

PART ONE

PLANNING *before* YOU LEAVE HOME

Visiting Walt Disney World is a bit like childbirth—you never really believe what people tell you, but once you have been through it yourself, you know exactly what they were saying!

—Hilary Wolfe, a mother and
Unofficial Guide reader from Swansea, Wales

GATHERING INFORMATION

IN ADDITION TO THIS GUIDE, we recommend that you obtain the following:

- 1. THE WALT DISNEY TRAVEL COMPANY FLORIDA VACATIONS BROCHURE AND DVD** These cover Walt Disney World in its entirety, list rates for all Disney resort hotels and campgrounds, and describe Disney World package vacations. They're available from most travel agents, by calling the Walt Disney Travel Company at ☎ 407-828-8101 or 407-934-7639, or by visiting www.disneyworld.com. Be prepared to hold. When you get a representative, ask for the DVD vacation planner.
- 2. THE DISNEY CRUISE LINE BROCHURE AND DVD** This brochure provides details on vacation packages that combine a cruise on the Disney Cruise Line with a stay at Disney World. Disney Cruise Line also offers a free DVD that tells all you need to know about Disney cruises and then some. To obtain a copy, call ☎ 800-951-3532 or order at www.disneycruise.com.
- 3. THE UNOFFICIAL GUIDE TO WALT DISNEY WORLD WEB SITE** Our Web site, TouringPlans.com, offers a free online trip organizer, more than 100 different touring plans, and updates on changes at Walt Disney World, among other features. The site is described more fully later in this chapter.
- 4. ORLANDO MAGICARD** If you're considering lodging outside Disney World or if you think you might patronize out-of-the-World attractions and restaurants, obtain an Orlando Magicard, a Vacation Planner, and the *Orlando Official Vacation Guide* (all free) from the Orlando Visitors Center. The Magicard entitles you to discounts for hotels, restaurants, ground transportation, shopping malls, dinner theaters, and non-Disney

theme parks and attractions. The Orlando Magicard can be conveniently downloaded for printing at www.orlandoinfo.com/magicard.

To order the accommodations guide, call ☎ 800-643-9492. For additional information and materials, call ☎ 407-363-5872 weekdays during business hours. Allow four weeks for delivery by mail.

5. **FLORIDA ROOMSAVER GUIDE** Another good source of discounts on lodging, restaurants, and attractions statewide is *Florida RoomSaver*, published by Exit Information Guide. The guide is free, but you pay \$3 for handling (\$5 if shipped to Canada). Call ☎ 352-371-3948, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. EST, or go to www.travelerdiscountguide.com and order online. To order by mail, write to 4205 NW Sixth Street, Gainesville, FL 32609. Similar guides to other states are available at the same number. You can also print hotel coupons free at the www.roomsaver.com Web site.
6. **"CHOOSE KISSIMMEE" GUIDE** This full-color visitors guide is one of the most complete resources available and is of particular interest to those who intend to lodge outside of Disney World, featuring ads for hotels, rental houses, time-shares, and condominiums as well as a directory of attractions, restaurants, special events, and other useful info. For a copy, call the Kissimmee Convention and Visitors Bureau at ☎ 800-327-9159 or 407-944-2400, or view it online at www.floridakiss.com.
7. **GUIDEBOOK FOR GUESTS WITH DISABILITIES** Each park's edition of this publication is available online at the Walt Disney World Web site (www.disneyworld.com).

unofficial TIP

Request information as far in advance as possible, and allow four weeks for delivery. Follow up if you haven't received your materials within six weeks.

PASSPORTER GUIDES

A PERFECT COMPANION to the *Unofficial Guide* is *PassPorter's Walt Disney World 2009 Planner and Organizer* (\$22.95). In addition to being a fine guidebook, the spiral-bound organizer offers all the bells and whistles of a desk organizer, including pockets for tickets, coupons, and receipts, as well as blank daily-itinerary forms. A super resource for anyone with special needs is *PassPorter's Open Mouse for Walt Disney World and the Disney Cruise Line* (\$22.95) by Deb Wills and Debra Martin Koma. The 436-page book covers everything from ADHD to asthma. Both books are available from PassPorter Travel Press at ☎ 877-929-3273 or www.passporter.com.

WALT DISNEY WORLD ON THE WEB

SEARCHING THE INTERNET for Disney information is like navigating an immense maze for a very small piece of cheese: there's a lot of information available, but you may have to wade through list after list until you find the Internet addresses you want and need.

Many individuals maintain elaborate Disney-related Web sites and chat groups, which can provide both correct and incorrect information, depending on who's chatting.

Recommended Web Sites

Unofficial Guide coauthor Len Testa has combed the Web looking for the best Disney sites. Turn the page for his picks.

BEST OFFICIAL THEME-PARK SITE With its recent improvements, we think the official **Universal Studios** site (www.universalorlando.com) has surpassed the official Walt Disney World Web site (www.disneyworld.com) as the most useful theme-park Web site; the official **SeaWorld** Web site (www.seaworld.com) gets an honorable mention. Both sites contains information on ticket options, park hours, attraction height requirements, disabled guest access, and the like. Universal's site is easier to navigate, with information for both parks displayed clearly on a single page and accessible with just a couple of mouse clicks. (Disney's site take at least 12 for basic operating hours, and more if you want to know parade times and showtimes.) While the Disney site is more comprehensive, it's loaded with too much high-tech gimmickry (music clips and animation that start up without asking), causing the pages to load slower than Space Mountain's standby line in July. (Wait—maybe they're just conditioning you!)

BEST GENERAL UNOFFICIAL WALT DISNEY WORLD WEB SITE Deb Wills's **AllEars.net** is the first Web site we recommend to friends who are interested in making a trip to Disney World. It contains information on virtually every hotel, restaurant, and activity in the World. Want to know what a room at a Disney resort looks like before you book one? This site has photos—sometimes for each floor of a resort. The Web site is updated several times per week and includes menus from Disney restaurants, ticketing information, maps, driving directions, and such.

UNOFFICIAL GUIDES WEB SITES The Web site of *The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World* can be found at **TouringPlans.com**. The Web site of the *Unofficial Guides* Travel and Lifestyle Series is at www.theunofficialguides.com.

The Web site for this guide, **TouringPlans.com**, offers quite a few useful features. The most recent addition is the ability for anyone to create and share his or her own customized touring plans, free of charge. You select the attractions, the order in which you want to see them, and your travel dates. We'll display your plan on a park map, with park, parade, and fireworks hours for the day of your visit, along with trivia and hidden Mickeys for the attractions you've chosen; weather predictions for your trip; and such important park information as restroom locations, child-care centers, and more.

