

Rumor Round-Up: A Disney Feature

by Dave Marx, PassPorter Guidebook Co-Authors

Rumors! What would we do without them? We'd have that much less to talk about in our discussion communities, less "news" to report in our newsletters, much less to worry about as we plan our Disney vacations, and for guidebook authors like Jennifer and me, we'd have far less warning about what we have to research and what we might have to change in our upcoming books.

Rumors, however, are always a perilous thing. They might be 100% true, 100% false or somewhere in between. There's often no telling what part is fantasy, and what parts contain a precious nugget of truth. In an organization the size of Disney there are many secrets, and relatively few people are entrusted with those secrets. With over 60,000 cast members at Walt Disney World and many tens of thousands more at Disneyland, the Disney Cruise Line, Disney Vacation Club (DVC), and the Disney resorts in Tokyo, Paris, and Hong Kong, we're still talking about a whole lot of secret-keepers. But when those secret-keepers whisper something in the strictest confidence to a trusted co-worker, and that co-worker tells another, and that co-worker tells yet another, we've got a game of "telephone" that can quickly morph the original leak beyond recognition. And that's just the start. Eventually, some cast member tells a guest (or a columnist, blogger, reporter, webmaster, etc.), and the story goes out all over the Internet in a matter of hours, with further layers of speculation and distortion added for good measure. That's why we take such pains here at PassPorter to identify rumors as rumors.

One thing to remember about any Disney rumor is that the company has countless feasibility studies underway at any time. The people working on those studies know there's just a fractional chance of them ever being approved and rolled-out in their current form. Often, the same idea is taken out several times over the course of many years, dusted-off, polished-up, modified, and placed back onto the shelf as something still not quite ready for primetime (and it may never be). But there will still be the occasional, enthusiastic Imagineer who just knows the project he/she is working on will get the green light - it's just so cool, so wonderful, that the bosses just can't help but approve it when they finally see it. So they tell someone that it's going to happen, and all the details are correct... but it just doesn't happen to get approved, and it becomes one of those persistent rumors that never seem to go away.

Then, there are the rumors that begin when actual construction begins -- the construction fences go up; the signs say they're building the

future of Epcot, Disneyland, or whatever; and tongues start wagging. Disney hasn't made a public announcement about what's being built, but we can all see that something's coming. Officially, it's still a rumor and probably, none of the reports we get from helpful cast members are completely accurate. But there it is, and we have to believe our own eyes. Right?

Finally, there's one more category of rumor out there, the "trial balloon." There's no hard proof that the Disney company does this, but it seems pretty likely. We suspect some of the rumors and leaks that reverberate around the web are actually planted by someone from the Disney organization in order to sample public opinion. This seems most likely to us when a rumored change comes to life soon afterwards, but with a few "tweaks" that address the concerns of the folks who commented on the rumor at message boards and other online forums.

We consider all reports to be unfounded rumors until we have an official announcement from Disney. That doesn't stop us, however, from trying to judge the quality and accuracy of the rumor, or speculating on whether the rumored item will become reality.

There's no shortage of places to read about Disney rumors. Tops on my list is Screamscape.com, which manages to report on most rumors, major and minor. Unfortunately, Screamscape doesn't include a discussion forum. However, folks have a way of discussing the latest word from Screamscape at nearly every community on the web. That includes, of course, our own PassPorter message boards, where we have an entire forum dedicated to Walt Disney World rumors (rumors about Disneyland and the Disney Cruise Line don't have a dedicated home, but they find their way into the appropriate Disneyland and cruise line forums).

So, with all that said, here's a rundown of some of the more prominent rumors floating around at the moment.

Disney Dining Plan Re-design for 2008. It seems new information/rumors on this topic emerge every few days, and we expect the 2008 offering to be announced officially by Disney in the next couple of weeks. The very popular Disney Dining Plan at Walt Disney World seems too good to be true, so whenever rumors emerge, they almost always report doom -- higher prices, fewer restaurants, and less-attractive features. So far, the doom scenarios have not come to pass. It does seem highly likely that the 2008 plan will no longer include 18% gratuities in the price -- that's a change that was made to the new trade union contract, so there's little reason to believe it won't happen. After that ... evidence was found at Disney's UK site that the plan would

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eliminate the gratuity and table-service appetizer, and that the price per person/per day would be reduced by about \$11 as a result. Seems like a fair deal. Subsequently, the UK site was re-programmed so information about the 2008 plan would no longer be divulged. Then, AllEarsNet reported a rumor with nearly the same information, with the key difference that the price would only be reduced by about a dollar. AllEarsNet also reported the possible availability of an additional, deluxe dining plan. AllEarsNet often gets good information, but this one smells like a "trial balloon" to me. Personally, I think Disney's aim will be to maintain current levels of popularity, or even increase it. I'm not sure a big price hike (by charging the same for less) will accomplish that. Rumor Status: Here's a pager. Your table will be ready in two to three weeks.

