfast at Epcot [Norway](#) Pavilion
- **Ariel** \$31, lunch at Epcot Norway Pavilion
- **Cinderella** \$32, dinner at Grand Floridian Resort & Spa

More tips

Especially sunny day? Go to Animal Kingdom, which was designed to have more shade than any other park.

Psst! There's a black market for rental strollers from families leaving early. Don't pay more than \$5.

Buy tickets through AAA and you can park right by the front gate in a AAA Diamond Lot.