

## Dashing Through The ... Snow?: Sleigh Rides at Walt Disney World

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There are few things that sum up the holiday season more than a sleigh ride. OK, so usually the idea of a sleigh ride is to be "dashing through the snow" to quote a famous song, but there's no reason why you have to have snow to enjoy a sleigh ride in the holiday season -- and Walt Disney World is proof of that.

Throughout the year, there are carriage rides running at the Disney's Fort Wilderness, Port Orleans, and Saratoga Springs resorts. They last around 25 minutes, cost \$35, and are a great way to either explore the resort you're staying at or to visit one of these resorts and get a good idea of what it would be like to stay there.

What's less well known is that, during the holiday season, there are some changes and additions to the program to allow the introduction of sleigh rides. Wilderness Lodge, which doesn't usually offer carriage rides at other times of the year, suddenly acquires its own sleigh ride, almost as if by magic. Now, by sleigh ride, you first have to understand what it actually is, otherwise you could be in for a disappointment, as we were, the first time we took one of these.

Essentially this is a carriage ride, pulled by a beautiful horse, but dressed up with some holiday decorations and some sleigh bells. That was my first disappointment when we took this sleigh ride. The second disappointment was the route we took. Wilderness Lodge is somewhat in the middle of nowhere and let's be honest, that fits its Pacific Northwest-style theming. However, when it comes to sleigh rides, it's a bit of a problem.

The solution appeared to be to plot a route into the nearby woods, but that just didn't work for us. I personally like to see the sights whenever I go out on a ride and a sleigh ride is no exception, so I came away very disappointed by this. It's a shame, as the Wilderness Lodge is a perfect setting to do this, but I think I very naively thought that perhaps -- and I don't know how I thought they could logistically do this -- there would be more to see of the resort, but sadly there isn't.

Fast forward a couple of years and it was time to give the sleigh ride another chance, but this time, we opted to try out the one over at Fort Wilderness. I'd heard so many great things about all the Christmas decorations there and figured that should mean there would be more to

see on this tour. Fortunately, I was right.

You meet your carriage for your sleigh ride by Pioneer Hall. I don't know about you, but Fort Wilderness strikes me as the type of resort you're unlikely to visit unless you're actually staying there or perhaps heading to one of their dinner shows. It's fairly remote and this was only our second or third visit there. Despite that, we found our pick-up point with no problem, thanks to some good information from the Cast Member when I booked it and some good signposting.

We were picked up at the appointed time and, after a quick stop for a drink for our horse, we were off. If there wasn't much to see on our sleigh ride at the Wilderness Lodge, it was the complete opposite here. We were given a choice of which route we wanted to take and my answer was immediate -- "whichever will allow us to see as many of the Christmas decorations as possible." Our driver was very knowledgeable and said she instantly knew of a few that shouldn't be missed -- and she knew what she was talking about.

I have never seen Christmas decorations like this before. Over here in the UK, we're a bit behind the States when it comes to decorating for the holidays. It's a trend that's taken off in recent years, with people putting up more lights and starting to buy in the large Christmas inflatables you see in most housing developments in America. However, having visited a few friends at Christmas time in various cities and towns, nothing could prepare us for what we were about to see.

We learned as we drove round that there's actually a competition at Fort Wilderness for the best campsite decorations and there's at least one couple who've been in the top three more than once in recent years. It quickly became clear that this resort is very much one that people return to year after year, with our driver explaining that many choose to head down here for the winter, arriving in October and leaving again in April or May the following year. Sounds like a perfect plan to me! That perhaps helps to explain why they invest so much time - and no doubt money as well -- into these decorations. We quickly lost count of the number of inflatable Miceys, Minnies, Poohs and Eeyores that we saw as we drove along. Although it was impossible to get good photos, due to the motion of the sleigh ride, it's a memory that will stay with me for years to come. You really felt as if you'd been privileged and had just entered a huge family home with different relatives all showcasing their best efforts for Christmas.

All too soon, we were back at Pioneer Hall and our driver told us how much she loved working on the Fort Wilderness route. She also told us it's easy for her to get this route, as everyone heads over to the

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Wilderness Lodge sleigh ride come the holiday season, which seemed like a great shame to us. Our boat arrived to take us back to the Wilderness Lodge, where we would be dining later that night and, as we left, we saw one of the sleigh rides about to set off from the front of the resort. I couldn't help but wonder if they'd tried out the competition at Fort Wilderness and, if they did, whether they'd end up falling in love with both the wonderful atmosphere of the resort and the decorations as much as we did.

Although the carriage rides that take place throughout the year are fairly well advertised and are easily booked by calling 407-WDW-PLAY, Disney seems to keep the Christmas sleigh rides more of a secret. Reservations are now being taken for Wilderness Lodge sleigh rides up to 90 days in advance. They are available between November 30 and December 30, with each ride lasting 25 minutes and costing \$60 for groups of up to four adults or three adults plus two children. Rides depart every half hour nightly between 5:30 pm and 9:30 pm, with rides between 3:30 pm and 8:30 pm on Christmas Eve. To book, call 407-WDW-PLAY and note that you can only pay by cash or room charge, as the sleigh drivers do not accept credit cards. You will need to guarantee your booking with a credit card and if you need to cancel, you'll have to do so 24 hours in advance to avoid paying the entire fee. It's worth booking sooner rather than later with the sleigh rides, as last year, I had three dates in mind and could only get one.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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