

PART FIVE

GET *in the* BOAT, MEN

THIS IS NOT A *JEOPARDY* ANSWER, but if it was, the question would be this: "What did George Washington say to his soldiers before they crossed the Delaware?" We share this interesting historic aside as our way of sounding the alarm, blowing the bugle, or whatever. It's time to move beyond preparation and practice and to leap into action. Walt Disney World here we come! Get in the boat, men!

READY, SET, TOUR! SOME TOURING CONSIDERATIONS

HOW MUCH TIME IS REQUIRED TO SEE EACH PARK?

THE MAGIC KINGDOM AND EPCOT offer such a large number of attractions and special live entertainment options that it is impossible to see everything in a single day, with or without a midday break. For a reasonably thorough tour of each, allocate a minimum of two days. The Animal Kingdom and the Disney-MGM Studios can each be seen in a day, although planning on a day and a half allows for a more relaxed visit.

WHICH PARK TO SEE FIRST?

THIS QUESTION IS LESS ACADEMIC than it appears. Children who see the Magic Kingdom first expect more of the same type of entertainment at the other parks. At Epcot, children are often disappointed by the educational orientation and more serious tone (as are many adults). Disney-MGM of-

fers some pretty wild action, but the general presentation is educational and more mature. Though most children enjoy zoos, live animals can't be programmed to entertain. Thus, children may not find the Animal Kingdom as exciting as the Magic Kingdom or Disney-MGM.

First-time visitors should see Epcot first; you will be able to enjoy it fully without having been preconditioned to think of Disney entertainment as solely fantasy or adventure. Children will be more likely to enjoy Epcot on its own merits if they see it first, and they will be more relaxed and patient in their touring.

See the Animal Kingdom second. Like Epcot, it has an educational thrust, but it provides a change of pace because it features live animals. Next, see Disney-MGM Studios, which helps all ages make a fluid transition from the educational Epcot and Animal Kingdom to the fanciful Magic Kingdom. Also, because Disney-MGM Studios is smaller, you won't walk as much or stay as long. Save the Magic Kingdom for last.

OPERATING HOURS

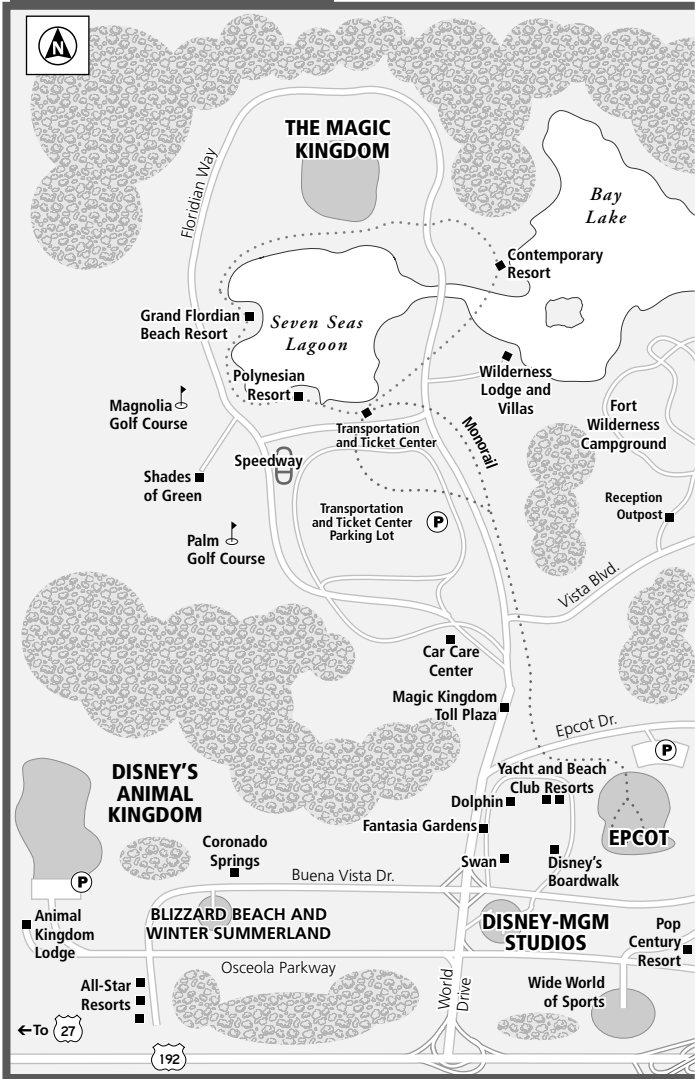
DISNEY CAN'T BE ACCUSED OF BEING inflexible regarding operating hours at the parks. They run a dozen or more schedules each year, making it advisable to call ☎ 407-824-4321 for the exact hours before you arrive. In the off-season, parks may be open for as few as eight hours (from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.). By contrast, at busy times (particularly holidays), they may be open from 8 a.m. until 2 a.m. the next morning.

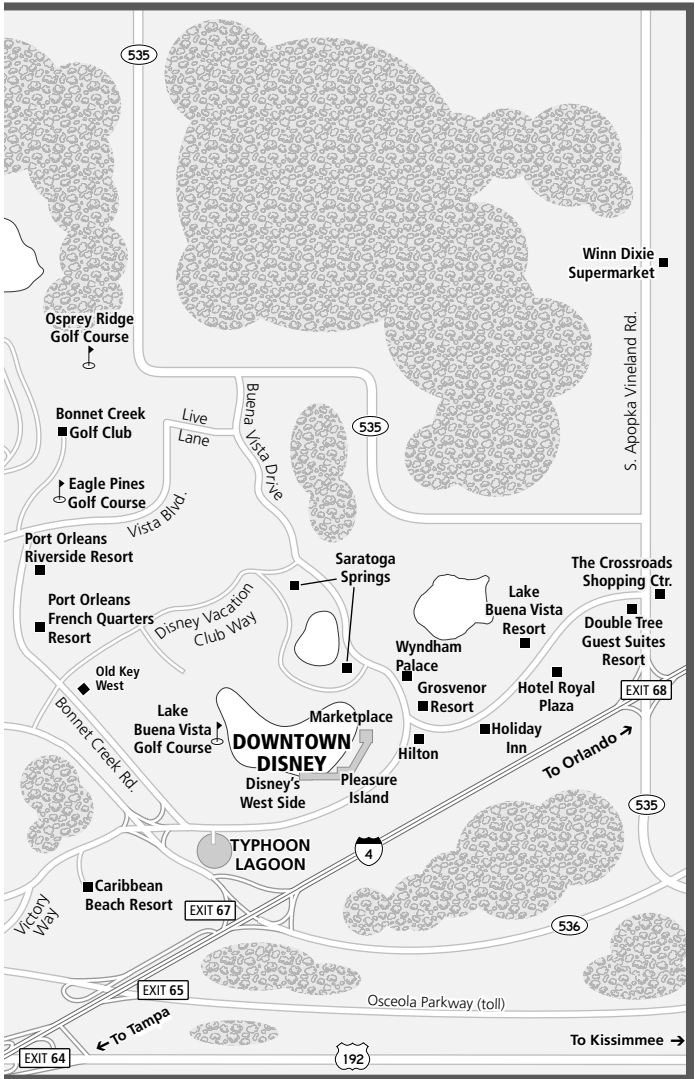
Usually, hours approximate the following: From September through mid-March, excluding holiday periods, the Magic Kingdom is open from 9 a.m. to 7, 8, or 9 p.m. During the same period, Epcot is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Disney-MGM Studios is open from 9 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m. The Animal Kingdom is open from 9 a.m. until 6 or 7 p.m. During summer, expect the Animal Kingdom to remain open until 8 p.m. Epcot and Disney-MGM Studios are normally open until 9 or 10 p.m., with the Magic Kingdom sometimes open as late as 1 a.m.

OFFICIAL OPENING VERSUS REAL OPENING

THE OPERATING HOURS YOU'RE QUOTED when you call are "official hours." The parks sometimes open earlier. Many visitors, relying on information disseminated by Disney Guest Relations, arrive at the official opening time and

Walt Disney World





find the park packed with people. If the official hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., for example, Main Street in the Magic Kingdom open at 8 or 8:30 a.m. with the remainder of the park opening at 8:30 or 9 a.m. If the official opening for the Magic Kingdom is 8 a.m. and you're eligible for early entry (if you are staying in a Disney resort), you sometimes are able to enter the park as early as 6:30 a.m.

Disney publishes hours of operation well in advance but reserves the flexibility to react daily to gate conditions. Disney traffic controllers survey local hotel reservations, estimate how many visitors they should expect on a given day, and open the theme parks early to avoid bottlenecks at parking facilities and ticket windows and to absorb the crowds as they arrive.

If you're a Disney resort guest and want to take advantage of Extra Magic Hours early entry, arrive one hour and 20 minutes before the early-entry park is scheduled to open to the general public. Buses, boats, and monorails will initiate service to the early-entry park about two hours before it opens to the general public.

At day's end, rides and attractions shut down at approximately the official closing time. Main Street remains open 30 minutes to an hour after the rest of the Magic Kingdom has closed.

THE RULES

SUCCESSFUL TOURING OF THE MAGIC KINGDOM, the Animal Kingdom, Epcot, or Disney-MGM Studios hinges on five rules:

1. Determine in Advance What You Really Want to See

What rides and attractions appeal most to you? Which additional rides and attractions would you like to experience if you have some time left? What are you willing to forgo?

To help you set your touring priorities, we describe each theme park and their attractions later in this book. In each description, we include the author's evaluation of the attraction and the opinions of Walt Disney World guests expressed as star ratings. Five stars is the best possible rating.

Finally, because attractions range from midway-type rides and horse-drawn trolleys to colossal, high-tech extravaganzas, we have developed a hierarchy of categories to pinpoint attractions' magnitude:

SUPER HEADLINERS The best attractions the theme park has to offer. Mind-boggling in size, scope, and imagination.

Represents the cutting edge of modern attraction technology and design.

HEADLINERS Full-blown, multimillion-dollar, full-scale themed adventures and theater presentations. Modern in technology and design and employing a complete range of special effects.

MAJOR ATTRACTIONS Themed adventures on a more modest scale, but incorporating state-of-the-art technologies. Or, larger-scale attractions of older design.

MINOR ATTRACTIONS Midway-type rides, small “dark” rides (cars on a track, zigzagging through the dark), small theater presentations, transportation rides, and elaborate walk-through attractions.

DIVERSIONS Exhibits, both passive and interactive. Includes playgrounds, video arcades, and street theater.

