

The School that Walt Built: Educational Opportunities at the Magic Kingdom

by Keely Hutton, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Last September I did the unthinkable. Two weeks into the school year, I, a former middle school teacher, whisked my children away to Walt Disney World. I know what you're thinking, "You pulled your kids from school to go on rides and hang out with Mickey?" It's a valid question, a question posed to me by many friends, parents and teachers. My answer is simply yes…and no.

When we decided to take our family to Walt Disney World, my husband and I ran through the laundry list of decisions that all Disney vacations demand: Where to stay? What tickets to buy? Which parks to visit? Which character meals to book? To "Disney Dining Plan (DDP)" or not to DDP? (That is the question.) But the most difficult decision we faced was when to go? After much discussion, we chose the third week of September.

Months of planning passed, and September 20th arrived. As we pushed through the turnstiles and made our way up the gentle slope leading to the Magic Kingdom, my pulse quickened, and I had the uncontrollable urge to jump up and down, clapping my hands like a toddler. This reaction was no surprise; it happens every time we visit the Magic Kingdom. What I wasn't prepared for was what happened next.

Throughout my life I have seen the Magic Kingdom through many eyes: the eyes of a child, the eyes of a newlywed, the eyes of a parent. But on this trip, most likely due to the months I spent fretting over yanking my kids from school and thus, stunting their intellectual growth, I saw the Magic Kingdom through the eyes of a teacher, and I was amazed. Beyond the colorful characters and pulse-racing rides, I discovered educational opportunities for every person who steps onto Main Street, USA. History, math, science, language arts, music …they're all there, waiting to be absorbed by young and old minds alike.

Where are all of these great learning opportunities, you ask? Let's take a quick tour of the school that Walt built. To begin, grab a map, so you know where to find your classes. This is also a perfect opportunity for younger students to learn how to read a map key and plot the best route to their destinations.

We begin on Main Street with music. Your instructors are the talented Dapper Dans. Their lesson today is a walk through American music at the turn of the 20th century and Disney classics. Tap your toes and

hum along as they masterfully demonstrate harmonies. Your homework: practice with family and friends.

With "It's a Small World" lodged snugly in your brain, it's off to math class. Now, I must admit that as a child, I hated math. However, I never had a teacher like the one found in Tomorrowland. In Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin, Buzz offers math lessons for learners at every level. Young space cadets can practice recognizing "greater than" and "less than" values on targets. For slightly older cadets, a lesson in finding the difference of two values has never been more fun. What child doesn't want to figure out the exact number, by which he or she has won, so they can rub it in their parents' and siblings' faces for the rest of the day. Ready for more? Count how many times you shoot a particular target, and then multiply that number by the target's worth to determine the number of points you've earned. The possibilities will take you to infinity and beyond.

Back on Earth, it's time for language arts with Belle. In a cozy garden near Cinderella's Castle, hone listening, comprehension and recall skills while watching the story of Beauty and the Beast unfold before your eyes. Or if you're lucky enough to be chosen as a volunteer, flex your Gaston-size reading and acting muscles, as well.

Now, I know you're probably ready for a snack, but I suggest holding off until after science class. The Mad Hatter is all about hands-on-learning, and for his lesson on centrifugal force, you'll need strong hands and a strong stomach. For students who desire a more advanced lesson in science, Space Mountain and Big Thunder Mountain offer some spine-tingling lessons in physics.

After stumbling from science, it's time for a quick lesson in time with FASTPASSes. Little students can practice telling time, while older children calculate how many minutes, or hours, they have before their Fastpass window opens.

With time to spare, it's off to Social Studies. Today's lesson is about the executive branch, and let's be honest, could you find a better teacher to deliver the Gettysburg Address than Abe Lincoln?

Now that you've filled your minds with knowledge, it's time to fill your bellies. Enjoy a meal at a Magic Kingdom eatery and chow down on a lesson in money. If lines permit, have young students pay for their own meals. Determining what they can afford and how much change to expect can be a valuable lesson in budgeting.

With a new sense of dollars and cents, it's time to take your assigned

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seat in one of Splash Mountain's carved-out logs. What does Splash Mountain have to do with learning, you ask? Good question, class, and thank you for raising your hands. To answer your query, let me show you what I see through my English teacher eyes. When I look at Splash Mountain, I see the perfect, physical incarnation of a plot diagram. "Huh?" you ask, but picture this.

Your log takes you through the calm waters of the opening scene and introduces you to the story's characters. But, wait, our protagonist, Brer Rabbit is conflicted. He leaves home in search of adventure and his laughing place. Along the way, he meets the antagonists, Brer Fox and Brer Bear, and the conflict builds. The ride becomes rougher; there are ups and downs, moments of fearful anticipation and belly-tickling laughter. The tension between our characters continues to rise until, finally you find yourself at the climax of our tale. Your protagonist faces certain death and you …a 5-story waterfall. You plummet into the briar patch, literally experiencing the falling action of the plot. There is great emotion involved, usually expressed through tightly closed eyes, high-pitched screams and the circulation-stopping grasp of the rider next to you. Dripping wet and slightly hoarse, you glide into the resolution of the story. Brer Rabbit has learned a valuable lesson, and if his students were paying attention, so have you.

On our trip, I discovered that the Magic Kingdom has more learning opportunities waiting to be devoured than it has turkey legs. It was a discovery repeated in each park we visited. At every ride and attraction, we learned valuable lessons in science, architecture, culture, math, language, art …the list goes on and on. And these are just the parks. The Disney resorts continue the theme of learning; you just have to look through the right eyes.

In conclusion, class, the school that Walt built is open year-round, so whether you choose to visit during breaks or when school is in session, push aside your guilt and see Walt Disney World through new eyes. That way, when you're asked if you go to Disney World to ride rides and hang out with Mickey, you can simply answer, yes… and no because you're taking your family to a magical place, where learning exists in its purest form; where it doesn't feel like learning; it feels like fun.

About The Author: Keely Hutton is a mother of two, writer of children's books, teacher of English and fan of all things Disney. When she is not planning her next Disney vacation or in front of her computer or class, she can be found at the local karate dojo, working out the stress brought on by a tough day of revising.

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