

best rooms are those in The Springs, numbered 3101 to 3436 and 3501 to 3836. Ask for a room toward the northeast side of these buildings (away from the lobby), as the southwest rooms border a well-traveled road. Avoid rooms 4101 through 4436 in building 14; a pedestrian walkway runs behind the patios of this building and gets a lot of use early in the morning from guests headed to breakfast.

If you've got a car or you don't mind a couple of extra furlongs' walk to the lobby, rooms 1101 to 1436 and 2501 to 2836 in Congress Park offer quietness, a view of Downtown Disney, and a relatively short walk to the bus stop. Also good are rooms 4501 to 4826, 6101 to 6436, and 6501 to 6836 in The Paddock. Avoid rooms on the northeast side of the 5101-to-5435 building of The Paddock, as well as the northwest side of the 5501-to-5836 building; these border a swimming pool and bus stop.

In addition to being quiet, rooms 1101 to 1436 of Congress Park and rooms 6101 to 6436 and 6501 to 6836 of The Paddock afford the closest walks to Downtown Disney shops, restaurants, and entertainment.

TREEHOUSE VILLAS AT SARATOGA SPRINGS RESORT & SPA Opened in 2009, this complex of 60 two-bedroom villas is situated between Old Key West and the Grandstand section of Saratoga Springs proper, with a separate entrance off Disney Vacation Club Way. The treehouses are bordered by Saratoga Springs' golf course to the northeast and a waterway to the southwest that feeds into Village Lake.

True to their name, the villas stand on stilts ten feet off the ground (ramps provide wheelchair access) and are surrounded by a densely wooded landscape. Each villa is an eight-sided structure with three bedrooms and two full bathrooms in approximately 1,074 square feet—about the same size as two-bedroom villas at the Wilderness Lodge, Beach Club, and Saratoga Springs but smaller than those at Animal Kingdom, BoardWalk, and Old Key West.

The villas hold nine people, one more than comparably sized rooms at the other DDV resorts. The master and second bedrooms have queen beds, and the third bedroom has bunk beds. A sofa bed and sleeper chair in the living room round out the mattress lineup. As with other sleeper sofas and chairs, we think these are more appropriate for kids than adults.

Because of their size, the treehouses cost about the same as a two-bedroom villa elsewhere at Saratoga Springs. If you don't mind a bit less wiggle room per person, the extra bedroom might represent a good value.

The interior of each villa is decorated with natural materials, such as stone floors in the kitchen, granite countertops, and stained wood furniture. End tables, picture frames, and bunk beds are made from rustic logs. Bathrooms, outfitted in modern tile, have showers and tubs plus a decent amount of counter space.

Because of its location, Treehouse Villas has few amenities of its own: each villa has a large wooden deck with charcoal grill, and all villas share a small central pool with spa. A walking path connects the complex to the main Saratoga Springs grounds, and Treehouse Villas guests can use all of the facilities at Saratoga Springs. Two dedicated bus stops serve the villas.

Treehouses 7024 to 7034 and 7058 to 7060 are closest to one of the villas' two dedicated bus stops and the walkway to Saratoga Springs; 7026 through 7033 also have water views. Treehouses 7001 through 7011 and 7052 through 7054 are closest to the other bus stop. Finally, treehouses 7035 through 7037, 7055, 7056, and 7060 surround the pool.

Disney's Old Key West Resort

OLD KEY WEST RESORT	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Extremely nice studios and villas	Large, confusing layout
Full kitchens in villas	Substandard bus service
Quiet, lushly landscaped setting	Limited on-site dining
Convenient self-parking	No easily accessible off-site dining
Small, private swimming pools	Extreme distance of many guest rooms from dining and services
Recreation options	
Boat service to Downtown Disney	No character meals

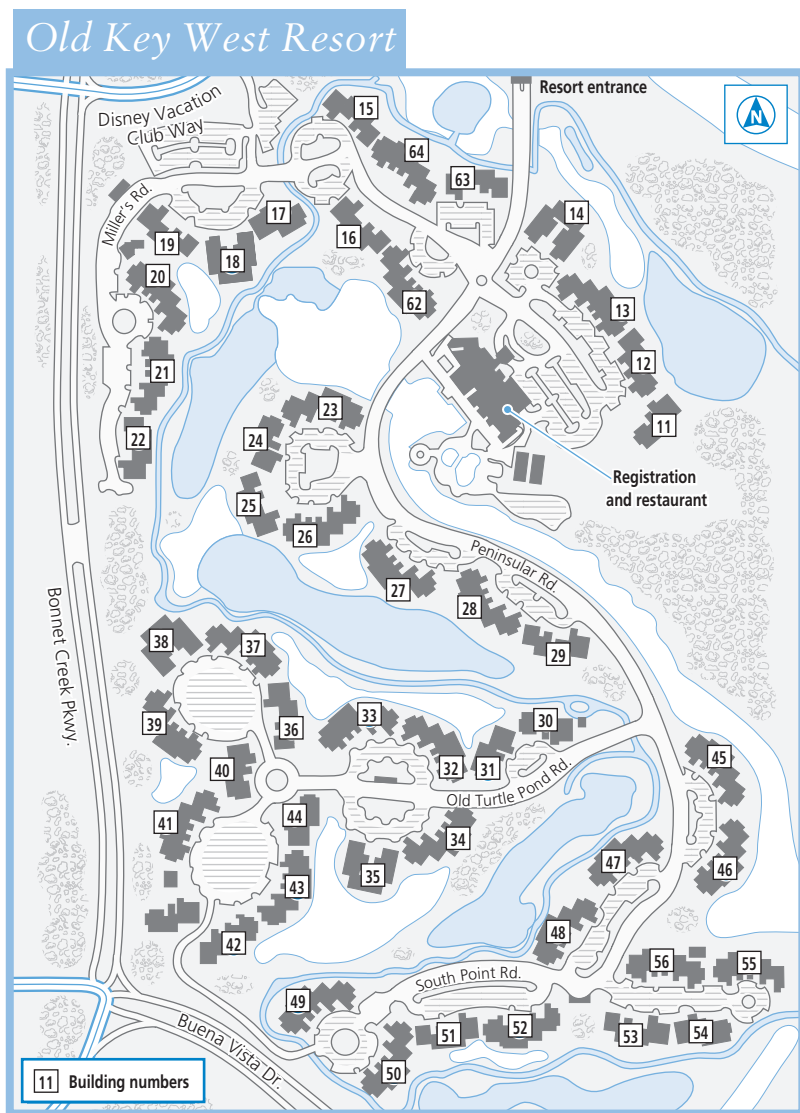
This was the first DDV property. Although the resort is a time-share property, units not being used by owners are rented on a nightly basis. Old Key West is a large aggregation of two- to three-story buildings modeled after Caribbean residences and guesthouses of the Florida Keys. Set subdivision-style around a golf course and along Bonnet Creek, the buildings are arranged in small, neighborhood-like clusters. They feature pastel facades, white trim, and shuttered windows. The registration area is in Conch Flats Community Hall, along with a full-service restaurant, modest fitness center, marina, and sundries shop. Each cluster of accommodations has a quiet pool; a larger pool is at the community hall. (A new waterslide in the shape of a giant sandcastle has been installed at the main pool.)