Though not every Walt Disney World attraction fits neatly into these descriptions, the categories provide a comparison of attractions’ size and scope. Remember that bigger and more elaborate doesn’t always mean better. Peter Pan’s Flight, a minor attraction in the Magic Kingdom, continues to be one of the park’s most beloved rides. Likewise, for many young children, no attraction, regardless of size, surpasses Dumbo.

2. Arrive Early! Arrive Early! Arrive Early!

This is the single most important key to efficient touring and avoiding long lines. There are no lines and fewer people first thing in the morning. The same four rides you can experience in one hour in early morning can take as long as three hours to see after 10:30 a.m. Have breakfast before you arrive so you won’t waste prime touring time sitting in a restaurant.

The earlier a park opens, the greater the potential advantage. This is because most vacationers won’t make the sacrifice to rise early and get to a theme park before it opens. Fewer people are willing to be on hand for an 8 a.m. opening than for a 9 a.m. opening. On those rare occasions when a park opens at 10 a.m., almost everyone arrives at the same time, so it’s almost impossible to get a jump on the crowd. If you’re a Disney resort guest and have early-entry privileges, arrive as early as early entry allows (6:30 a.m. if the park opens to the public at 8 a.m., or 7:30 a.m. if the park opens to the public at 9 a.m.). If you are visiting during midsummer, arrive at non-early-entry parks 40 minutes before the official opening time. During holiday periods, arrive at non-early-entry parks 50 minutes before the official opening.

3. Avoid Bottlenecks

Crowd concentrations and/or faulty crowd management cause bottlenecks. Avoiding bottlenecks involves being able to predict where, when, and why they occur. Concentrations of hungry people create bottlenecks at restaurants during lunch and dinner. Concentrations of people moving toward the exit at closing time create bottlenecks in gift shops en route to the gate. Concentrations of visitors at new and popular rides and at rides slow to load and unload create bottlenecks and long lines. To help you get a grip on which attractions cause bottlenecks, we have developed a Bottleneck Scale with a range of one to ten. If an attraction ranks high on the Bottleneck Scale, try to experience it during the first two hours the park is open. The scale is included in each attraction profile in Parts Six through Nine.

4. Go Back to Your Hotel for a Rest in the Middle of the Day

You may think we're beating the dead horse with this mid-day nap thing, but if you plug away all day at the theme parks, you'll understand how the dead horse feels. No joke; resign yourself to going back to the hotel in the middle of the day for swimming, reading, and a snooze.

5. Let Off Steam

Time at a Disney theme park is extremely regimented for younger children. Often held close for fear of losing them, they are ushered from line to line and attraction to attraction throughout the day. After a couple of hours of being on such a short leash, it's not surprising that they're in need of some physical freedom and an opportunity to discharge that pent-up energy. As it happens, each of the major theme parks offers some sort of elaborate, creative playground perfect for such a release. At the Magic Kingdom it's Tom Sawyer Island, at the Animal Kingdom it's the Boneyard, and at the Disney-MGM Studios it's the "Honey, I Shrank the Kids" Adventure Set. Epcot's play area, the Fitness Fairground in the Wonders of Life Pavilion, is a little anemic in comparison to the other parks' playgrounds, and is open only seasonally. Because Epcot has such large pedestrian plazas, however, there are several places where children can cut loose without making nuisances of themselves. Be advised that each playground (or plaza) is fairly large, and it's pretty easy to misplace a child while they're exploring. All children's playgrounds except the Fitness Fairgrounds,

however, have only one exit, so although your kids might get lost within the playground, they cannot wander off into the rest of the park without passing through the single exit (usually staffed by a Disney cast member).

YOUR DAILY ITINERARY


PLAN EACH DAY IN THREE BLOCKS:

1. Early morning theme-park touring
2. Midday break
3. Late afternoon and evening theme-park touring

Choose the attractions that interest you most, and check their bottleneck ratings along with what time of day we recommend you visit. If your children are 8 years old or younger, review the attraction's fright potential rating. Using the theme park maps in this guide, work out a step-by-step plan and write it down. Experience attractions with a high bottleneck rating as early as possible, transitioning to attractions with bottleneck ratings of six to eight around midmorning. Plan on departing the park for your midday break by 11:30 a.m. or so.

For your late afternoon and evening touring block, you do not necessarily have to return to the same theme park. If you have purchased one of the Disney admission options that allow you to "park hop," that is, visit more than one theme park on a given day, you may opt to spend the afternoon/evening block somewhere different. In any event, as you start your afternoon/evening block, see attractions with low bottleneck ratings until about 5 p.m. After 5 p.m., any attraction with a rating of one to seven is fair game. If you stay into the evening, try attractions with ratings of eight to ten during the hour just before closing.

In addition to attractions, each theme park offers a broad range of special live entertainment events. In the morning block, concentrate on the attractions. For the record, we regard live shows that offer five or more daily performances a day (except for street entertainment) as attractions. Thus, *Indiana Jones* at the Disney-MGM Studios is an attraction, as is *Festival of the Lion King* at the Animal Kingdom. *IllumiNations* at Epcot or the parades at the Magic Kingdom, on the other hand, are live entertainment events. A schedule of live performances is listed on the handout park map available at the entrance

 **unofficial TIP**
We strongly recommend deferring special parades, stage shows, and other productions until the afternoon/evening block.

of each park. When planning your day, also be aware that major live events draw large numbers of guests from the attraction lines. Thus, a good time to see an especially popular attraction is during a parade or other similar event.

FASTPASS

In 1999, Disney launched a new system to moderate the waiting time for popular attractions. Called FASTPASS, it was originally tried at the Animal Kingdom and then subsequently expanded to cover attractions at the other parks. Here's how it works:

Your handout park map, as well as signage at respective attractions, will tell you which attractions are included. Attractions operating FASTPASS will have a regular line and a FASTPASS line. A sign at the entrance will tell you how long the wait is in the regular line. If the wait is acceptable to you, hop in line. If the wait seems too long, you can insert your park admission pass into a special FASTPASS machine and receive an appointment time to come back and ride later in the day. When you return at the appointed time, you will enter the FASTPASS line and proceed directly to the attraction's preshow or boarding area with no further wait. This procedure, pioneered by Universal Studios Hollywood many years ago, works well and can save a lot of time standing in line. There is no extra charge to use FASTPASS.

The effort to accommodate FASTPASS holders makes anyone in the regular line feel like an illegal immigrant. As a telling indication of their status, guests in the regular lines are referred to as "standby guests."


unofficial TIP
FASTPASS works remarkably well, primarily because Disney provides preferential treatment for FASTPASS holders.

However, FASTPASS doesn't eliminate the need to arrive at the theme park early. Because each park offers a limited number of FASTPASS attractions, you still need to get an early start if you want to see as much as possible in a single day. Plus, as we'll discuss later, there is a limited supply of FASTPASSes available for each attraction on a given day.

If you don't arrive until the middle of the afternoon, you might find that all the FASTPASSes have been distributed to other guests. FASTPASS does make it possible to see more with less waiting than ever before, and it also allows you to postpone wet rides, like Kali River Rapids at the Animal Kingdom or Splash Mountain at the Magic Kingdom, until the warmer part of the day.


UNDERSTANDING THE FASTPASS SYSTEM The basic purpose of the FASTPASS system is to reduce the waiting time for designated attractions by more equally distributing the arrival of guests at those attractions over the course of the day. This is accomplished by providing an incentive, namely a shorter wait in line, for guests who are willing to postpone experiencing the attraction until later in the day. The system also, in effect, imposes a penalty (i.e., being relegated to standby status) on those who opt not to use it.

When you insert your admission pass into a FASTPASS time clock, the machine spits out a small slip of paper about two-thirds the size of a credit card—small enough to fit in your wallet but also small enough to lose easily. Printed on the paper is the name of the attraction and a specific one-hour time window, for example 1:15–2:15 p.m., during which you can return to ride. Also printed on the paper is the time you’ll be eligible to obtain another FASTPASS.

 *unofficial TIP*
Each person in your party must have his or her own FASTPASS.

When you report back to the attraction during your one-hour window, you’ll enter a line marked “FASTPASS Return” that will route you more or less directly to the boarding or preshow area. Each person in your party must be ready to show a FASTPASS to the Disney cast member at the entrance of the FASTPASS Return line. Before you enter the boarding area or theater, another cast member will collect your FASTPASS.

You may show up at any time during the period printed on your FASTPASS, and from our observation, no specific time within the window is better or worse. This holds true because cast members are instructed to minimize waits for FASTPASS holders. Thus, if the FASTPASS Return line is suddenly inundated, cast members rapidly intervene to reduce the FASTPASS line by admitting as many as 25 FASTPASS holders for each standby guest until the FASTPASS line is reduced to an acceptable length. Although FASTPASS will eliminate as much as 80% of the wait you’d experience in the regular line, you can still expect a short wait, but it’s usually less than 20 minutes. Often the FASTPASS will be accepted if you arrive at an attraction after the return window has expired.

 *unofficial TIP*
As a rule of thumb, the earlier in the day you secure a FASTPASS, the shorter the interval between time of issue and your one-hour return window.

You can obtain a FASTPASS anytime after a park opens, but the FASTPASS Return lines do not begin operating until about 45

minutes after opening. Whenever you obtain a FASTPASS, you can be assured of a period of time between when you receive your FASTPASS and when you can report back. The interval can be as short as 20 minutes or as long as three to seven hours, depending on park attendance, the popularity of the attraction, and the attraction's hourly capacity.

To more effectively distribute guests over the course of a day, the FASTPASS machines bump the one-hour return

unofficial **TIP**

With very few exceptions, using the standby line at theater attractions requires less time than using FASTPASS.

period back five minutes for a set number of passes issued (usually the number is equal to about 6% of the attraction's hourly capacity). For example, when Splash Mountain opens at 9 a.m., the first 125 people to obtain a FASTPASS will get a 9:40–10:40 a.m. return window. The next 125 guests are issued FASTPASSES with a 9:45–10:45 a.m.

window. If an attraction is exceptionally popular and/or its hourly capacity is relatively small, the return window might be pushed back all the way to park closing time. When this happens the FASTPASS machines simply shut down and a sign is posted saying FASTPASSES are all gone for the day. It's not unusual for Test Track at Epcot or Winnie the Pooh at the Magic Kingdom to distribute an entire day's allocation of FASTPASSES by 1 p.m.

Rides routinely exhaust their daily FASTPASS supply, but shows almost never do. FASTPASS machines at theaters try to balance attendance at each show so that the audience of any given performance is divided about evenly between standby and FASTPASS guests. Consequently, standby guests for shows are not discriminated against to the degree experienced by standby guests for rides. In practice, FASTPASS diminishes the wait for standby guests.

