

On-Site Lodging vs. Off-Site Lodging: Your Most Important Decision

by Christine Pedersen, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Planning a Disney vacation is a series of choices, some big and some small. But of all the decisions you'll make, where you choose to stay may have the biggest impact on the overall quality of your vacation. I know this w

Of all the decisions I made about my first trip to Walt Disney World for my family of four, the hardest was deciding whether to stay at a Disney resort ("on-site" or "off-property") or to choose non-Disney ("off-site" or "off-property") lodging. I knew from reading my PassPorter that Jennifer and Dave had a clear preference for staying on-property, but I figured they were professional Disney samplers and it came with the territory. I was still debating on-site vs. off-site, when family friends offered us a deal almost too good to be true -- \$230 total for their time-share condo at Oak Plantation in Kissimmee, two bedrooms and two bathrooms for seven nights, just 20 minutes from the Magic Kingdom. That was about what one night at the Animal Kingdom Lodge would have cost! It seemed like a no-brainer and we happily accepted their kind offer.

Coincidentally, my friend Jennie was planning a trip at nearly the same time. Her family of four would be leaving Walt Disney World on the day mine would be arriving. We had so much fun discussing all the details, especially when our respective spouses were "Disney-ed out." Jennie got a good deal at Disney's Beach Club Resort and was able to add the Disney Dining Plan to her stay.

Jennie's family and mine both had great vacations, but our experiences were quite different, mainly due to our different choices of lodgings. Looking back, I see a few factors that everyone should consider before deciding whether to stay on- or off-property: expense, meals, space, time in the parks, and that intangible thing I will call "Disney Per Square Inch" or Disney PSI. Here are some pros and cons to consider before you make your final vacation plans.

Room Rate

Staying off property was a lot cheaper per night. With our exceptional deal, we spent approximately \$30 per night, and there are plenty of off-site hotel rooms to be had in that price range. There is no doubt you can get cheaper lodgings outside of Walt Disney World on a per night basis. A Disney Value Resort room would be at least \$79 per night. Even considering that you have to pay for parking if you stay off-property (\$10 a day), off-property will almost always be cheaper.

Meals

Because we had a full-size refrigerator, we saved money on groceries, at least compared to what we would have spent eating out every night. However, staying off-property meant we did not qualify for the Disney Dining Plan.

My friend Jennie and her family did purchase the Disney Dining Plan, and they did not spend much more than we did (about \$70 per person more) since we did still have to buy food. The meals we did eat out (our three "splurge" meals at Cinderella's Royal Table, the Rain Forest Cafe and Marrakesh) set us back in excess of \$100 a pop, including tip. The food was fabulous, and each lunch or dinner was an experience as well as a meal. Also, the few snacks and what would be considered "counter-service" meals we ate at the park added up. We did pack snacks and carried water, but what is the point of a Disney vacation if you can't spring for Mickey Bars on a hot day? These things would have been covered under the dining plan.

Another factor I hadn't taken into consideration when calculating my savings was how much it cost me in time and energy to find a grocery store and shop, with two kids and husband in tow. Think about it: how much time do you want to spend grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning up on your vacation? By day four, I would have forked over my roughly \$300 meal savings in a heartbeat.

Space

One big reason I had opted for an off-property stay was that we could afford so much more space. Our condo was spacious, about 750 square feet. My husband and I had envisioned watching a movie or talking in the living room when the kids were asleep. However, we were so tired by the end of the day, we pretty much all fell asleep at the same time. The king-sized bed and the privacy were nice, but I could have slept soundly in the middle of Grand Central Station after all that walking!

Before you decide, think realistically about how important that extra elbow room will be to your family. And how much time do you plan to spend in your room, anyway?

Time

By staying off property, we lost time by having to drive to the parks. Yes, it was only a twenty-minute drive, but that can feel like an eternity. Once we got into the condo, it took effort and energy to go back out. Conversely, once we got to the parks, we didn't want to take the time to get back to the van and drive back to the condo...even when a break would have been quite welcome. We couldn't split up easily either, since we only had one car. Nobody wanted to get stranded, either at the park

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or at the condo, so we all clumped along together. While we could and did split up at the parks, we couldn't conveniently give my five-year-old the nap break that my eight-year-old didn't need. Finally, we didn't get those Extra Magic Hours, since one must be a guest at a Disney resort to take advantage of them.

Jennie's family could do things very differently because they were on property. They could essentially walk into Epcot from their resort. It was easy for Jennie to head back to the room with the younger boy while her husband and her older son stayed at the park, because everyone had access to buses. They used the morning and evening Extra Magic Hours, resting in the hot middle part of the day.

Disney PSI

There really is something magical about a Disney vacation. It's an indefinable, intangible feeling that pervades the parks. It's the glee that wings through you when you see your personal favorite character or it's the sweep of pure joy in your heart when your child is staring in open-mouthed wonder at the 360-degree fireworks display overhead. And just as it's difficult to put a price tag on that feeling, it's impossible to quantify how much Disney PSI you actually get on any one vacation. Suffice it to say that it's just not something that you're going to get as much of if you stay off property. If you stay on property, that extra sprinkle of pixie dust may be just the thing that makes your vacation something wonderful.

Our condo could have been Anywhere, USA. The pool was a regular pool. The kids enjoyed it but it was not unique in any way. My friend Jennie's sons had a Disney-themed pool, and a Radio Disney DJ spinning tunes for them at a pool party. So, even when they weren't in the parks, they were at Disney. Her kids wanted to spend as much time at the resort as at the parks, and had about as much fun at one as at the other!

So, how do I decide where to stay?

Try to spend some time thinking about what you are looking for from your vacation. If your primary goal is to do Disney in the most affordable way, staying off-property is clearly the most economical. If you are willing and/or able to spend a fair amount more and want to high rate of that magical Disney PSI, then staying on property is clearly the way to go

In conclusion, the Disney PSI factor is what I wish I would have considered before I took our friends up on their offer to stay in that nice off-property condo. Until I got inside the parks and literally felt the magic in the air, I didn't know how great it would be. I must admit I was even a little worried I would get "Disneyed-out" and that I might find too

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much Disney annoying. However, now that the vacation is over, I realize the bottom line is that I saved some money, and I got a very nice and enjoyable vacation with some Disney mixed in. My friend who stayed on property definitely paid more but, with the extra time in the parks and the high Disney PSI of her vacation, she and her family got a lot more Disney bang for their buck.

For our next trip, the decision will be an easy one for me. I will definitely stay on site, even if we have to go with a value resort to make it affordable. Because when it comes right down to it I want more than just a nice vacation - I want a Disney vacation! I want a vacation dripping with Disney magic, sparkling with fireworks, and stuffed with as much Mickey Mouse and pixie dust as I can handle.

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