

Disneyland: A Walt Disney World Veteran's Perspective

by Richard Mercer, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Like many baby boomers, I grew up watching Walt Disney on TV telling the country about Disneyland. But it was a distant, impossible dream. Our family didn't have the money for that kind of vacation. So when a colleague suggested last year that I should come with her to a conference in California to help make a presentation, my eyes lit up and I immediately started conspiring to visit Disneyland as part of that trip. I made arrangements to stay at Disneyland two nights prior to the conference.

Approaching the entrance to Disneyland is a very different experience from Walt Disney World. After checking into the Howard Johnson hotel right across the street, I started walking down Harbor Boulevard toward the entrance. The only hint of Disneyland was Space Mountain peeking over the wall on the other side of the street. Across the street was a simple sign arching over the walkway that said "Disneyland" in blue letters. I walked under the sign, past the bus drop-off area and into a concrete courtyard. Only a few minutes after leaving my room I was at the gates of Disneyland bearing my park hopper pass.

I entered Disneyland at 1:00 pm on Wednesday. I stayed until closing (8:00 pm) that day, came back at 9:00 am on Thursday (early entry) and again stayed until closing. In a day and a half, 18 hours of park time, I did nearly everything I wanted to do in both Disneyland and Disney's California Adventure!

Not that I necessarily recommend this. Folks, don't try this at home. Or at Disneyland! This was done under ideal conditions by an experienced commando tourist alone from opening to closing, during one of the least crowded times of the year, on weekdays with excellent weather conditions. At Disneyland, the difference between weekday and weekend crowds is much greater than it is at Walt Disney World. For a family trip, plan at least three days for the Disneyland Resort. In addition to the two parks, there is also a small Downtown Disney district and three official Disney hotels.

Rather than reporting my experience in excruciating detail, I will answer some questions I think other Disney World veterans might have.

Q: Is January a good time to go?

A: Yes! The weather was perfect from my point of view, varying between 50° and 75° with low humidity and no rain! (This is after all!) The parks were marvelously un-crowded. I even started recognizing people by the end of the day. I only stood in two significant lines, for Matterhorn Bobsleds and Autopia, each about 20-25 minutes. Everything else was a walk-on or short wait.

A disadvantage was that unlike at Walt Disney World, there is very little evening entertainment on weekdays during slow season. There was only the Parade of Dreams at the Disneyland park. No fireworks, no Fantasmic!, and (sob!) no Electrical Parade.

Q: What's the best attraction that isn't at Walt Disney World?

A: I would say "Disney's Aladdin -- A Musical Spectacular," a stage show at Disney's California Adventure. A large well-appointed new theater, excellent staging and special effects, and a talented cast result in a show as good as the shows on Disney Cruise Line. The only stage show at Walt Disney World that even comes close is the newly-opened Finding Nemo show at Animal Kingdom. I loved them both and it's great to see live shows making a comeback at Disney resorts. But in a head-to-head comparison Aladdin seems to be the clear winner.

Honorable mention goes to California Screamin' at Disney's California Adventure, and Indiana Jones Adventure at Disneyland park.

Q: Is there any compelling reason for those living far away to visit Disneyland Resort rather than Walt Disney World?

A: This is a matter of personal preference, but I would say no, not as far as attractions are concerned. Of the 20+ unique attractions at Disneyland, the only headliners are the three mentioned in the previous answer, plus Matterhorn Bobsleds.

Here are some possible reasons for those from the Eastern US to visit Disneyland Resort:

- * You want to experience as many different Disney parks as you can.
- * You want to make a pilgrimage to the source of the magic, "where it all began."
- * You're going to Los Angeles anyway, so why not? All three of these applied to me!

Q: What was better, what was worse, what was a surprise or disappointment?

Better: Park entry -- they just scan the bar code on your pass. Pirates of

the Caribbean, Winnie the Pooh, and ToonTown are better at Disneyland. Autopia is better than Tomorrowland Speedway. Park-to-park transportation is much better -- it's a 100-yard walk!

Worse: Mulholland Madness is just an inferior version of Primeval Whirl -- it doesn't spin. Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters has fewer targets but at least you can tell when you've hit them. "Disneyland -- The First 50 Magical Years" is worth seeing if you have the time, but "One Man's Dream" at the Disney-MGM< Studios is much better.

Surprises: The Disneyland Railroad goes through a covered section with a large dinosaur display ["Primeval World," which is satirized/honored as "Primeval Whirl" at Disney's Animal Kingdom's Chester and Hester's Dino-Rama - Ed.]. Space Mountain has side-by-side seating and a very different track than at Walt Disney World; it has only one small drop and a smoother ride. The film about California, Golden Dreams, is somewhat like the movies in World Showcase, but better and longer. I watched a session of the Jedi Academy, which was a real treat for a Star Wars fan.

Disappointments: There is no "Partners" statue with Walt and Mickey, and no Roy and Minnie bench. The Main Street Electrical Parade was not running. There is no Tomorrowland Transit Authority ("people mover") in Tomorrowland. Matterhorn Bobsleds was awkward to ride; you tend to slide around in the plastic seat and the restraint didn't feel adequate.

Q: What was the strangest experience you had at Disneyland Resort?

A: FASTPASS®! I only got two, and both times I had to ask for help. To avoid the problems I had, you need to know two things. Disneyland FASTPASS® machines don't pull your pass in like the ones at Walt Disney World. And they expect you to put in your park pass with the magnetic stripe up. (Unlike the rest of the world where the stripe goes down.)

Q: Does Disneyland "feel" the same as Walt Disney World? Does it have the same "magic"?

A: Inside Disneyland Park itself the answer is yes. There you are in pretty much familiar territory, and the magic is still there. Some have suggested that Disneyland cast members are less "magical" than those in Walt Disney World. Upon reflection that may have been true, but the difference was minor and didn't affect my enjoyment. If there is a difference, it is balanced by the intimacy of a smaller park, and the realization that this is Where It All Began.

On the other hand California Adventure has an entirely different feel to it than anywhere in Disney World. The Hollywood Pictures Backlot area does feel somewhat like a small, through-the-looking-glass version of Disney-MGM Studios, but the rest of it is ...different. It feels like it was assembled from random parts. Nevertheless, I had a good time, spending nearly half of my park time there exploring this "part-Disney and part-something-new" park. "Adventure" really is the right word for it.

Q: Are you going back?

A: Someday ... But it's hard to justify taking the whole family when Walt Disney World is bigger and closer!

About The Author: Richard Mercer is a veteran of 11 Walt Disney World trips, three Disney cruises, four MouseFests, and now one trip to Disneyland! In "real life" he is a mathematics professor at Wright State University in the Dayton area.

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