If you'd prefer a variation on the *Unofficial Guide's* plans, the Web site offers more than 110 touring plans that don't fit in this book. These plans feature variations for holidays, seniors, Extra Magic Hours, and folks who like to sleep in. Our site also features crowd-level projections for each theme park for every day of the year, plus a free comprehensive online trip planner that allows you to keep track of all your trip details, including packing checklists, flight information, ground transportation, lodging, budgets, and daily activities in each of the parks. Best of all, you can optionally share trip details with family, friends, and others online. For example, your travel agent can update your organizer, and you'll be able to see the new information immediately. When it's time for your trip, you can print the

Important Walt Disney World Addresses

Compliments, Complaints, and Suggestions

Walt Disney World Guest Communications
P. O. Box 10040
Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830-0040

Convention and Banquet Information

Walt Disney World Resort South
P.O. Box 10000
Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830-1000

Merchandise Mail Order (Guest Service Mail Order)

P.O. Box 10070
Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830-0070

Walt Disney World Central Reservations

P.O. Box 10100
Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830-0100

Walt Disney World Educational Programs

P.O. Box 10000
Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830-1000

Walt Disney World Info/Guest Letters/Letters to Mickey Mouse

P.O. Box 10040
Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830-0040

Walt Disney World Ticket Mail Order

P.O. Box 10140
Lake Buena Vista, FL 32830-0140

organizer's pages in any of three different sizes: the pocket size is handy for on-the-go types interested in traveling as light as possible; a standard size fits many off-the-shelf binders as well as the *PassPorter* organizer guides; and the large format is a notebook-sized page for those who prefer more room. Free refills and blank templates for all formats are also available. The online organizer also includes pages for Disneyland.

Much of our Web site's content—including the customized touring plans, the online trip planner, and the Least Expensive Ticket Calculator, described on page 57—is completely free for anyone to use. The online crowd calendar and extra *Unofficial Guide* touring plans are also free to owners of this book (or one of our other Disney World guides) for this edition's year. Simply visit the crowd-calendar page, answer two quick questions about this book, and you're done. Without the current edition of a book, access to the additional touring plans and crowd calendar requires a small subscription fee of less than \$10, which helps keep the site running and costs roughly the same as a sandwich and a drink at Flame Tree Barbecue in Animal Kingdom. Plus, we offer a 45-day money-back guarantee on the Web site—something we don't think Flame Tree can match.

BEST MONEY-SAVING SITE Mary Waring's **MouseSavers.com** is the kind of Web site for which the Internet was invented. It keeps an

updated list of discounts and reservation codes for use at Disney resorts. The codes are separated into categories such as “For the general public” and “For residents of certain states.” Anyone who calls Disney’s central reservations office (☎ 407-W-DISNEY) can use a current code and get the discounted rate. Savings can be considerable—up to 40% in many cases. The site also displays discounts for AAA members and Disney Annual Pass holders, making it easier to determine whether those options make financial sense for your trip. Two often-overlooked site features are the discount codes for rental cars and non-Disney hotels in the area.

OTHER SITES No matter where you travel, do a Web search with the city name and the word *coupon*—for example, “Orlando coupon.” You’ll be surprised how many deals for discounts come up (avoid deals connected to time-shares and coupons that are valid only if you buy something first). Also, at www.squaremouth.com, you’ll find an independent travel-insurance agency with a Web program that lets you compare more than 100 insurance options from a multitude of companies.

BEST DISNEY DISCUSSION BOARDS The best online discussions of all things Disney can be found at www.disboards.com. With tens of thousands of members and millions of posts, these discussion boards are the most active and popular on the Web. For boards that feel more familiar than your neighborhood bar, try disneyecho.emuck.com. Disney visitors from the United Kingdom can say “cheerio” to one another whilst online at www.wdisneyw.com/forums, where tips on transatlantic-airfare discounts, visa requirements, American customs, and more can be found.

BEST INTERNET RADIO STATION We thought our couple-hundred-hour collection of theme-park digital audio was complete until we found www.mouseworldradio.com. Several different radio stations are available (some free, others for a small fee), playing everything from attraction ride scores and hotel background music to old sound clips from Disney-resort TV ads. What makes Mouse World Radio special is that the tracks match what the Disney parks are playing at the time of day you’re listening. So every morning at 8 a.m., you’ll hear essentially the same music that’s currently playing at the Magic Kingdom before it opens, and every night at 9 p.m. you’ll hear *IllumiNations* just as if you were at Epcot. An added bonus: several stations contain lyric-free Disney background music, suitable for listening at work.

BEST PODCAST FOR DISNEY NEWS *Unofficial Guide* coauthor Len Testa cohosts three weekly podcasts (on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) on all things related to Disney World. Free subscriptions are available through iTunes. These shows consistently rank among the top iTunes travel podcasts, drawing more than 20,000 listeners per show. Len’s podcast has covered topics from the best resorts and restaurants for small children to touring plans that show how Kevin Bacon is linked to every attraction in the Magic Kingdom. Noted for its spontaneity (read: lack of preparation) and what Disney geeks consider humor, the show assumes that everyone listening to the show must be doing so as part of some court-mandated community

WDW Phone Numbers

General Information	☎ 407-824-4321
General Information for the Hearing Impaired (TTY)	☎ 407-827-5141
Accommodations/Reservations	☎ 407-W-DISNEY or 407-824-8000
All-Star Movies Resort	☎ 407-939-7000
All-Star Music Resort	☎ 407-939-6000
All-Star Sports Resort	☎ 407-939-5000
AMC Theaters Pleasure Island	☎ 407-298-4488
Animal Kingdom Lodge and Villas	☎ 407-938-3000
Beach Club Resort	☎ 407-934-8000
Blizzard Beach Information	☎ 407-560-3400
BoardWalk Inn Resort	☎ 407-939-5100
Caribbean Beach Resort	☎ 407-934-3400
Celebration Realty Office	☎ 407-566-4663
Centra Care	☎ 407-238-2273
<i>Formosa Gardens</i>	☎ 407-397-7032
<i>Kissimmee</i>	☎ 407-390-1888
<i>Lake Buena Vista</i>	☎ 407-934-2273
<i>Vineland</i>	☎ 407-351-6682
Cirque du Soleil	☎ 407-939-7600
Contemporary Resort	☎ 407-824-1000
Convention Information	☎ 407-828-3200
Coronado Springs Resort	☎ 407-939-1000
Dining Advance Reservations	☎ 407-WDW-DINE (939-3463)
Disabled Guests Special Requests	☎ 407-939-7807
Disney Professional Seminars	☎ 407-824-7997
DisneyQuest	☎ 407-828-4600
Disney's Wide World of Sports	☎ 407-939-4263
Downtown Disney Information	☎ 407-828-3058
Fantasia Gardens Miniature Golf	☎ 407-939-7529
Fort Wilderness Campground	☎ 407-824-2900
Golf Reservations and Information	☎ 407-WDW-GOLF (939-4653)
Grand Floridian Resort & Spa	☎ 407-824-3000
Group Camping	☎ 407-939-7807
Guided-tour Information	☎ 407-WDW-TOUR (939-8687)
Guided VIP Solo Tours	☎ 407-560-4033
House of Blues Tickets and Information	☎ 407-934-2583

WDW Phone Numbers (continued)

Lost and Found for articles lost:

<i>Today at Animal Kingdom</i>	☎ 407-938-2785
<i>Today at Disney's Hollywood Studios</i>	☎ 407-560-3720
<i>Today at Epcot</i>	☎ 407-560-7500
<i>Today at Magic Kingdom</i>	☎ 407-824-4521
<i>Today at Universal Orlando</i>	☎ 407-224-4244
<i>Today at Islands of Adventure</i>	☎ 407-224-4245
Yesterday or before (<i>all Disney parks</i>)	☎ 407-824-4245
Merchandise Guest Services	☎ 407-363-6200
Ocala Chamber of Commerce	☎ 352-629-8051
Old Key West Resort	☎ 407-827-7700
Outdoor Recreation Reservations and Information	☎ 407-WDW-PLAY (939-7529)
Pleasure Island Information	☎ 407-939-2648
Polynesian Resort	☎ 407-824-2000
Pop Century Resort	☎ 407-938-4000
Port Orleans Resort	☎ 407-934-6000
Resort Dining	☎ 407-WDW-DINE (939-3463)

service. Drop the hosts a line and they'll put in a good word with your parole officer. Visit **www.wdwtoday.com** for more details.

