How to Feel Like an Orlando Family

In my house, and undoubtedly in many others, the mere mention of Walt Disney World and Orlando can cause little eyes to sparkle and smiles to appear, a phenomenon often accompanied by the spontaneous outbreak of jumping and dancing about the room. If there is any doubt at all that a trip to Orlando is worth the effort, I need only see the wonder, amazement, and excitement in the faces of my five kids, not to mention the tens of thousands of other kids I see when visiting Orlando. It simply confirms what I've known for a long time: that this is truly a magical place where children and families are the real VIPs.

For every business that caters to adult travelers, there are three or four others that roll out the red carpet to children of all ages and their families. The city tempts you with special child check-in desks, kid-friendly menus, character meet-and-greets, and slightly lower admission prices for those 3 to 9 years old. Some hotels and motels have special programs for youngsters—and, in a few cases, teenagers—giving them their own space to hang around with their peers. A handful of landing zones offer rooms themed to cartoon characters or action heroes. And almost every one of them lets kids ages 17 and under stay free with paying adults.

Thank Walter Elias Disney and his wannabes for that.

Uncle Walt laid the foundation for what in the past 3 decades has become America's *No. 1 vacation destination* for the young and young at heart.

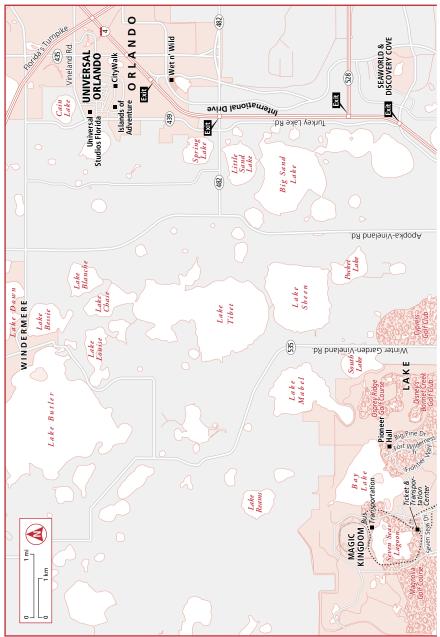
Until Disney's heirs opened the Magic Kingdom in 1971, water-skiing and alligator wrestling shows were the only attractions, and central Florida's motels and restaurants had to make most of their living off business travelers or those who came to visit relatives at a high-and-dry naval training center.

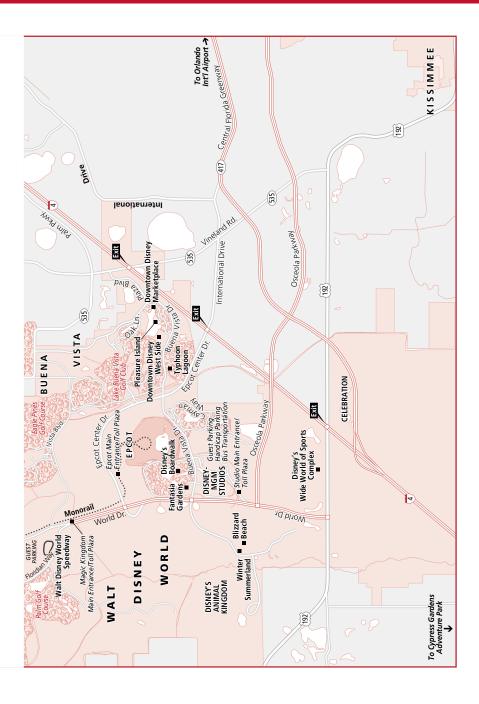
Nowadays, The Kingdom That Walt Built tempts you with four major theme parks; two water parks; a dozen smaller attractions; two nightclub districts for when Mom and Dad need a rest; tens of thousands of hotel rooms, including timeshares or what they call the vacation club; scores of restaurants; and two cruise ships. Universal Orlando adds two theme parks to the mix, while SeaWorld tosses in two (soon to be three) more, and the smaller fry ante up 80 or so lesser attractions, an avalanche of restaurants, and enough hotel rooms to boost central Florida's total population to more than 114,000.

Of course, all of that comes with a price, and you're the one paying.

Amusement Business, a trade journal that charts theme-park attendance, says a typical family of four spends about \$300 a day for admission, parking, a fast-food lunch, and two small souvenirs. That's without a room, other meals, transportation to and from Orlando, and other expenses.

