

Being the Ideal Guest: Tips and Reminders

by Brad Randall, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Perfection. Isn't that what we truly want when we plan a vacation? After all of the preparation and expense, we want our experience - our hotel, dining, and all of our entertainment - to be the best that they can be! Sure, things can and do go wrong, but we aim high. In fact, that desire for excellence is one reason so many of us return to Disney theme parks again and again -- we know that, on the whole, the Walt Disney Company sets high standards and delivers a quality experience for our vacation dollar.

On our last vacation to Walt Disney World, one less-than-perfect moment wasn't the fault of Disney or a lack of planning, but rather had to do with another guest, who rudely tried to elbow his way to the front of a check-in line at the Sci-Fi Dine-In Theatre. This got me to thinking about the "role" of the guest: How do guests add to or detract from the whole vacation experience? What makes an ideal guest? And (gulp!) am I an ideal guest?

To find out, there could be no better source than those fine people who have been there, done that, and wear the nametag: cast members! Let me admit from the start that I am not a Disney employee and have never worked at a theme park. I have, however, been fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of many current and former cast members (and employees of other non-Disney theme parks), both in person and online, and I really admire and respect the work they do. I've also come to learn that the ones who have been at it for any length of time have seen it all -- good, bad, and ugly -- and most have formed strong opinions about what makes a good guest. (Thanks especially to the regulars at www.StupidGuestTricks.com for their suggestions!)

Here are just a few tips I've gleaned from their experience:

An ideal guest is considerate. This seems basic, but cast members say that common courtesy will take you a long way towards becoming an ideal guest! This means, of course, thinking about how your actions affect others, and treating other guests and cast members with respect. It's the simple things -- waiting patiently in line (unlike the guest at the Sci-Fi Dine-In Theatre), or following instructions (like "move all the way across the theater, filling in all available seats" rather than stopping in the middle and making people climb over you) -- that can make life easier on everybody. Of course "vacation stress" can get to any of us,

especially when things start going wrong, but in those situations an ideal guest tries to keep his or her focus on calmly solving the problem rather than berating other guests or cast members.

An ideal guest respects the rules. Courtesy is high on the list of priorities that cast members themselves follow, but it is not the highest item -- safety is! Unfortunately, many guests seem to think that vacation time means complete freedom from any restrictions, and that is not the case. There are laws and regulations that must be followed, most involving safety, and a vital part of cast members' jobs is making sure those rules are enforced. When workers have to tell guests not to climb on walls, or to refrain from jumping over ropes or chains, or to smoke in designated areas, or that the guest's precious munchkin is not tall enough to ride a certain attraction, they are not doing so to be mean or to persecute anyone, but to protect the guest and others.

Cast members who operate attractions with height restrictions encounter parents every day who try to beg, plead or cajole the cast member into letting their too-short child ride. These parents either don't realize -- or don't care -- that the restrictions are safety matters, and that they are putting their child at risk of injury if he or she rides. (Stories are numerous, too, of parents who try to dodge the rules by making their child "taller," stuffing the child's shoes with things such as tissue, toys, and in one notorious instance, ice cream bars -- quick, measure him before they melt!) An ideal guest respects the rules -- and the people enforcing them.

Which leads to the next tip...

An ideal guest who is a parent... is still a parent. Too often, cast members observe parents who think that they are on a vacation from responsibility for their children. Stories abound of parents letting their kids engage in unsafe or disruptive behavior: climbing walls, standing up on trains, making noise during attractions. Others seem to think cast members are babysitters, and will leave their very young children unattended. Once, in Disney's Animal Kingdom, a worker who was rearranging strollers outside the Pocahontas show found a sleeping infant -- the baby's parents had parked her in her stroller and gone in to watch the show!

Most of us parents realize that we should keep closer watch on our kids while on vacation, not less -- but this is another way some guests can be less than ideal.

An ideal guest goes with the flow. Sure, we aim for a perfect vacation, but the real world does intrude from time to time, even on Disney

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property. Illness, crowded parks, bad weather, ride closures, lost luggage ... all of these and more can put a dent in an otherwise nice day. One way to minimize disruption, as well-informed PassPorter readers already know, is to plan ahead: bring rain ponchos, medications, research the anticipated crowds and weather. But still things will pop up that you just can't plan for.