This resort offers some of the roomiest accommodations at Walt Disney World. Studios are 376 square feet; one-bedroom villas, 942; and two-bedroom villas, 1,333. Studios contain two queen-size beds, a table and two chairs, and an extra vanity outside the bathroom. One-bedroom villas have a king-size bed in the master bedroom, a queen-size sleeper sofa in the living room, a laundry room, and a full kitchen. Two-bedroom villas feature a king-size bed in the master bedroom and two queen beds in the second bedroom. All villas have enough closet space to contain your entire wardrobe. Studios and villas are tastefully decorated with wicker and upholstered furniture and peach and light-green color schemes. Each villa has a private balcony that opens onto a delightfully landscaped private courtyard.

Transportation to other Disney World destinations is by bus. Walking time to transportation loading areas from the most remote rooms is about six minutes.

An Erie, Pennsylvania, reader thinks Old Key West is Walt Disney World's most well-kept secret:

We've been coming to WDW for 14 years and have stayed at all the [DDV] resorts except the new one at Animal Kingdom [Lodge]. Old



Key West has the most spacious rooms and villas and the easiest access to your car (right outside your door!). It's in a great location and built around a gorgeous golf course. There are a number of small, almost private pools, so you don't have to go to the main pool to swim. You don't hear much about Old Key West, but if you go there you won't want to stay anywhere else.

GOOD (AND NOT-SO-GOOD) ROOMS AT OLD KEY WEST RESORT Old Key West is huge, with 56 three-story villa buildings. Each contains a mix of studio and multiroom villas. Views are nice from almost all villas. To enhance the view, all multiroom villas and some studios have a

large balcony furnished with a table and chairs. Though nice vistas are easy to come by, quiet is more elusive. Because the resort is bordered by busy Bonnet Creek Parkway and even busier Buena Vista Drive, the best villas are those as far from the highway noise as possible. For quiet isolation and a lovely river view, ask for building 46 or 45, in that order. For a lake and golf-course view away from road noise but closest to restaurants, recreation, the marina, the main swimming complex, and shopping, ask for building 13. Nearby buildings 12 and 11 are likewise quiet and convenient but offer primarily golf-course views. Next-best choices are buildings 32 and 34. Building 32 looks onto a lake with the golf course in the background, while 34 faces the golf course with tennis courts to the left and a lake to the right. None of the buildings recommended is more than a two- to five-minute walk to the nearest bus stop or pool. Avoid buildings 19 to 22, 38 and 39, 41 and 42, and 49 to 51.

Ground-floor villas make lugging in suitcases and groceries less taxing. Though the top floor requires a three-story climb, views from on high are superior. The top floor also ensures that you'll have no noisy neighbors clomping above you.

Disney's Port Orleans Resort

PORT ORLEANS RESORT

STRENGTHS

Creative swimming areas
Nice guest rooms, especially in French Quarter
Beautiful landscaping and grounds
Pleasant setting along Bonnet Creek
Food courts
Convenient self-parking
Children's play areas
Varied recreational offerings
Boat service to Downtown Disney

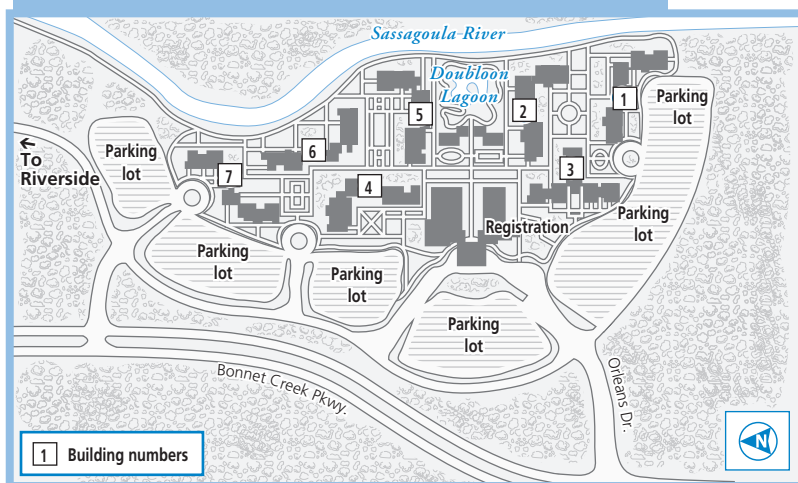
WEAKNESSES

Large, confusing layout
Extreme distance of many guest rooms from dining and services
Insufficient on-site dining
No easily accessible off-site dining
No character meals
Congested bus loading areas

In 2001 the Port Orleans and Dixie Landings Resorts were merged. The combined Moderate resort, called Port Orleans, is divided into two sections. The smaller, southern part that previously was Port Orleans is now called the French Quarter. The larger section encompassing the former Dixie Landings is labeled Riverside.

PORT ORLEANS FRENCH QUARTER RESORT The 1,008-room French Quarter section is a sanitized Disney version of New Orleans's Vieux Carré. Consisting of seven three-story guest-room buildings next to the Sassagoula River, the resort suggests what New Orleans would look like if its buildings were painted every year and garbage collectors never went on strike. There are prim pink-and-blue guest buildings with wrought-iron filigree, shuttered windows, and old-fashioned iron lamp-posts. In keeping with the Crescent City theme, the French Quarter is landscaped with magnolia trees and overgrown vines. The centrally

Port Orleans French Quarter Resort



located “Mint” contains the registration area and food court and is a reproduction of a turn-of-the-19th-century building where Mississippi Delta farmers sold their harvests. The registration desk features a vibrant Mardi Gras mural and old-fashioned bank-teller windows. The section’s “Doubleloon Lagoon” surrounds a colorful fiberglass creation depicting Neptune riding a sea serpent.

French Quarter rooms measure 314 square feet. Most contain two double beds, a table and two chairs, a dresser/credenza, and a vanity outside the bathroom. All rooms were refurbished from bow to stern in 2005, resulting in the most attractive and tasteful rooms of any of the Disney Moderate resorts. With their cherry headboards, Mardi Gras-pastel bedspreads, cherry-wood credenzas with oak inlays, and dark-blue floral carpet, the rooms rival those of several Deluxe resorts. No rooms have balconies, but ornamental, iron-railed accessways on each floor provide a good (though less private) substitute.

There’s a food court but no full-service restaurant. The closest full-service eatery is in the adjacent Riverside section of the resort, about a 15-plus-minute walk. The commute to restaurants in other hotels may be 40 to 60 minutes each way. The Disney bus system links the French Quarter to all Disney World destinations. Walking time to bus-loading areas from the most remote French Quarter rooms is seven to ten minutes.

