

The More, The Mickey-er: Planning a Group Trip to Walt Disney World

by Nicole Courson, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Our first family trip to Walt Disney World was relatively straightforward; my husband Mike and I were taking the kids for a week. And no way my mom wasn't coming. She, after all, took me on my first Disney vacation all those years ago and I couldn't wait for her to enjoy my boys as they visited for the first time. My brother Jimmy's family had to come, because it wouldn't be a family vacation without them. And our best friends Jennifer and Jason, never the people to say no to a trip Orlando, readily signed on. Finally, there was my Aunt Pat and her mom Grandma Helen, who have a timeshare in Florida. Happily, they said yes, too. And just like that, our family trip for four had grown to fourteen!

Here's a secret. If you're going to Walt Disney World with a large group, planning is EVERYTHING!

Let's talk resorts. The wonderful cast members at the Walt Disney World call center will assure you that every resort on property is family friendly -- and of course they're right. But which resort is right for your group? It may seem as though you'll only be sleeping there, but what about down time?

Of the four Value resorts (All-Star Music, All-Star Movies, All-Star Sports, and Pop Century), All-Star Music wins our "group" vote thanks to the Family Suites option. The resort boasts 52 units that sleep up to six in the Jazz Inn building, and each suite also has a second bath -- a bonus, with more than two or three people in a room.

The four Moderate resorts (Caribbean Beach, Coronado Springs, Port Orleans Riverside and French Quarter) all have slightly larger rooms -- but Coronado Springs stands above the crowd with additional amenities: four pools (the main one sports a 123-foot water slide and hot tub), comfy hammocks, an onsite fitness center, and a beauty/barber shop. All this within walking distance to your room!

The Deluxe resorts all come under the heading of, as my ten year old would say, "fancy shmancy." While any one of them makes for a world-class stay, some have features that may appeal to your group more than others. Take, for instance, the Animal Kingdom Lodge. With three sit-down restaurants, three lounges, and virtually every room showcasing a balcony view, you'll want to be sure you pack your binoculars. Need childcare for a romantic evening? Animal Kingdom

Lodge has it onsite!

Once the resort has been chosen, you can call Disney's Grand Gatherings at (407) 939-7256 to make your reservation. (Any group of eight or more people ages 3 and up can be made into a Grand Gathering.) Your group will be assigned a gathering number. This allows Walt Disney World to put a group into what they refer to as "priority room grouping" -- meaning that they'll do their best to put an entire travel party in the same general vicinity, resort wise. It's just one of those wonderful perks Walt Disney World offers free of charge. It will also help with dining reservations. Yes, dining reservations! Currently, they can be made ninety days out -- but as of October 27 2009, the system will be reverting to its former 180 days out policy. The Grand Gatherings department will help you make dining reservations for your group as the online dining reservation system will not accept reservations for more than nine people. Which brings us to dining!

Consider restaurant choices with everyone in mind. Vegetarians may not be crazy about 'Ohana, just as young children may not enjoy Sunday lunch at the ESPN club during football season. Another tip? If the entire group doesn't fit in at an ideal time, try booking two or more smaller parties. Or if there's a specific "must do" restaurant that's unable to take your dinner reservation, book lunch instead.

Another tip: look at the meals that serve "family style" seating. Biergarten, in Epcot, is a great place to enjoy an all-you-can-eat meal with groups. We found another good option to be 1900 Park Fare in the Grand Floridian -- they easily seated our party of fourteen. Lady Tremaine made an appearance with her two daughters, and then Cinderella and Prince Charming rounded out the parade of characters.

Which brings us to another hot topic: Character Meals!

Okay, everyone's got to do one, just to get face time with that favorite mouse or princess. Chef Mickey's, a buffet eatery in the Contemporary Resort, is a great place to snap photos with breakfast or dinner. There's also the Crystal Palace or Cinderella's Royal Table in the Magic Kingdom, and Akershus Royal Banquet Hall in the Norway pavilion at Epcot.

Another tip: be sure to check out the Grand Gathering Experiences. They're specifically designed for larger groups and include special experiences with a meal or dessert party. There's a Safari Celebration Dinner, complete with private safari and dining at the Animal Kingdom's Tusker House; International Dinner and Illuminations Dessert Experience in Epcot (includes preferred seating for the evening's

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IllumiNations attraction); or a Good Morning Character Breakfast. Details on all of these can be obtained by calling the Grand Gatherings hot line at 407-939-7526.

Okay, lastly, it's time to tour!

It's essential to have a plan for each day -- or, in the case of group traveling, several plans. Our first tip? Pick a centralized, easily visible location and announce it as the meet up spot for anyone who loses the party -- and yes, it will happen.

Another tip? Break in to sub-groups. The little kids all want to see Muppets 3D, dads are yelling for Star Tours and some of the older members would rather see the One Man's Dream attraction. Instead of leap-frogging all over and making people wait, part ways and plan to regroup in front of the Sorcerer's Hat in an hour. Two-way radios and cell phones are also helpful in keeping a group together.

Another great sub-group strategy? Breaking down early-in-the-day activities. Our friends Jenn and Jason liked to skip breakfast so they could hit the parks running, then break for lunch and a nap before their evening plans. Jimmy and his wife Candace took a different approach: they chose to eat a slightly-later breakfast, tour straight through the day, then eat an early dinner and get back to the hotel at a reasonable hour for relaxing, thereby avoiding the opening and closing rushes. We fell somewhere in the middle and hit serendipity: four hours between Jim and Candace's breakfast but before Jenn and Jason left for lunch were perfect for the kids to spend time together.

Our next trip, in December 2010, is in the planning stages. It will, of course, include my mother -- I think she had as much fun as my boys the last time around. And my mother-in-law and father-in-law, who wouldn't miss the chance to see all their collective grandchildren in the Happiest Place on Earth, because we'll be joined by Mike's brother Ben and his family, Mike's sister Becky and her family, and Mike's brother Andrew, plus Mike's stepbrother John and his kids. Oh, and of course Jenn and Jason and their kids because now that we've visited Walt Disney World with them, my kids won't have it any other way (truthfully, neither would I). Jenn's parents, who are like extended family to us, too, are in.

"Twenty-six," I told Mike, tallying it up. "Twenty-six people. Eight men, seven women, four princesses and seven princes. It's eighteen months away, so we'd better start planning."

He blinked at me. "Good luck."

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I love a challenge.

About The Author: Nicole Courson lives in the magical kingdom of Pittsburgh, PA, with her two growing Mouseketeers and Prince Charming. They're planning their next trip to Walt Disney World in December of 2010 -- this time, with Mike's family.

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