

Last Minute Planning: Disney World

by Mary Albright, PassPorter Guest Contributor

You probably read the title of this article and said to yourself, "No, you can't!" Like so many of you, I am a serious, Type-A, obsessed vacation planner when it comes to visiting Walt Disney World. I don't plan last minute trips. I usually plan at least a year out. I like being in control of everything.

I went to Walt Disney World in early December 2007 for a week. Usually, I'm good for a while after a trip. I have a little withdrawal that I can hold in check. But this winter was driving me crazy and I felt like I needed to get the heck out of Dodge! Then they announced that Mickey's Pirate and Princess Party was back for 2008. Argh!

I've always wanted to make it to one of these parties. But they have usually happened right after the New Year, after our usual December pilgrimage, and in August, which are just not times we usually travel to Florida.

So, after having mooned over the fact that the Pirate and Princess Parties ended in early March and that I'd not have a chance to go, what does Disney do? They extend into June! More importantly, they extend through the first week of April, which happens to be Spring Break for my kids. My biggest obstacles in the past were that it was too hard to sneak down for even a weekend because 1) I just went in December and would feel guilty spending money to go back so soon; 2) These parties just weren't coinciding with the days my kids did have off; 3) When they occurred when my kids had school off, it was a high priced travel time, like over Daytona 500 weekend.

Now remember who you are talking to; I normally plan my trips AT LEAST one year in advance. I'm slightly obsessive-compulsive, more than slightly Type A. Planning is part and parcel of who I am. Last minute trips like this ... six weeks away ... are totally last minute to me. What was I going to do?

Accommodations: Thank goodness for Disney Vacation Club (DVC). No stress about laying out the cash for a hotel room when you have points around. I called up Member Services on February 14. I thought perhaps that with April still being a busier time, I might be out of luck, but was crossing my fingers that since it was past Easter and past the prime Spring Break times, I'd get lucky. And I did! I scored a one-bedroom villa at Saratoga Springs Resort (SSR) right away. I also chose to be waitlisted for the Beach Club Villas (BCV) and Animal

Kingdom Villas (AKV), but had no illusions about either one coming through.

Getting there: I'm in Minnesota. Anyone who can, flees the state over Spring Break. I expected that maybe flights would be full or overpriced and keep me from going. Wrong again. I got flights on Northwest Airlines that met my time requirements, and at what I thought was a reasonable price considering I was looking only six weeks out over a busy travel period. I got airfare for \$303 per person and I had a few vouchers from bumps I took on a business trip earlier this year. Essentially, I had next-to-free airfare.

Dining: Since we were only going to be there for 3 nights/4 days, I wasn't going to make a ton of dining reservations. We planned on doing counter service or eating in the villa most of the time, but I wanted to try for one dinner. Originally, I was hoping to get into 'Ohana, but when I called on February 16, the earliest dining time available for my party size was 8:30 pm, too late for us. We all do better when we eat on a normal schedule and it makes vacation more enjoyable for everyone. However, I was able to get a reservation for Boma - one of my personal favorites - for 5:45 pm on April 2.

On February 19, I was thinking it might be nice to sit down to eat at the park before the party gets started, as the crowds are leaving. I didn't think I'd have any luck getting into Crystal Palace or Liberty Tree Tavern, given that this was less than six weeks out. Imagine my surprise when both places had availability that night. Liberty Tree had one opening at 6:30 pm. Crystal Palace had an opening just before 4:00 pm and at 6:25 pm. for my party size. I took the Crystal Palace because we've wanted to try dinner there for a long time.

Tickets: I ordered Pirate and Princess Party Tickets for April 1 from DVC Member Services over the phone on February 16. I had to pick them up at Magic Kingdom's Will Call window the night of the party. I ended up getting them at Epcot's Guest Services window earlier and found out that had I brought my Will Call Number with me, I could have also gotten the tickets at my resort concierge. Transportation from Orlando International Airport: Remember, I'm Type-A. I can't do Magical Express. I have to be in control of my own transportation. So renting a car is mandatory. I'm an Emerald Aisle Member with National Car Rental so I usually rent from them. When I first checked rental car rates, I knew I was going to have trouble getting a good rate. I wasn't staying over a weekend and I wasn't staying five or more days; so the weekly rates were out. I was coming Monday-Thursday; the kiss of death in getting a good deal on a rental car. My first check came back with \$176 for an intermediate. Blech. I looked around online a little more and

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found a great contract ID that saved me a ton of money. My reservation was \$115.21 and was made on February 18.

No word all through March on my waitlist with DVC. On March 26, while multitasking in my home office, I thought I'd call DVC and see if anything was available at Beach Club Villas. The waitlists are generally dropped 7 days out, so I knew that if any last minute cancellations came in, I'd have to call and ask. So I get a representative, and start my speech: "Hi, I have a reservation checking in on March 31. I know its last minute and there's probably no availability, but could you check and see if I could get into the Beach Club Villas for my dates?" The representative says, "You are at the Beach Club Villas!" I was like, "Huh?" She says, "Yes. Your waitlist matched on March 24." So, fellow DVC-ers, the waitlist does work!

We went to Disney World with less than two months for me to plan it. Did it work out? Absolutely! We enjoyed the party immensely, had a wonderful stay at the Beach Club Villas and even decided to take in the Flower and Garden Festival at Epcot, which we had never done before.

So, the answer is, "Yes! You can plan a last minute trip," and have it be just as enjoyable as if you planned it a year in advance. Will that stop me from planning a year in advance? Uh...no. You can't cure this gal with one last minute trip, but I'm a little more open to it in the future.

About The Author: Mary Albright is a previous PassPorter News Guest Contributor. Married with two children, she lives in Minnesota and works as a director for a direct sales company. She has visited Walt Disney World 13 times since 2000. Her next trip is October 2008.

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