WHEN TO USE FASTPASS Except as discussed below, there's no reason to use FASTPASS during the first 30–40 minutes a park

unofficial **TIP**

Regardless of time of day, if the wait in the regular line at a FASTPASS attraction is 25–30 minutes or less, we recommend joining the regular line.

is open. Lines for most attractions are quite manageable during this period, and this is the only time of day when FASTPASS attractions exclusively serve those in the regular line. Using FASTPASS requires two trips to the same attraction: one to obtain the pass and another to use it. This means you must invest time to secure the pass (sometimes there are lines at the FASTPASS machines!) and then later inter-

rupt your touring and backtrack in order to use your FASTPASS. And don't forget that even in the FASTPASS line you must endure some waiting.

Six attractions in the Disney parks build lines so quickly in the early morning that failing to queue up within the first six or so minutes of operation will mean a long wait. The attractions are Soarin' and Test Track at Epcot, Kilimanjaro Safaris and Expedition Everest (opens 2006) at the Animal Kingdom, Space Mountain at the Magic Kingdom, and Rock 'n' Roller Coaster at Disney-MGM Studios. With these attractions, you can either be present when the park opens and race directly to the attraction or opt for a FASTPASS. Another six FASTPASS attractions, including Splash Mountain, Winnie the Pooh, Peter Pan's Flight, and Jungle Cruise in the Magic Kingdom and Tower of Terror at Disney-MGM Studios, and Mission: Space at Epcot develop long lines within 20–40 minutes of park opening. If you can get to one or more of these before the wait becomes intolerable, all the better. Otherwise, your options are FASTPASS or a long wait.

FASTPASS Guidelines

- Don't mess with FASTPASS if it can't save you 30 minutes or more.
- If you arrive after a park opens, obtain a FASTPASS for your preferred FASTPASS attraction first thing.
- Do not obtain a FASTPASS for a theater attraction until you have experienced all the FASTPASS rides on your itinerary (using FASTPASS at theater attractions usually requires more time than using the standby line).
- Always check the return period before obtaining a FASTPASS.
- Obtain FASTPASSES for Rock 'n' Roller Coaster at MGM-Studios, Soarin' and Test Track at Epcot, and Winnie the Pooh, Peter Pan's Flight, Space Mountain, and Splash Mountain at the Magic Kingdom as early in the day as practicable.
- Try to obtain FASTPASSES for remaining rides by 1 p.m.
- Don't depend on FASTPASSES being available for rides after 2 p.m. during busier times of year.
- Make sure everyone in your party has his or her own FASTPASS.
- Be mindful that you can obtain a second FASTPASS as soon as you enter the return period for your first FASTPASS or at the time printed at the bottom of your FASTPASS, whichever comes first.

There are a number of attractions where the time gap between issuance and return can be three to seven hours. If

you think you might want to use FASTPASS on the following attractions, try to secure it before 11 a.m.:

MAGIC KINGDOM	EPCOT	DISNEY-MGM STUDIOS
Winnie the Pooh	Test Track	Rock 'n' Roller Coaster
Peter Pan's Flight	Soarin'	
Space Mountain		
Splash Mountain		

VARIABLES THAT AFFECT HOW MUCH YOU'LL SEE

HOW QUICKLY YOU MOVE FROM ONE RIDE to another; when and how many refreshment and restroom breaks you take; when, where, and how you eat meals; and your ability (or lack thereof) to find your way around will all have an impact on how much you'll see. Smaller groups almost always move faster than larger groups, and families with older children and teens generally can cover more ground than families with young children. Switching off (see pages 133–135), among other things, prohibits families with little ones from moving expeditiously among attractions. Plus, some children simply cannot conform to the “arrive early!” rule.

A mom from Nutley, New Jersey, writes:

[Although you] advise getting to parks at opening, we just couldn't burn the candle at both ends. Our kids (10, 7, and 4) would not go to sleep early and couldn't be up at dawn and still stay relatively sane. It worked well for us to let them sleep a little later, go out and bring breakfast back to the room while they slept, and still get a relatively early start by not spending time on eating breakfast out. We managed to avoid long lines with an occasional early morning, and hitting popular attractions during parades, mealtimes, and late evenings.


Finally, if you have young children in your party, be prepared for character encounters. The appearance of a Disney character is usually sufficient to stop your family dead in its tracks. What's more, although some characters continue to stroll the parks, it is becoming more the rule to assemble characters in some specific venue (like the Hall of Fame at Mickey's Toontown Fair) where families must line up for photos and autographs. Meeting characters, posing for photos, and collecting autographs can burn hours. If your kids are into character autograph collecting, you will need to anticipate these interruptions to your touring and negotiate some

understanding with your children about when you will tour and when you will collect autographs. The only time-efficient way to collect autographs is to line up at the character greeting areas first thing in the morning. Because this is also the best time to experience popular attractions, you may have some tough decisions to make.

While we realize that starting early and going full-tilt through the morning might not be consistent with your idea of a vacation, it's still the best way to see the most popular attractions without long waits. We recommend, therefore, continuous, expeditious touring until around 11 a.m. or so. After that point, breaks and diversions won't affect your touring significantly.

Other variables that can profoundly affect your progress are beyond your control. Chief among these are the manner and timing in which a ride is brought to capacity. For example, Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, a roller coaster in the Magic Kingdom, has five trains. On a given morning it may begin operation with two of the five, then add the other three if and when needed. If the waiting line builds rapidly before operators decide to go to full capacity, you could have a long wait, even in the early morning.

Another variable relates to the time you arrive for a theater performance. Usually, your wait will be the length of time from your arrival to the end of the presentation in progress. Thus, if *Country Bear Jamboree* is 15 minutes long and you arrive one minute after a show has begun, your wait for the next show will be 14 minutes. Conversely, if you arrive as the show is wrapping up, your wait will be only a minute or two.

 **unofficial TIP**
Our advice is to either go with the flow or, alternatively, set aside a certain morning or afternoon for photos and autographs. Be aware, however, that queues for autographs, especially in Toontown at the Magic Kingdom and Camp Minnie-Mickey at the Animal Kingdom, are just as long as the lines for rides.

A WORD ABOUT DISNEY THRILL RIDES

READERS OF ALL AGES SHOULD ATTEMPT to be open-minded about the so-called Disney “thrill rides.” In comparison with rides at other theme parks, the Disney thrill attractions are quite tame, with more emphasis on sights, atmosphere, and special effects than on the motion, speed, or feel of the ride itself. While we suggest you take Disney’s preride warnings seriously, we can tell you that guests of all ages report enjoying rides such as Tower of Terror, Big Thunder Mountain, and Splash Mountain.

A reader from Washington sums up the situation well:

Our boys and I are used to imagining typical amusement park rides when it comes to roller coasters. So, when we thought of Big Thunder Mountain and Space Mountain, what came to mind was gigantic hills, upside-down loops, huge vertical drops, etc. I actually hate roller coasters, especially the unpleasant sensation of a long drop, and I have never taken a ride that loops you upside down.

In fact, the Disney [rides] are all tame in comparison. There are never any long and steep hills (except Splash Mountain, and it is there for anyone to see, so you have informed consent going on the ride). I was able to build up courage to go on all of them, and the more I rode them the more I enjoyed them—the less you tense up expecting a big long drop, the more you enjoy the special effects and even swinging around curves. Swinging around curves is really the primary motion challenge of Disney roller coasters.

Disney, recognizing that it needs more attractions that appeal to the youth and young adult markets, has added some roller coasters to its parks. The Rock 'n' Roller Coaster at the Disney-MGM Studios, for example, incorporates at least some of the features our Washington reader seeks to avoid.

A WORD ABOUT HEIGHT REQUIREMENTS

A NUMBER OF ATTRACTIONS REQUIRE CHILDREN to meet minimum height and age requirements, usually 44 inches tall to ride with an adult, or 44 inches and 7 years of age to ride alone. If you have children too short or too young to ride, you have several options, including switching off (described on pages 133–135). Although the alternatives may resolve some practical and logistic issues, be forewarned that your smaller children might nonetheless be resentful of their older (or taller) siblings who qualify to ride. A mom from Virginia bumped into just such a situation, writing:

You mention height requirements for rides but not the intense sibling jealousy this can generate. Frontierland was a real problem in that respect. Our very petite 5-year-old, to her outrage, was stuck hanging around while our 8-year-old went on Splash Mountain and [Big] Thunder Mountain with Grandma and Granddad, and the nearby alternatives weren't helpful [too long a line for rafts to Tom Sawyer Island, etc.]. If we had thought ahead, we would have left the younger kid back in Mickey's Toontown with one of the grownups for another roller coaster ride or two and then met up later at a designated point. The best areas had a play-



ground or other quick attractions for short people near the rides with height requirements, like the Boneyard near the dinosaur ride at the Animal Kingdom.

The reader makes a valid point, though in practical terms splitting the group and meeting later can be more complicated than she might imagine. If you choose to split up, ask the Disney greeter at the entrance to the attraction(s) with height requirements how long the wait is. Tack five minutes for riding onto the anticipated wait, and then add five or so minutes to exit and reach the meeting point for an approximate sense of how long the younger kids (and their supervising adult) will have to do other stuff. Our guess is that even with a long line for the rafts, the reader would have had more than sufficient time to take her daughter to Tom Sawyer Island while the sibs rode Splash Mountain and Big Thunder Mountain with the grandparents. For sure she had time to tour the Swiss Family Treehouse in adjacent Adventureland.

WAITING-LINE STRATEGIES FOR ADULTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

CHILDREN HOLD UP BETTER THROUGH the day if you minimize the time they spend in lines. Arriving early and using our touring plans immensely reduces waiting. Here are additional ways to reduce stress for children:

1. LINE GAMES Wise parents anticipate restlessness in line and plan activities to reduce the stress and boredom. In the morning, have waiting children discuss what they want to see and do during the day. Later, watch for and count Disney characters or play simple guessing games like 20 Questions. Lines move continuously, so games requiring pen and paper are impractical. The holding area of a theater attraction, however, is a different story. Here, tic-tac-toe, hangman, drawing, and coloring make the time fly by.

ATTRACTIONS YOU CAN USUALLY ENTER AT THE LAST MINUTE

Magic Kingdom

Liberty Square

The Hall of Presidents

Liberty Square Riverboat

Epcot

Future World

The Circle of Life (except during mealtimes)

World Showcase

Reflections of China

The American Adventure

O Canada!

Disney-MGM Studios

Sounds Dangerous

Backlot Tour

Animal Kingdom

Flights of Wonder

2. LAST-MINUTE ENTRY If an attraction can accommodate an unusually large number of people at once, it's often unnecessary to stand in line. The Magic Kingdom's *Liberty Square Riverboat* is a good example. The boat holds about 450 people, usually more than are waiting in line. Instead of standing uncomfortably in a crowd, grab a snack and sit in the shade until the boat arrives and loading is under way. After the line is almost gone, join it.

