

Baby Steps: Six Sanity Savers For Baby's First Trip to Walt Disney World

by Jackie Perrin, PassPorter Guest Contributor

It's the happiest place on earth -- or it can be, if you plan appropriately.

For many families, baby's first trip to Walt Disney World is on the short list of memorable life moments, right after first steps, first words and first day of school.

But it's not always thrilling to travel with a baby -- particularly to a spot where spectacle and sensory overload are central themes. Fickle as they are, infants tend to throw us curveballs -- one minute they're grinning in ecstasy, and the next they're screaming in fury.

In order to enjoy the magical moments, wise parents arrive with a plan. Enjoy these baby touring tips, gathered from over a decade's worth of family travel experience.

Tip #1: Lighten the load

Ship or order baby items ahead, and invest in family-friendly travel gear.

When you're toting a ton of baby gear, airline baggage fees can equal a small fortune. Making your way through the airport with a major load is no picnic either -- it can be a drain on your time, as well as your stamina.

* For quick and easy travel with baby through airports and theme parks, we love [our Ergo BabyCarrier](#). This fantastic pack helps us clear security in a snap and keep baby close and happy on rides.

* Take the chore out of car seat schlepping with wheeled snap-on cruisers from [Go-go Babyz](#)®.

* Streamline packing and avoid add-on baggage fees by shipping basic supplies ahead to your resort accommodation.

* If you can't get it together to send ahead, [Babies Travel Lite](#) will do the work for you. In addition to your favorite brands of diapers, formula and baby food, the online service can ship cleaning supplies, toys and baby proofing gear to your accommodation -- and provides an optional "Ship it Home" service (US domestic locations only) so that you can easily send your gear home when your vacation is complete.

* In the Orlando area, local companies providing baby gear and supplies include [All About Kids](#), [ABaby's Best Friend](#) and [Babies on Vacations](#).

* Keep your gang in order on the go. Our hands-free basic kids kit

includes a small backpack with three gallon-size ziploc bags (one each for food, clothing/changing, and first aid essentials) and an around the neck travel pouch for tickets, money, and PhotoPass cards.

Tip #2: A suitable stroller can save your sanity

For those traveling with infants, bring your own lightweight reclining stroller -- or rent or buy one in Orlando.

* Bring your own lightweight reclining stroller, or else rent one in Orlando. Why? Theme park rental strollers, while great for older children, are not the best choice for touring with baby. For one thing, the bases are hard and not conducive to napping. For another, they don't recline -- a definite downer for a tired baby. Plus, there's very little storage space, and you're limited in that you can only use the stroller onsite. Likewise, the Kolcraft umbrella strollers sold throughout Walt Disney World (\$52 as of December 2008) are suitable for toddlers, but too flimsy for infants not yet sitting up well.

* Go with a stroller model that collapses easily. You'll need to fold it flat on shuttles, trams and boats. For its instant, compact fold, easy maneuvering and full-cover sun and rain shade, we love our Baby Jogger Citi Mini (<http://www.babyjogger.com/cityminimain.htm>), suitable for babies age six months and up. [Orlando Stroller Rentals](#) will deliver a single or double side-by-side Citi Mini model to your resort or vacation home.

* Consider a sit-and-stand-type stroller if you're also traveling with older toddlers or pre-schoolers, and have your own car (so that compactness is less of an issue). Some theme park veterans swear by Baby Trend models, available through some of the equipment rental firms mentioned above.

Tip #3: Stick with the schedule

Your baby's schedule, that is. Visit theme parks in the early daytime hours, and limit duration of visits.

* For maximum happiness factor, a good rule of thumb is to limit theme park visits with baby to four hours or less, and time them to accommodate baby's current schedule. For us, that means visiting theme parks in the early daytime hours --; arriving before the gates open and taking advantage of morning [Extra Magic Hours](#) (a perk available to Disney resort guests).

Since the parks are less crowded at this time, lines are shorter and we can visit all of our favorite rides and attractions well before lunchtime. At this point, we return to our accommodation for a nap and a swim. After sticking with this schedule for a week, our kids are generally happy, well-rested and meltdown free.

Tip #4: Take advantage of free family-friendly services.

Utilize Walt Disney World Baby Care Centers and the Rider Switch Pass

* Make use of [Baby Care Centers](#), located at each of the four Walt Disney World theme parks. These infant service hubs are one of the better known but perhaps more under-utilized Orlando family helpers. Ranging in size from a small room (Disney's Hollywood Studios) to a multi-area operation (Disney's Animal Kingdom), Baby Care Centers contain everything you need for changing, feeding and tending to a small child. We have used the facilities many times over the past 10 years, and the services continue to be excellent. In addition to private, dimly lit areas for nursing, we have especially enjoyed the dedicated areas where smaller children can rest and view videos.

* You can shop for emergency supplies for the entire family at Baby Care Centers. On a recent visit, we spotted deodorant, sunscreen and contact lens cleaner - items you might be surprised to find at an infant-centered facility.

* Wait less and keep the family peace with the Rider Switch program. What many don't realize is that this wonderful service, formerly known as "Baby Swap," does not require an immediate switch-off upon one parent completing a ride and is not limited to those with infants. It's explained by a member of the Walt Disney World Moms Panel [here](#).

Tip #5: Choose a setting to fit your style

Look for family-friendly amenities when booking accommodations.

While I won't weigh in on the perennial debate of on-site vs. off-site lodging, I can attest that it's worth the extra investment -- as well as effort -- to locate accommodations with baby and family-friendly amenities.

* Pay a little extra for a lot more relaxation. Items we seek -- and are willing to pay extra for -- include kitchen facilities, an accessible washer and dryer, and more than one room (so that parents and older kids can relax while baby sleeps). A baby pool, an age-appropriate play area such as a sandy beach, and an activity program for older kids in the family are nice but non-essential perks.

* Look for baby-friendly add-ons. In addition to portable cribs, most all Disney resort accommodations will provide bed rails upon request at no extra charge (for co-sleeping babies). Disney Vacation Club properties provide high chairs, as do many off-site condo-style and vacation home properties.

Tip #6: Make magical moments in unexpected places

Be open to memories on the fly.

You don't have to book a character meal -- or wait in line to see each character -- to make magical moments for baby's scrapbook - and your vacation memories. Celebrate the small moments - whether it's a run through a fountain, a new balloon, or baby's newfound appreciation for a fruity frozen dessert.

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