A "go with the flow" attitude will carry the ideal guest a long way -- things go wrong, now how can we have fun anyway? Cast members who work in Walt Disney World's water parks say that they get a chuckle every time one of Florida's regular afternoon rain showers occurs, because many of the guests will squeal in surprise and leave the pool to find shelter. That's understandable if there's lightning around, of course, but in that case Disney would be getting you out of the water themselves. If it's just rain, well, you're already wet, right? Why not stay in? Speaking of rain, many savvy local guests have learned that those brief showers have a way of clearing out the parks, so they'll make a point to go when it's raining so they can enjoy the shorter lines! The ideal guest takes that same attitude and enjoys him or herself no matter what the circumstances.

An ideal guest is informed. Cast members marvel at people who pay thousands of dollars to vacation at a Disney resort but who apparently don't know what to expect when they get there. One Epcot worker recently reported meeting a couple from Italy who rode Spaceship Earth and then asked how to get back to the monorail -- not realizing how much more there is to the park! While you can enjoy any of Disney's theme parks without much planning, vacations work much better when you know what to expect. (I must confess, on my first vacation of any length to Walt Disney World, I wasn't too informed, either -- but hey, it was my honeymoon. I had other things on my mind!)

Similarly, visitors sometimes display frustration when an attraction is down for rehab ("I traveled 2000 miles just to ride _____!" is an oft-heard complaint). As savvy PassPorter News readers already know, there is abundant information available online, including data on the parks themselves and long-term ride closures. There are also posted signs that give updates at the parks, and cast members themselves are a great source of information. There is no need for anyone to visit a Disney park uninformed.

An ideal guest asks questions. This may seem to contradict the previous suggestion, but not really. If you aren't sure of something, don't be afraid to ask -- cast members are there to help!

Of course, the previous "be informed" hint might save you some

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embarrassment. Some cast members enjoy exchanging amongst themselves funny questions they've been asked: "What time is the 3 o'clock parade?" is a perennial favorite. (Pity the poor soul at Epcot who actually asked, apparently referring to Spaceship Earth, "What time do they roll the big ball out?") But fear not, cast members also recognize that we're on vacation and our brains sometimes shut off, so don't spend time in frustration when you need information. Instead, allow yourself the luxury of experiencing that famous Disney service and ask for help.

An ideal guest gives feedback. Most cast members really want to make your trip special, so it helps them to know how they are doing, both good and bad. Guests are often quick to complain when something isn't perfect, but sadly, not many pass out compliments.

I've always taken notes on my trips, but last year I began recording when a cast member went out of their way to add "magic" to our trip. When I returned home I wrote a brief letter to Guest Services at Walt Disney World, listing for each instance the time, location, the first name of the cast member, and a brief description of the incident. A few days later my wife received a phone call from Guest Services thanking us for the letter, and letting her know that the people named -- and their supervisors -- were being notified of the compliment. That was very satisfying, and a great way to repay some special cast members for their kindness.

You can write Walt Disney World Guest Services at PO Box 10,000, Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830. The Disneyland address is PO Box 3232, Anaheim, CA 92803-3232. You can also stop by any Guest Services desk to leave comments.

Finally, an ideal guest is a kid or kid at heart. Disney parks are special for children, to be sure, but cast members also love interacting with grown-ups who get caught up in the "magic." Recently on a Disney online discussion board, cast members who "work with" the Disney characters were asked what they thought of adults who wanted to meet, pose with, or hug the characters. The response was unanimous; they'd much rather have adults who are excited to see the character than have them grump around and act like they're above it all.

Disney parks are great places to relax and have fun, and you miss out on a lot of magic if you act too cool to enjoy it. So go ahead, be a kid; laugh, smile, skip, give a character a hug. You're miles from home, so who's going to know? To this day, one of my favorite memories is when I was walking alone in a hallway onboard the Disney Wonder cruise ship and had a chance encounter with the Big Cheese himself. For one glorious minute, I had Mickey Mouse -- to me, the real Mickey Mouse --

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all to myself. I couldn't stop smiling for the rest of the week!

So there they are; tips for being the ideal guest. You might have noticed that following these guidelines not only help cast members; they also help you to enjoy your vacation more! And having your vacation be magical is everyone's goal -- guest and cast member alike.

So... how do you measure up?

About The Author: Brad Randall is a Dallas-area attorney, the married father of two boys, and veteran of several trips to Disney parks and two Disney cruises. He and his family plan to return to Walt Disney World in December 2007, his first holiday-season trip since his honeymoon. He thinks he might be able to pay more attention to the decorations this time.

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