Orlando Area Theme Parks





Fun Fact By the Numbers

With tourism once again on the rise, Central Florida finds itself hosting a staggering number of tourists. While individual parks don't release specific figures, *Amusement Business* magazine estimates theme-park attendance. Its figures show the Disney parks welcome around 45 million visitors annually; Universal's two parks, about 13 million; and SeaWorld chips in another 5½ million.

There's also an intangible price to pay: anxiety. There are so many things to see and do that even a 2-week stay and deep pockets won't allow you the time to hit all of the parks and attractions. That unravels some travelers and can leave the unwary family feeling slightly frazzled.

But don't panic—not yet, anyway. The solution to the situation is simple. Over the years, I've explored and re-explored the parks with (and without) my five kids in tow, dined at Orlando's restaurants, and scoped out the area's best resorts and hotels just so I can give you the inside track. With this book, you'll have the tools to plan ahead and make sure all members of your family have a good time. There's more than enough information here to make you a savvy shopper. My job: to make your family vacation easy to arrange and as enjoyable as possible, so you'll be able to relax and have fun while you're here. At the same time, I give you plenty of options to make your vacation affordable. I've noted some of the best deals around, along with a handful of ways to maximize your fun while keeping your expenses to a minimum. And Orlando tourism gurus will make sure your family has a steady stream of new things to see and do each and every time you visit.

1 Frommer's Favorite Orlando Family Experiences

From Cinderella Castle to Space Mountain, everybody loves the Magic Kingdom, but here are some other things to try at Disney and Universal, and in the greater Orlando area (see chapters 6 and 7 for details):

- Spend a day at Epcot. This is a great stop if your kids are old enough to have inquiring minds. You can travel around the world at the World Showcase pavilions; get your thrills riding Mission: Space, Test Track, and Soarin'; and then glimpse the future from ground level at Innoventions, where space-age products and interactive games await you. And what better way to cap your day than watching the **IllumiNations** fireworks show? For more details, see "Epcot," in chapter 6.
- Star-gaze at the Orlando Science Center. The center's planetarium is only part of the fun. Your heirs can dabble in Weird Science, 123 Math Avenue, KidsTown, and lots more at this popular downtown attraction. See p. 286.
- Visit Disney–MGM Studios. This park has plenty to offer both tots and teens. Ariel, Belle, and Bear in the Big Blue House come alive on stage, entrancing the younger set, while kids over 8 won't want to miss Tower of Terror and Rock 'n' Roller Coaster. The whole family should see the Light, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show, where chilling chase scenes take center stage and stunt-car secrets are revealed, and then end the day with Fantasmic!—the after-dark fireworks, live-action, and laser-lights show.

Moments Chills & Thrills

For parents and older children (who meet the mandatory height requirements) looking for the ups and downs of a good ride, here are the top stomach-churners and G-force generators in Orlando (see chapter 6, "What Kids Like to See & Do in Walt Disney World," and chapter 7, "What Kids Like to See & Do Beyond Disney," for more information):

- Incredible Hulk Coaster (Islands of Adventure). You'll blast from 0 to 40 mph in 2 seconds, spin upside down, and endure seven rollovers and two plummets on this glow-in-the-dark roller coaster. See p. 264.
- Rock 'n' Roller Coaster (Disney–MGM Studios). You'll launch from 0 to 60 mph in 2.8 seconds and go into the first inversion as 120 speakers in your "stretch limo" mainline Aerosmith at (yeeeow!) 32,000 watts. See p. 222.
- **Dueling Dragons** (Islands of Adventure). Your legs dangle as you ride through five inversions at 55 to 60 mph and—get this—come within 12 inches of the other roller coaster three times. See p. 267.
- Summit Plummet (Disney's Blizzard Beach). This one starts from a 120foot-high perch and turns into the world's fastest body slide—a test of your courage and swimsuit, as it has you moving sans vehicle at 60 mph. See p. 237.
- Twilight Zone Tower of Terror (Disney–MGM Studios). The free-fall experiences (there are several scenarios) are more than thrilling—they're also scary (one of the ride's designers is too scared to get on it). Once your legs stop shaking, *some of you* will want to ride again. See p. 223.
- The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man (Islands of Adventure). 3D doesn't get any better than this ride, which has you twisting, spinning, and soaring before a simulated 400-foot drop that feels awfully real. See p. 263.
- Mission: Space (Epcot). If you're claustrophobic or prone to motion sickness, stay clear of this ride, which simulates an actual liftoff (and the accompanying G-force) and gets the seal of approval from the NASA astronauts who helped design it. See p. 205.
- Kraken (SeaWorld). This floorless, open-sided coaster uses speed (up to 65 mph), steep climbs, deep drops, and seven loops to create a stomachchurning ride that lasts far too long for some folks. See p. 276.
- Revenge of the Mummy (Universal Studios): In shadowy darkness, you'll
 plunge forward, propel backward, twist and turn, start and stop without
 warning—all while flames and fireballs are flying past you and creepy
 skeletal creatures give chase. See p. 254.
- Check out Gatorland. Located between Orlando and Kissimmee, this throwback park is a great way to spend a half day at less than half the price of the major theme parks. Make sure to see Gator Jumparoo, which