Most readers really like Port Orleans French Quarter. This comment from a Lincoln, Nebraska, family is typical:

Port Orleans French Quarter is a real gem. The pool is exceptional for kids, and you can also use the very good pool at Riverside, which is an added bonus. They already have life jackets there for kids and good laundry facilities; shuttle service to parks was pretty good.

A dad from Danbury, Connecticut, says the secret is out:

[Port Orleans] French Quarter used to be our little secret. Thanks to greater word of mouth on the Internet, it was much more crowded this trip, which affected the pool, food court, and bus service. The [food at the] food court was much improved and was really quite good. We also enjoyed Boatwright’s at the Port Orleans Riverside. Very relaxed dining compared to other on-property restaurants, and the new menu was very good.

This from a mother of two hungry teens:

Port Orleans French Quarter was beautiful! It was very quiet. We had two adults and two teenagers in our room, and we had plenty of room for everyone. We had a refrigerator, which was very handy because we ate breakfast in our room and kept sodas and cold meat and cheese on hand.

A Milford, Connecticut, mom experienced transportation problems:

We had a wonderful time at Disney, but I do wish Port Orleans [French Quarter] and Riverside didn’t share a bus route. After the French Quarter bus stop, there are four stops at Riverside. You always got a seat, but sometimes it took upwards of an hour to get to the parks after waiting for the bus, then stopping at all four Riverside depots.

One Philadelphia Gen Xer wasn’t exactly flushed with joy about his Port Orleans stay:

The in-room toilets seem to be powered by jet thrusters. We were woken up far too many times in the night when someone in a neighboring room would flush.

GOOD (AND NOT-SO-GOOD) ROOMS AT THE PORT ORLEANS FRENCH QUARTER RESORT

Seven guest-room buildings flank the pool and Guest Services building and bus stop. The best views are from rooms directly facing the river and natural pine forest on the opposite bank. Wings of buildings 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 flank the river and provide the best river views in either the French Quarter or Riverside sections of Port Orleans. River-view rooms in buildings 1, 6, and 7 are a long walk from French Quarter public facilities, but they’re the most tranquil. Families with children should request river-view rooms in buildings 2 and 5, nearest the swimming complex. Make sure the reservationist understands that you are requesting a room with a river view, not just a water view. All river-view rooms are also water-view rooms, but not vice versa.

Following are the best river-view rooms in each building:

- Building 1 Rooms 1127 to 1132, 1227 to 1232, 1327 to 1332
- Building 2 Rooms 2127 to 2132, 2227 to 2232, 2327 to 2332
- Building 5 Rooms 5117 to 5122, 5217 to 5222, 5317 to 5322
- Building 6 Rooms 6123 to 6126, 6223 to 6226, 6323 to 6326, 6133 to 6140, 6233 to 6240, 6333 to 6340, 6141 to 6148, 6241 to 6248, 6341 to 6348
- Building 7 Rooms 7141 to 7148, 7241 to 7248, 7341 to 7348

Standard-view rooms look onto a courtyard or a parking lot. There are no private balconies, but you can bring a lawn chair and sit on the

exterior accessway. You'll have to make way for fellow guests coming and going to their rooms, but most of the time you'll be undisturbed.

PORT ORLEANS RIVERSIDE RESORT Riverside draws on the lifestyle and architecture of Mississippi River communities in antebellum Louisiana. Spread along the Sassagoula River, which encircles “Ol’ Man Island” (the section’s main swimming area), Riverside is subdivided into two more themed areas: the “mansion” area, which features plantation-style architecture, and the “bayou” area, with tin-roofed rustic (imitation) wooden buildings. Mansions are three stories tall, while bayou guesthouses are a story shorter. The river-life theme is augmented by groves of azalea and juniper. Riverside’s food court houses a working cotton press powered by a 32-foot waterwheel.

Each of Riverside’s 2,048 rooms is 314 square feet. Most provide two double beds, a table and two chairs, and two pedestal sinks outside the bathroom. Rooms in the Alligator Bayou section of Riverside feature brass bathroom fixtures, hickory-branch bedposts, trundle beds, and quilted bedspreads. Rooms in the plantation-themed Magnolia Bend section of Riverside are more conventional, with light yellow walls, dark wood furnishings, and teal carpets with dark-blue floral patterns. Room refurbishment is under way throughout Riverside, but the look will be substantially the same as before.

Many readers have written asking us to emphasize that, aside from the differences in guest rooms described above, all the rooms are the more or less the same regardless of the facade of your building. In other words, if your building looks like a mansion, that doesn’t mean your guest room will look like it belongs in one.

Riverside has one full-service restaurant and a food court. The restaurant is a 15-minute walk from many of the guest buildings. The Disney bus system links the resort to all Disney World destinations. The commute to restaurants in other hotels may be 40 to 60 minutes each way. Walking time from the most remote rooms to the transportation loading areas is ten minutes.

A multigenerational family from Little Rock, Arkansas, shares the following:

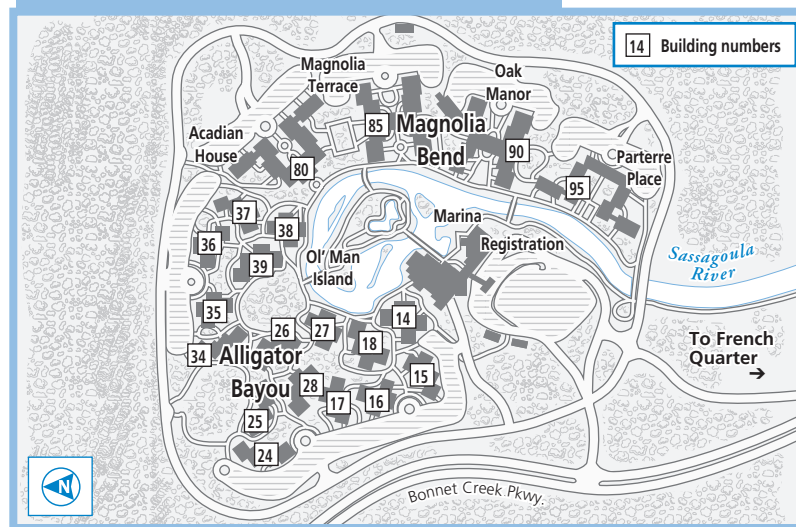
We loved Port Orleans. The cast members were very friendly and helpful—much more so than at the Polynesian. The grounds were absolutely beautiful. The rooms were also very quiet as opposed to the Polynesian’s. The only downside about this resort is the shuttle service: it was standing-room-only much of the time, and this was the off-season—we wonder how bad it would be in July! However, we liked the resort so much, we can’t wait to stay there again.

From a Des Moines, Iowa, mom:

We are going back to Port Orleans Riverside—it was amazing. I would put it up against the Polynesian any day of the week, having stayed there two times before. I got all my room requests met at Port Orleans, and the building was in a great location!