At large-capacity theaters like that for Epcot's *The American Adventure*, ask the entrance greeter how long it will be until guests are admitted for the next show. If it's 15 minutes or more, take a restroom break or get a snack, returning a few minutes before the show starts. You aren't allowed to carry food or drink into the attraction, so make sure you have time to finish your snack.

ATTRACTIONS WHERE YOU CAN USUALLY COMPLETE A HAIL MARY PASS
Magic Kingdom

Adventureland	Swiss Family Treehouse
Frontierland	<i>Country Bear Jamboree</i>
Fantasyland	Mad Tea Party
	Snow White's Scary Adventures
	Dumbo the Flying Elephant
	Cinderella's Golden Carousel
	Peter Pan's Flight

Epcot

Future World	Spaceship Earth
	Living with the Land

Disney-MGM Studios

<i>Sounds Dangerous</i>	<i>Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!</i>
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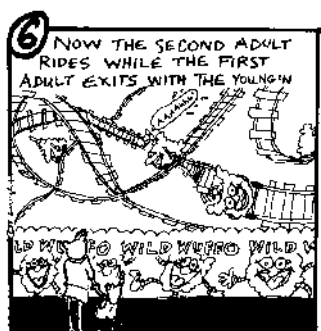
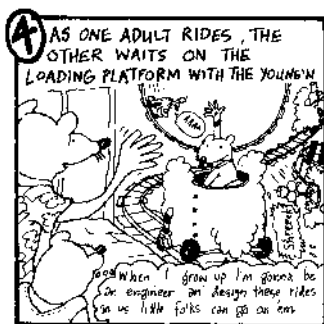
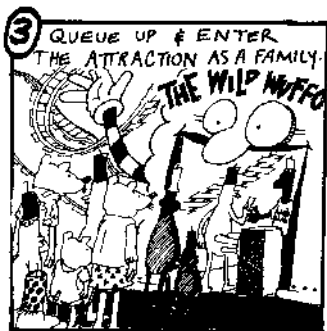
Animal Kingdom

DinoLand U.S.A.	TriceraTop Spin
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3. THE HAIL MARY PASS Certain lines are configured to allow you and your smaller children to pass under the rail to join your partner just before actual boarding or entry. This technique allows children and one adult to rest, snack, or go to the potty while another adult or older sibling stands in line. Other guests are very understanding about this strategy when used for young children. You're likely to meet hostile opposition, however, if you try to pass older children or more than one adult under the rail. To preempt hostility, tell the folks behind you in line what you are doing and why.

4. SWITCHING OFF (A.K.A. THE BABY SWAP) Several attractions have minimum height and/or age requirements, usually 40 to 48 inches tall to ride with an adult, or age 7 and 40 inches to ride alone. Some couples with children too small or too young forgo these attractions, while others take turns to ride. Missing some of Disney's best rides is an unnecessary sacrifice, and waiting in line twice for the same ride is a tremendous waste of time.

Instead, take advantage of the "switching off" option, also called "The Baby Swap." To switch off, there must be at least two adults. Everybody waits in line together, adults and children. When you reach an attendant (called a "greeter"), tell him or her that you want to switch off. The greeter will allow everyone, including the young children, to enter the



attraction. When you reach the loading area, one adult rides while the other stays with the kids. Then the riding adult disembarks and takes charge of the children while the other adult rides. A third adult in the party can ride twice, once with each of the switching off adults, so that the switching off adults don't have to experience the attraction alone.

Most rides with age and height minimums load and unload in the same area, facilitating switching off. An exception is Space Mountain, where the first adult at the conclusion of the

ATTRACTIONS WHERE SWITCHING OFF IS COMMON**Magic Kingdom**

Tomorrowland

Space Mountain

Frontierland

Splash Mountain

Big Thunder Mountain Railroad

Epcot

Future World

Body Wars

Test Track

Mission: Space

Disney-MGM Studios

Star Tours

The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror

Rock 'n' Roller Coaster

Animal Kingdom

DinoLand U.S.A.

Dinosaur

Asia

Kali River Rapids

Primeval Whirl

ride must also inform the unloading attendant that he or she is switching off. The attendant will admit the first adult to an internal stairway that goes back to the loading area.

Attractions at which switching off is practiced are oriented to more mature guests. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage for a child just to move through the queue holding dad's hand. In the boarding area, many children suddenly fear abandonment as one parent leaves to experience the attraction. Unless your children are prepared for switching off, you might have an emotional crisis on your hands. A mom from Edison, New Jersey, advises:

Once my son came to understand that the switch-off would not leave him abandoned, he did not seem to mind. I would recommend to your readers that they practice the switch off on some dry runs at home, so that their child is not concerned that he will be left behind. At the very least, the procedure could be explained in advance so that the little ones know what to expect.

Finally, a mother from Ada, Michigan, who discovered that the procedure for switching off varies from attraction to attraction, offered this suggestion:

Parents need to tell the very first attendant they come to that they would like to switch off. Each attraction has a different procedure for this. Tell every other attendant too, because they forget quickly.

5. HOW TO RIDE TWICE IN A ROW WITHOUT WAITING Many young children like to ride a favorite attraction two or more

times in succession. Riding the second time often gives them a feeling of mastery and accomplishment. Unfortunately, even in the early morning, repeat rides can be time consuming. If you ride Dumbo as soon as the Magic Kingdom opens, for instance, you will wait only a minute or two for your first ride. When you come back for your second, the wait will be about 12 minutes. If you want to ride a third time, count on 20 minutes or longer.

The best way to get your child on the ride twice (or more) without blowing your morning is to use the “Chuck Bubba Relay” (named in honor of a Kentucky reader):

- a. Mom and little Bubba enter the waiting line.
- b. Dad lets a specific number of people go in front of him (24 at Dumbo), then gets in line.
- c. As soon as the ride stops, mom exits with Bubba and passes him to dad to ride the second time.
- d. If everybody is really getting into this, mom can hop in line again, no fewer than 24 people behind dad.

The Chuck Bubba Relay won't work on every ride, because waiting areas are configured differently (that is, it's impossible in some cases to exit the ride and make the pass). For those rides (all in Fantasyland) where the Bubba Relay works, here are the numbers of people to count off:

Mad Tea Party: 53

Snow White's Scary Adventures: 52

Dumbo the Flying Elephant: 24

Cinderella's Golden Carousel: 75

Peter Pan's Flight: 64

Magic Carpets of Aladdin: 48

If you're the second adult in the relay, you'll reach a place in line where it's easiest to make the hand-off, often where those exiting the ride pass closest to those waiting to board. In any event, you'll know it when you see it. If you reach it before the first parent arrives with Bubba, let those behind you pass until Bubba shows up.

6. LAST-MINUTE COLD FEET If your young child gets cold feet just before boarding a ride where there is no age or height requirement, you usually can arrange with the loading attendant for a switch off. This is common at Pirates of the Caribbean, where children lose their courage while winding through the dungeon-like waiting area. Additionally, no law says you *have* to ride. If you reach the boarding area and someone is unhappy, tell an attendant you've changed your mind and you'll be shown the way out.

7. ELEVATOR SHOES FOR THE SHORT AND THE BRAVE If you have a child who is begging to go on the rides with height requirements but who is a little too short, slip heel lifts into his Nikes before he reaches the measuring point. Be sure to leave the heel lifts in, because he may be measured again before boarding.

A Huntsville, Alabama, mom has worked out all the details on the heel lift problem:

Knowing my wild child 3-year-old as I do, I was interested in your comment regarding shoe lifts. I don't know about other places, but in the big city of Huntspatch where we live, one has to have a prescription for lifts. Normal shoe repair places don't make them. I couldn't think of a material with which to fashion a homemade lift that would be comfortable enough to stand on while waiting in line. I ended up purchasing some of those painfully ugly two-inch chunky-heeled sandals at my local 'mart where they carried these hideous shoes in unbelievably tiny sizes (\$12). Since they didn't look too comfortable, we popped them on her right before we entered the ride lines. None of the height checkers ever asked her to remove them and she clip-clopped onto Splash Mountain, Big Thunder Railroad (Dat BIG Choo-Choo), Star Wars, and The Tower of Terror—twice! However, the same child became so terrified at the Tiki Bird show that we were forced to leave—go figure! For adventuresome boys, I would suggest purchasing some of those equally hideous giant-heeled cowboy boots.

Similarly, a Long Pond, Pennsylvania, mom had this to offer:

Tower of Terror, Star Tours, and Body Wars have 40-inch requirements. Being persistent with a 39½-inch child, we tried these several times. She got on Tower of Terror two of three times, Body Wars one of one time, and Star Tours one of two tries. She wore elevator shoes and a bun hair style to increase height.

Note that boosting your child's height by an inch or two with a heel lift or the like will not compromise his safety on the ride.

8. CATCH-22 AT TOMORROWLAND SPEEDWAY Though Tomorrowland Speedway is a great treat for young children, they're required to be 52 inches tall in order to drive unassisted. Few children ages 6 and younger measure up, so the ride is essentially withheld from the very age group that would most enjoy it. To resolve this catch-22, go on the ride with your small

child. The attendants will assume that you will drive. After getting into the car, shift your child over behind the steering wheel. From your position, you will still be able to control the foot pedals. Children will feel like they're really driving, and because the car travels on a self-guiding track, there's no way they can make a mistake while steering.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

THE LARGE AND FRIENDLY COSTUMED versions of Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Goofy, and others—known as “Disney characters”—provide a link between Disney animated films and the theme parks. To people emotionally invested, the characters in Disney films are as real as next-door neighbors, never mind that they're just drawings on plastic. In recent years, theme park personifications of the characters also have become real to us. It's not just a person in a mouse costume we see; it is Mickey himself. Similarly, meeting Goofy or Snow White in Fantasyland is an encounter with a celebrity, a memory to be treasured.

While there are hundreds of Disney animated film characters, only about 250 have been brought to life in costume. Of these, a relatively small number (less than a fifth) are “greeters” (characters who mix with patrons). The remaining characters perform in shows or parades. Originally confined to the Magic Kingdom, characters are now found in all the major theme parks and Disney hotels.

unofficial TIP

If your children can't enjoy things until they see Mickey, ask a cast member where to find him. If the cast member doesn't know right away, he or she can find out quickly. Cast members have a number they can call to learn exactly where the characters are at any time.

