

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Walt Disney World and Orlando

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Experiencing the best that Orlando has to offer
  - ▶ Finding the city's best hotels
  - ▶ Getting a taste of the best dining in Orlando
  - ▶ Boarding the coolest theme-park rides
  - ▶ Discovering the greatest shows and attractions
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Vacationing in Orlando is like escaping to another time and place, a world of fantasy, a world filled with fun. The city attracts the young and the young at heart from all over the world, all of whom come to experience the theme parks, the world-class resorts, and the area's spectacular natural beauty. It should come as no surprise to you that Orlando is the number-one family vacation destination in the United States, not to mention one of the top vacation destinations in the world. Yes, it gets crowded, and in the summer it's hot and sticky, but one thing you definitely won't ever be is bored. And in this chapter, I offer the best of the best that Orlando and Walt Disney World have to offer.

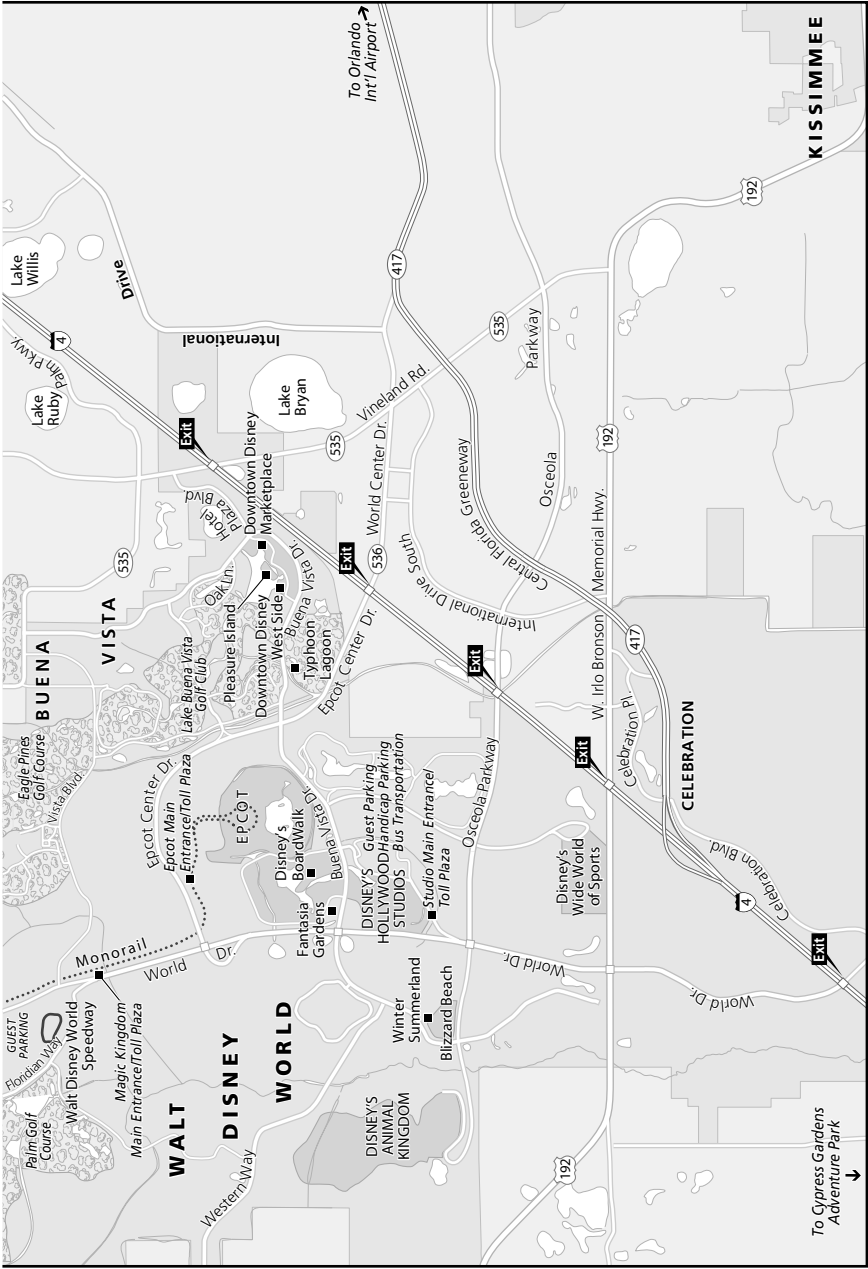


**Note:** With the exception of the items listed in “The Best Orlando Experiences,” I highlight all the hotels, restaurants, and attractions in this chapter with a Best of the Best icon when reviewed in this book.