Finally, from a New York City reader who doesn’t think the atmosphere there lives up to its promise:

Port Orleans Riverside Resort



Although the Riverside section (formerly Dixie Landings) is modeled after mansions of the Old South, this will have no bearing on one’s stay. The outside decor of each building is simply a “shell” that is irrelevant to your guest room. In other words, there are no interior public areas of these buildings that provide the feeling that you are staying inside a Southern mansion. In fact, there is little or no decor inside your guest room that corresponds to this theme either. (Believe it or not, the official Disney guidebook actually suggests this property as a “romantic” alternative for those who cannot afford the Grand Floridian. Talk about an exaggeration!)

GOOD (AND NOT-SO-GOOD) ROOMS AT THE PORT ORLEANS RIVERSIDE RESORT

Riverside is so large that we use bicycles whenever we work there. All told, there are 20 guest-room buildings (not counting flanking wings on two buildings). Divided into two sections, Alligator Bayou and Magnolia Bend, the resort is arrayed around two pine groves and a watercourse that Disney calls the Sassagoula River. Magnolia Bend consists of four three-story, grand-plantation-style complexes named Acadian House, Magnolia Terrace, Oak Manor, and Parterre Place. Though Magnolia Bend is on the river, only about 15% of the guest rooms have an unobstructed view of the water. The vast majority of rooms overlook a courtyard or parking lot. Trees and other vegetation block the view of many rooms actually facing the river. The best views in Magnolia Bend are from the third-floor river side of Acadian House (building 80), which overlooks the river and Ol’ Man Island.

To the south are Magnolia Terrace (building 85) and Oak Manor (building 90), each in an H shape. In them, only second- and third-floor rooms on the very top of the H (facing the river) have an unobstructed water view. Ask for rooms 9416, 9417, 9039, 9042, and 9239 to 9242.

Both H-shaped buildings, however, are nearer the front desk, restaurant, lounge, and shopping complex than is Acadian House. Continuing south, Parterre Place (building 95) has a number of rooms overlooking the river, but they also overlook the parking lot on the far shore. In general, with the few exceptions described above, if you really want a nice river view, opt for Port Orleans French Quarter downriver.

Alligator Bayou, the other part of Port Orleans Riverside, forms an arch around the resort's northern half. Sixteen smaller, two-story guest-room buildings, set among pine groves and abundant gardens, offer a cozy, tranquil alternative to the more-imposing structures of the Magnolia Bend section of Riverside and Port Orleans French Quarter. If you want a river view, ask for a second-story water-view room in building 27 or 38. Building 14 also offers some river-view rooms and is convenient to shops, the front desk, and the restaurant, but it's in a noisy, high-traffic area. A good compromise building for families is building 18. It's insulated from traffic and noise by landscaping, yet is next to a satellite swimming pool and within an easy walk of the Guest Services building.

Disney's Port Orleans Riverside map shows two lakes north of the river bend, suggesting additional water views in Alligator Bayou. But these are dried-up lakes now forested with pine. This area, however, is richly landscaped to complement the "pine islands," and though out of sight of water, it offers the most peaceful and serene accommodations in the Port Orleans resort. In this area, we recommend buildings 26, 25, and 39, in that order. Note that these buildings are somewhat distant from the resort's central facilities, and there's no adjacent parking. In Alligator Bayou, avoid buildings 15, 16, 17, and 24, all of which are subject to traffic noise from nearby Bonnet Creek Parkway.

Remember: All Port Orleans guest buildings have exterior corridors. When you look out your window, a safety rail will be in the foreground, and other guests will periodically walk past.

THE ANIMAL KINGDOM RESORTS

Animal Kingdom Lodge and Villas

In the far southwest corner of the World and adjacent to Animal Kingdom theme park, Animal Kingdom Lodge opened in 2001. Designed by Peter Dominick of Wilderness Lodge fame, Animal Kingdom Lodge fuses African tribal architecture with the exotic, rugged style of grand East African national-park lodges. Five-story, thatched-roof guest-room wings fan out from a vast central rotunda housing the lobby and featuring a huge mud fireplace. Public areas and about half of the rooms offer panoramic views of a private 33-acre plain, punctuated with streams and elevated *kopje* (rock outcroppings) and populated with some 200 free-roaming animals and 130 birds. Most of the 762 guest rooms measure 344 square feet and boast hand-carved furnishings and richly colored soft goods. Almost all have full balconies.

In 2007, in the first of three phases, Disney converted 216 rooms of the original hotel into DDV accommodations. Disney opened the second phase, called Kidani Village, in the spring of 2009, with the third phase opening in late 2009. To avoid the confusion of having to differentiate

ANIMAL KINGDOM LODGE AND VILLAS

STRENGTHS

Exotic theme

Uniquely appointed guest rooms

Most rooms have private balconies

Views of savanna and animals from guest rooms

Themed swimming area

Excellent on-site dining, including a buffet

On-site nature programs and storytelling

Health and fitness center

Child-care center on-site

Proximity to non-Disney restaurants on US 192

WEAKNESSES

Remote location

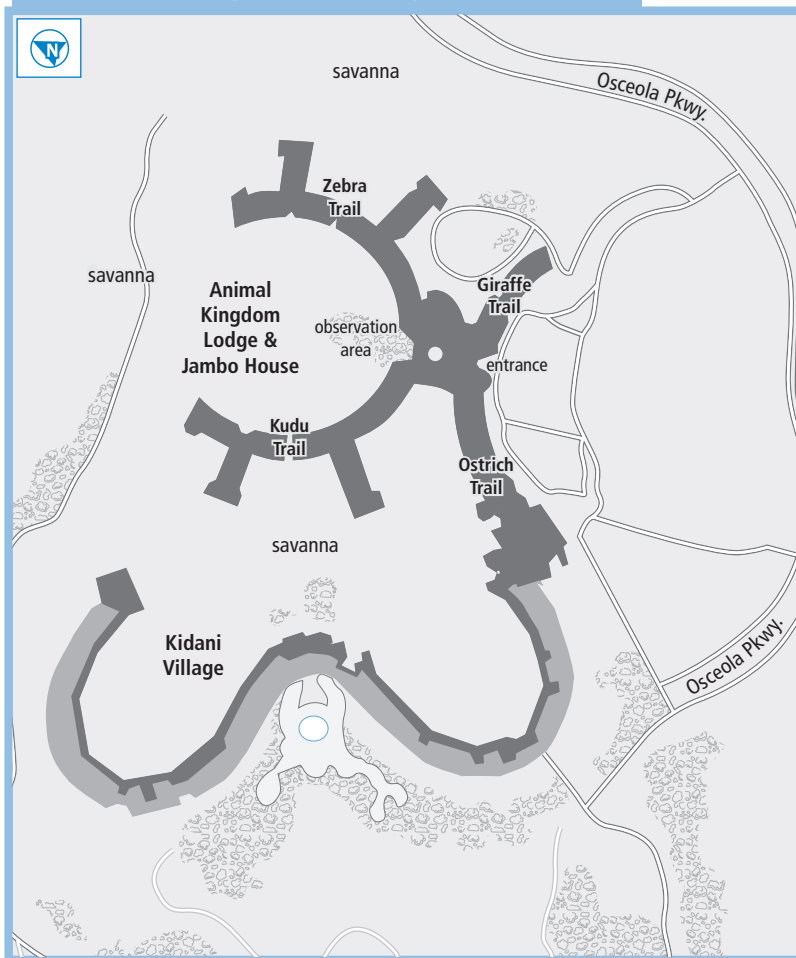
two separate DDV buildings with "Animal Kingdom Villas" in their names, Disney has christened the units in the original hotel—as well as the building itself—as Jambo House. Thus, if you're staying in a DDV unit at Animal Kingdom Lodge you're at Jambo House, and if you're staying in the new building you're at Kidani Village. The entire complex, classified by Disney as a Deluxe resort, is called Animal Kingdom Lodge and Villas.