CHARACTER WATCHING Character watching has become a pastime. Families once were content to meet characters only occasionally and by chance. They now pursue them relentlessly, armed with autograph books and cameras. Because some characters are only rarely seen, character watching has become character collecting. (To cash in on character collecting, Disney sells autograph books throughout the World.) Mickey, Minnie,

and Goofy are a snap to bag; they seem to be everywhere. But Winnie the Pooh seldom comes out. Other characters appear regularly, but only in a location consistent with their starring role. Cinderella, predictably, reigns at Cinderella Castle in Fantasyland, while Brer Fox and Brer Bear frolic in Frontierland near Splash Mountain.

A Brooklyn dad thinks the character autograph-hunting craze has gotten out of hand, complaining:


Whoever started the practice of collecting autographs from the characters should be subjected to Chinese water torture! We went to Walt Disney World 11 years ago, with an 8-year-old and an 11-year-old. We would bump into characters, take pictures, and that was it. After a while, our children noticed that some of the other children were getting autographs. We managed to avoid joining in during our first day at the Magic Kingdom and our first day at Epcot, but by day three our children were collecting autographs. However, it did not get too out of hand, since it was limited to accidental character meeting.

This year when we took our youngest child (who is now age 8), he had already seen his siblings' collection, and was determined to outdo them. However, rather than random meetings, the characters are now available practically all day long at different locations, according to a printed schedule, which our son was old enough to read. We spent more time standing in line for autographs than we did for the most popular rides!

A family from Birmingham, Alabama, found some benefit in their children's relentless pursuit of characters, writing:

We had no idea we would be caught up in this madness, but after my daughters grabbed your guidebook to get Pocahontas to sign it (we had no blank paper), we quickly bought a Disney autograph book and gave in. It was actually the highlight of their trip, and my son even got into the act by helping get places in line for his sisters. They LOVED looking for characters (I think it has all been planned by Kodak to sell film). The possibility of seeing a new character revived my 7-year-old's energy on many occasions. It was an amazing, totally unexpected part of our visit.

“THEN SOME CONFUSION HAPPENED” Young children sometimes become lost at character encounters. Usually, there's a lot of activity around a character, with both adults and children touching it or posing for pictures. Most commonly, Mom and Dad stay in the crowd while Junior approaches to meet the character. In the excitement and with people milling and the character moving around, Junior heads off in the wrong direction to look for Mom and Dad. In the words of a Salt Lake City mom: “Milo was shaking hands with Dopey one minute, then some confusion happened and [Milo] was gone.” Families with several young children and parents

 **unofficial TIP**
Our advice for parents with preschoolers is to stay with the kids when they meet characters, stepping back only to take a quick picture.

who are busy with cameras can lose track of a youngster in a heartbeat.

MEETING CHARACTERS FOR FREE

YOU CAN SEE DISNEY CHARACTERS IN live shows at all the theme parks and in parades at the Magic Kingdom and Disney-MGM Studios. Consult your daily entertainment schedule for times. If you want to *meet* the characters, get autographs, and take photos, consult the free *Times Guide*.

AT THE MAGIC KINGDOM Characters are encountered more frequently here than anywhere else in Walt Disney World. There almost always will be a character next to City Hall on Main Street and usually one or more in Town Square or near the railroad station. If it's rainy, look for characters on the veranda of Tony's Town Square Restaurant. Characters appear in all the lands but are more plentiful in Fantasyland and Mickey's Toontown Fair. At Mickey's Toontown Fair, you can meet Mickey privately in his Judge's Tent. Characters actually work shifts at the Toontown Hall of Fame next to Mickey's Country House. Here, you can line up to meet three different assortments of characters. Each assortment has its own greeting area and, of course, its own line. One group, variously labeled Mickey's Pals or Famous Friends or something similar, will include Minnie, Pluto, Goofy, Donald, and sometimes Chip and Dale, Daisy, and Uncle Scrooge. The other two assortments vary and are more ambiguously defined. The 100 Acre Wood Friends are mostly Winnie the Pooh characters, while Fairy Tale Friends include Snow White, assorted dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty, the Beast, Belle, Cinderella, Prince Charming, and so on. Sometimes, however, it's Villains (Captain Hook, Cruella DeVil, Jabar, et al.) and Princesses (Sleeping Beauty, Mary Poppins, yada, yada, yada). Cinderella regularly greets diners at Cinderella's Royal Table in the castle. Also look for characters in the central hub and by Splash Mountain in Frontierland.

Characters are featured in afternoon and evening parades and also play a major role in Castle Forecourt shows (at the entrance to the castle on the moat side) and at the Galaxy Palace Theater in Tomorrowland. Find performance times for shows and parades in the park's daily entertainment schedule. Sometimes characters stay to greet the audience after shows.

AT EPCOT At first Disney didn't think characters would be appropriate for the more serious, educational style of Epcot. Later, in response to criticism that Epcot lacked warmth and


humor, characters were imported. To integrate them thematically, new and often bizarre costumes were created. Goofy roams Future World in a metallic silver cape reminiscent of Buck Rogers. Mickey greets guests at the American Adventure dressed like Ben Franklin.

Although chance encounters with characters are less frequent at Epcot than at the other parks, Epcot compensates by periodically bringing in characters by the busload, literally. Several times each a day, a whole platoon of characters pile onto a British double-decker bus and set out for one of the countries arrayed around the World Showcase Lagoon. When the bus stops, all of the characters hop off and mingle with the crowd, posing for pictures and signing autographs. Mickey, Minnie, Goofy, Chip and Dale, and Pluto are almost always on the bus, frequently accompanied by Ballou, Tigger, Eyeore, the Genie from Aladdin, Jasmine, Mushu, Timor, and Snow White. The bus is dispatched about eight to ten times a day. Specific times and stops are listed in the Epcot handout park map. In fact, the bus offers the easiest access to the most characters in one place in all of Walt Disney World. Once the crowd in the immediate area gets the drift, however, the characters are mobbed.

Characters may be rarer at Epcot, but they're often easier to meet. A father from Effingham, Illinois, writes:

Trying to get autographs and pictures with Disney characters in the Magic Kingdom was a nightmare. Every character we saw was mobbed by kids and adults. Our kids had no chance. But at Epcot and Disney-MGM, things were much better. We got autographs, pictures, and more involvement. Our kids danced with several characters and received a lot of personal attention.

AT DISNEY-MGM STUDIOS Characters are likely to turn up anywhere at the Studios but are most frequently found in front of the Animation Building, along Mickey Avenue (leading to the soundstages), and at the end of Streets of America on the backlot. Mickey and his “friends” pose for keepsake photos (about \$14 each) on Hollywood Boulevard, Sunset Boulevard, and Streets of America. Characters are also prominent in shows, with *Voyage of the Little Mermaid* running almost continuously and an abbreviated version of

 **unofficial TIP**
Position yourself at a scheduled stop a couple of minutes before the bus arrives so you can score a bunch of photos and autographs before everyone else figures out what's going on.

Beauty and the Beast performed several times daily at the Theater of the Stars. Check the *Times Guide* for show times.

AT THE ANIMAL KINGDOM Camp Minnie-Mickey in the Animal Kingdom is a special location designed specifically for meeting characters. There are four designated character greeting “trails” where you can meet Mickey, Minnie, and various characters from *The Jungle Book* and *The Lion King*. Also at Camp Minnie-Mickey are two stage shows featuring characters from *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*.

Responding to requests, each theme park has added a lot of information about characters to its handout *Times Guide*. The *Times Guide* lists where and when certain characters will be available and provides information on character dining.

unofficial TIP

Lines for face characters move m-u-c-h more slowly than do lines for nonspeaking characters.

Because face characters are allowed to talk, they often engage children in lengthy conversations, much to the dismay of families still in the queue.

Disney has taken several initiatives intended to satisfy guests’ inexhaustible desire to meet the characters. Most important, Disney assigned Mickey and a number of other characters to all-day duty in Mickey’s Toontown Fair in the Magic Kingdom and Camp Minnie-Mickey in the Animal Kingdom. Although making the characters more available has taken the guesswork out of finding them, it has robbed encounters of much of their spontaneity. Instead of chancing on a character,

it’s much more common now to wait in line to meet the character.

DINING

FOR EFFICIENCY AND ECONOMY, WE recommend eating breakfast in your hotel room. Even if you roll out to Denny’s or eat breakfast at your hotel, however, finish early enough to arrive at the theme park prior to opening. For lunch it’s cheaper and more relaxed to eat out of the parks during your midday break. If you elect not to take a midday break, you won’t have any trouble finding something your children will eat. Hamburgers, fries, hot dogs, or pizza can be had within 50 yards of any attraction. Plan on spending about twice what you would pay at a Hardee’s or McDonald’s. Portions are often large enough to split.

No matter how formal or imposing a Disney full-service restaurant appears, rest assured that the staff is accustomed

RECOMMENDED COUNTER-SERVICE RESTAURANTS**MAGIC KINGDOM**

Tomorrowland Terrace Noodle Station	Cosmic Ray's
Pecos Bill's Tall Tale Inn and Cafe	The Plaza Pavilion

EPCOT

Rose and Crown Pub	Sunshine Seasons (The Land)
Sommerfest	Yakitori House

DISNEY-MGM STUDIOS

ABC Commissary	Backlot Express
Studio Catering Company	

ANIMAL KINGDOM

Flame Tree Barbecue

to wiggling, impatient, and often boisterous children. The bottom line: young children are the rule, not the exception, at Disney restaurants. Almost all Disney restaurants offer a child's menu, and all have booster seats and high chairs. Because the waitstaff understands how tough it can be for children to sit still for an extended period, they will supply your little ones with crackers and rolls and serve your dinner much faster than in comparable restaurants elsewhere. And if your children raise the roof? No problem, the other diners will be too preoccupied with their own kids to notice.

CHARACTER DINING

FRATERNIZING WITH CHARACTERS HAS BECOME SO popular that Disney offers character breakfasts, brunches, and dinners where families can dine in the presence of Mickey, Minnie, Goofy, and other costumed versions of animated celebrities. Besides grabbing customers from Denny's and Hardee's, character meals provide a familiar, controlled setting in which young children can warm gradually to characters. Though we mention only the featured character(s) in the following descriptions, all meals are attended by several characters. Adult prices apply to persons ages 12 or older, children's prices to ages 3 to 11. Little ones under age 3 eat free.

Character Dining: What to Expect

Character meals are bustling affairs held in hotels' or theme parks' largest full-service restaurants. Character breakfasts offer a buffet or a fixed menu served family-style. The typical family-style breakfast includes scrambled eggs; bacon, sausage, and ham; hash browns; waffles or French toast; biscuits, rolls,

or pastries; and fruit. The meal is served in large skillets or platters at your table. If you run out of something, you can order seconds (or thirds) at no additional charge. Buffets offer much the same fare, but you have to fetch it yourself.

