

Taking Toddlers to Walt Disney World: Treat or Torture?

by Anna Totty, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Taking a toddler to Walt Disney World. To some it sounds like a great adventure, to others it sounds like a nightmare in the making.

Should you rent a stroller or bring your own? How will you get out of the hotel in time for Extra Magic Hour? How can you ride Space Mountain when your child can't? What is there to do while you wait in line? I've taken toddlers to Walt Disney World and it is wonderful. Your trip can be too, with a little advance planning. Here are some of the tips we've learned through trial and error during our Disney trips.

Before Leaving Home -- There are several things to do before leaving home to ensure a smooth vacation. First you will need a stroller. I've heard parents with two- and three-year-olds say they don't need one because their child walks everywhere at home. But Disney World is the size of Manhattan and the walking you do here is much more than an average person does at home. Toddlers need to conserve their energy and need a place to rest and perhaps even nap while touring the World and a stroller is perfect for both. Plus, if you're planning on doing a child swap at some of the big rides, you will need a comfortable place for your child to wait.

To Bring a Stroller or Not? -- Should you bring your own stroller or rent one? I recommend bringing your own. There are some disadvantages, but in my experience, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. A lot of it depends on how you explore the parks. If you travel light and only need a stroller when your toddler needs a break, bringing your own stroller might not be the way to go. But most toddlers don't travel light. Your toddler, the toddler gear, cameras, snacks, drinks, and other stuff can be quite a load. Your stroller can be the perfect pack mule. And if you stay on property, your cargo-moving needs don't end at the park gate. You've got quite a load to get to the bus stop and then to your room. Some of the Disney resorts are rather sprawled out. When we stayed at Animal Kingdom Lodge it was over a quarter of a mile from the bus stop to our room. That's a very long way to carry a tired, probably sleeping child at the end of the day along with everything else.

Another plus to bringing your own stroller is that yours is probably made out of a comfortable material and your child likes it. (Or at least is familiar with it!) Disney strollers are made out of hard, molded plastic

and are too big for babies and are difficult for some small toddlers to sleep in comfortably. You also know what your stroller will hold, the best way to pack it for the day, and probably have those oh-so convenient cup holders. If you bring your own and will be using Disney transportation, make sure your stroller is lightweight, compact, and can be folded quickly to get on and off the buses easily.

If bringing your own isn't an option, don't despair. Disney strollers are very convenient and functional. You can rent one near the front of every park and at Downtown Disney by the day or for the length of your stay. They will give you a paper ID tag to place in the plastic sleeve on the stroller to identify it as yours for the day. If you decide to park hop, keep your ID tag. Use it to get a stroller at the next park at no additional charge. If you decide to rent for multiple days, they will give you vouchers to use for the other days. All you have to do is show the voucher at the first park each day and place your ID tag on the stroller and you're ready to go.

Whether you bring your own or rent, you'll need an easy way to ID your stroller in a sea of others. You may think you're the only person who has a green striped stroller with white wheels, but believe me -- you're not. And to make it even harder, Disney has cast members whose job is to move parked strollers so that everything stays looking neat. You may have left it next to the entrance of Kilimanjaro Safaris, but by the time you come out, it could be wedged way back in the back of the stroller area. Tie something personal to the stroller's handle. It doesn't have to be big or fancy, a simple bandana will work. Just make it something you can spot easily.

Luggage Decisions -- After the stroller decision is made, you'll need to decide what bag to take to Disney. Toddlers never travel light and a trip to Disney is no exception. You'll need a place to carry all those little things: diapers, pull ups, wipes, extra clothes, sunscreen, sippy cups, etc. On our second trip, I learned an invaluable lesson just by chance. I took a clear backpack instead of a regular diaper bag so I could easily find what we needed in the parks. I had no idea that it would actually be a big time saver as well. When we came up to the security bag check, the guards just glanced at it and waved us on through. No having to spend time unzipping all the pockets and having all our stuff searched. Security can see everything you have in it in a glance and you can just zip through the line.

Packing -- Now that those two decisions are made, you need to think about ways to make it easier to make it to the bus stop for Extra Magic Hour or those great character breakfasts. A little advanced planning goes along way here too. First, when packing, put each complete outfit

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in its own zip lock bag (shirt, shorts, underwear/pull-up, socks, hat, hair bows for girls, etc). That way, all you have to do is grab one thing out of the suitcase and you have everything you need. Doing this, our girls could get their own clothes each morning. Plus, you can easily grab a complete change of clothes to take to the parks with you in case of accidents. And if anything gets wet during the day, you can pack it in the plastic bag to take back to the hotel.

Another tip to make it easier to get going in the morning is to go to a discount store that sells things for \$1 before your trip and buy a shoe holder with pockets that will hang over the bathroom door or on the closet rod. Put each person's toothpaste/toothbrush in its own slot as well as hairbrush/comb in one, makeup in another, etc. It makes it easy to see and get to everything you need in the morning. Plus, your kids know where their toothbrushes or hairbrushes are all the time.

Label Everything! -- To keep arguments down to a minimum and to be able to find these quickly, bring labels you make at home and label every thing. This helps in case you lose something. And it also helps if the kids have two of the exact same thing such as autograph books, sand buckets that come with the kid meals at Blizzard Beach, Epcot passports, etc. You will be able to see whose is whose if it has their name on it, cutting down on lots of arguments. Our youngest can't read yet, so I let her pick out a character to be for the week. All of her things get a Cinderella label so she can quickly pick out her own refillable mug or disposable camera as we're running out the door.

