

Your First Trip to Universal Studios Orlando: A Planning Guide

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Message Board Guide (Moderator)

With four theme parks, there's plenty to keep you busy at the Walt Disney World Resort, especially if you only have a few days in Orlando. But venture outside those famous purple gates and there's a whole new world of theme park entertainment waiting for you.

Now I'll be honest here. I'm one of the worst for venturing off Disney property during our vacation. The only exception to that are our trips to the mall to pick up some bargains. Apart from those, I'm happiest staying within the boundaries of Walt Disney World. But we have to push ourselves and after ten visits to Disney, perhaps it was finally time to see what Universal Orlando was like. So our last trip was arranged so that we could spend a couple of days there, trying out the various rides and shows. For me, it would be my first ever visit there and unsurprisingly, I had plenty of questions that I wanted answered before we got through the park gates.

As a seasoned Disney veteran, planning my visits to the various Disney parks is second nature for me, but wait... my trusty PassPorter doesn't extend to cover Universal Orlando! Now what? That was really my first question -- where can I find out what I need to know? Fortunately, I found a good substitute for my faithful PassPorter in the shape of Universal Orlando: The Ultimate Guide to the Ultimate Theme Park Adventure by Kelly Monaghan, which is packed full of useful information. And it's available to purchase through the PassPorter store.

Other great places to get information about Universal Orlando include their official web site which has sections on the parks, hotels, nightlife, and tickets, amongst other things. One of the most important things I learned was that if a ride was deemed to be suitable for "ultimate adventurers" in Universal-speak, that was a sure signal that we should keep as far away from it as possible if we didn't want to be turned green!

Now, there's another great addition to the wealth of information about Universal Orlando on our very own PassPorter boards. The recently added Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure section is the place to head if you've got any questions that you can't find the answers to.

Let's be clear. Heading to Universal Orlando is not a small undertaking

and it's not some quick day trip. It's second in size only to Disney, with two theme parks, CityWalk, which is their equivalent of Downtown Disney, complete with dining and nightlife and three resorts - the Portofino Bay, Hard Rock and Royal Pacific Hotels. The main difference you'll immediately notice is the size of the place. Compared to Disney, it's tiny and everything is in walking distance, although I'll grant you, it's still a long walk from one end of the theme parks back to the hotels -- I know, as we walked it!

That means there's lots to see and you're not going to do it all in one day. Ideally, you need to allow three days to do both parks, perhaps longer if you want to do every ride or you're visiting at a busy time of the year. And don't forget to put some time aside in your visit to check out CityWalk -- its well worth a visit and has some excellent restaurants.

With so much to do at Universal Orlando, it's worth looking at staying at one of three onsite hotels. OK, so it's not cheap, with prices on par with Disney, but if you're a Universal Orlando hotel guest, you do get a pretty impressive bonus -- exclusive front of the line passes. The Universal Express system allows hotel guests to bypass the regular lines and best of all; this perk is free of charge to hotel guests. It's something worth thinking about, particularly if your visit to Universal Orlando is likely to be at a busy time of the year. Fortunately ours wasn't, so we stayed put at our beloved Beach Club and drove over.

Regardless of whether you stay on Universal property or not, it's worth making time in your schedule to visit the three resorts. They're all unique and beautifully themed and if nothing else, you can admire them and consider staying at one of them in the future. We were exceptionally impressed with what we saw of the resorts and in particular, how you can walk over to the parks in the mornings, although admittedly by the end of the day, the walk back might be a bit too much. Then again, that's what the complimentary water taxi that runs to all the resorts is for!

If you drive over to Universal Orlando from Disney, the drive should take you about 20 -- 30 minutes, depending where you are on Disney property, although obviously it could take a lot longer in the rush hour or if there's been an accident on the I-4. Universal Orlando, as you'd expect, is very well signposted and as a result, it's easy to find. Self parking costs \$11 a day and there's also an option to valet park, which costs \$18 a day.

The other question I had was, which tickets should we get? Having worked out that we'd be spending two days at Universal Orlando, I knew

that at the very least, that's what we'd need. Over the next few months, I watched the Universal web site very carefully, having learned that their park tickets are very different than Disney's. Unlike Disney tickets, which are fixed price at all times, Universal regularly has great offers on park tickets. We ended up paying for two-park, two-day tickets that were extended to five days admission! So if you're planning a trip to Universal, don't just buy the tickets at the first price you see -- unless it is a great deal that you can't pass up! Instead, keep an eye on the web site, as you never know what type of offer might be around the corner.

So now we've looked at tickets, how long to spend in the parks, whether to stay at the resort and where to find more information about Universal Orlando. If you're thinking of a visit there for the first time, that should be a lot of your questions already answered. And if you've got any others -- don't forget to pop into PassPorter's new Universal forums and ask away!

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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