Contemporary Resort DVC Tower. There have been rumors that Walt Disney World's Contemporary Resort would be the "next" DVC development for some years. Then a while back, somebody performed a web search and found an architect's rendering of a DVC high-rise building adjacent to the Contemporary Resort's famous 15-story tower. That rendering soon disappeared from the web, which we'd consider proof-positive that someone at Disney is watching the rumor mill and that the rendering had some basis in reality (otherwise, why remove it). However, just a while later, Disney Vacation Club announced their next project would be built at Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge. Not long thereafter, demolition crews destroyed the Contemporary's North Garden Wing, and construction crews started sinking support pilings into the ground. That suggests something big is in the works. Historically, DVC only announces one new project at a time. Once the sales staff succeeds in selling a substantial number of DVC memberships at the new resort, they announce the next project. So, will the new construction at the Contemporary be the next DVC resort to be announced? It seems very likely, but we probably won't hear an official peep out of Disney until the Animal Kingdom Lodge villas are nearly sold-out. Rumor Status: High (Rise) Probability.

A new Disney park in Texas (Missouri, Oklahoma...). Will a Disney park/resort be built somewhere near the geographic center of the United States? Reports hit local newspapers on a fairly regular basis and make their way to the Disney rumor mill. They usually take the same form--somebody reports that Disney is secretly acquiring large parcels of land in the area. This echoes Disney's actual practice when it acquired land for Walt Disney World. So far, none of the rumors seem to have any truth to them. Local real estate speculators may be the source of some of those rumors and hopeful thinking may be the source for others. Our own analysis goes as follows: Why would Disney build another park/resort that might draw attendance away from either Walt

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Disney World or Disneyland? Entertainment industry analysts have long considered the U.S. theme park industry to be fully saturated. Something like 98% of the population is within easy driving distance of a regional amusement park/theme park. For folks that travel some distance to a major attraction like Disneyland or Walt Disney World, a park in the center of the country would have to offer a particular benefit in terms of travel time or cost. However, a park in Texas would be no closer than Walt Disney World for most people east of the Mississippi and no closer than Disneyland for folks from the Rockies west. The only substantial benefit would be for potential guests in the low-population Great Plains region and those within about a day's driving distance--not quite enough people to sustain a Disney-sized resort, especially considering so many from that region are already traveling in droves to Walt Disney World and Disneyland. Even guests from Latin America would face similar flight distances and costs when compared to the distances to California and Florida. Recently, however, Disney CEO Robert Iger suggested that the company might develop smaller-scale resorts in other locations around the country, close to existing popular attractions. These might be hotels or DVC resorts similar to the DVC resorts at Vero Beach, Florida and Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Rumor Status: Won't ever happen (major resort); Moderate probability (minor resort).

New Country at Epcot. The last new country pavilion to open at Epcot was Norway in June 1988. Ever since, park fans have been hoping for more countries, and poring over aerial photos of Epcot to prove that the space exists for at least one more pavilion. The last solid rumors go back quite a while now, when Spanish government sources announced they were speaking with Disney about just such a pavilion. Since then, not a word, so it seems less likely as time goes by. Still, the space is there, and Disney probably wouldn't mind finding a country willing to spend the money a pavilion sponsorship entails. Rumor Status: No-Man's Land.

Star Tours Upgrade. Star Tours has been operating at Disney parks since the '80s. One important feature of the ride system is that it can be reprogrammed with relative ease - just change the ride's movie, re-program the flight simulator-based ride system to match the film, and off you go! Three new Star Wars films have been released since Star Tours began ferrying passengers to the Forest Moon of Endor, and fans of the ride have been hoping for a new slant on this old favorite since Anakin Skywalker climbed into a pod racer for the first time. How hard would it be to change the story line so that guests ended-up in a crazed pod race, instead of joining the attack on the Death Star? So far, no good. A New Hope. Actor Anthony Daniels (C-3PO), a frequent guest at Star Trek conventions, reportedly announced at a recent convention that he had filmed some new sequences for an upgraded ride film. Will