has been the signature show since the park opened in 1949. If you have deep pockets, and your kids are over 12, they (or you) can be a Trainer for a Day. And don't forget a visit to the gift shop if the boys (and some girls) want to take home an offbeat gator gift. See p. 282.

- Experience Universal Orlando. Universal Studios Florida and its sister, Islands of Adventure, combine cutting-edge, high-tech special effects with amazing creativity. Not-to-bemissed attractions: Back to the Future . . . The Ride; Fear Factor Live; Terminator 2: 3-D Battle Across Time; Revenge of the Mummy; Men in Black Alien Attack; Jimmy Neutron's Nicktoon Blast; Shrek 4-D; Dueling Dragons; the Incredible Hulk Coaster; The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man; and Dudley Do-Right's Ripsaw Falls. You'll have a tough time tearing the younger ones away from A Day in the Park with Barney, Curious George Goes to Town, Fievel's Playland, Caro-Seuss-El, and Camp Jurassic.
- Explore eco-edutainment at Sea-World and Discovery Cove. Journey to Atlantis and Kraken give SeaWorld a little zip, but it's the hands-on encounters with sea critters, spectacular shows, and up-close viewing of the animals from polar bears to killer whales (kids of all ages will be entranced) that you should come for here. Its younger sister, Discovery

Cove, gives you a chance to swim with dolphins and other undersea inhabitants (alas, currently at a cost of \$259) as part of its package. At press time SeaWorld announced plans for a third park, a water park, set to open sometime in 2007. As with its predecessors, the slides and rides here will feature up-close animal encounters and aquatic edutainment.

- Catch a wave at Disney's Typhoon Lagoon and Blizzard Beach. Sandy beaches to sink your toes in and waterslides that range from terrifying to toddler-friendly—the entire family will find something fun to do at these water parks. You can hang ten and learn to surf before park opening at Typhoon Lagoon. Lessons are offered twice weekly for those with cash to spare.
- Become a monorail co-pilot. If there's no one but the pilot aboard, ask to sit up front, and you and your kids can pretend to drive Disney's monorail. Your best chance is if you board at the Grand Floridian, Contemporary, or Polynesian resorts, where the crowds are thinner than at the transportation center. And don't try this at park opening and closing times.

2 The Best Hotel Bets

Get all of the information you'll need on these and other area hotels and motels in chapter 4, "Family-Friendly Accommodations." But here are the high points:

• Most Family-Friendly Hotels: All Disney properties cater to families, with special menus for kids; videogame arcades; free transportation to the parks; extensive recreational facilities; and, in some cases, character meals and kids clubs. Camping at woodsy Fort Wilderness (© 407/934-7639) makes for a unique and fun-filled family experience. If bunk beds, bubbling springs in the lobby, and a gushing geyser sound good, check into the Wilderness Lodge (O 407/934-7639). Set sail for The Yacht and Beach Club (O 407/934-7639), where the sandbottom pool and pirate-ship play area are just part of its seaside charm. The African Savannah serves as a backdrop for the Animal Kingdom Lodge (O 407/934-7369). Beyond the House of Mouse, the Nickelodeon Family Suites by Holiday Inn (© 877/387-5437 or 407/387-5437), Holiday Inn Nikki Bird Resort (© 800/206-2747 or 407/396-7300), Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort Lake Buena Vista (© 800/366-6299 or 407/239-4500), and Seralago Hotel & Suites Main Gate East (© 407/396-4488) offer Kid Suites, kids' clubs, activities, and more. See chapter 4 for more familyfriendly accommodations.