Character dinners range from a set menu served family-style to buffets or ordering off the menu. The character dinner at the Liberty Tree Tavern in the Magic Kingdom, for example, is served family-style and consists of turkey, ham, marinated flank steak, salad, mashed potatoes, green vegetables, and, for kids, macaroni and cheese. Dessert is extra. Character dinner buffets, such as those at 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian and Chef Mickey's at the Contemporary Resort, offer separate adults' and children's serving lines. Typically, the children's buffet includes hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, fish sticks, fried chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Selections at the adult buffet usually include prime rib or other carved meat, baked or broiled Florida seafood, pasta, chicken, an ethnic dish or two, vegetables, potatoes, and salad.

At both breakfasts and dinners, characters circulate around the room while you eat. During your meal, each of

unofficial TIP

For the best photos, adults should sit across the table from their children. Always seat the children where characters can reach them most easily, such as on the aisle rather than against the wall.

the three to five characters present will visit your table, arriving one at a time to cuddle with the kids (and sometimes the adults), pose for photos, and sign autographs. Keep autograph books (with pens) and loaded cameras handy.

Disney people don't rush you to leave after you've eaten. You can get seconds on coffee or juice and stay as long as you wish to enjoy the characters. Remember, however, that there are lots of eager children and adults waiting not so patiently to be admitted.

When to Go

Though a number of character breakfasts are offered around Walt Disney World, attending them usually prevents you from arriving at the theme parks in time for opening. Because early morning is best for touring the parks and you don't want to burn daylight lingering over breakfast, we suggest:

1. Substitute a character breakfast for lunch. Have juice or coffee and a roll or banana from room service or from your cooler first thing in the morning to tide you over. Then tour the theme park for an hour or two before breaking off around 10:15 a.m. to go to the character breakfast of your choice.

Make a big brunch of your character breakfast and skip lunch. You should be fueled until dinner.

2. Go on your arrival or departure day. The day you arrive and check in is usually good for a character dinner. Settle in at your hotel, swim, then dine with the characters. This strategy has the added benefit of exposing your children to the characters before chance encounters at the parks. Some children, moreover, won't settle down to enjoy the parks until they have seen Mickey. Departure days also are good for a character meal. Schedule a character breakfast on your check-out day before you head for the airport or begin your drive home.
3. Go on a rest day. If you plan to stay five or more days, you probably will take a day off from touring to rest or do something else in the Orlando area. These are perfect days for a character meal.
4. Go for lunch or dinner instead of breakfast. A character dinner in late afternoon or evening won't conflict with your touring schedule.

How to Choose a Character Meal

We receive a lot of mail asking for advice about character meals. This question from a Waterloo, Iowa mom is typical:

Are all character breakfasts pretty much the same or are some better than others? How should I go about choosing one?

In fact, some are better than others, sometimes much better. Here's what we look for when we evaluate character meals.

I. THE CHARACTERS The various meals offer a diverse assortment of Disney characters. Selecting a meal that features your children's special favorites is a good first step. Check the Character Meal Hit Parade chart (pages 150–151) to see which characters are assigned to each meal. With the exception of 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian, most restaurants stick with the same characters from year to year. Even so, it's wise to check the character lineup when you phone to make your advance reservations, as this mom from Austin, Texas attests:

We went to two character meals at 1900 Park Fare. We ate dinner there the night we arrived, unaware that the characters would all be villains. My 4-year-old was a little scared of the witch from Snow White but amazingly kept his cool! Cruella DeVil, Captain Hook and Prince John (from Robin Hood) were also there. My son asked the next morning if that witch was going to be at the theme parks

too. Needless to say, we did not ride the Snow White ride in the Magic Kingdom! (The character breakfast was kinder and gentler.)

A family from Michigan, unfortunately did not fare as well:

Our character meal at the 1900 Park Fare was a DISASTER! Please warn other readers that have younger children that when they make advance reservations, and the characters are “villians,” they may want to rethink their options. We went for my daughters fifth birthday and she was scared to death. The Queen of Hearts chased her sobbing and screaming down the hallway. Most young children we saw at dinner were very frightened. Captain Hook and Prince John were laid back but Governor Ratcliff (Pocahontas) and the Queen were amazingly rude and intimidating. I was very disappointed in our meal and the characters.

The villains have been replaced by princesses. The moral of the story, however, remains the same: Always confirm which characters will attend before you make your advance reservations.

2. ATTENTION FROM THE CHARACTERS In all character meals the characters circulate among the guests hugging children, posing for pictures, and signing autographs. How much time a character spends with you and your children depends primarily on the ratio of characters to guests. The more characters and fewer guests the better. Because many character meals never fill to capacity, the Character to Guest Ratios in our Character Meal Hit Parade chart were adjusted to reflect an average attendance as opposed to a sell-out crowd. Even so, there’s quite a range. The best character to guest ratio is at Cinderella’s Royal Table, where there is approximately 1 character to every 26 guests. The worst ratio can be found at the Garden Grove Café at the Swan Resort. Here there is only 1 character for every 216 guests. What this means in practical terms is that your family will get eight times more attention from the characters at Cinderella’s Royal Table than from those at the Garden Grove Café. As an aside, many children particularly enjoy meals with characters such as Snow White, Belle, Jasmine, Cinderella, Aladdin, etc. These so-called “face characters” speak and are thus able to engage children in a way not possible for the mute animal characters.

3. THE SETTING Some character meals are staged in quite exotic settings, while for others moving the venue to an ele-

mentary school cafeteria would be an improvement. Our chart rates the setting of each character meal with the familiar five-star scale. Two restaurants, Cinderella's Royal Table in the Magic Kingdom, and the Garden Grill in the Land Pavilion at Epcot, deserve special mention. Cinderella's Royal Table is situated on the first and second floors of Cinderella Castle in Fantasyland, offering guests a look at the inside of the castle. The Garden Grill is a revolving restaurant that overlooks several scenes from the "Living With the Land" boat ride attraction. Although Chef Mickey's at the Contemporary Resort is rather sterile and cold in appearance, it affords a great view of the monorail running through the interior of the hotel. The respective themes and settings of the remaining character meal venues, while apparent to adults, are lost on children.

4. THE FOOD Although some food served at character meals is quite good, most is average, in other words palatable but nothing to get excited about. In terms of variety, consistency, and quality, restaurants generally do a better job with breakfast than with lunch or dinner (if served). Some restaurants offer a buffet while others opt for "one skillet," family-style service where all the hot items on the bill of fare are served from the same pot or skillet. A few restaurants offer more traditional table service, where a waiter serves a pre-set meal to each guest individually. This last-mentioned type of service provides for dishes that are fresher than those that languish under buffet heat lamps or dry out in metal skillets and pots. This, however, like most generalizations, has its exceptions. In our chart, to help you sort it out, we rate the food at each character meal using the tried and true five-star scale.

5. THE PROGRAM Some of the larger restaurants stage modest performances where the characters dance, head up a parade or conga line around the room, or lead songs and cheers. For some guests these productions lend a celebratory air to the proceedings, while for others they turn what was already mayhem into absolute chaos. In either event, the antics consume time that the characters could be spending with families at their table.

6. NOISE If you want to eat in peace, character meals are a bad choice. That having been said, some are much noisier than others. Once again, our chart gives you some idea of what to expect.

7. WHICH MEAL? Although character breakfasts seem to be the most popular, character lunches and dinners are usually

more practical because they do not interfere with your early morning touring. During hot weather months especially, a character lunch at midday can be heavenly.

8. COST Dinners cost more than lunches, and lunches more than breakfasts. Prices for any given meal vary only about \$3 from the least expensive to the most expensive restaurant. Breakfasts run \$17–\$20 for adults, \$8–\$11 for children ages 3–9. For character lunches, expect to pay \$18–\$24 for adults, \$10–\$13 for kids. Dinners range from \$21–\$24 for adults and \$10–\$11 for children. Little ones ages 2 and under eat free.

9. RESERVATIONS The Disney dining reservations system makes advance reservations for character meals up to 90 days prior to the day you wish to dine. An advance reservation for most character meals are easy to obtain, even if you forget to call until a couple of weeks before you leave home. Breakfasts at Cinderella’s Royal Table are another story. To get a breakfast table at Cinderella’s, you’ll need our strategy (explained below) as well as the help of Congress and the Pope.

10. NO RESERVATIONS Character meals at the Gulliver’s Grill at the Swan Resort do not participate in the advance reservations program. All of their business is walk-in (groups of ten or more should call ahead). Waits to be seated almost never exceed 20 minutes, even at the busiest times of year. Gulliver’s Grill serves an outstanding buffet, but has only one character on duty at a time.

11. ODDITIES Character meals are odd affairs at best, with the name “character meal” rather implying that you eat the characters. Yet although we have seen characters savagely gnawed, we’ve not seen one devoured. Semantics aside, the oddities we refer to are ones that may confuse or disappoint you. In the confusion department, the Garden Grove Café at the Swan Resort changes its name to Gulliver’s Grill for dinner. If you ask, Garden Grove Café/Gulliver’s Grill will tell you that two characters attend each meal. What you need to know, however, is that they work alternating 30 minute shifts, so there is usually only one character present at a time.

Many who fail to obtain advance reservations for the character breakfast at Cinderella’s Royal Table reserve a table for a character lunch. Unfortunately, dinner is not a character meal. Although Cinderella and Snow White have been known to make impromptu appearances during dinner, there’s no guarantee. Finally, 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian Resort trots out five characters for dinner but only four for breakfast. Conversely, the Crystal Palace features four characters for breakfast but only three for lunch and dinner.

Getting an Advance Reservation at Cinderella's Royal Table

Cinderella's Royal Table, situated in Cinderella Castle in the Magic Kingdom, hosts the obsessively popular character breakfast starring Cinderella and a number of other Disney princesses. Admittedly, the toughest ticket at Disney World is an advance reservation for this character meal. Why? Cinderella's Royal Table is Disney's tiniest character meal restaurant, accommodating only about 130 diners at a time. Demand so outdistances supply for this event that Walt Disney World visitors go to unbelievable lengths to secure an advanced reservation. After decades of guests complaining and beating their chests over their inability to get a table, Disney finally is offering a noon to 2 p.m. character lunch with the same cast of characters.

This frustrated reader from Golden, Colorado, complains:

I don't know what you have to do to get an advance reservation for Cinderella's [Royal] Table in the castle. I called Disney Dining every morning at 7 [a.m.], which was 5 [a.m.] where I live! It was like calling into one of those radio shows where the first person to call wins a prize. Every time I finally got through, all the tables were gone. I am soooo frustrated and mad I could spit. What do you have to do to get a table for Cinderella's breakfast?

The only way to get a table is to obtain an advance reservation through Disney reservations. You must call ☎ 407-WDW-DINE at 7 a.m. EST exactly 90 days before the day you want to eat at Cinderella's. Reservations can be made 90 days in advance.