Animal Kingdom Lodge–Jambo House offers fine dining in a casual setting at Jiko—The Cooking Place. Twin wood-burning ovens are the focal point of the restaurant, which serves meals inspired by the myriad cuisines of Africa. Boma, the family restaurant, serves a buffet with food prepared in an exhibition kitchen featuring a wood-burning grill and rotisserie. Tables are under thatched roofs. Mara, a quick-service restaurant with extended hours, and Victoria Falls, a delightful mezzanine lounge overlooking Boma, round out the hotel's food-and-beverage service. Other amenities include an elaborate swimming area and a village marketplace. A kids' program called Bush Camp is available on Saturday only, from 1 to 4 p.m. Children ages 6 to 14 can explore African culture through games and crafts. Cost is \$70 per child; reservations must be made using a credit card.

Consisting of a separate freestanding building shaped like a backwards 3, Kidani Village comprises 492 units, a dedicated savanna, a new pool, and Sanaa, a sit-down restaurant combining Indian and African cuisines. Other features include a fitness center, an arcade, a gift shop, and tennis, shuffleboard, and basketball courts. Kidani Village is connected to the original hotel by a half-mile walking trail; DDV guests at either resort can use the facilities at both buildings.

Both Jambo House and Kidani Village have studios and one-, two-, and three-bedroom villas. Most rooms at Kidani Village are larger, however, and the difference is anywhere from 50 square feet for a studio to more than 200 square feet for a two-bedroom unit. (The three-bedroom Grand Villas at Jambo House, 148 square feet larger

Animal Kingdom Lodge and Villas



see the animals, there are plenty of free viewing areas. The pool and the kids' club were fantastic and the hotel stunning. We visited Boma, but my children found the food very different and spicy. The food court was fine, although we wished they'd change the menu as after two weeks you are fed up of the same choices.

From an Owensboro, Kentucky, family:

We had Kilimanjaro Club (concierge-level) privileges at Animal Kingdom Lodge and found them to be a great value. We were willing to pay up to get a savanna-view room, and club level wasn't much more expensive than that. They had a wonderful Continental breakfast in the mornings, snacks all day, and hot hors d'oeuvres in the evening that we ate for our evening meal before going back out. The timing of the food fits well with your suggestions of going to the parks until midday, escaping the crowds at your hotel in the afternoon, and returning to the parks in the evening.

Finally, from a Chandler, Arizona, couple:

Specifically wanted to stay at Animal Kingdom Lodge. We weren't disappointed! Fantastic resort. We loved sitting on our balcony in the afternoon and watching the animals. Found the transportation to be easy and convenient from this location as well.

GOOD (AND NOT-SO-GOOD) ROOMS AT ANIMAL KINGDOM LODGE AND VILLAS

A glance at the resort map tells you where the best rooms and villas are. Kudu Trail and Zebra Trail, two wings branching from the rear of Jambo House, form a semicircle around the central wildlife savanna. Along each wing are seven five-story buildings, with accommodations on floors two through five. Five buildings on each wing form the semicircle, while the remaining two building jut away from the center. The best rooms—on floors three and four, facing into the circle—are high enough to survey the entire savanna yet low enough to let you appreciate the ground-level detail of this amazing wildlife exhibit; plus, these rooms offer the easiest access to the lobby and restaurants. Second-floor rooms really can't take in the panorama, and fifth-floor rooms are a little too high for intimate views of the animals. Most of the fourth-floor rooms in Jambo House are reserved for concierge guests, and the fifth and sixth floors house the DDV units.

Most rooms in the outward-jutting buildings, as well as rooms facing away from the interior, also survey a savanna, but one not as compelling as that of the inner circle. On the Zebra Trail, the first two buildings plus the first jutting building provide savanna views on one side and look onto the swimming complex on the other.

Less attractive still are two smaller wings, Ostrich Trail and Giraffe Trail, branching from either side of the lodge near the main entrance. Some rooms in Ostrich Trail, on the left, overlook a small savanna. Rooms on the opposite side of the same buildings overlook the front entrance. Least desirable is Giraffe Trail, extending from the right side of the lobby. Rooms in this wing overlook either the pool (water view) or the resort entrance (standard view).

The best views in Kidani Village are the north-facing rooms near the bottom and middle of the backwards 3. These overlook the

than those in Kidani Village, are the exception.) Because of the difference in area, one-bedroom units in Kidani Village can accommodate up to five people and two-bedroom units can hold up to nine—one more each than corresponding units at Jambo House, through the inclusion of a sleeper chair in the living room.

Animal Kingdom Lodge and Villas is connected to the rest of Disney World by bus, but because of the resort's remote location, you should seriously consider having a car if you stay there.

A family of four from Lincoln, England, gives Animal Kingdom Lodge a mixed, though mostly positive, review:

We had a fab holiday, but we would not recommend people paying the extra money to have a savanna room. The animals are scarce, and you don't really spend much time in your room. If you want to

savanna next to the lodge's Kudu Trail rooms and beyond into undeveloped woods. West- and south-facing rooms in the bottom half of the Kidani building overlook the parking lot, while west-facing rooms in the top half have either pool or savanna views.