- Best Moderately Priced Hotels: Disney's Port Orleans Resort (1) 407/ 934-7639) has Southern charm in its French Quarter and Riverside areas, and the pool in the French Quarter has a water slide that curves out of a dragon's mouth. See p. 89. In the free world, the Hawthorn Suites Lake Buena Vista (\mathbf{C}) 800/936-9417 or 407/597-5000) is near but sheltered from Disney, and has large rooms, free breakfasts, and weekday social hours. See p. 103. Nearby, the Staybridge Suites (@ 407/238-0777; p. 105) has room to spare, with oversize 1- and 2-bedroom suites. Full kitchens, free breakfast, weekday receptions, and helpful services, including grocery delivery, are all part of the deal here. A second location on International Drive (C) 407/352-2400, p. 115) offers much the same. The Homewood Suites, located near Downtown Disney (407/465-8200; p. 104), in Kissimmee (1) 407/396-2229, and by Universal Orlando (?) 407/226-0669 all have full kitchens, free breakfast, and weekday-evening social hours.
- Best Value/Deal: That's easy: Disney's All-Star Movies Resort (© 407/ 934-7639; p. 92), All-Star Music Resort (© 407/934-7639; p. 93), All-Star Sports Resort (© 407/934-7639; p. 93), and Pop Century

Resort (@ 407/934-7639; p. 94). If you're going to stay on WDW property, you can't beat them, though they would be significantly overpriced outside the realm. La Quinta Inn Lakeside (\mathbf{r}) 407/396-2222; p. 109) has 3 pools, putt putt, and an onsite convenience store. Extras include free shuttle service to all area theme parks and a kids-eat-free program. Plenty of restaurants are right nearby, and Disney's only 2 miles away. The Comfort Suites Main Gate East (1) 407/397-7848; p. 106) offers plenty of freebies including breakfast, shuttles to the theme parks-all of them-and high-speed Internet access. From this all-suite hotel it's only a short walk to shops, restaurants, and minigolf, plus Disney's only minutes away.

- Best Budget Motel: The Comfort Maingate Suites at Formosa (1) 407/390-9888; p. 109) is clean and comfortable, with a location and price that are hard to beat. Nearby restaurants and shops are steps away and Disney's just 2 miles down the road. Kids can check in at a treehouse at the Howard Johnson Enchanted Land Hotel (1) 407/396/4343), where you'll find themed rooms, a kids' club, an onsite market, movies, and more. Little kids love the sleepybear-themed rooms at the Travelodge Maingate East (@ 407/396-4222). Parents will love the free shuttles to the theme parks.
- Best Spa for Kids: That's not a typo. The Nickelodeon Family Suites by Holiday Inn (© 877/387-5437 or 407/387-5437) started something good with its Kids Spa, with services priced from \$10 to \$40 and packages costing up to \$99. The resort also has a lounge where parents can spend a little time on their own. See p. 104.

- · Best Kids' Programs: The Wizard of Diz has dandy kids' clubs at select resorts, but some really good ones can be found beyond Disney's doorstep too. The top five picks beyond Mickey's boundaries include Camp Hyatt at the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress (1) 800/233-1234 or 407/ 239-1234), Ritz Kids at the Ritz-Carlton (@ 800/241-3333 or 407/ 206-2400), Camp Nikki at Holiday Inn Nikki Bird (1) 800/206-2747 or 407/396-7300), La Petite Academy at Gavlord Palms (@) 877/677-9352 or 407/586-0000), and Camp Holiday at Holiday Inn Sunspree (800/366-6299 or 407/239-4500). You can find more details in chapter 4, "Family-Friendly Accommodations."
- Tops for Toddlers: Watch your kids' faces light up when larger-than-life raccoon mascots Max and Maxine show up to tuck them in at Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort Lake Buena Vista (© 800/366-6299). See p. 103. Of course, it's hard to beat the Nickelodeon Family Suites (© 407/387-5437; p. 104), with its water parkstyle pools, themed KidSuites, and character breakfast. Kids from tots to tweens will go crazy for this one.
- Tops for Teens: I've yet to find a mainstream hotel that comes close to the activities offered in Common Grounds, the teen clubs aboard the Disney Cruise Line's Wonder and Magic (© 800/951-3532). Activities for 13- to 17-year-olds include karaoke, a Hawaiian pool party, and improv. See p. 52.