BEST DISNEY BLOG John Frost's unofficial Disney blog (**www.the-disneyblog.com**) is witty, concise, and updated continually. Topics cover everything in the Disney universe, from theme parks and movies to the latest rumors. Best of all, you'll find links to other Disney-related sites on the Web to continue your addiction, er, planning.

BEST SITE FOR BREAKING NEWS AND RUMORS We try to check **www.wdwmagic.com** every few days for the latest news and rumors on Disney World. The site is popular with Disney fans and park cast members, who often provide insider information on upcoming attractions and developments. It also features pages dedicated to major rides, parades, and shows in each park, including audio and video. User forums allow you to read and post messages.

BEST THEME-PARK-INSIDER SITE If *The E! True Hollywood Story* ever did an episode on theme-park development, the result would be something like **www.jimhillmedia.com**. Well researched and supplied with limitless insider information, Jim Hill's columns guide you through the internal squabbles, shareholder revolts, budget compromises, and outside competition that made (and make) Walt Disney World what it is.

Saratoga Springs Resort & Spa	☎ 407-827-1100
Security	
Routine	☎ 407-560-7959
Urgent	☎ 407-560-1990
Shades of Green Resort	☎ 407-824-3400
Telecommunication for the Deaf Reservations	☎ 407-939-7670
Tennis Reservations/Lessons	☎ 407-621-1991
Walt Disney Travel Company	☎ 407-828-3232
Walt Disney World Dolphin	☎ 407-934-4000
Walt Disney World Speedway	☎ 407-939-0130
Walt Disney World Swan	☎ 407-934-3000
Walt Disney World Ticket Inquiries	☎ 407-566-4985
Weather Information	☎ 407-827-4545
Wilderness Lodge and Villas Resort	☎ 407-824-3200
Winter Summerland Miniature Golf	☎ 407-560-3000
Wrecker Service	☎ 407-824-0976
Yacht Club Resort	☎ 407-934-7000

BEST TRIVIA SITES Lou Mongello's excellent *Walt Disney World Trivia Book* has an equally good online companion—www.disneyworldtrivia.com—with message boards, Disney theme-park news, and more. Lou hosts live Net chats at his site, usually on Tuesdays. Lou also hosts the *WDW Radio Show* podcast, where his name functions as an all-purpose greeting (“Mongello, everyone!”) and invective (“Oh, Mongello!”) to his fans. Check it out on iTunes and at www.wdwradio.com.

At long last, fans of Steve Barrett's *Hidden Mickey's* book now have an online destination where they can keep updated on the latest tri-circle sightings at www.hiddenmickeysguide.com. Steve also writes the *Hassle-Free Walt Disney World Vacation* guidebook, chock-full of touring plans and Disney advice that he's developed for family and friends over the years. Aside from the *Unofficial Guide*, Steve's probably got the most thorough and thoughtful touring advice around.

BEST ONLINE TOUR In early 2008, Disney teamed up with Google to present a 3-D virtual walk-through of the Orlando theme parks and resorts via Google Earth. While you can't yet go inside the attractions, you do get an unparalleled simulation of the park experience. Visit www.disneyworld.com/3dparks and hope for the day they're able to pipe the smell of the Main Street Bakery to your PC.

BEST ORLANDO WEATHER INFORMATION Printable 15-day forecasts for the Orlando area are available from www.accuweather.com. The site is especially useful in winter and spring, when temperatures can vary dramatically. During summer, the ultraviolet-index forecasts will help you choose between a tube of sunscreen and a keg of it.

BEST SAFETY SITE All children younger than age 6 must be properly restrained when traveling by car in Florida. Check www.buckleupflorida.com to learn about state child-restraint requirements.

BEST WEB SITE FOR ORLANDO TRAFFIC, ROADWORK, AND CONSTRUCTION INFORMATION Visit www.expresswayauthority.com for the latest information on roadwork in the Orlando and Orange County areas. The site also contains detailed maps, directions, and toll-rate information for the most popular tourist destinations.

BEST DRIVING DIRECTIONS The printable directions available at www.mapquest.com are accurate and efficient. We especially like the feature that allows you to get driving directions for the return drive with the click of a button.

There are hundreds of other Disney sites, as well as sites that rate and contrast thrill rides in theme parks in the United States and all over the world. Start with the sites listed previously and follow the links.

Information about Disney World is also available at public libraries, travel agencies, and AAA; also see “Important Walt Disney World Addresses” on page 27.

THIS YEAR'S BUZZ: MAGICAL BEGINNINGS

MAGICAL BEGINNINGS is a marketing campaign designed to attract families with very young children. During the slow period from late August until mid-November, Disney offers Magical Beginnings packages and schedules entertainment such as The Wiggles that appeals to little ones. The program is augmented by materials pointing out toddler-friendly attractions, children's menus, stroller rentals, kiddie pools, play areas, baby-services locations, and in-room babysitting.

WHEN *to* GO *to* WALT DISNEY WORLD

Why do they call it tourist season if we can't shoot them?

—Palatka, Florida, outdoorsman

SELECTING THE TIME OF YEAR FOR YOUR VISIT

WALT DISNEY WORLD IS BUSIEST Christmas Day through New Year's Day. Also extremely busy are Thanksgiving weekend, the week of Washington's birthday, the first full week of November, spring break for colleges, and the two weeks around Easter. On just a single day in these peak times, as many as 92,000 people have toured the Magic Kingdom! While this level of attendance isn't typical, only those who absolutely cannot go at any other time should challenge the parks at their peak.

The least busy time is the week after Thanksgiving until the week before Christmas. Next slowest are the second full week of November through the weekend preceding Thanksgiving, September (after Labor Day) and October, January 4 through the first week of February (except the Martin Luther King holiday weekend), and the week after Easter through early June. Late February, March, and early April are dicey. Crowds ebb and flow according to spring-break schedules and the timing of Presidents' Day weekend. Though crowds have grown in September and October as a result of promotions aimed at locals and the international market, these months continue to be good for weekday touring at the Magic Kingdom, Disney's Hollywood Studios, and Animal Kingdom, and for weekend visits to Epcot.

unofficial TIP

You can't pick a less crowded time to visit Walt Disney World than the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The Downside of Off-season Touring

Though we strongly recommend going to Disney World in the fall, winter, or spring, there are a few trade-offs. The parks often open late and close early during off-season. When they open as late as 9 a.m., everyone arrives at about the same time. A late opening coupled with an early closing drastically reduces touring hours. Even when crowds are small, it's difficult to see big parks such as the Magic Kingdom between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. Early closing (before 8 p.m.) also usually means no evening parades or fireworks. And because these are slow times, some rides and attractions may be closed. Finally, central Florida temperatures fluctuate wildly during late fall, winter, and early spring; day-time highs in the 40s and 50s aren't uncommon.