Disney's Coronado Springs Resort

CORONADO SPRINGS RESORT

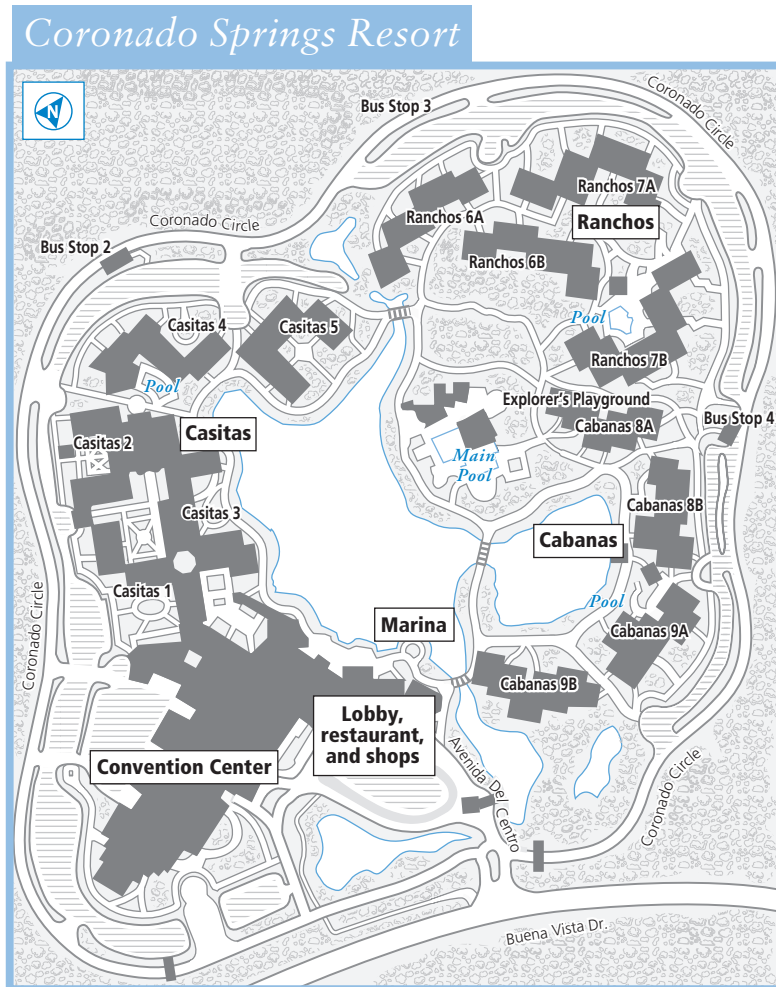
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Nice guest rooms	Insufficient on-site dining
Good view from waterside guest rooms	Extreme distance of many guest rooms from dining and services
Food court	No character meals
Themed swimming area with waterslides	Low-flow showerheads make rinsing off take longer
Fitness center	
Business center	
Convenient self-parking	

Coronado Springs Resort, near Animal Kingdom, is Disney's only midpriced convention property. Inspired by northern Mexico and the American Southwest, the resort is divided into three separately themed areas. The two- and three-story Ranchos call to mind southwestern cattle ranches, while the two- and three-story Cabanas are modeled after Mexican beach resorts. The multistoried Casitas embody elements of Spanish architecture found in Mexico's great cities. The lobby, part of the Casitas, features a mosaic ceiling and tiled floor. The vast resort surrounds a 15-acre lake, and there are three small pools as well as one large swimming complex. The main pool features a reproduction of a Mayan steppe pyramid with a waterfall cascading down its side.

Most of the resort's 1,921 guest rooms measure 314 square feet and contain two double beds, a table and chairs, and a vanity outside the bathroom. Rooms are decorated with sunset colors and feature hand-painted Mexican wall hangings. All have coffeemakers. No room has its own balcony.

Perhaps because it's geared to conventions, getting work done at Coronado Springs is easier than at any other Disney Moderate resort. A specially designed light fixture above the desk holds a halogen bulb and provides excellent illumination of the work area. Wireless Internet access is available in many public spaces throughout the resort, and the business-center staff is friendly and knowledgeable.

Coronado Springs offers one full-service restaurant as well as Disney World's most interesting food court. Unfortunately, there's not nearly enough food service for a resort this large and remote. If you book Coronado Springs, we suggest you have a car to expand your dining options. The resort is connected to other Disney destinations by bus only. Walking time from the most remote rooms to the bus stop is eight to ten minutes.



Disney is adding concierge facilities to the resort. Club Level rooms will cost an additional \$106 to \$126 per night depending on the season.

Reader opinions concerning Coronado Springs are split. A mother and daughter from Kalamazoo, Michigan, write:

Coronado Springs is my new favorite Moderate resort—the bus transportation is the best I've seen at any Disney resort, including deluxes. The choices at Pepper Market were excellent, and the resort never seemed crowded, even though it was fully booked.

But a family from Cumming, Georgia, had a different experience:

We stayed two nights at the Coronado Springs Resort, which I would not recommend to anyone. It was more comparable to Pop

Century than Port Orleans Riverside. The convention center really interferes with a family vacation—everyone we met there was working and wanted to talk about work while we were trying to get away from work! There was no luggage assistance available, and bus service was slow. We will not stay there again.

A mom from St. Catharines, Ontario, says, “Enough walking already!”

This resort was far too big. It was a ten-minute walk to get to the main pool and a ten-minute walk in a different direction to get to the food court. After walking all day at the parks, you don't want to walk that much!

A family from Indianapolis had no complaints about the swimming pools:

The pool at Coronado Springs was excellent—the kids loved the slide! Clean, well attended by lifeguards, not too crowded. Also utilized smaller pool close to our room—was good for kids to relax prior to bedtime.

A longtime reader from Horsham, Pennsylvania, shares this:

I was really disappointed at the rating for Coronado Springs Resort. When I stayed there last summer, I thought it was great. The theme and atmosphere were exceptional. The rooms were very clean, comfortable, and quiet, which is very important to almost every family. The food court was great, and the pool was the best I have ever seen at a resort. Also right by the pool was a great counter-service food court that was great for lunch out by the pool. Lastly, it had beautiful lake set in the middle of the resort that you could take a boat out on or ride a bike around. I would definitely recommend this Moderate resort to anybody. I was very pleased with my stay there.

As a convention hotel, Coronado Springs is peculiar. Unlike most convention hotels, where everything is centrally located with guest rooms in close proximity, rooms at this resort are spread around a huge lake. If you're assigned a room on the opposite side of the lake from the meeting area (and restaurants!), plan on an 11- to 15-minute hike every time you leave your room. If your organization books Coronado Springs for a meeting, consider having your meals catered. The hotel's restaurants simply don't have the capacity during a large convention to accommodate the breakfast rush or to serve a quick lunch between sessions.

