

A Debtor's Tale - Saving Money for Disney: A Walt Disney World Budgeting Article

by Amy Jones, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Once upon a time, we had a seemingly unconquerable mountain of credit card debt.

I know, that doesn't sound like the beginning of a lovely Disney fairy tale, does it? It isn't. In fact, I can almost picture the "once upon a time" Disney storybook opening in a tall tower, but this tower is dark, menacing, and belongs to a sinister villain. Not the happiest place on earth.

But it is true. We did have a mountain of credit card debt that controlled every part of our lives. It was, more accurately, a growing, moving, mountainous wall of thorns that crept in and around our home like the vines around Sleeping Beauty's castle. It choked out all fun and dominated over our confidence. It grew from the the seeds of bad habits. Time, ignorance, and negligence were great gardeners.

Then, one day, a most unlikely hero came riding into our lives--a hero that neither of us ever imagined had such strength, such wisdom, and such power. He came brandishing a sword that, eventually, sliced that mountain of thorns into julienne fries. This hero also restored our confidence, our kingdom, and led us to troves of hidden treasure. His name---Sir Budget!

All kidding aside, it was the power of budgeting and learning to live far enough within our income that took us from being broke, and having to watch the interest payments grow while the credit limits shrank, to having no credit card debt at all and the freedom to do the things we love.

This took a few years, a lot of tears, and plenty of hard work. There were many times when we thought that we couldn't do it and that nothing would change. That we would never be the ones who would get to go on vacations, have new things, and, well, breathe normally. BUT the day did come when we made our last payment, took several cleansing breaths, and started planning all the cool things we could do with our newfound freedom!

Of course, at the top of the list was…;Walt Disney World. So, after almost a year of intense planning and lots of PassPorter podcasts,

we finally went on our dream vacation in November of 2015!

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□I won't go into every detail, and there were highs and lows with a family of four, but it was truly magical. All the cast members who saw our first time visitor buttons went out of their way to sprinkle pixie dust (sometimes literally), or at least greet us and ask how we were enjoying our trip. Just two examples are: an early-morning electric car ride straight to the castle; and two free fastpasses so that we could ride both Soarin' and Test Track the same day!

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□But the best part of the entire vacation was the ability to say YES. Yes to a Mickey bar or a box of popcorn. Yes to dessert after dinner. Yes to a balloon on Main Street. Yes to a nice souvenir for each child and a few t-shirts for myself!

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□There was a time when I had thought that the only way to stay at Walt Disney World was to go on the most bare-bones trip I could come up with. I don't even mean staying at Value Resorts or off property. I thought those choices were too good for us. I think I had a mental image of us going to the campground with a tiny tent and eating grass and twigs, hoping that someone would be merciful to us and let us into at least one of the parks.

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□Don't get me wrong--I'm not saying ANYTHING against vacationing on a shoestring budget. If that works for you, then you should absolutely do it.

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□But, as for us, we found that if we took plenty of time to plan, paid for things as the year went on, and didn't stray from the budget, we didn't have to take the cheapest choices by default. For instance, we paid for our room in the spring, our park tickets in the summer (plus big pre-paid meals like Hoop de Doo Review and Cinderella's Royal Table), and spent the rest of the time saving up for things like travel and spending money. Then, when we got to Walt Disney World, we knew exactly what we had, and found that we had quite a bit left over at the end!

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□Which leads us to the magical end of the fairy tale--a surprise ending that neither of us saw coming.

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□We were enjoying some end-of-vacation time at Disney Springs. We'd had lunch and the kids (and dad) were playing at the LEGO store when I decided to take a quick trip to the bathroom. Well, between the LEGO store and the bathroom was an intriguing Disney Vacation Club (DVC) kiosk with super friendly people…

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□ We did the tour while they put our kids in the clubhouse (which they are already asking to go back to!). Our guide was wonderful, and there was absolutely NO pressure whatsoever (and we've heard time-share spiels before; believe me, the pressure is there at other places).

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□ For us, the Disney Vacation Club just made sense. I had been researching DVC for some time and was familiar with how the point system worked; in fact, our stay this vacation was on rented DVC points.

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□ We also knew that we were in love with Disney and definitely wanted to come back again and again. We were already planning two more vacations for 2017, and I already had in mind how much I wanted to budget for those accommodations. So, when our guide asked us how many points we wanted to buy, I simply looked at how much I had budgeted for accommodations over the next year and a half and did the math.

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□ On a side note, I should tell you that we didn't pay the full amount up front. And, after having just come out of debt, I wasn't too eager to go into more. But my husband and the guide explained to me the difference in real estate and credit card debt: ownership of an actual asset!

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□ The really cool thing is that, when she ran our credit, our score (after having had our "mountain" paid off for almost a year) was so good that we both qualified for premium financing and got the lowest rate possible! And we had done so well on our spending on this trip, that we had plenty of cash on hand for the down payment.

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□ So, now we are full-fledged DVC members. We can stay at some of Disney's nicest resorts and come out winners in the bargain. In fact, to stay at a value resort or a campground (again, not dissing those) wouldn't make financial sense. And with the deep discounts on annual passes that we get with becoming DVC members, we can actually manage a third trip over the next year for practically free (except for food and travel)!

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□ The most important lesson we've learned from this story is this: we can. Thanks to our valiant knight, Sir Budget, we are no longer damsels in distress, held captive and at the mercy of bad finances. With Sir Budget by our side, we can be the heroes of our own story, not the victims that need to be rescued. And you can too!

About The Author: Amy Jones lives in Kentucky with her husband and two daughters (one princess and one pirate empress), and has been a Disney fan

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since the days of LP records. She is counting the days until her family's next Walt Disney World vacation in May of 2016.

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