- Best Location: Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa (1) 407/ 934-7639; p. 82), Polynesian Resort (@ 407/934-7639; p. 84), and Contemporary Resort (1) 407/ 934-7639; p. 81) not only offer waterfront access to Seven Seas Lagoon and Bay Lake, but also, they're right on the WDW monorail route, providing quick and easy access to the parks. The Portofino Bay Hotel (888/322-5541 or 407/503-1000; p. 113), Hard Rock Hotel (1) 800/232-7827 or 407/ 503-7625; p. 113), and Roval Pacific (**800/232-7827** or 407/503-3000; p. 115) are within walking distance of Universal's parks and CityWalk, with boat service available as well.
- Best Views: The whole family can watch the Magic Kingdom's Wishes fireworks display from the comfort of your room if you book one on an upper floor on the west side of the Contemporary Resort (@ 407/934-7639; p. 81). And you have a frontrow seat for the action at SeaWorld from the upper-east-side floors at the Renaissance Orlando Resort at Sea-World (@ 800/327-6677; p. 114).
- Best Family Pools: Arguably the best pool in O-Town is at the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Resort (© 800/233-1234 or 407/239-1234). It's a half-acre, lagoonlike pool that flows through rock grottoes, is spanned by a rope bridge, and has 12 waterfalls and two steep water slides. See p. 100. The JW Marriott's Lazy River (© 800/241-3333 or

Fun Fact Room Roulette

If you wanted to stay one night in every guest room at the hotels and resorts currently on Walt Disney World property, it would take you over 72 years to get the job done.

407/206-2300) finishes a very close second. It's a 24,000-square-foot stream winding through small waterfalls and rock formations. See p. 102. The newest edition to the list is the **Nickelodeon Family Suites by Holiday Inn** (**C** 407/387-5437, p. 104).

3 The Best Dining Bets

While Orlando can't compete with U.S. destinations such as New York or San Francisco in the dining department, it has everything on the restaurant front, from fast-fooderies that will satisfy your kids to 5-star fine dining for a more adult palate. Look for more details on these and other eateries in chapter 5, "Family-Friendly Dining."

- Best Character Meal: Hands down, it doesn't get any better than Chef Mickey's (© 407/939-3463) breakfasts and dinners at Disney's Contemporary Resort. These "events" feature their respective namesake and other characters, but a word of warning: They draw up to 1,600 guests at each meal. See p. 161.
- Best Kids' Menu Variety: When it comes to the deepest menu for young tastebuds, Pastamore Ristorante at Universal CityWalk (407/363-8000) gives kids a choice of nine entrees. See p. 151.
- Best Offbeat Kids' Menu: With a menu that offers beef or chicken teriyaki, shrimp tempura, pork dumplings, and sushi, it's hard to beat Ran-Getsu of Tokyo (© 407/345-0044) in this category.
- Best Burgers: From Cheeseburgers in Paradise to Cuban Meatloaf Survival Sandwiches, Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville at Universal City-Walk (@ 407/224-2155) has some of the juiciest and most unusual burgers in town. See p. 151.

Thanks to its two water park-style pools, complete with slides, flumes, squirters, fountains, and more, the action here is almost unending. Most Walt Disney World resorts have terrific pools, too.

- · Best Outdoor Eating: Kids can get into the festive jungle atmosphere while digging into their own wild menu at the Rainforest Cafe in Downtown Disney West Side, which offers indoor as well as patio dining (1) 407/827-8500). See p. 137. The terrace at Artist Point (1) 407/939-3463), the premier restaurant at Disney's Wilderness Lodge, overlooks a lake, waterfall, and scenery evocative of America's national parks. See p. 140. And the Rose & Crown at Epcot (1) 407/939-3463) delivers a front-row seat for the IllumiNations fireworks display. See p. 129.
- Best Value: At Romano's Macaroni Grill (© 407/239-6676), the ambience and northern Italian cuisine score very high, and prices are low, low, low. See p. 148.
- Best Spot for a Parent's Night Out: Dinners don't get much more romantic than those at the Victorian-style Victoria & Albert's (© 407/939-3463). The meal is comprised of six courses served by a maid and butler. See p. 139.
- Best Ice Cream: Go for the splurge (you may need to let out your belt) at Ghirardelli Soda Fountain and Chocolate Shop (@ 407/934-8855) in Downtown Disney West Side. See p. 307.
- Best Barbecue: Hands down, follow your nose to Bubbalou's Bodacious BBQ (@ 407/628-1212) after catching a whiff of the tangy hickory

(Tips Orlando's Best Online Sites

Given Orlando's enormous popularity, it should come as no surprise that hundreds of websites are devoted to it. These sites have a lot of information about everything from Walt Disney World history to getting around town.

