

A Year at Walt Disney World: A Walt Disney World Event Review

by *Liliane Opsomer, PassPorter Guest Contributor*

No matter when you are visiting there is always something going on at Walt Disney World, but nothing beats the live entertainment during the holidays.

If you think Christmas, think again! Of course there is Christmas, but all year round the parks feature special events, parades, fireworks and elaborate decorations. The many events held at the parks also affect the crowd conditions. Here is a roundup of my favorite events:

In January the Walt Disney World Marathon pulls in some 65,000 runners, enough people to affect crowd conditions throughout the Kingdom of the Mouse. Each year the China Pavilion in Epcot has a Chinese New Year celebration and Black History month is celebrated throughout Walt Disney World with displays, artisans, storytellers, and entertainers. The Kinsey Collection at Epcot's United States Pavilion is a highlight.

□ Presidents Day increases attendance in the parks as school is out. At the end of Presidents week is the Princess Half Marathon. The schedule for that weekend includes a health expo, kids' races, a family 5K, a 10K on Saturday, and the big race on Sunday. The 2013 event -- in which I ran my first runDisney race, a 5K all dressed up, tutu and all - drew more than 21,000 runners, enough to affect vehicular and pedestrian traffic. This year I cranked it up a notch and did run the Princess Half!

□ If like me, you like Mardi Gras, a stay at Port Orleans French Quarters is a must. The resort has its very own parade and wonderful activities all day long for the kids. At Downtown Disney, the mighty St. Patrick's Day Festival, a two-week celebration culminating on St. Patrick's Day, pays tribute to Irish music, dance, and food. Make sure to sample some great cuisine at Raglan Road, the headquarters of the festival.

The Epcot International Flower & Garden Festival runs annually from mid-March to mid-May and is a must for anybody with a green thumb. Expert horticulturists showcase exotic floral displays and share gardening tips. The 30 million blooms from some 1,200 species will make your eyes pop, and best of all; the event doesn't seem to affect crowd levels at Epcot. I love flowers and I love taking pictures so the festival is a match made in heaven.

□ Easter is another busy but wonderful time at the parks. The Easter

Parade at the Magic Kingdom features floats carrying Mickey, Minnie, and the gang, all dressed in their Sunday best. Mr. and Mrs. Bunny are available for photo ops. Next The Force is upon Disney's Hollywood Studios as they are hosts to the Star Wars Weekends. These events draw mainly local sci-fi fans, but some, like me, come from all over the country. While the impact on regular Disney World crowds is low, you'll find long lines if you want to meet the celebrities. I am a Star Wars fan and can't get enough of it. During my last visit I dressed up as Princess Lea and could not resist purchasing an umbrella that best is described as a lightsaber in disguise.

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□Independence Day at Disney World basically means crowds and more crowds. All parks are in a festive and patriotic mood, and I love the fireworks, which are simply incredible. A very special place to visit is The Hall of Presidents at the Magic Kingdom. I recommend leaving the parks prior to the evening fireworks and watching them from the beach of the Polynesian Resort. Most parks will reach full capacity by 10 a.m., and no advance reservations will get you into a park once it is closed. So pick your park and be prepared to stay there all day.

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□In the Fall Epcot is the place to be! The Epcot International Food & Wine Festival held in the World Showcase mid-September through mid-November is another of my favorite events. The celebration represents 25 nations and cuisines, including cooking demonstrations, wine seminars, tastings, and opportunities to see some of the world's top chefs.

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□If like me you love Halloween you must at least once visit the Magic Kingdom for Mickey's not-so-scary Halloween Party. The event includes trick-or-treating in costume, parades, live music, storytelling, and a fireworks show. Several times that evening, Disney villains will put on a great show followed by a Villains' Mix and Mingle in front of Cinderella Castle. Aimed primarily at younger children, the party is happy and upbeat rather than spooky and frightening. The park will be crowded and the event is not a good fit for a first time visitor. An absolute must-ride is The Haunted Mansion, which is especially spooky but only in the sweetest way. Look for the ghost in the garden of the mansion when queuing up. His hilarious tales and interaction with the guests will make you forget you are standing in line. Characters are out in force all over the park, and the Boo to You Parade is pretty amazing. My two favorite parts of the parade are the headless horseman riding at full speed through the park and the Haunted Mansion's groundskeeper, with his dim lantern in one hand and his bloodhound, followed by a large group of ghosts and gravediggers. Don't be shy: wear a costume -- I always do.

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□ Two more runDisney races are among my favorites as the year winds down: The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror 10-miler road race in October and the Wine and Dine Half-Marathon that ends with a party amid Epcot's International Food & Wine Festival. A half-marathon followed by great food, count me in!

□ There are no special Thanksgiving events or decorations in the parks, so if you're looking for the equivalent of the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade, you're out of luck, although many of the Christmas decorations are normally in place by Thanksgiving. But the kids are out of school, and this is the busiest travel weekend of the year. Christmas at Walt Disney World however is beautiful and I recommend you visit after Thanksgiving and before Christmas. The Magic Kingdom is home to a stunning display of holiday decorations. Another must do is Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party, held at the Magic Kingdom on select days from mid-November to mid-December. It is a lot of fun, but just like Mickey's not-so-scary Halloween Party an event for return visitors, not for first timers. Holiday-themed stage shows, cookies and hot chocolate, carolers, "a magical snowfall on Main Street," white lights on Cinderella Castle, and fireworks will make for an unforgettable experience.

□ My favorite Yuletide park is Epcot. Don't miss the Candlelight Processional, featuring a celebrity narrator accompanied by a huge live choir and a full orchestra at the America Gardens Theatre. However Holidays from around the World is what I love most. While strolling from land to land, you can enjoy storytellers in each country. At the United Kingdom Pavilion Father Christmas tells of his country's holiday customs. In Italy you can meet La Befana, the good witch who brings gifts to children on Epiphany, and in Mexico, the Three Sage Kings (Los Tres Reyes Magos) make appearances throughout the afternoon telling the story of Epiphany. Santa himself is also on hand for photo ops and special programs are held for Kwanzaa and Hanukkah at the American Pavilion.

□ At Disney's Hollywood Studios, the park is also dressed for the season, but the big attraction here is the Osborne Family Spectacle of Dancing Lights. Millions -- yes, millions -- of lights decorate the buildings on the Streets of America, and snow machines provide the perfect atmosphere.

□ These are only some of my favorite things to do throughout the year, the list is not meant to be complete. From the great events to the daily street entertainment in the parks there is always something new to discover. I would love to hear what some of your favorites are.

About The Author: Liliane was born in Belgium and has been living in New

York City for 25 years. She is a freelance writer and the co-author of the "[Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World with Kids](#)," a guidebook that provides detailed planning and touring tips for a family vacation. She is passionate about travel, Disney, and hobbits. Liliane contributes to [The New York Daily News](#), [UndercoverTourist.com](#), [JohnnyJet.com](#) and [TheMouseforLess.com](#) and just started her own [blog](#).

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