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that film see the light of day? There's always the chance that it doesn't satisfy either Disney brass or Star Wars creator George Lucas. Then again... Rumor Status: Suspended Animation

Disney's California Adventure Re-Theming. Disney's California Adventure park (DCA) has had its detractors since the day it opened, and rumors that Disney would re-work the park from front to back are nearly as old as the park itself. If you don't like the park and you can see that it doesn't attract the same dense crowds as Disneyland park right across the Esplanade, how can you not believe that the company will eventually right the situation? These rumors have only accelerated since Bob Iger replaced Michael Eisner at Disney's helm, and since Pixar Animation Studios was acquired by Disney soon thereafter. Part of this is based on the belief that Pixar's John Lasseter, who now also holds an executive consulting role at Walt Disney Imagineering, wants to re-make whole sections of DCA (and other Disney parks) in Pixar's own image. Historically, Disney "tweaks" its parks, it doesn't remake them. Even that legendary disaster Euro Disney re-emerged as Disneyland Paris with relatively few major changes--just lots of little tweaks. Rumor Status: California dreamin' ain't becoming a reality.

Disney-MGM Studios Name Change. This rumor is unsquashable. It's going to be Disney Studios. It's going to be Disney-Pixar Studios (or maybe, Pixar-Disney Studios). "MGM" will be gone with the wind. Yes, Disney uses the MGM name under license and that license has to be renewed from time to time, but why would the movie company want to give up the free publicity, and why would Disney want to go to the expense of changing a name that has seemed to work pretty well? It's true that many Disney cast members (and civilians) occasionally refer to the park as Disney Studios, and that terminology has even crept (accidentally, as I see it) into Disney's vacation planning video and the programs you can view on Disney's hotel room TV channels. There are some reports (mostly from blogger Jim Hill, who has been critical of Disney's Pixar acquisition) that suggest John Lasseter's Pixar-ego has become so large that he wants to rename everything in sight for Pixar and convert every attraction to a Pixar theme. It seems to me that Disney management would be more interested in blurring the distinction between Disney and Pixar, so that the Pixar magic can be associated with all Disney-branded products. Re-naming Disney products "Pixar" is an admission that Pixar is superior, which erodes the value of the Disney brand. Rumor Status: "Hollywood, land of broken dreams."

Animal Kingdom's Beastly Kingdom. Have you ever looked at the Animal Kingdom Logo and wondered what a dragon is doing among all those real animals? That's more or less the root of the notion behind Beastly

Kingdom, a new land at the park that has yet to be (and may never be) developed. Most rumors expect the land to be the home of a big E-Ticket coaster (or two or three), but with the addition of Expedition: Everest, the park may no longer need a thrill-focused addition. Yes, the space seems to be there. Yes, coaster enthusiasts keep hoping Disney will build a thrill-oriented park. Since an entire park is such a long shot, this rumored land seems their next best hope. Rumor Status: Here Be No Dragons

Walt Disney World's "Fifth Gate." Will Walt Disney World ever have a fifth major theme park? Yes, the land still exists for it. This rumor was especially hot after Universal announced plans for its thrill-oriented park, Islands of Adventure (IOA). Disney just had to compete head-to-head with IOA, didn't it? By all appearances, Disney's response has been to add thrills to existing parks, rather than build a park only a thrill-seeker could love. Yet the possibility exists that Disney will some day add another park. Adding another park is a way to extend the average Walt Disney World vacation from five days to six, or more. That's more money at Disney hotels, restaurants, and turnstiles. However, the current regime at Disney Parks and Resorts has found other ways to extend vacation stays without spending huge sums on construction. Disney (and all park and hotel operators) like things crowded. It's far more efficient/profitable than having several parks/hotels operating at less than full capacity. That's especially true these days at Disney. They're finding more and more ways to utilize existing facilities at near-full capacity year-round, and are very slow to add additional capacity. How long did it take Disney management to commit to building new ships for the hugely profitable Disney Cruise Line? When did Disney last add a new "regular" (non-DVC) resort? When are they going to complete construction at Pop Century, the most recent regular resort to be built? The company moves very, very slowly to expand capacity, and the company is probably concerned that another horror like 9/11 could leave it holding a whole lot of excess capacity. A fifth major park may indeed happen eventually, but we'll probably see more money invested in new overseas parks before that happens. Rumor Status: Someday our prince will come.

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