Given the choice, however, smaller crowds, bargain prices, and stress-free touring are worth risking cold weather or closed attractions. Touring in fall and other "off" periods is so much easier that our research team, at the risk of being blasphemous, would advise taking children out of school for a Disney World visit.

Most readers who have tried Disney World at various times agree. A gentleman from Ottawa, Ontario, who toured in early December, writes:

It was the most enjoyable trip [to Walt Disney World] I have ever had, and I can't imagine going [back] to Disney World when it is crowded. Even without the crowds, we were still very tired by afternoon. We will never go again at any other time.

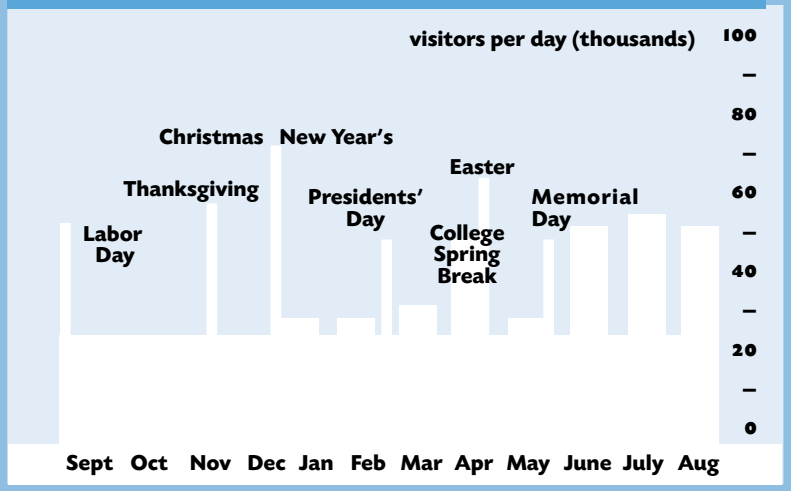
A father of two from Reynoldsburg, Ohio, offers this opinion:

Taking your kids out of school. Is it worth it? Yes! It used to be true that missing a week of school would place your child so far behind it could take months for him/her to regain that lost week. Not so today. With advance preparations and informing the teachers months before our departure, this was no problem. With less than an hour of homework after dinner, our kids went back to school with assignments completed and no makeup work. But it was all those other hours with no lines and no heat that were the real payoff.

unofficial TIP

In our opinion, the risk of encountering colder weather and closed attractions during an off-season visit to Walt Disney World is worth it.

Annual Attendance Patterns at the Magic Kingdom



There is another side to this story, and we have received some well-considered letters from parents and teachers who don't think taking kids out of school is such a hot idea. From a father in Fairfax, Virginia:

My wife and I are disappointed that you seem to be encouraging families to take their children out of school to avoid the crowds at WDW during the summer months. My wife is an eighth-grade science teacher of chemistry and physics. She has parents pull their children, some honor-roll students, out of school for vacations, only to discover when they return that the students are unable to comprehend the material. Parental suspicions [about] the quality of their children's education should be raised when children go to school for six hours a day yet supposedly can complete this same instruction with "less than an hour of homework" each night.

Likewise, a teacher from Louisville, Kentucky, didn't mince words:

Teachers absolutely hate it when a kid misses school for a week, because (a) parents expect a neat little educational packet to take with them as if every minute can be planned—not practicable; (b) when the kid returns he is going to be behind, and it is difficult to make up classroom instruction.

If a parent bothers to ask my opinion, I tell them bluntly it's their choice. If the student's grades go down, they have to accept that as part of their family decision. I have a student out this entire week, skiing in Colorado. There's no way she can make up some of the class activities (and that's exactly what I told her mom).

A Martinez, California, teacher offers this compelling analogy:

There are a precious 180 days for us as teachers to instruct our students, and there are 185 days during the year for Disney World. I have seen countless students during my 14 years of teaching struggle to catch up

the rest of the year due to a week of vacation during critical instructional periods.

The analogy I use with my students' parents is that it is like walking out of a movie after watching the first five minutes, then returning for the last five minutes and trying to figure out what happened. That is what the students experience when they leave at the beginning of units of study to go to Disney World and return a week later.

BE UNCONVENTIONAL The Orange County Convention Center in Orlando hosts some of the largest conventions and trade shows in the world. Rooms anywhere near Walt Disney World are hard to find when there's a big convention, and as this Toronto, Ontario, reader points out, are also expensive:

If saving money on accommodations is an important part of your trip, be sure to check rates on the Net before you settle on a date. Trade shows at the Orange County Convention Center can host over 100,000 attendees, with most of them staying one to a room. This drives rates on even average properties to two or three times [normal] rates. Since all large conventions are scheduled over one year out, these spikes in room rates should be visible up to 12 months prior.

You can check the convention schedule at the Orlando Orange County Convention Center for the next seven months at www.occ.net/global/calendar.

DON'T FORGET AUGUST Kids go back to school pretty early in Florida (and in a lot of other places, too). This makes mid- to late August a good time to visit Walt Disney World for families who can't vacation during the off-season. A New Jersey mother of two school-age children spells it out:

The end of August is the PERFECT [reader's emphasis] time to go (just watch out for hurricanes, it's the season). There were virtually no wait times, 20 minutes at the most.

A mom from Rapid City, South Dakota, agrees:

School starts very early in Florida, so our mid-August visit was great for crowds, but not for heat.

And from a family from Roxbury, New Jersey:

I recommend the last two weeks of August for anyone traveling there during the summer. We have visited twice during this time of year and have had great success touring the parks.

HIGH-LOW, HIGH-LOW, IT'S OFF TO DISNEY WE GO Though we recommend off-season touring, we realize that it's not possible for many families. We want to make it clear, therefore, that you can have a wonderful experience regardless of when you go. Our advice, irrespective of season, is to arrive early at the parks and avoid the crowds by using one of our touring plans. If attendance is light, kick back and forget the touring plans.

unofficial TIP

Instead of taking the kids out of school, consider scheduling your Disney World trip immediately following the last week of school in the spring or during the week prior to school starting in the fall. The crowds will be well below summer peak. Obviously, this strategy will require some advance planning and organization, but the payoff is well worth the effort.