Locate the Baby Care Centers -- Pick up a map at the entrance and locate the Baby Care Center(s). They will be a great retreat for you. They have changing tables, rocking chairs, and if you've left something behind or run out of diapers, the center will have exactly what you need. An added bonus is that they are air conditioned so you can get out of the heat for awhile. The Baby Care Center will also be your best friend if you are potty training your child.

The Baby Care Centers have small toddler-size potties that don't flush automatically, which are great for potty-training toddlers. All the other restrooms have automatic-flush toilets and they nearly ruined our first trip for our youngest. She's small and every time she wiggled, the toilet flushed, loudly. She was terrified and refused to use the bathroom anywhere but in the hotel room. She still asks if the toilet is like Disney's every time we go to a new bathroom. But if you can't make it to the special potties at the Baby Care Center and have to use a regular bathroom, try this trick. Just cover the flush sensor with your hand or with a small Post-It note until your child is finished so it doesn't flush until your little one is done.

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Baby Swap -- Now, you're ready for the rides. Do you have older kids who want to ride Space Mountain but your younger one is still too small? Disney has an answer. All of the rides that have height requirements also have a baby swap option. What does this mean? One parent can ride Splash Mountain while the other one waits with the baby. Then, the second parent can ride while the first parent waits with the baby. Your older kids will love baby swap. Disney wants to make sure everyone has a great trip so no one has to ride alone. The older kids will get to ride with Dad and then ride again with Mom, too. That's right; the older kids get to ride twice at the baby swap rides.

One thing to keep in mind with the baby swap is that all of the rides handle it differently. For example, at Kali River Rapids we were able to take our sleeping baby in her stroller through the FASTPASS line to a special waiting area with benches just for people using the baby swap option. At Rock 'n' Roller Coaster, however, the parent waiting with the baby is given a pass like a FASTPASS and waits outside of the ride until the first parent comes out. Always tell the first cast member you come to at each ride that you want to do the baby swap and they will tell you how to handle it.

Just for Little Kids -- There are also some special things that small ones can do while waiting for the bigger kids to ride the big rides. For example, if some of you are riding Splash Mountain or Big Thunder Mountain at Magic Kingdom, the others can take advantage of the toddler-size playground located near the entrance to Splash Mountain, hop on the train at the nearby station and ride the complete loop around the park, or go see the Country Bear Jamboree. Is your group riding Space Mountain or Buzz Lightyear? Then ride the Tomorrowland Transit Authority with your toddler. It goes through both of these rides so you can play a game to see if you can find the rest of your group.

Do you want to explore the World Showcase at Epcot but you're scared your little one won't sit still? At the first country, locate the Kidcot Fun Stop - there's one in each country. One parent can stay with your toddler while she does the art project and makes her mask, while the other parent explores. Then you can swap. If you explore all of "the world" and your child gets stamps from all the Kidcot Fun Stops, she will get a free poster at the last stop. My girls loved doing the Kidcot Fun Stops. It really kept their interest.

Also in Epcot, are you doing Mission Space or Test Track? If so, there's a small playground in the Mission Space building and, to make it even better, it's air conditioned. Go through the regular queue and pre-show, and ask a cast member to show you the way. Are your older kids spending lots of time in Innoventions? There are a few computer games

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for smaller kids near the Toontown game.

Disney's Hollywood Studios is a little trickier. There's nothing for little ones to do near Rock 'n' Roller Coaster or Tower of Terror but wait outside in the sun. I suggest going back down Sunset Boulevard to the open air Sunset Ranch Market and buying a snack and waiting for the rest of the group there at a table in the shade. If you think the Studios Backlot Tour is too intense for your little one, you can wait at the very convenient Honey I Shrank the Kids Playground. When it comes to Star Tours, baby swap allows you to go all the way up to the ride and wait on a bench outside the entrance. While your child will have to wait, it will give you a nice break in the air conditioning.

Disney's Animal Kingdom is very toddler friendly. If your group wants to ride Primeval Whirl, the baby swap occurs at the ride platform at the loading gates. It has benches and is in the shade. If part of your group is riding Dinosaur or It's Tough to Be a Bug and you decide it's too much for your little one, your toddler will love the convenient Boneyard playground. It has toddler-sized slides in addition to the big climbing areas, and a huge, shaded sand box where you can dig up fossils.

Here are some other things you can do to make your trip less stressful and more memorable:

- * When checking in at your resort take advantage of the fact that only the person whose name is on the reservation has to stand in line. Take the kids to explore the hotel. Go look at the pool or some of the special things at your resort such as the animals at Animal Kingdom Lodge, the giant paddlewheel at Port Orleans Riverside, etc.

- * Take things with you to the parks to keep your toddler happy while waiting. Some easy things to carry are pipe cleaners in multiple colors that can be used over and over to make anything your child imagines, bubbles, the small, travel-sized Magna-Doodles that can be attached to your stroller, Playdoh, etc.

- * If you are going to Disney's Animal Kingdom and your child won't drink without a straw, make sure you bring a sippy cup. Straws are taboo at Animal Kingdom for the safety of the animals, but disposable sippy cups work wonderfully well.

Take a Break -- Finally, take a break in the afternoon. That advice is so basic, and it's also the advice that's most often ignored. If you are staying onsite, hop on Disney transportation and take the short ride back to the hotel. You will feel so much better, and your toddler will, too. If going back to the hotel isn't an option, find a quiet place at the parks to rest such as one of the chairs on Tom Sawyer's Island in the Magic Kingdom, or watch the boats and have a snack at the Cantina de San

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Angel at Epcot.

Your vacation is going to be great. Don't rush; take time to experience the magic of Disney. Your toddler won't care if she didn't get to ride everything in the park. Toddlers like the small things and Disney is a great place for making magical memories. We've found that it's often the small, unexpected things that children, especially toddlers remember most vividly.

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