### *The Best Orlando Experiences*

If images of Cinderella Castle pop into your head at the mention of Orlando, you're not alone. The **Magic Kingdom's** iconic castle and the lovable mouse who started it all are, by far, the most famous of all Disney icons and the reason most folks venture to the Sunshine State in the first place. Keep in mind that although a visit to the Magic Kingdom





is one of the biggest highlights of the Orlando experience, especially for kids, plenty more attractions and experiences await:

- ✔ **Spend a day exploring Disney's Animal Kingdom.** Embark on an undersea adventure at **Finding Nemo—The Musical**, trek through the Himalayas in search of the legendary Yeti on **Expedition Everest—Legend of the Forbidden Mountain**, or make your way by foot through the jungles of Asia for a glimpse of the exotic wildlife that inhabit the park. **Kali River Rapids** will leave you soaked, but that's half the fun. Head out on **Kilimanjaro Safaris** for an expedition through the African savanna or travel back to the time when dinosaurs ruled the Earth. Be sure to catch **Mickey's Jammin' Jungle Parade**, one of the liveliest parades in all of Disney. (Check out Chapter 15 for details about the park.)
- ✔ **Spend a day traveling the world at Epcot.** At Epcot, you can find high-speed thrills aboard **Mission: SPACE** and **Test Track**, a breathtaking experience **Soarin'** over the California landscape, and undersea adventure exploring **The Seas with Nemo & Friends**. Then it's off to tour some of the world's most fascinating countries along the World Showcase. Dance with the **oompah band** in Germany or try to **belly-dance** with the natives in Morocco. (For more details about things to do at Epcot, see Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **Go behind the scenes at Disney's Hollywood Studios.** You can find some of the most intense thrills in all of Disney World here, with both the **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror** and **Rock 'n' Roller Coaster Starring Aerosmith** taking center stage. **Toy Story Mania!**, the park's newest attraction, will test your skill as you play your way through the re-imagined midway. Be sure to take in the spectacular shows, too — this is a studio, after all. Top billing goes to **Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show** and the **Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!** Debuting in 2009, the **American Idol Experience** will allow park-goers a chance to sing their way to stardom. Close out the night with the incredible **Fantasmic!**, an after-dark show that combines a love for all things Disney with the most amazing combination of water and fireworks. (See Chapter 14 for the lowdown on all the park has to offer.)
- ✔ **Test your physical limits at Islands of Adventure.** You can spin; you can fly upside down; you can get wet. And that's all just in the first few minutes in this park. Don't miss the **Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man**; **Dueling Dragons** twin roller coasters; **Jurassic Park River Adventure**; and the big, green **Incredible Hulk Coaster**. If it's really hot out, a good soak on **Popeye & Bluto's Bilge-Rat Barges** is just the thing to refresh you. In late 2009, look for the **Wizarding World of Harry Potter** — including Hogwarts Castle, the village of Hogsmeade, and the Forbidden Forest — to apparate (that's debut, for those not familiar with wizarding lingo). (For information on other adventures awaiting you in the park, see Chapter 19.)

- ✔ **Explore the ocean depths at SeaWorld, Discovery Cove, and Aquatica.** SeaWorld has a few thrill rides — namely, **Journey to Atlantis, Kraken, and Wild Arctic** (with **Manta** on its way later in 2009) — but the real reason to visit these parks is the chance to observe and interact with a wide variety of marine life. Discovery Cove even allows you to swim with a dolphin. If you'd rather slide, ride, and splash the day away, head to Aquatica, the eco-themed water park. (For details on all three parks, see Chapter 20.)
- ✔ **Experience Universal Studios Florida (USF).** Once just a diversion, Universal has turned itself into a true destination. Not-to-be-missed attractions include **Revenge of the Mummy, Terminator 2: 3D Battle Across Time, Men in Black Alien Attack, Fear Factor Live, Shrek 4-D, Disaster!—A Major Motion Picture Ride . . . Starring YOU**, and the new **Simpsons Ride**. In 2009, add **Hollywood Rip, Ride, Rockit** to your to-do list. Call it a night after taking in the **Universal 360—A Cinesphere Spectacular**, when the entire lagoon lights up with pyrotechnics, lasers, and four 360-degree projection cinespheres. (Chapter 18 has info on other cool things to see and do at USF.)
- ✔ **Top off the day with a spectacular nighttime show.** Many of the parks love to close out the day with fireworks or a show-stopping performance. Check out the Magic Kingdom's **Wishes Nighttime Spectacular** or "**SpectroMagic**" Parade, Epcot's **IllumiNations: Reflections of Earth**, Disney's Hollywood Studios' **Fantasmic!**, Universal Studios' **Universal 360**, or SeaWorld's **Odyssea, Fusion, or Mistify** (with select shows offered only seasonally). For a truly magical performance, see **Cirque du Soleil's La Nouba**; it's expensive, but unforgettable. (For information on all these spectacles, see Chapters 12–14, 18, 20, and 25.)
- ✔ **Wrestle a gator at Gatorland.** An Orlando original, Gatorland was astounding visitors with its crocodiles and alligators long before the Mouse moved in. Catch one of the amazing shows, such as **Gator Wrestlin'** and **Gator Jumparoo**, or just take a leisurely stroll through swamp and marsh on the boardwalks — no one's in a hurry here. (For more information on Gatorland, see Chapter 21.)