TOP TEN AMERICAN THEME PARKS

THEME PARK	ANNUAL ATTENDANCE	AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDANCE
Magic Kingdom	16.2 million	44,384
Disneyland	14.6 million	40,000
Epcot	9.9 million	27,123
Disney's Hollywood Studios	8.7 million	23,836
Animal Kingdom	8.2 million	22,466
Universal Studios Orlando	6.1 million	15,172
Islands of Adventure	5.8 million	15,890
Disney's California Adventure	5.8 million	15,890
SeaWorld	5.6 million	15,310
Universal Studios Hollywood	4.7 million	12,877

Source: *Amusement Business* magazine

WE'VE GOT WEATHER! Long before Walt Disney World, tourists visited Florida year-round to enjoy the temperate tropical and subtropical climates. The best weather months generally are October, November, March, and April. Fall is usually dry, whereas spring is wetter. December, January, and February vary, with average highs of 72°F to 73°F intermixed with highs in the 50°F-to-65°F range. May is hot but tolerable. June, July, August, and September are the warmest months. Rain is possible anytime, usually in the form of scattered thunderstorms. An entire day of rain is unusual.

CROWD CONDITIONS AND THE BEST AND WORST PARKS TO VISIT FOR EACH DAY OF THE YEAR Each year we receive more than 1,000 e-mails and letters inquiring about crowd conditions on specific dates throughout the year. Readers also want to know which park is best to visit on each day of their stay. To make things easier for you (and us!), on our Web site, **TouringPlans.com**, we provide a free calendar covering the last half of 2008 and all of 2009. For each date, we offer a crowd-level index based on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being least crowded and 10 being most crowded. Our calendar takes into account all holidays, special events, and more, as described below. The same calendar lists the best and worst park(s) to visit in terms of crowd conditions on any given day. All you have to do is look up the days of your intended visit on the calendar.

HOW WE DETERMINE CROWD LEVELS AND BEST DAYS A number of factors contribute to the models we use to predict both crowd levels and the best days to visit each theme park.

Data we use to predict crowd levels:

- Historical park hours from the same time period in previous years
- Disney's special-events calendar (for example, Grad Nights and Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party)
- Legal holidays in the United States
- Public-school schedules (including spring-break schedules for the

Walt Disney World Climate

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Average Daily Low (F°)											
49°	50°	55°	60°	66°	71°	73°	73°	73°	65°	57°	51°
Average Daily High (F°)											
72°	73°	78°	84°	88°	91°	92°	92°	90°	84°	78°	73°
Average Daily Temperature (F°)											
61°	62°	67°	72°	77°	81°	82°	82°	82°	75°	68°	62°
Average Daily-humidity Percentages											
74	71	71	69	72	77	79	80	80	77	76	76
Average Rainfall per Month (Inches)											
2.1	0.8	3.2	2.2	3.9	7.4	7.8	6.3	5.6	2.8	1.8	1.9
Number of Days of Rain per Month											
6	7	8	6	9	14	17	16	14	9	6	6

50 largest public-school districts east of the Mississippi, plus Massachusetts and Connecticut)

- Weekly historical occupancy rates for Orlando-area hotels
- Central Florida tourism demographics

Historical park hours include the actual operating hours for all of the past five years. Special events include everything from official Disney-sanctioned events such as Grad Nights and Super Soap Weekend to such independent events as Gay Days. Our hotel data contains weekly occupancy rates for seven different areas within the Orlando market, including the key Disney-area hotels located in Lake Buena Vista, in the greater International Drive area, in Kissimmee, and along US 192 (Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway). Our central-Florida tourism demographics cover everything from where Orlando visitors come from and how long they stay, to how many people make up each party and which theme parks they visit.

Data we use to determine the best days for each park:

- Actual wait-time statistics gathered in the parks
- Our own surveys of Disney guests' touring habits
- Disney's Extra Magic Hours schedule
- Special events calendars
- U.S. legal holidays
- Outside sources (such as the U.S. Department of Transportation and *Consumer Reports*)

SOME EXCEPTIONS You'll occasionally see a particular recommendation in the calendar that contradicts general advice given in this guide. As an example, the *Unofficial Guide* recommends, as a rule of thumb, to avoid any park on its Extra Magic Hour days. But we recommend Epcot on the Tuesday before Christmas, even though Tuesday is typically Epcot's

morning Extra Magic Hour day. Why? Because Epcot is the best park to be in when crowds are large, as they are around Christmas. The effect of additional crowds from Epcot's morning Extra Magic Hours pales in comparison to the effect of holiday crowds in the other parks, especially the Magic Kingdom. In this case, Epcot is not so much a "good" choice as it is the proverbial lesser evil.

Likewise, we'll occasionally recommend the Magic Kingdom on a Thursday or Monday, especially during the slower months, even if there's a special event like Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party scheduled there. This is because we're trying to recommend each park at least once in any seven-day period so that families taking a week-long vacation can be sure to visit each park on at least one day. When all the other rules used don't fulfill this requirement, we're forced to make another of those lesser evil recommendations.

EXTRA MAGIC HOURS

EXTRA MAGIC HOURS is a perk for families staying at a Walt Disney World resort, including the Swan, Dolphin, and Shades of Green, and the Hilton in the Downtown Disney resort area. On selected days of the week, Disney-resort guests will be able to enter a Disney theme park one hour earlier, or stay in a selected theme park up to three hours later than the official park-operating hours. Theme park visitors not staying at a Disney resort may stay in the park for Extra Magic Hour evenings, but cannot experience any rides, attractions, or shows. In other words, they can shop and eat.

Because Extra Magic Hours figure so prominently in our Crowd-level Calendar calculations, and because Disney is constantly rearranging the Extra Magic Hours schedule for each theme park, we have been forced to withdraw the calendar from the guidebook. Fortunately we can make daily changes to our Crowd-level Calendar on our Web site, **Touring Plans.com**, and thus keep the calendar totally updated for you.

We should also mention that the swimming theme parks, Typhoon Lagoon and Blizzard Beach, also offer Extra Magic Hours.

WHAT'S REQUIRED? A valid admission ticket is required to enter the park, and you must show your Disney Resort ID when entering. For evening Extra Magic Hours, you can pick up a wristband inside the park starting two hours before park closing if you want to experience any of the rides or attractions, or just show up at the park turnstiles at any time after evening Extra Magic Hours begin.

WHEN ARE EXTRA MAGIC HOURS OFFERED? The regular Extra Magic Hours schedule is subject to constant change, especially during holidays and other periods of peak attendance. Gone are the days when you could be certain which park was running Extra Magic Hours.

You can phone Walt Disney World Information at ☎ 407-824-4321 or 407-939-6244 (press 0 for a live representative) or visit **disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/common/helpFAQ?id=HelpFAQThemeParkPage**, an

 **unofficial TIP**
You'll need to have a Park Hopper option on your admission ticket to take advantage of the Extra Magic Hours at more than one theme park on the same day.

FAQ page, to check the schedule for the dates of your visit. Scroll down to the question “When are the Extra Magic Hours at each theme park?” The answer will provide the Extra Magic Hours schedule for the current month. The same information, along with tips for avoiding crowds, is available at our Web site, **TouringPlans.com**.

We seriously hope that Disney will adopt a permanent schedule, but if it does not, use the information available from Walt Disney World Information to discover any schedule changes that might affect you. To avoid the most crowded park, simply steer clear of the one(s) offering Extra Magic Hours, or access TouringPlans.com for guidance.