GOOD (AND NOT-SO-GOOD) ROOMS AT CORONADO SPRINGS RESORT

Coronado Springs encircles a large man-made lake called Lago Dorado. In addition to the main building (El Centro), which contains shopping venues, restaurants, and a conference center, there are three communities of accommodations, each different in appearance and layout. Moving clockwise around the lake, the Casitas are near the lobby, restaurants, shops, and convention center. Standard-view rooms face parking lots or a courtyard. Water-view rooms cover pools, lake, birdbaths, and so on. For a good view of Lago Dorado, try to book one of these rooms:

3220 to 3287 (except 3224, 3230, 3260, 3261, 3265 to 3267, and 3274)
 3320 to 3387 (except 3324, 3330, 3360, 3361, 3365 to 3367, and 3374)
 3420 to 3487 (except 3424, 3430, 3460, 3461, 3465 to 3467, and 3474)
 4230 to 4266
 5200 to 5213, 5223 to 5263 (except 5250)
 5300 to 5313, 5323 to 5363 (except 5350)
 5400 to 5413, 5423 to 5463 (except 5450)

Next in our rotation are the Ranchos, set back from the lake. The desert theme translates to plenty of cactus and gravel, not much water or shade, and almost no good views. Though near the main swimming facility, Ranchos are a hike from everything else. The following rooms afford the best views:

6103, 6203, 6303, 6225, 6226, 6325, 6326, 6245, 6246 (water views);
 6600 to 6604, 6610 (water views); 6750 to 6760 (woods views)

Next are the Cabanas, which offer some very nice lake views. Cabana 9B is our favorite, near restaurants and the convention center, and only a moderate walk to the main pool. Rooms with the best views are 9500 to 9507, 9600 to 9611, and 9650 to 9657, with lake views, and 4640 to 4647 and 9640 to 9647, with a view of a small lagoon. Rooms that overlook the lake are subject to some generally tolerable traffic noise.

Other lake-view rooms we recommend include:

8120, 8121, 8124 to 8126, 8128 to 8131, and 8140 to 8147
 8500 to 8511, 8550 to 8553, 8571, and 8573
 8600 to 8611, 8650 to 8653, 8671, and 8673
 9108 to 9110, 9150 to 9153, 9170 to 9173, 9203 to 9210, 9250 to 9253, and 9270 to 9273

As at Port Orleans and the Caribbean Beach Resort, external railed walkways to guest rooms double as balconies. Because there's not a lot of traffic along them, you can pull a chair from your room onto the walkway and enjoy the view. We always bring lawn chairs expressly for “balcony” use when we stay at Coronado Springs.

Disney's All-Star Sports, All-Star Music, and All-Star Movies Resorts

ALL-STAR RESORTS

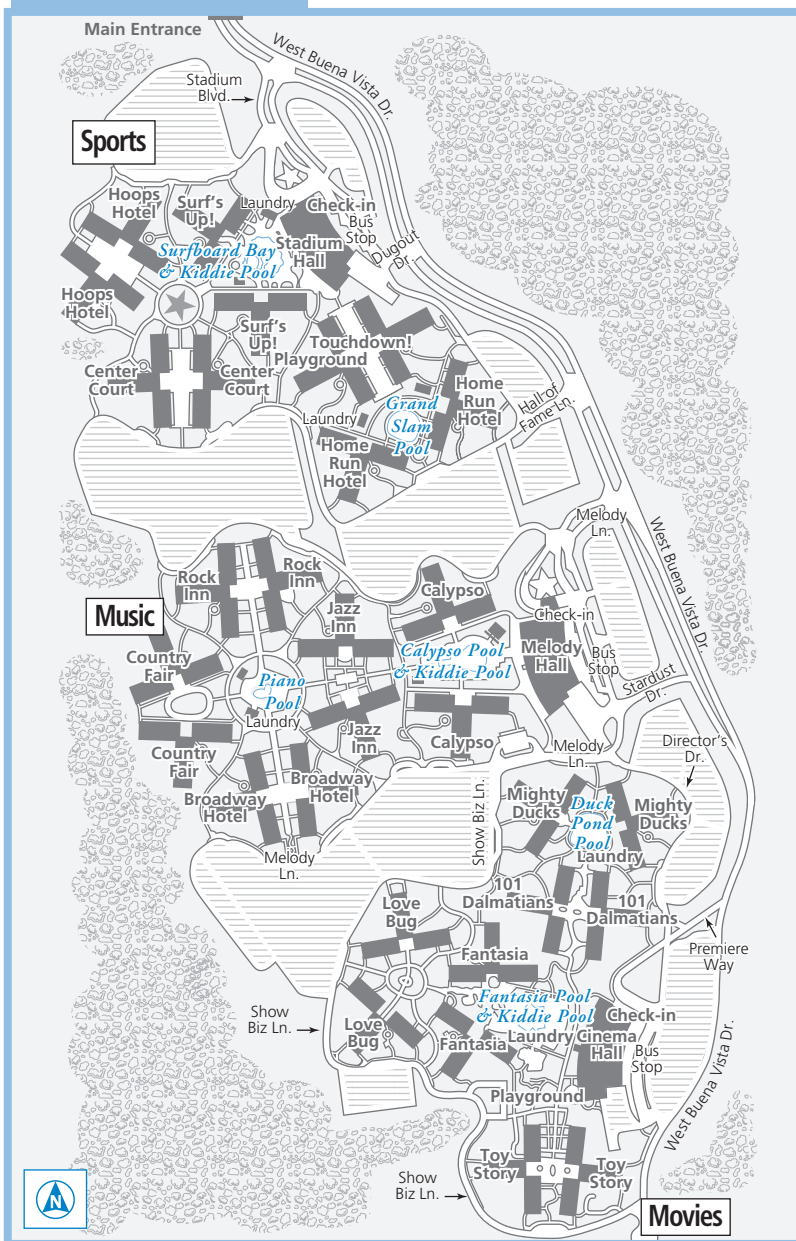
STRENGTHS

Super-kid-friendly theme
 Low (for Disney) rates
 Large swimming pools
 Food courts
 Convenient self-parking
 Close to McDonald's

WEAKNESSES

Remote location
 Small guest rooms (except family suites)
 No full-service dining
 Large, confusing layout
 Congested bus-loading areas
 No character meals
 Limited recreation options

All-Star Resorts



Disney's version of a budget resort features three distinct themes executed in the same hyperbolic style. Spread over a vast expanse, the resorts comprise 30 three-story motel-style guest-room buildings. Although the three resorts are neighbors, each has its own lobby, food

court, and registration area. The All-Star Sports Resort features huge sports icons: bright football helmets, tennis rackets, and baseball bats—all taller than the buildings they adorn. Similarly, the All-Star Music Resort features 40-foot guitars, maracas, and saxophones, while the All-Star Movies Resort showcases giant popcorn boxes and icons from Disney films. Lobbies of all are loud (in both decibels and brightness) and cartoonish, with checkerboard walls and photographs of famous athletes, musicians, or film stars. There's even a photo of Mickey Mouse with Alice Cooper. Each resort has two main pools; Music's are shaped like musical instruments (the Piano Pool and the guitar-shaped Calypso Pool), and one of Movies' is star-shaped. All six pools feature plastic replicas of Disney characters, some shooting water pistols.

At 260 square feet, guest rooms at the All-Star Resorts are very small. They're so small that a family of four attempting to stay in one room might redefine "family values" by week's end. Each room has two double beds or one king bed, a separate vanity area, and a table and chairs. The bedspreads feature athletes, movie stars, or musicians; the light fixtures are star shaped. No rooms have balconies.

If you're planning to save for a Disney vacation, you may want to save enough for a bigger room at another resort if space is an important consideration. Also, the All-Stars are the noisiest Disney resorts, though guest rooms are well soundproofed and quiet.