Here's how it works. It's 6:50 a.m. EST and all the Disney dining reservationists are warming up their computers to begin filling available seats at 7 a.m. As the clock strikes seven, Disney dining is blasted with an avalanche of calls, all trying to make advance reservations for the character meals at Cinderella's Royal Table. There are more than 100 reservationists on duty, and most advance reservations can be assigned in two minutes or less. Thus, the coveted seats go quickly, selling out as early as 7:02 a.m. on many days.

To be among the fortunate few who score an advance reservation, try the following. First, call on the correct morning. Use a calendar and count backward exactly 90 days from (but not including) the day you wish to dine. (The computer doesn't understand months, so you can't, for example, call on February 1st to make an advance reservation for May 1st because that's fewer than 90 days.) If you want to eat on May 1st, for example, begin your 90-day

Character Meal Hit Parade

1. CINDERELLA'S ROYAL TABLE

RANK 1
LOCATION
 Magic Kingdom
MEALS SERVED
 Breakfast/Lunch
CHARACTERS
 Cinderella, Snow White, Belle, Jasmine, Aladdin
SERVED Daily
SETTING ★★★★★
SERVICE
 Buffet/Family style
FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY
 ★★★
NOISE LEVEL Quiet
CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO
 1 to 26

2. AKERSHUS PRINCESS STORYBOOK BREAKFAST

RANK 2
LOCATION
 Epcot
MEALS SERVED
 Breakfast/Lunch/Dinner
CHARACTERS
 4–6 characters chosen from Belle, Mulan, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Esmeralda, Mary Poppins, Jasmine, Pocahontas
SERVED Daily
SETTING ★★★★
SERVICE
 Family style
FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY
 ★★★½
NOISE LEVEL Quiet
CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO
 1 to 54

3. CHEF MICKEY'S

RANK 3
LOCATION
 Contemporary
MEALS SERVED
 Breakfast/Dinner
CHARACTERS
Breakfast:
 Minnie, Mickey, Chip, Pluto, Goofy
Dinner:
 Mickey, Pluto, Chip, Dale, Goofy
SERVED Daily
SETTING ★★★
SERVICE Buffet
FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY
 ★★★ (breakfast)
 ★★★½ (dinner)
NOISE LEVEL Loud
CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO
 1 to 56

7. LIBERTY TREE TAVERN

RANK 7
LOCATION
 Magic Kingdom
MEALS SERVED
 Dinner
CHARACTERS
 Minnie, Pluto, Donald Duck, Meeko, Chip and/or Dale
SERVED Daily
SETTING ★★★½
SERVICE
 Family style
FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY
 ★★★
NOISE LEVEL Moderate
CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO
 1 to 26

8. RESTURANTOSAURUS

RANK 8
LOCATION
 Animal Kingdom
MEALS SERVED
 Breakfast
CHARACTERS
 Mickey, Donald, Pluto, Goofy
SERVED Daily
SETTING ★★★
SERVICE
 Buffet
FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY
 ★★★
NOISE LEVEL Very loud
CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO
 1 to 112

9. CAPE MAY CAFE

RANK 9
LOCATION
 Beach Club
MEALS SERVED
 Breakfast
CHARACTERS
 Goofy, Chip, Dale, Pluto
SERVED Daily
SETTING ★★★
SERVICE
 Buffet
FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY
 ★★★½
NOISE LEVEL Moderate
CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO
 1 to 67

4. CRYSTAL PALACE

RANK 4

LOCATION

Magic Kingdom

MEALS SERVED

Breakfast/Lunch/Dinner

CHARACTERS*Breakfast:*

Pooh, Tigger, Eeyore, Piglet

Dinner:

Pooh, Tigger, Eeyore

SERVED Daily**SETTING** ★★★**SERVICE**

Buffet

FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY

★★½ (breakfast)

★★★ (dinner)

NOISE LEVEL Very loud**CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO**

1 to 67 (breakfast)

1 to 89 (dinner)

5. 1900 PARK FARE

RANK 5

LOCATION

Grand Floridian

MEALS SERVED

Breakfast/Dinner

CHARACTERS*Breakfast:*

Mary Poppins and friend

Dinner:

Cinderella and friends

SERVED Daily**SETTING** ★★★**SERVICE**

Buffet

FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY

★★★ (breakfast)

★★★½ (dinner)

NOISE LEVEL Moderate**CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO**

1 to 54 (breakfast)

1 to 44 (dinner)

6. GARDEN GRILL

RANK 6

LOCATION

Epcot

MEALS SERVED

Lunch/Dinner

CHARACTERSChip, Dale,
Mickey, Pluto**SERVED** Daily**SETTING** ★★★½**SERVICE**

Family style

FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY

★★½

NOISE LEVEL Very quiet**CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO**

1 to 46

10. OHANA

RANK 10

LOCATION

Polynesian Resort

MEALS SERVED

Breakfast

CHARACTERSMickey, Goofy,
Chip, Dale**SERVED** Daily**SETTING** ★★**SERVICE**

Family style

FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY

★★½

NOISE LEVEL Moderate**CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO**

1 to 57

11. GULLIVER'S GRILL

RANK 11

LOCATION

Swan

MEALS SERVED

Dinner

CHARACTERSGoofy and Pluto or
Rafiki and Timon**SERVED** Daily**SETTING** ★★★**SERVICE**

Buffet/Menu

FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY

★★★½

NOISE LEVEL Moderate**CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO**

1 to 198

12. GARDEN GROVE CAFE

RANK 12

LOCATION

Swan

MEALS SERVED

Breakfast

CHARACTERS

Goofy and Pluto

SERVED

Saturday and Sunday

SETTING ★★★**SERVICE**

Buffet/Menu

FOOD VARIETY AND QUALITY

★★★½

NOISE LEVEL Moderate**CHARACTER TO GUEST RATIO**

1 to 198

backward count on April 30th. If you count correctly, you'll find that the correct morning to call is January 31st. If you don't feel like counting days, call ☎ 407-WDW-DINE, and the Disney folks will calculate it for you. Call them during the afternoon when they're less busy, about 100 days before your trip. Let them know when you'd like your advance reservation, and they'll tell you the morning to call.

To get a table, you must dial at almost exactly 7 a.m. EST. Disney does not calibrate its clock with the correct time as determined by the U.S. Naval Observatory or the National Institute of Standards and Technology, but we conducted synchronizing tests and determined that Disney reservation system clocks are accurate to within one to three seconds. Several Internet sites will give you the exact time. Our favorite is **www.atomictime.net**, which offers the exact time in displays that show hours, minutes, and seconds. Once the Atomic Time home page is up, click on "html multizone continuous" and look for the Eastern Time Zone. Using this site or your local "Time of Day" number from the phone directory, synchronize your watch TO THE SECOND. About 18 to 20 seconds before 7 a.m., dial ☎ 407-WDW-DINE, waiting to dial the final "E" in "DINE" until 7 seconds before the hour.

Hang up and redial until your call is answered. When it is, you will hear one of two recorded messages:

1. "Thank you for calling the Disney Reservation Center. Our office is closed . . ." If you get this message, hang up the instant you hear the words "Our office" and hit redial.

OR

2. You'll get a recording with a number of prompts. The prompts change periodically. Call a few mornings before the day you actually make your reservation to learn what prompts are being used. Once you know the prompts, you can determine which numbers on your touch-tone phone to press in order to work through the prompts at warp speed. Some prompts begin with "If," others may request info such as your phone number or resort reservation number. Do not listen to the entire prompt. Immediately press the appropriate numbered key(s) as determined by your previous trial run.

Your call will be answered momentarily by a Disney Reservations Center (DRC) agent. Don't get nervous if you're on hold for a bit. The worst thing you can do now is hang up and try again.

As soon as a live DRC agent comes on the line, interrupt immediately and say, "I need Cindy's breakfast (lunch), for May 1st, for four people, any available time" (substituting

your own breakfast (lunch) dates, of course). Don't engage in "good mornings" or other pleasantries. Time is of the essence. You can apologize later to the DRC agent for your momentary rudeness if you feel the need, but she already knows what's going on. Don't try and pick a specific time. Even two seconds to ask for a specific time will seriously diminish your chances of getting an advance reservation.

If the atomic clock thing seems too complicated (not to mention anal), start dialing ☎ 407-WDW-DINE about 50 seconds before 7 a.m. If the reservation center isn't open yet, you'll get a recorded message saying so. When this happens, hang up and call back immediately. If you have a redial button on your phone, use it to speed the dialing process. Continue hanging up and redialing as fast as you can until you get the recording with the prompts. This recording verifies that your call has been placed in the service queue in the order in which it was received. If you were among the first to get through, a reservationist will normally pick up in 3 to 20 seconds. What happens next depends on how many others got through ahead of you, but chances are good that you'll be able to get an advance reservation. Bear in mind that while you're talking, other agents are confirming advance reservations for other guests, so you want the transaction to go down as fast as possible. Flexibility on your part counts. It's much harder to get a seating for a large group; give some thought to breaking your group into numbers that can be accommodated at tables for four or even tables for two.

All advance reservations for Cinderella's Royal Table character meals require a credit-card deposit (not guarantee) of \$10 per adult and \$5 per child at the time of the booking. The name on the booking can't be changed after the advance reservation is made. Advance reservations may be canceled with the deposit refunded in full by calling ☎ 407-WDW-DINE at least 24 hours before the seating time.


While many readers have been successful using our strategies, some have not:

[Regarding] reservations for breakfast at Cinderella's castle. I did exactly what you suggested, five days in a row, and was unable to get through to an actual person until after 7:15 each day (although I was connected and put on hold at exactly 7 a.m. each time). Of course, by then, all reservations were gone (this was for the first week in May, not a peak time).

On most days, a couple of hundred calls slam Disney's automated call queuing system within milliseconds of one another. With this call volume, 1/20 of a second or less can make

the difference between getting and not getting a table. As it happens, there are variables beyond your control. When you hit the first digit of a long-distance number, your phone system leaps into action. As you continue entering digits, your phone system is already searching for the best path to the number you're calling. According to federal regulation, a phone system must connect the call to the target number within 20 seconds of your entering the last digit. In practice, most systems make the connection much faster, but your system could be pokey. How fast your call is connected, therefore, depends on your local phone system's connection speed, and even this varies according to traffic volume and available routing paths for individual calls. Distance counts too, although we're talking milliseconds. Thus, it takes just a bit longer for a

call to reach Disney World from Chicago than from Atlanta, and longer yet if you're calling from San Francisco.