WHAT DO EXTRA MAGIC HOURS MEAN TO YOU? Crowds are likely to be larger when the theme parks host an Extra Magic Hours session. If you’re not staying at a Disney resort, the *Unofficial Guide* suggests avoiding the park hosting Extra Magic Hours, if at all possible.

If you’re staying at a Disney resort, there are a couple of strategies you can employ to cut down on your wait in lines. One strategy is to avoid the park hosting Extra Magic Hours entirely, if possible.

If you can be at the park when it opens, a second strategy would be to visit the park offering a morning Extra Magic Hours session until lunchtime, then visit another, less-crowded park in the afternoon. This strategy would allow you to take advantage of smaller morning crowds to visit the headliner attractions in one park, then take a slower, more relaxed tour of another park in the afternoon. For example, you might visit the Magic Kingdom Thursday morning, seeing as much of Tomorrowland or Fantasyland as possible during Extra Magic Hours, then visit the rest of the park until lunch. Before the Magic Kingdom crowds peaked in the early afternoon, you’d leave for Epcot and spend the rest of the day there.

Consider two things if choosing between morning or evening Extra Magic Hours sessions: first, whether your family functions better getting up early or staying up late, and second, the time at which the parks close to day guests. If you can handle those early mornings, you’ll find shorter lines during morning Extra Magic Hours. Evening Extra Magic Hours are most useful when the crowds are low and the parks close relatively early to the general public, so your family doesn’t have to stay up past midnight to take advantage of the perk.

EARLY ENTRY (AKA MORNING EXTRA MAGIC HOURS)

THE EARLY-ENTRY PROGRAM APPLIES to the Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Animal Kingdom, Disney’s Hollywood Studios, Blizzard Beach, and Typhoon Lagoon Water Park. Several days of the week, Disney-resort guests are invited to enter a designated theme park one hour before the general public. During the early-entry hour, guests can enjoy attractions opened early just for them.

unofficial TIP
Extra Magic Hours draw more Disney-resort guests to the host park, which results in longer lines than you would otherwise experience.

unofficial TIP
Whatever edge resort guests gain by taking advantage of early entry is offset by horrendous crowds later in the day. During busier times of year, regardless of your hotel, avoid any park on the day it’s scheduled for early entry.

TYPICAL EXTRA MAGIC HOURS SCHEDULE (*frequently varies*)

Morning						
MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
Animal Kingdom	Epcot	—	Magic Kingdom	—	DHS	—
Evening						
MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
DHS	—	Animal Kingdom	—	Epcot	—	Magic Kingdom

How Early Entry Affects Attendance at the Theme Parks

Early entry strongly affects attendance at the theme parks, especially during busier times of year. Vast numbers of Disney-resort guests tour whichever park is designated for early entry. If the Magic Kingdom is tapped for early entry on Thursday, for example, it'll be more crowded that day, while Epcot, Animal Kingdom, and Disney's Hollywood Studios will be less crowded. Epcot, Animal Kingdom, and Disney's Hollywood Studios will be more crowded when those parks are slated for early entry.

During holiday periods and summer, when Disney hotels are full, early entry makes a tremendous difference in crowds at the designated park. The program funnels so many people into the early-entry park that it fills by about 10 a.m. and is practically gridlocked by noon.

If you elect to use your early-entry privileges, be among the first early entrants. A mother of three from Lee Summit, Missouri, writes:

Our first full day at WDW, we went to the Magic Kingdom on an early-entry day for resort guests. We were there at 7:30 a.m. and were able to walk onto all the rides in Fantasyland with no wait. At 8:45 a.m. we positioned ourselves at the Adventureland rope and ran toward Splash Mountain when the rope dropped. We were able to ride Splash Mountain with no wait (switching off), and then Big Thunder with about a 15-minute wait (switching off). We then went straight to the Jungle Cruise and the wait was already 30 minutes, so we skipped it. The park became incredibly crowded as the day progressed, and we were all exhausted from getting up so early to get there for early entry. We left the park around noon. After that day, I resolved to avoid early-entry days and instead be at a non-early-entry park about a half hour before official opening time. This worked much better for us.

This note from a North Bend, Washington, dad emphasizes the importance of arriving at the beginning of the early-entry period.

We only used early entry once—to [Disney's Hollywood Studios]. We got there 20 minutes after early entry opened, and the wait for Tower of Terror was already one-and-a-half hours long [without FASTPASS]. We skipped it.

A Dallas mother of two had a similar experience:

The crowds were generally OK, but we did not follow your advice to avoid the morning Extra Magic Hours park. We went to the Magic

Kingdom and it was wall-to-wall people, even at opening. . . . EVERYBODY from EVERY DISNEY HOTEL was there, it seemed. We started to go to Animal Kingdom for Extra Magic Hours one morning, got to the bus stop, then changed our plans and went to [Disney's Hollywood Studios]. It was nearly empty, and we completed our tour in almost half a day. . . . The morning Extra Magic Hours weren't a big deal the first year because the crowds were so light, but this year we learned the hard way.

A Louisville, Kentucky, family concurs:

We attended all of the morning EMHs that week, looking at the crowd levels projected by the Unofficial Guide and thinking that EMHs would be lightly attended. Big mistake. The headline attractions at each park (Space Mountain, Soarin', Expedition Everest, and Tower of Terror) had long lines almost from the beginning. We got much more accomplished in the mornings at parks that weren't holding morning EMHs. No more EMHs for us.

A woman from Ann Arbor, Michigan, who is clearly working overtime trying to figure all this stuff out, says:

We are starting to think that reverse–reverse psychology might work: Disney opens one park earlier for all their guests, so all the guests go to that park, but then everyone buys your book in which you tell them not to go to that park because all Disney guests are there, so no one goes to that park; therefore we can go to that park because people think it is going to be packed and they avoid it. What do you think?

Early Entry and Park Hopping

An alternative strategy for Disney-resort guests is to take advantage of early entry, but only until the designated park gets crowded. At that time, move to another park. This plan works particularly well at the Magic Kingdom for families with young children who love the attractions in Fantasyland. However, it will take you about an hour to commute to the second park of the day. If, for example, you depart the Magic Kingdom for the Disney's Hollywood Studios at 10 a.m., you'll find the Studios pretty crowded when you arrive at about 11 a.m. Keeping these and other considerations in mind, here are some guidelines:

1. Use the early-entry–park-hopping strategy during the less busy times of year when the parks close early. You'll get a jump on the general public and add an hour to what, in the off-season, is an already short touring day.
2. Use the early-entry–park-hopping strategy to complete touring a second park that you've already visited on a previous day, or specifically to see live entertainment in the second park.

A Providence, Rhode Island, reader found early admission an advantage:

During the off-season, the early admission was great. Only on Saturday did the crowd get so large that there were lines and bottlenecks. The mother behind me at Dumbo told me that they had waited three hours to ride Dumbo during their last visit to WDW.

She took advantage of early admission to let her kid ride three times in a row with no waiting.

Never hop to Animal Kingdom—it is almost always the first park to close each evening, so arriving later than 2 p.m. for the handful of remaining hours is not generally a good use of time, plus it will be too crowded by the time you arrive.

