

The Rivers of Light Dining Package at Tusker House: A Walt Disney World Dining Review

by Julie Long, PassPorter Guest Contributor

If meeting up with Mickey and friends for dinner on safari, and making night-time magic at Animal Kingdom are on your wish list, a Rivers of Light Dining package may be your ticket!

When Animal Kingdom unveiled its Rivers of Light Nighttime Experience, many of us Disney fans rejoiced - finally, the park was going to be open later into the evening, giving a whole new way to tour and enjoy a nighttime show.

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□ Recently, my family was able to see Rivers of Light for the first time, and here is why the Rivers of Light Dining Package worked perfectly for us.

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□ There are three ways you can experience Rivers of Light:

□ • Fastpass+

□ • Standby

□ • Dining package

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□ We decided against the first two options. We wanted to be able to use our fastpasses earlier in the day and then get a rolling fastpass, instead of saving one fastpass for Rivers of Light. After researching that the standby wait could be long and standby seating is minimal, as soon as the dining packages opened for our stay, I jumped on it.

With two daughters, (a teen and pre-teen), we decided to book the [Tusker House](#) Dining Package. It is a bountiful buffet of African-inspired dishes, and we thought it would give our family of "some adventurous-some not" a good selection. It also happens to include a character meeting with everyone's favs: Mickey, Goofy, Donald, and Daisy in their safari gear! The other option, which always gets rave reviews, is Tiffins, near the entrance of the brand new Pandora. You can book your meal at either Tusker House or Tiffins for breakfast, lunch, or dinner--but we chose a dinner at 4:30 p.m. While you may think that's an "early bird" dinner time, it worked out because Disney recommends arriving to dine no later than two hours and 30 minutes before the show starts. Our Rivers of Light Viewing was on a Thursday evening at 8:45 pm.

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When we arrived at Tusker House, we were a little early for check in, but they didn't turn us away at all, which was great to get a little jump start on getting in. We waited outside for under five minutes before they brought us in to be seated. Our hostess was wonderful, they ask if you've ever been to Tusker House before (we hadn't) and they walk you right into the big, natural-lit room with all the different buffet stations and she explained how it worked. She also surprised us with a popular Lotus flower light-up popcorn bucket that we could fill at the show and our entire stay for just \$1.50. (Popcorn alert: the only location to fill the lotus flower bucket near the Dining package entrance to Rivers of Light is a little popcorn stand in Dinoland.)

□ Our delightful server came over and gave us a little envelope with our four tickets for the Rivers of Light and explained that Disney recommends getting to the show 30 or even 45 minutes early. While you have a guaranteed seat, it is just one big reserved section.

□ Tusker House is buffet-style, so after getting your drink order taken you head to the buffet stations. The four characters make their way around the restaurant, coming table to table for photos and autographs. The server told us the character's path, so we would know when to stay put or when we had time to get food. I'll admit, there were two times that we had to go track down our 10-year-old and have her come back because Mickey or Donald was coming close to our table. (If you do miss them, don't fear: they come back around, we saw Daisy twice!) All the characters are very interactive and take time to hug and joke. They don't have a photopass photographer with them here. So, I took the photo duty and my husband did video while also snapping stills on his camera. A nice woman dining next to us also offered to take photos of our whole family--so don't be afraid to ask, or offer for other families.

□ The Tusker House menu is really unique and delicious! My husband, teenage daughter and I tried lots of different things like the delicious Basmati rice, toasted couscous salad, and coconut shrimp, while our pickier younger daughter stuck with macaroni and cheese, meats and the plentiful bread selections. And the desserts? The chocolate turtle brownies are decadent and they even have cinnamon roll bread pudding that you really must leave room for.

□ We had a great experience, we never felt rushed and got all the food we wanted. I did notice it start to get a lot busier by the time we were leaving at 5:45 p.m., a more standard dinner time for people.

□ We decided that we would follow the plan of arriving around 8-8:15 p.m. for the 8:45 Rivers of Light show. This gave us time to see the Festival of the Lion King show AND ride Expedition Everest five times

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straight with no line (a perk of lower crowds in late April) before heading to Rivers of Light. I found out the lotus flower popcorn bucket did stay secure at my feet during the roller coaster rides!

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□We walked from Everest, located in the Asia section of Animal Kingdom, across the bridge and you can see the River's of Light open air theater in front of you. The entrance for the dining package is directly across from the entrance of Finding Nemo: The Musical. They have ushers there to direct you to your section and they have you slide all the way down to the end, similar to Fantasmic seating.

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□The Rivers of Light seating for the dining package is in a good location, right in the middle, but I would caution you to try to sit lower in the bleachers if possible, and try to position yourself so you're not right behind someone taller. The benches are close together without much of a rise, so it's a little challenging to station yourself between people's heads. Both our daughters ended up getting their views partly obscured by people in front of us who held up their cell phones to record or live stream the show. Which, made me discover the tip of turning your screen brightness way down so you don't distract others--very helpful! I decided to only snap a couple photos and quick video and just enjoy it.

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□As we waited the final minutes for the show with our popcorn in hand, you can look over across the lake and see Disney magic - it appears fireflies are starting to come out in the trees and even some shadows of elephants walk by. The Tree of Light gets a purple glow; truly enchanting as you anticipate the show's beginning.

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□Rivers of Light captivates you with gorgeous floats such as the lotus flowers and spirit animals of the Tiger, Turtle, Elephant and Owl glowing on the water. The story is that we are all bound together by earth and spirit, and the gorgeous artistry and beautiful music score really made the park come alive. It was energizing, and I loved when projections of animals from many of Disney nature films jumped onto the fans of water in front of us. The finale was truly stunning.

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□After Rivers of Light, which runs about 15 minutes, the park officially closed on that night, and everyone is leaving at once, much like the mass exodus after the Magic Kingdom fireworks. Since I'd never been in Animal Kingdom after dark, I wasn't really sure the best way to exit, but we were impressed that they had cast members with signs showing you how to exit, which was helpful.

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□Our family had a delicious dinner, character meet, and enjoyable evening outside on a warm spring night at Rivers of Light. I think the Tusker House food and atmosphere are great, and we had the bonus of

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guaranteed seats for Rivers of Light. The show was perfectly described by our 14-year-old, "I really liked the music and the projections - it was an immersive experience."

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□ Note: Make sure you check which nights Rivers of Light is showing during your stay, so you can plan your days to Animal Kingdom. They sometimes have two or even three shows in an evening and your dining package reservation and your tickets at the restaurant will tell you which showing you're in.

About The Author:

□ Julie is an avid Disney fan who lives in LeRoy, N.Y., (the birthplace of JELL-O) with her husband Rob and two daughters. She works as chief public relations officer of a private college, and before that was a TV news producer. Julie enjoys blending her love of Disney with her digital scrap-booking hobby, and loves to document their latest Disney trip and other family memories.

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