 **unofficial TIP**
It's often easier to get through to reservations if you call on Saturday or Sunday. Presumably, folks don't mind calling at the break of dawn if they're up getting ready for work but object to interrupting their beauty rest on weekends.

So, if you're having trouble getting an advance reservation at Cinderella's Royal Table using the strategies outlined earlier, here are our suggestions. Make a test call to ☎ 407-WDW-DINE at 7 a.m. EST a couple of days before you call in earnest. Using a stopwatch or the stopwatch function on your watch, time the interval between entering the last digit of the number and when the phone starts to ring. This exercise will provide a rough approximation of the call connection speed at that time from your area, taking into account both speed

of service and distance. For most of you, the connection interval will be very short. Some of you, however, might discover that your problem in getting through is because of slow service. Either way, factor in the connection interval in timing your call to Disney. Phone traffic is heavier on weekdays than weekends, so if you plan to call reservations on a weekday, conduct your test on a weekday. Finally, don't use a cell phone to make the call. The connection time will usually be slower and certainly less predictable.

Though this is one of the most widely used sections in this guidebook, we're amazed that anyone would go to this much trouble to eat with Cinderella . . . atomic clocks, split-second timing, test calls . . . yikes!

IF YOU CAN'T GET AN ADVANCE RESERVATION If you insist on a meal at Cinderella's but can't get an advance reservation,

go to the restaurant on the day you wish to dine and try for a table as a walk-in. This is a long shot, though possible during the least busy times of year. There's also a fair shot at success on cold or rainy days when there's an above-average probability of no-shows. If you try to walk in, your chances are best during the last hour of serving.

Dinner at Cinderella's is not a character meal, but Cinderella or Snow White sometimes look in (no guarantees). Landing an advance reservation for dinner is a snap. If you're unable to lock up a table for breakfast or lunch, a dinner reservation will at least get your children inside the castle. Even without characters, a meal in the castle costs a bundle, as this Snellville, Georgia, mom points out:

We ate [dinner] at Cinderella's Castle to fulfill my longtime dream. The menu was very limited and expensive. For three people, no appetizers or dessert, the bill was \$100.

And no alcoholic beverages, either. Alcohol isn't served in the Magic Kingdom.

Character Campfire

A campfire sing-along is held nightly at 7 or 8 p.m. (depending on the season) near the Meadow Trading Post and Bike Barn at Fort Wilderness Campground. Chip and Dale lead the songs, and a full-length Disney film follows. The program is free and open to resort guests. For a schedule, call ☎ 407-824-2788.

STROLLERS

STROLLERS ARE AVAILABLE FOR A MODEST daily rental fee at all four major theme parks. If you rent a stroller at the Magic Kingdom and decide to go to Epcot, the Animal Kingdom, or Disney-MGM Studios, turn in your Magic Kingdom stroller and keep your receipt to present at the next park. You'll be issued another stroller without additional charge.

Strollers are a must for infants and toddlers, but we have observed many sharp parents renting strollers for somewhat older children (up to age 5 or so). The stroller prevents parents from having to carry children when they sag and provides a convenient place to carry water and snacks.

unofficial TIP
When you enter a show or board a ride, you must park your stroller, usually in an open area. Bring a cloth or towel to dry it if it rains before you return.

unofficial TIP
 Rental strollers are too large for all infants and many toddlers. If you plan to rent a stroller for your infant or toddler, bring pillows, cushions, or rolled towels to buttress him in.

A family from Tulsa, Oklahoma, recommends springing for a double stroller: *We rent a double for baggage room or in case the older child gets tired of walking.*

If you go to your hotel for a break and intend to return to the park, leave your rental stroller by an attraction near the park entrance, marking it with something personal, such as a bandanna. When you return, your stroller will be waiting.

Bringing your own stroller is permitted.

However, only collapsible strollers are allowed on monorails, parking-lot trams, and buses. Your stroller is unlikely to be stolen, but mark it with your name.

Having her own stroller was indispensable to a Mechanicsville, Virginia, mother of two toddlers:

How I was going to manage to get the kids from the parking lot to the park was a big worry for me before I made the trip. I didn't read anywhere that it was possible to walk to the entrance of the parks instead of taking the tram, so I wasn't sure I could do it.

I found that for me personally, since I have two kids aged 1 and 2, it was easier to walk to the entrance of the park from the parking lot with the kids in [my own] stroller than to take the kids out of the stroller, fold the stroller (while trying to control the two kids and associated gear), load the stroller and the kids onto the tram, etc. . . . No matter where I was parked I could always just walk to the entrance . . . it sometimes took awhile but it was easier for me.

An Oklahoma mom, however, reports a bad experience with bringing her own stroller:

The first time we took our kids we had a large stroller (big mistake). It is so much easier to rent one in the park. The large [personally owned] strollers are nearly impossible to get on the buses and are a hassle at the airport. I remember feeling dread when a bus pulled up that was even semifull of people. People look at you like you have a cage full of live chickens when you drag heavy strollers onto the bus.

STROLLER WARS Sometimes strollers disappear while you're enjoying a ride or show. Disney staff will often rearrange strollers parked outside an attraction. This may be done to tidy up or to clear a walkway. Don't assume your stroller is stolen because it isn't where you left it. It may be neatly arranged a few feet away.

Sometimes, however, strollers are taken by mistake or ripped off by people not wanting to spend time replacing one that's missing. Don't be alarmed if yours disappears. You won't have to buy it, and you'll be issued a new one.

WHEN KIDS *get* LOST

IF ONE OF YOUR CHILDREN GETS SEPARATED from you, don't panic. All things considered, Walt Disney World is about the safest place to get lost we can think of. Disney cast members are trained to watch for seemingly lost kids, and because children become detached from parents so frequently in the theme parks, cast members know exactly what to do.

If you lose a child in the Magic Kingdom, report it to a Disney employee, then check at the Baby Center and at City Hall, where lost-children logs are kept. At Epcot, report the loss, then check at Baby Services near the Odyssey Center. At Disney-MGM Studios, report the situation at the Guest Relations Building at the entrance end of Hollywood Boulevard. At Animal Kingdom, go to the Baby Center in Discovery Island. Paging isn't used, but in an emergency an "all points bulletin" can be issued throughout the park(s) via internal communications. If a Disney employee encounters a lost child, he or she will immediately take the child to the park's guest relations center or its baby-care center.

As comforting as this knowledge is, however, it's nevertheless scary when a child turns up missing. Fortunately, circumstances surrounding a child becoming lost are fairly predictable and, for the most part, preventable.

For starters, consider how much alike children dress, especially in warm climates where shorts and T-shirts are the norm. Throw your children in with 10,000 other kids the same size and suddenly that "cute little outfit" turns into theme-park camouflage. It's also smart to sew a label into each child's shirt that states his or her name, your family name, your hometown, and the name of your hotel. The same thing can be accomplished by writing the information on a strip of masking tape. Hotel security professionals suggest the information be printed in small letters and the tape be affixed to the outside of the child's shirt, five inches

unofficial TIP
We suggest that children younger than age 8 be color-coded by dressing them in "vacation uniforms" with distinctively colored T-shirts or equally eye-catching apparel.

below the armpit. Also, special name tags can be obtained at the major theme parks.

Other than just blending in, children tend to become separated from their parents under remarkably similar circumstances:

1. PREOCCUPIED SOLO PARENT In this situation, the party's only adult is preoccupied with something like buying refreshments, loading the camera, or using the restroom. Junior is there one second and gone the next.

2. THE HIDDEN EXIT Sometimes parents wait on the sidelines while two or more young children experience a ride together. Parents expect the kids to exit in one place and, lo and behold, the youngsters pop out somewhere else. Exits from some attractions are distant from the entrances. Make sure you know exactly where your children will emerge before letting them ride by themselves.

3. AFTER THE SHOW At the end of many shows and rides, a Disney staffer will announce, "Check for personal belongings and take small children by the hand." When dozens, if not hundreds, of people leave an attraction simultaneously, it's surprisingly easy for parents to lose contact with their children unless they have them directly in tow.

4. RESTROOM PROBLEMS Mom tells 6-year-old Tommy, "I'll be sitting on this bench when you come out of the restroom." Three possibilities: One, Tommy exits through a different door and becomes disoriented (Mom may not know there is another door). Two, Mom decides she also will use the restroom, and Tommy emerges to find her gone. Three, Mom pokes around in a shop while keeping an eye on the bench, but misses Tommy when he comes out.

If you can't be with your child in the restroom, make sure there's only one exit. The restroom on a passageway between Frontierland and Adventureland in the Magic Kingdom is the all-time worst for disorienting visitors. Children and adults alike have walked in from the Adventureland side and walked out on the Frontierland side (and vice versa). Adults realize quickly that something is wrong. Young children, however, sometimes fail to recognize the problem. Designate a meeting spot more distinctive than a bench, and be thorough in your instructions: "I'll meet you by this flagpole. If you get out first, stay right here." Have your child repeat the directions back to you.

5. PARADES There are many parades and shows at which the audience stands. Children tend to jockey for a better view.

By moving a little this way and that, the child quickly puts distance between you before either of you notices.

6. MASS MOVEMENTS Be on guard when huge crowds disperse after fireworks or a parade, or at park closing. With 20,000 to 40,000 people at once in an area, it's very easy to get separated from a child or others in your party. Use extra caution after the evening parade and fireworks in the Magic Kingdom, *Fantasmic!* at the Disney-MGM Studios, or *Illuminations* at Epcot. Families should have specific plans for where to meet if they get separated.

7. CHARACTER GREETINGS Activity and confusion are common when the Disney characters appear, and children can slip out of sight. See "Then Some Confusion Happened" (pages 139–140).

8. GETTING LOST AT THE ANIMAL KINGDOM It's especially easy to lose a child at the Animal Kingdom, particularly in the Oasis entryway, on the Maharaja Jungle Trek, and on the Gorilla Falls Exploration Trail. Mom and Dad will stop to observe an animal. Junior stays close for a minute or so, and then, losing patience, wanders to the other side of the exhibit or to a different exhibit.

9. LOST . . . IN THE OZONE More often than you'd think, kids don't realize they're lost. They are so distracted that they sometimes wander around for quite a while before they notice that their whole family has mysteriously disappeared. Fortunately, Disney cast members are trained to look out for kids who have zoned out and will either help them find their family or deposit them at the Lost Child Center. There are times, however, when parents panic during the interval in which these scenarios play out. If you lose a child and he doesn't turn up at the Lost Child Center right away, take a deep breath. He's probably lost in the ozone.

10. TEACH YOUR KIDS WHO THE GOOD GUYS ARE On your very first day in the parks, teach your kids how to recognize a Disney cast member by pointing out the Disney name tags that they all wear. Instruct your children to find someone with such a name tag if they get separated from you.