On any day except the park's Extra Magic Hours days, hopping to Epcot is usually good. Epcot is able to handle large crowds better than any other Disney park, minimizing the effects of a midday arrival. Also, World Showcase has a large selection of interesting dining options, making it a good choice for evening touring.

Don't hop to the park with early entry (Extra Magic Hours). The idea is to avoid crowds, not join them.

Limit your hopping to two parks per day. Hopping to a third park in one day would result in more time spent commuting than saved by avoiding crowds.

Nighttime Version of Extra Magic Hours

The nighttime Extra Magic Hours program allows Disney-resort guests to enjoy a different theme park on specified nights for up to three hours after it closes to the general public. Guests pay no additional charge to participate. Two hours before the park closes, eligible guests obtain an after-hours wristband by having their Resort ID card scanned. Inquire at park Guest Relations for the locations of the four or five wristband distribution centers. You can also show up at the turnstiles at any point after evening Extra Magic Hours have started. Note that if you've been in another park that day, you'll need the Park Hopping feature on your admission ticket to enter.

Evening Extra Magic Hours now approach morning Extra Magic Hours in terms of crowd levels. A mom from Fairhaven, Massachusetts, doesn't mince words:

I say steer clear of a park that is open late. There are only a few attractions open and tons of people trying to get on them. It was a nightmare trying to get around!

A New Hampshire reader agrees:

I do think you should put in big, bold letters to avoid EMH days at parks. I know they're on the Web sites and they're mentioned in the book, but that was the biggest thing we noticed. Epcot the day after Memorial Day was worse than the Magic Kingdom on the same day, just because it was an EMH night.

And a Parma, Ohio, family of four chimes in with this:

There are two important things for everyone to know: never go to the park offering early admission for resort guests, and never go to the Magic Kingdom when the late-night Extra Magic Hours are offered. The only unmanageable crowds we encountered were on Friday night during Extra Magic Hours. Instead, we typically arrived at a non-early-entry park at 8:45 a.m. and always stayed ahead of the crowds.

We never stayed in a park past 3 p.m., always returning to our resort for a quick refresher before hopping to another park in the evening.

Animal Kingdom, with its shorter operating hours, is somewhat problematic, especially for evening Extra Magic Hours, as a Sydney, Australia, couple explains:

Animal Kingdom was an amazing place to visit—we were there for the Extra Magic Hours but were disappointed that most of the attractions close early, so there seems to be little point in having extended hours. Disney really needs to advertise this fact so that patrons will not miss out on most [Animal Kingdom] attractions by coming for the evening.

Another disadvantage to evening Extra Magic Hours at Animal Kingdom is the animals' bedtimes—most hit the hay (pun intended) at dusk.

More attractions operate during the extended evening period than during the early-entry hour in the morning. Certain fast-food and full-service restaurants remain open as well. The program is presumably in response to perks extended to Universal Orlando hotel guests that allow them to go to the front of the line at any Universal attraction. Disney has thus far maintained a level playing field, rejecting programs that extend line-breaking privileges to resort guests.


SUMMER AND HOLIDAYS

A READER FROM COLUMBUS, OHIO, once observed, “The main thing I learned from your book is not to go during the summer or at holiday times. Once you know that, you don’t need a guidebook.”

While we might argue with the reader’s conclusion, we agree that avoiding summer and holidays is a wise strategy. That said, we also understand that many folks have no choice concerning the time of year they visit Disney World. Much of this book, in fact, is dedicated to making sure those readers who visit during busier times enjoy their experience. Sure, off-season touring is preferable, but, armed with knowledge and some strategy, you can have a great time whenever you visit.

To put things in perspective, early summer (up to about June 15) and late summer (after August 15) aren’t nearly as crowded as the intervening period. And even midsummer crowds pale in comparison to the hordes during holiday periods. If you visit in midsummer or during a holiday, the first thing you need to know is that the theme parks’ guest capacity is not infinite. In fact, once a park reaches capacity, only Disney-resort guests arriving via the Disney transportation system are allowed to enter. If you aren’t a Disney resort guest, you may find yourself in a situation similar to this Boise, Idaho, dad’s:

This is the worst of it. The Magic Kingdom and [Disney’s Hollywood Studios] were so full they closed the parks. For three days we could not

 **unofficial TIP**
If it’s not your first trip to Walt Disney World and you must go during a crowded holiday weekend, you may have just as much fun enjoying Disney’s fantastic array of shows, parades, fireworks, and more as you would riding the rides.

enter those parks, so we were forced to go to Epcot and use up two days of our four-day pass. We decided to pay for another night at our hotel to see if the crowds would let up, but no luck. All we could do was just drive around Orlando and sightsee.

We hasten to point out that this reader would have had no difficulty gaining admission to the parks of his choice had he committed to being at the turnstiles 35 to 60 minutes before official opening time.

Packed-parks Compensation Plan

The thought of teeming throngs jockeying for position in endless lines under the baking Fourth of July sun is enough to wilt the will and ears of the most ardent Mouseketeer. Disney, however, feeling bad about those long lines and challenging touring conditions on packed holidays, compensates patrons with a no-less-than-incredible array of first-rate live entertainment and events.

Shows, parades, concerts, and pageantry continue throughout the day. In the evening, so much is going on that you have to make tough choices. Concerts, parades, light shows, laser shows, fireworks, and dance productions occur almost continually. No question about it: you can go to Walt Disney World on the Fourth of July (or any crowded extended-hours day), never get on a ride, and still have a good time. Admittedly, the situation isn't ideal for a first-timer who wants to experience the attractions, but for anyone else it's a great party.

Disney provides colorful decorations for most holidays, plus special parades and live entertainment for Christmas, New Year's, Easter, and Fourth of July, among others. Regarding Christmas, we advise visiting in early December when you can enjoy the decorations and festivities without the crowds. If you must tour during the holidays and New Year's, skip the Magic Kingdom; consider visiting Epcot or Disney's Hollywood Studios instead.

If you visit on a nonholiday midsummer day, arrive at the turnstile 30 minutes before the stated opening on a non-early-entry day. If you visit during a major holiday period, arrive 60 minutes before. Hit your favorite rides early using one of our touring plans, then go back to your hotel for lunch, a swim, and perhaps a nap. If you're interested in the special parades and shows, return to the park in late afternoon or early evening. Assume that unless you use FASTPASS, early morning will be the only time you can experience the attractions without long waits. Finally, don't wait until the last minute in the evening to leave the park. The exodus at closing is truly mind-boggling.

Epcot is usually the least crowded park during holiday periods. Expect the other parks to be mobbed. To save time in the morning, buy your admission in advance. Also, consider bringing your own stroller or wheelchair instead of renting one of Disney's. If you're touring Epcot or the Magic Kingdom and plan to spend the day, try exiting the park for lunch at a nearby resort hotel. Above all, bring your sense of humor, and pay attention to your group's morale. Bail out when touring is more work than fun.