## The Best Hotels

One of the cool things about a trip to Orlando is the chance to stay at one of its great resorts or themed hotels. Check out Chapter 9 for more in-depth information about all the accommodations listed in this section:

- ✔ **Best for Families:** Both **Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge** and **Disney's Wilderness Lodge** offer spectacular surroundings, kid-friendly eateries, and rooms with bunk beds. At nearby Lake Buena Vista, the **Nickelodeon Family Suites** features themed KidSuites (separate sleeping areas with bunk beds, game stations, and TVs for the kids), water-park-like pools, and Nick-style entertainment. In



Kissimmee, **Seralago Hotel & Suites Main Gate East** features tons of on-site activities and kid suites, too.

- ✓ **Best Inexpensive Hotels:** Several good choices offer basic amenities in convenient locations for a low price. On Disney property, choose **Disney's Pop Century Resort**, which offers themed motel-style rooms for the lowest prices in Mickeyville. **Disney's All-Star Resorts** recently revamped several of its rooms, making them into suites — and they're some of the least expensive in town. The **Masters Inn Maingate** offers a good location and moderate amenities for less than \$50 a night, as does **Americas Best Value Inn & Suites**.
- ✓ **Best Moderate Hotel:** **Disney's Coronado Springs Resort** edges out the other two WDW moderate resorts with slightly larger rooms and a cool Mayan temple pool.
- ✓ **Best for a Romantic Getaway:** The **Portofino Bay Hotel** at Universal is *molto* romantic with its quaint Italian-village theme. If money is no object, sweep your significant other off to a getaway at the lushly tropical **Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes**, or the Mediterranean-inspired **Villas of Grand Cypress**.
- ✓ **Best Hotels for Business Travelers:** The **Orlando World Center Marriott Resort** in Lake Buena Vista and the **Peabody Orlando** both offer an extensive array of business services and amenities.
- ✓ **Best Location:** All three Universal resorts are within walking distance of Universal's parks and CityWalk, and all offer boat transportation to the theme parks as well. For location and value, the **Royal Pacific Resort** is the best of the bunch. At WDW, **Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa** offers the best accommodations in the World and is right on the monorail. For those who must be in the thick of it all, **Disney's Yacht Club Resort**, **Disney's Beach Club Resort**, and **Disney's BoardWalk Inn** (all close to Epcot) also get my vote.
- ✓ **Best Pools:** The **Hard Rock Hotel** boasts a sandy beach and an underwater sound system that brings out the lounging rock star in you. Stormalong Bay is the 3-acre mini water park that calls itself a pool at **Disney's Yacht Club Resort** and **Disney's Beach Club Resort**. Away from the theme parks, the **Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress** has an amazing lagoon-like pool with rock grottoes and 12 waterfalls, while the **JW Marriott Orlando, Grande Lakes**, boasts an incredible lazy river surrounded by lush landscaping. The **Nickelodeon Family Suites** wins the kids' vote with its water-park-style pools sporting flumes, climbing nets, and slides.

