

Why We Stayed Off-Property For our Disney Vacation: Confessions of a Disney Resort Fan

by Thomas Urbain, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Let me introduce myself. I'm "That Guy" ... the one who would chastise anyone who ever considered going to Walt Disney World and staying "off property."

What could be more magical than staying at a Disney resort?

My story starts a year before the trip in question. In late 2012, we stayed at Port Orleans French Quarter and took advantage of free dining. We were making plans to return in June of 2013 and again in the fall of 2013 for the Food and Wine Festival. Knowing that we would be spending three one-week trips at Walt Disney World within 365 days made it an easy decision to upgrade our 7-day park hoppers to annual passes.

□ In June 2013, free dining wasn't offered, so we tried an Annual Passholder benefit, the Tables in Wonderland card. We rented points from a DVC member for two nights at the BoardWalk and finished the week off at Caribbean Beach. On checkout day, we took advantage of a bounce-back offer and booked rooms at Coronado Springs for September 2013. (It's fun to try a new resort every trip!)

□ During summer 2013 we made dining reservations, ordered a Photo Pass Plus voucher and Mickey's Not So Scary Halloween Party tickets, and began planning other aspects for the trip. One evening, while sitting and staring at a number of different Excel spreadsheets, my lovely wife (and fellow Disney fanatic) asked if maybe we should consider staying off-site for a change. I have to confess that I was appalled at first. Betrayed! However, she went on to point out her reasoning, why this was the time to change things up.

With all of our Disney vacations, we look at pros and cons, analyze everything on a spreadsheet to crunch numbers, and spend hours neglecting our children in order to discuss all possible scenarios.

□ If you are Disney fanatics like us (and you are because you are reading this article!), you already know the perks of staying On Property. Our discussion started here.

□ **Perk #1: Free Dining.** There was nothing offered during our stay.

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Thanks to Tables in Wonderland, we were able to make the most of advanced reservations, in addition to points we had earned with our Disney Visa rewards card.

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□ **Perk # 2: Parking.** We usually take Amtrak's Auto Train to Florida so we have our own car with us. Although I see the convenience of using Disney's transportation to get from the resorts to the parks, we save a considerable amount of time by driving to the parks ourselves. Staying offsite, you'd normally have to pay to park at the four theme parks. Annual Passholders park for free, so not an issue for us.

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□ **Perk # 3: Extra Magic Hours for On Site Resort guests.** (This allows early entry or late departure from certain parks on designated days of a given week.) We generally stay clear of parks that have Extra Magic Hours, since we feel they are typically more crowded.

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□ **Perk # 4: (and the most obvious reason to stay on property) DISNEY MAGIC IMMERSION.** You just can't find the level of magic and service elsewhere; we spend most of our time in the parks anyway, so we thought we'd try to do without immersion this trip.

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□ The remaining two talking points were distance to Disney property and price. Since most of the perks for staying on property didn't matter on this particular visit, we had to see if there was a cost-efficient option for lodging that wouldn't put us quite a distance from the gates!

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□ It was easier than I thought to find several options not far from Property. After reading many reviews, we chose Parkway International. Disclaimer: this resort is a time share, and when rooms are available, they allow non-owners to make reservations. During check-in, you obtain your parking pass from (what turned out to be) a sales person of sorts. He explained that our stay entitled us to a free breakfast or lunch, and he tried to sign me up for one of the open slots. (Translation: This is the Sales Pitch meal!) I politely declined any free meals (and held my ground) and without much hassle at all, was able to obtain my parking permit.

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□ I'll admit that my expectations for our room were not that high. The website description made it sound wonderful, of course. So we were pleasantly surprised by the amount of space we had and how nice the accommodations actually were. Entering the vacation condo's main hallway, we found a small bedroom on the right and a bathroom on the left. The bedroom had two single beds, a dresser, and flat-screen television, with lots of room for our Pack 'n' Play. The bathroom had a nice vanity area, toilet and shower/tub combo, and was much bigger than Moderate Resort bathrooms! The main hallway led to a full-size

kitchen on the left (and a stacked washer/dryer) and beyond that, an open-concept dining and living room area with wet bar, which would probably match the square footage of an entire Value Resort room. The master bedroom was off the living room; it was very spacious, with a closet and a king-sized bed. What really blew me away was the master bath; it was huge! A large vanity area, Jacuzzi tub, separate glass-enclosed stand-up shower, shelves, and an open area in the middle that would allow you to practice ballroom dancing. Attached to the master bath was a separate toilet area. And to sweeten the deal, there was a screened-in deck with a table and chairs that could be accessed from the master bedroom or the living room. All of this, and we were only about two miles from the main gate.

□ Based on our calculations, a week in a 2-bedroom DVC Villa could be a minimum of 220 points at the same time of year. To rent a DVC villa for \$13 a point would equate to \$2860 or over \$400 a night.

□ Are you wondering how much a room like this set us back? Believe it or not, it cost less than a Value Resort! I don't know how much the price fluctuates depending on the time of year (or if it changes at all), but our cost was about \$96.00 per night.

□ Other amenities of this resort include a nice pool area, pool-side bar and grill, boardwalk-style walking paths, a well done African theme, a grocery store, and restaurants within walking distance to our room.

□ I would definitely consider staying here again if we would not be negatively affected by staying off-property and not receiving any of the perks that staying at a Disney resort would offer. My biggest concern at this time would be the advantage of being able to reserve Fast Pass Plus times 60 days in advance. But, the rules for Fast Pass Plus are constantly changing, so that is an analysis for another day.

About The Author: Tom works in Human Resource Development as an Instructional Designer and Trainer. His favorite hobby is listening to Disney podcasts and planning trips to Disney. Tom and his family are currently planning trips to the world in two months, six months and a Disney cruise in 18 months.

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