THE DISNEY CALENDAR

WALT DISNEY WORLD MARATHON Usually held the second weekend after New Year's, the marathon pulls in about 20,000 runners and their families, enough people to affect crowd conditions in the parks. It also disrupts vehicular and pedestrian traffic throughout Disney World. The event will expand to four days in 2009 with the addition of kids' races and a health-and-fitness expo.

MICKEY'S PIRATE AND PRINCESS PARTY This bash takes place in the Magic Kingdom on select evenings from mid-January to early June, and mid-August to early September. The special-ticket event that begins following park closing features a pirate-and-princess-themed fireworks show and parade, and a "quest" for beads and candy. Kids are encouraged to come dressed as their favorite pirate or princess. Advance tickets with tax (about \$47 for adults and \$40 for children ages 3 to 9) are available by calling ☎ 407-WDW-AHOY (939-2469) or visiting www.disneyworld.com.

MARDI GRAS A Mardi Gras party is held at Pleasure Island from the Friday before Mardi Gras through Fat Tuesday itself. The area is mobbed, but the rest of the World is largely unaffected.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH Black History Month is celebrated throughout Walt Disney World in February with displays, artisans, storytellers, and entertainers. There is no extra charge for the activities, and the celebration's effect on crowd levels is negligible.

ATLANTA BRAVES SPRING TRAINING The Braves hold spring training and play a number of exhibition games at Disney's Wide World of Sports from mid-February through March. You can obtain the exhibition schedule and purchase tickets by calling ☎ 407-839-3900. You can watch the training sessions at no charge when you buy general admission to Wide World of Sports (\$11.75 adults, \$9 under age 13).

EPCOT INTERNATIONAL FLOWER & GARDEN FESTIVAL Held annually from mid-March to early June. Expert horticulturists showcase exotic floral displays, share gardening tips, and demonstrate techniques for planting, cultivating, and pest control. The 20 million blooms from some 1,200 species will make your eyes pop, and, best of all, the event doesn't seem to affect crowd levels at Epcot.

GAY DAYS Since 1991, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) people from around the world have converged on and around the World in early June for a week of events centered around the theme parks. Today, Gay Days attracts more than 135,000 GLBT visitors and their families and friends. Universal Studios, SeaWorld, and Busch Gardens also participate. For additional information, visit www.gaydays.com.

TOM JOYNER FAMILY REUNION Radio personality Tom Joyner hosts an extremely popular party at Walt Disney World. Usually held during Labor Day weekend, the Reunion typically features live musical performances, comedy acts, and family-oriented discussions. For more information, visit www.blackamericaweb.com.

NIGHT OF JOY This is a Christian-music festival staged at Disney's Hollywood Studios, usually on the second weekend in September. About 16 nationally known acts perform concerts on Friday and Saturday evenings after the park has closed. Cost with tax is about \$48 for one night and \$81 for both nights. Tickets sold on the day of the event (if available) go for about \$53 with tax. For information or to purchase tickets, call ☎ 407-W-DISNEY or visit www.disneyworld.com/nightofjoy.

EPCOT INTERNATIONAL FOOD & WINE FESTIVAL From late September through mid-November, about 30 nations trot out their most famous cuisine, wine, and entertainment. Held in the World Showcase, the celebration includes demonstrations, wine seminars, tastings, and opportunities to see some of the world's top chefs. Although many activities are included in Epcot admission, the best workshops and tastings are by reservation only and cost extra. Call ☎ 407-WDW-DINE well in advance for more information. Crowd conditions at Epcot are affected only slightly.

MICKEY'S NOT-SO-SCARY HALLOWEEN PARTY Held each year two dozen or so nights before Halloween, plus Halloween night, the party runs from 7 p.m. to midnight at the Magic Kingdom. The event includes trick-or-treating in costume, parades, live music, storytelling, and a fireworks show. Aimed primarily at younger children, the party is happy and upbeat rather than spooky and scary. Admission is about \$42 for adults and \$35 for ages 3 to 9 if purchased in advance. Tickets at the gate (assuming they're available) run \$49 for adults and \$43 for children. For reservations and details, call ☎ 407-W-DISNEY. Teens and young adults looking for a Halloween happening should check out parties at Disney's Hollywood Studios, Pleasure Island, Universal CityWalk, and at the Universal theme parks.

A woman from Nokomis, Florida, reports that crowds were the only scary thing at the Not-So-Scary Halloween Party:

I've been to Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party twice, and both times it has been an overcrowded nightmare! Don't even bother to try and ride anything.

Another reader chose a date well in advance of Halloween and had a totally different experience:

We did Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party. Yeah, advance tickets cost about \$40 each, but we ended up with about six pounds of candy and there were virtually no lines at any ride. It was worth it.

A mother from Kissimmee, Florida, writes:

For me, the festive nature of the [Not-So-Scary Halloween] Party makes up for the crowds. I love seeing all the kids and characters.

The partying and entertainment are what make Disney Halloween and Christmas events special. These celebrations aren't a good choice if your primary agenda is to experience the attractions.

MOUSEFEST Usually held in mid-December, MouseFest is a meeting of hundreds of Disney theme-park fans, unofficial Disney Web site owners, and guidebook authors (including us). Dozens of activities

are offered, from trivia contests to guided walks through the theme parks. Visit www.mousefest.org for more details.

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S AT THE THEME PARKS Don't expect to see all the attractions in a single day of touring at any park. Skip the Magic Kingdom, if possible, if you tour the week between Christmas and New Year's. We love the Magic Kingdom. Really. But that love is tempered by the fact that women will have to wait up to 20 minutes to use the restrooms during this week.

Epcot, on the other hand, is at its best during the holidays. Touring in the evening will reward you with stunning displays of holiday decorations and slightly smaller crowds than during the day. Exceptional live entertainment abounds, too. The U.S. Pavilion, for example, has two choral groups—easily more than 150 singers total—performing holiday favorites during this week.

Disney's Hollywood Studios is also a good choice for evening touring. Crowds will be larger than normal, but the decorations make up for it. One must-see is the Osborne Family Spectacle of Dancing Lights, featuring a staggering 5 million Christmas lights.

MICKEY'S VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS PARTY This event is staged 7 p.m. to midnight (after regular hours) on several evenings in November and December. Advance tickets cost about \$44 for adults and \$36 for ages 3 to 9; tickets at the gate run about \$51 and \$44, respectively. For dates and prices, call ☎ 407-W-DISNEY. Included in the cost is the use of all attractions during party hours, holiday-themed stage shows featuring Disney characters, cookies and hot chocolate, performances of Mickey's Once Upon a Christmastime Parade, carolers, "a magical snowfall on Main Street," white lights on Cinderella Castle, and fireworks.

A reader from Pineville, Louisiana, tried the Very Merry Christmas Party and found the guest list too large for her liking:

Another thing I will not do again is go to the Very Merry Christmas Party. We went in early December to avoid crowds and were taken by surprise to find wall-to-wall people. They offered some great shows, but we could not get to them. The parade at 9 p.m. and the fireworks at 10 p.m., then fighting our way back to the parking lot, was all we could muster.

Remember: during major holiday periods such as Christmas, many of the festive extras can be enjoyed in the weeks before the actual week in which the holiday occurs.