## The Best Restaurants

Fast food may rule in Orlando, but the city doesn't lack good places to dine. Find more information about all these restaurants in Chapter 10:

- ✔ **Best for Kids:** It's hard to go wrong with any of the Disney **character breakfasts**. Among Disney's resorts, the **Whispering Canyon Café** (Disney's Wilderness Lodge) ensures a stompin' good time. Kids also love the jungle-themed **Rainforest Café** (Downtown Disney and Animal Kingdom).
- ✔ **Best Seafood:** The **Oceanaire Seafood Room** (Pointe Orlando), a recent addition to Orlando's dining scene, features a menu filled with fresh seafood, an upscale atmosphere reminiscent of a 1930s supper club, and service that's simply unparalleled. **Todd English's bluezoo** (inside the Dolphin) consistently draws raves for its flavorful food and unique décor. **Fulton's Crab House** (Pleasure Island) is a longstanding favorite with a great wine list.
- ✔ **Best Steakhouse:** The highly regarded **Yachtsman Steakhouse** (Disney's Yacht Club Resort) offers wood-fire grilled steaks.
- ✔ **Best Dining with a View:** This one's a toss-up between **Manuel's on the 28th**, which offers a stunning after-dark view of the city and food to match, and the **California Grill**, which boasts spectacular views of Disney's fireworks and a winning wine list.
- ✔ **Best Buffet:** **Boma—Flavors of Africa**, inside Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge, offers the most eclectic buffet in Orlando, mingling traditional items with exotic African fare.
- ✔ **Best Margarita:** Head to **Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville**, of course. The mango margarita's the best of the bunch.
- ✔ **Best Spot for a Romantic Meal:** **Victoria & Albert's**, in Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa, is the runaway leader.
- ✔ **Best Value:** **Kim Wu**, a local favorite for over 20 years, features fabulous food and friendly service. **Café Tu Tu Tango** offers inexpensive tapas dishes that are perfect for sharing.



## The Best Thrill Rides

If you're a speed freak who lives for the ups and downs of a good ride, here are the top stomach churners and G-force generators in Orlando:

- ✔ **Expedition Everest—Legend of the Forbidden Mountain** (Disney's Animal Kingdom): This hair-raising expedition through the Himalayas ends in a face-to-face encounter with the legendary Yeti. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✔ **Mission: SPACE** (Epcot): Disney folks used NASA technology to create an astronaut simulator so effective that they've installed "lunch bags" for all the motion sickness it causes. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **Rock 'n' Roller Coaster Starring Aerosmith** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): You launch from 0 to 60 mph in 2.8 seconds and go right into the first inversion as 120 speakers in your "stretch limo"

mainline Aerosmith at (yeeeow!) 32,000 watts right into your ears. (See Chapter 14.)

- ✔ **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): The free-fall experiences are more than thrilling — they're scary. After your legs stop shaking, you *may* want to ride again. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Summit Plummet** (Disney's Blizzard Beach): This one starts slow, with a lift ride to a 120-foot mountain summit. But it finishes with the world's fastest body slide, a test of your courage and swimsuit as it goes virtually straight down and has you moving sans vehicle at 60 mph by the end. (See Chapter 16.)
- ✔ **Revenge of the Mummy the Ride** (Universal Studios Florida): This thrill ride combines a coaster run with the best special-effects technology (flame ceilings, scarabs pouring out of the walls) for a ride that touches on your worst phobias. (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man** (Islands of Adventure): 3-D doesn't get any better than this ride where you twist, spin, and soar before a simulated 400-foot drop. It's sure to get your Spidey senses tingling. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Dueling Dragons** (Islands of Adventure): Your legs dangle as you do five inversions at 55 to 60 mph and — get this! — three times come within 12 inches of the other roller coaster. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **The Incredible Hulk Coaster** (Islands of Adventure): You blast from 0 to 40 mph in two seconds, spin upside down more than 100 feet from the ground, and execute seven rollovers and two deep drops on this coaster. You may find this hard to believe, but it's the smoothest ride around. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Jurassic Park River Adventure** (Islands of Adventure): Riders travel through a prehistoric land inhabited by fierce dinosaurs that growl and bare their teeth, some within inches of your face. After being threatened by a Tyrannosaurus rex, you plunge 85 feet almost straight down into water below. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Kraken** (SeaWorld): This floorless, open-sided coaster uses speed, steep climbs, deep drops, and seven loops to create a stomach-churning ride that lasts far too long for some folks. (See Chapter 20.)

## The Best of the Rest

For those who can't stomach the thought of boarding anything that pulls the same G-forces as a fighter jet or induces adrenaline rushes of any sort of magnitude, the theme parks have several exceptional (and tamer) rides and shows that nobody should overlook:

- ✔ **The Haunted Mansion** (Magic Kingdom): Forget the unfortunate Eddie Murphy film and be sure to visit this cult favorite, which



shows off Disney's knack for details as 999 ghosts offer up more delights than frights. (See Chapter 12.)