There are several sites written by Disney fans, employees, and self-proclaimed experts. A favorite (www.hiddenmickeys.org) is about Hidden Mickeys, a park tradition (see chapter 6, "What Kids Like to See & Do in Walt Disney World"). These subtle Disney images can be found scattered throughout the realm, though they sometimes are in the eye, or imagination, of the beholder. Deb's Unofficial Walt Disney World Information Guide (www.allearsnet.com) is another pleaser for Disney fans and offers tons of family info on hotels, restaurants, attractions, and more. And you should definitely take a look at Disney's official site, www.disneyworld.com, if you're planning a pilgrimage to the Land of the Mouse. The newest addition to the wireless waves, www.travelinsights.com, is filled with information for families, including the best hotels, hot spots, restaurants, recreation, and attractions in and around Orlando.

If a trip to one of Universal Orlando's theme parks or CityWalk is on your dance card, stop at www.universalorlando.com. You can check out the attractions, order tickets, make reservations, and find out about special events, among other things on the site. And fish fans can get in the know about Sea-World at www.seaworld.com and Discovery Cove at www.discovery cove.com.

If you're seeking general information about the city, accommodations, dining, nightlife, or special events, head over to the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau site at www.orlandoinfo.com. Orlando Weekly (www.orlandoweekly.com) offers cutting-edge reviews and recommendations for arts, movies, music, restaurants, and much more from Orlando's premier alternative weekly. Links at the site include dining, arts and culture, shopping, and news. Other great options include the online version of the local newspaper, the Orlando Sentinel, at www.orlando sentinal.com, as well as the Sentinel-produced site www.go2orlando.com. Both feature information on upcoming events, area attractions, restaurant reviews, and local nightlife.

smoke. It tastes as good as it smells. See p. 159.

- Best Italian Cuisine: I have to give the nod to Pacino's Italian Ristorante in Kissimmee (© 407/396-8022). It has great food and a moderately priced menu. See p. 156.
- Most Entertaining Restaurant: It's hard to contain yourself when the

corny jokes and lively music kick into gear at the **Hoop-Dee-Doo Musical Revue** at Disney's Fort Wilderness Resort and Campground (*C* 407/ 939-3463). See p. 120.

• Best Steak House: At the Yachtsman Steakhouse at Disney's Yacht Club Resort (© 407/939-3463), the aged steaks, chops, and seafood are grilled over a wood fire. See p. 139.

- Best Breakfast: Disney character breakfasts certainly get the nod if you have children under 10 in tow. But it's hard to beat the buffet at Boma in the Animal Kingdom Lodge (© 407/ 938-3000). See p. 140.
- Most Kid-Friendly Service: The "kids eat free with a paying adult" program, at the fun, all-you-can-stuff breakfast buffet at Nickelodeon Family Suites by Holiday Inn (© 877/387-5437), makes it a winner. As a bonus, kids 12 and under (the real VIPs at this hotel) also eat lunch and dinner here for free when accompanied by paying adults. See p. 104.
- Best Late-Night Dining: The trendy B-Line Diner (@ 407/345-4460) at the Peabody Orlando is open around the clock for eclectic fare ranging from steaks to falafel sandwiches to grits and eggs. You and your kids won't be able to resist the desserts. See p. 154.
- Best Spot to Celebrate: Emeril's at Universal's CityWalk (*C*) 407/224-2424) is a great choice for a high-end special occasion. See p. 149. The chefs at Mikado Japanese Steak House (*C*) 407/239-4200), located in the Orlando World Center Marriott, entertain you by slicing and dicing your meal. It makes for a fun evening out. For the pure party factor, you can't beat Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville (*C*) 407/224-2155) at City-Walk. See p. 151.
- Best Special Sunday Brunch: The House of Blues (@ 407/934-2583), at Disney's West Side, has a downhome gospel brunch featuring live foot-stomping music and an array of Southern/Creole vittles that includes greens, red beans and rice, jambalaya, catfish, shrimp, and beef. The entertainment makes it a certifiable winner. Reservations aren't accepted for parties under six, so arrive early for the 10:30am or 1pm show. See p. 146.