- ✔ **Pirates of the Caribbean** (Magic Kingdom): This oldie but goodie features randy pirates and lots of yo-ho-ho music. Recent refurbishments have spiced it up even further, with improved special effects and such famous faces as Captain Jack Sparrow, Barbossa, and Davy Jones. (See Chapter 12.)
- ✔ **Test Track** (Epcot): Fasten your seat belts. This collaboration with GM allows riders to take a “car” through a series of standard motor vehicle test sequences that include a near-crash, a speed run, and some rather interesting weather. It's not a thriller, but it's definitely a cool ride. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **The Seas with Nemo & Friends** (Epcot): Aboard slow-moving “Clamobiles,” you'll join in the search for Nemo alongside a slew of familiar finned friends as they swim right along with the aquarium's live inhabitants. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **Soarin'** (Epcot): After boarding the multiseat gliders, you'll find yourself flying high over some of California's most spectacular landscapes with realistic multisensory effects. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): Special effects, razzle-dazzle stunts, and pyrotechnics make this stunt show worth the (incredibly long) wait. Wear a brightly colored shirt, wave your arms spastically, and you may be called up on stage as an extra. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): A high-speed car chase, pyrotechnics, special effects, and some amazing stunt driving add up to a thrill-packed show for the whole family. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Toy Story Mania!** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): This all-new interactive 3-D ride immerses guests in a whimsical world of midway-style games with a high-tech *Toy Story* twist. No matter your age, this one's an absolute winner. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Mickey's PhilharMagic** (Magic Kingdom): This amusing show combines a comedic cast of Disney characters, a delightful score, and an array of 3-D effects that will tickle your senses as Mickey, Donald, Lumiere, and Ariel, to name a few, seemingly spring right off the screen. This one's not to be missed. (See Chapter 12.)
- ✔ **Muppet Vision 3-D** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): The action takes place in a re-creation of the Muppets' theater (complete with the blessedly crotchety Statler and Waldorf critiquing the action from the balcony) and is a zany mix of 3-D film, animatronics, live action, and special effects. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Finding Nemo—The Musical** (Disney's Animal Kingdom): Film favorites including Nemo, Marlin, Dory, and Bruce jump from the

big screen into the “big blue,” live and on stage. Coming to life before your eyes, actors combine with creatively designed puppet-like costumes to re-create the original undersea adventure in this spectacular and entrancing production. (See Chapter 15.)

- ✔ **Festival of the Lion King** (Disney’s Animal Kingdom): One of the best shows in town, this is a don’t-miss Broadway-esque version of the famous Circle of Life. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✔ **Kilimanjaro Safaris** (Disney’s Animal Kingdom): At this must-see attraction, the special safari trucks bump you about as you head out into Disney’s version of the African wilderness. You’ll enjoy the thrill of seeing giraffes and zebras up close. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✔ **Men in Black Alien Attack** (Universal Studios Florida): Zap icky aliens with ray guns as you ride through the streets of New York. At the conclusion, you tackle the Big Roach himself and then get rated by Will Smith for your shooting prowess. (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **Shrek 4-D** (Universal Studios Florida): This one uses 3-D effects and seats that move and bounce to continue the story of Shrek and Fiona. It’s fun for all ages and *very* popular! (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **The Simpsons Ride** (Universal Studios Florida): Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie come along for the ride on this wildly wacky action-packed adventure through a Krusty-the-Clown-created carnival. (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **Terminator 2: 3D Battle Across Time** (Universal Studios Florida): This production features the creepy-steely T-1,000,000 and live-action doubles of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Edward Furlong, who roar onto the stage on Harleys and then into a giant movie screen, a very cool trick you absolutely must see. This show is an absolute winner. (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **Popeye & Bluto’s Bilge-Rat Barges** (Islands of Adventure): A bit too tame to be considered a thrill ride, this white-water raft experience can have you soaked in no time at all. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Believe** (SeaWorld): This Shamu extravaganza will have you “oohing” and “ahhing” as the sleek black-and-white killer whale shows off his skill on a splashy souped-up set. (See Chapter 20.)
- ✔ **Shark Encounter** (SeaWorld): At this aquatic exhibit, you find a walk-through tunnel populated with the scarier denizens of the deep, such as moray eels, barracudas, rays, scorpion fish, and (of course) sharks. It’s the coolest aquarium in town. (See Chapter 20.)