To the rejoicing of parents everywhere, Disney has opened 192 family suites at its All-Star Music Resort. Located in the Jazz and Calypso buildings, these suites measure roughly 520 square feet, slightly larger than the cabins at Fort Wilderness. Each suite, formed from the combination of two formerly separate rooms, includes a kitchenette with mini-refrigerator, microwave, and coffeemaker. Sleeping accommodations include a queen bed in the bedroom, plus a pullout sleeper sofa and two chairs that convert to beds in the family room. We're not sure we'd let adult friends (ones we want to keep, anyway) on the sofa bed or those chair beds, but they're probably fine for children. A hefty door separates the two rooms.

The suites also feature flat-screen televisions in each room, plus two bathrooms—one more than the Fort Wilderness cabins. The suites cost anywhere from 25% to 40% less than the cabins, but they don't have the kitchen space or appliances to prepare anything more than rudimentary meals. If you're trying to save money by eating in your room, the cabins are your best bet. If you just want a little extra space and somewhere to nuke your Pop-Tarts in the morning, go with the All-Star suites.

Reader comments concerning the family suites have been generally positive, though measured. First, a Verona, Kentucky, mother of three:

We stayed at an All-Star Music family suite. We have a 15-year-old, a 7-year-old, a 5-year-old, and a 2-year-old. The room was great, but it didn't accommodate us because we needed a "grown-up" room so we could relax after the little kids went to bed. People might want to book two individual rooms instead.

A mother of three from Clementon, New Jersey, is more enthusiastic:

We tried out the family suites at All-Star Music and loved them! Finally, parents can sleep in a queen bed and have their own room at Disney without breaking the bank. If you don't cook on vacation, the suites work out better than a Fort Wilderness cabin.

With a low staff-to-guest ratio, service is not the greatest. Also, there are no full-service restaurants, and the bus ride from the remote All-Stars to a full-service restaurant at another resort is about 45 minutes each way. There is, however, a McDonald's about a quarter mile away. Bus service to the theme and water parks is pretty efficient. Walking time to the bus stop from the most remote guest rooms is about eight minutes.

We receive a lot of letters commenting on the All-Star Resorts. The following are representative:

From a family group of 13 from East Greenbush, New York:

The All-Star Resorts are perfectly family-oriented. Some nice touches that were not mentioned in your guide—a small amphitheater set up in the lobby to occupy the kids while you check in, and soft sidewalk material surrounding the kiddie pool, which is only about ten inches deep. And the playground has two separate jungle gyms—one for older kids and one for younger kids.

Regardless of your personal preference, if you are going to stay at an All-Star Resort, stay at Sports. The sole reason is that the shuttle buses pick up and drop off at the All-Star Resorts in this order: Sports, Music, Movies. That little difference can mean a lot when traveling with kids or with a group.

An Orland Park, Illinois, family had a tough time with their All-Star neighbors, copying us on a letter to Disney:

I am not a person who usually complains, but I had to write and tell you how extremely disappointed I was with the accommodations we had at the All-Star Sports. I was expecting that a Disney resort would be geared toward families. Boy, was I mistaken! What we mostly had staying with us were young teenagers who were extremely loud and foul-mouthed. We could hardly get any rest. We had groups of people outside our room partying on the football field one night until midnight before someone finally closed them down. Then in the morning (one time as early as 6:30 a.m.), we had cheerleaders practicing right outside our door, shouting their cheers.

A Canadian family had a similar experience:

The guide did not prepare us for the large groups of students who take over the resorts. They are very noisy and very pushy when it comes to getting on buses. Our scariest experience was when we tried getting on a bus and got mobbed by about 100 students. We didn't know if our children would come out alive from the experience. We don't think we would go back to the All-Star Resorts for this reason (they offer packages to student groups). Also, the motel does not want to hear your complaints at all.

From a Massachusetts family of four:

I would never recommend the All-Star for a family. It was like dormitory living. Our room was about one mile from the bus stop, and the room was tiny. I'm in the hotel business, and it was one of the smallest I've been in. You needed to step into the bathroom, shut the door, then step around the toilet that blocked half the tub.

But a Baltimore family had a very positive experience:

We decided early on that we'd rather spend more money on food than lodging. We love to eat and figured that we wouldn't spend that much time in the room, so we picked the All-Star Movies Resort. We were pleasantly surprised. Yes, the rooms are small. But the overall magic there is amazing. The lobby played Disney movies, which is perfect if you get up early and the buses aren't running yet. There are great photo ops everywhere (Donald and Daisy were awesome). It's heaven for fans of Fantasia 2000. Customer service was impeccable. Everyone seems to bust on the food court, which—let's face it—is crap . . . except for the refrigerator cases, where you can buy fresh-tasting (albeit expensive) fruit, water, healthy snacks, and great chicken-salad sandwiches. Further, despite forewarnings of loud children, we were in the Love Bug building and found it very quiet. The express-checkout service was also a godsend.

From a 20-something woman from Georgetown, Texas:

We stayed at the All-Star Movies Resort, which was great for us. The room was small, but it was just my sister and me, so we did fine. It didn't have a lot of amenities, but we probably wouldn't have taken advantage of them anyway. The food court was very convenient.

From a North Adams, Massachusetts, dad:

We opted for the [All-Star Music] Family Suite this trip and were really pleased. The biggest advantage was the two full bathrooms. We were thinking about going to the Fort Wilderness Resort and renting a cabin (for the full kitchen and homey atmosphere), but between having a meal plan and then realizing that there would be two bathrooms in the Family Suite, we decided on that. It was about \$300 less expensive [than Fort Wilderness] as well.

From a Skokie, Illinois, family of five:

We found the All-Star Music Family Suite to be very roomy for the six of us. Our teenagers and preteen were quite comfortable on the pull-out sofa, chair, and ottoman. Having the two bathrooms was a must, and the kitchen area was great; lots of shelf space for the food we had delivered from GardenGrocer (they are excellent, by the way) [see page 421]. Our only complaint about the resort is that from 7:30 a.m. until midnight there is always music playing—it can get annoying to always have that beat going in the background. I did ask them to turn it down once, but that didn't work. The rooms are soundproofed but not enough; had to use earplugs. Also, the housekeeping was terrible. Could not get them to leave regular coffee and enough towels without calling several times. The bus service was very good, though; the

Music Resort often had its own bus and did not make stops at the other All-Star Resorts. Overall, it was a good experience.

From a young Washington, D.C., couple:

Many rooms at All-Star Movies are closer to All-Star Music for food and shuttle pickups. Knowing this gives you twice as many options for shuttle-bus return trips from the parks.

A mom from Scotch Plains, New Jersey:

I felt the book did not do justice to the All-Star Resorts. Because of the book, my expectations were very low, but the resort was very good. Although it [doesn't offer] four- or five-star hotel service (front desk, housekeeping, etc.), it was excellent and the hotel staff knowledgeable and friendly.

GOOD (AND NOT-SO-GOOD) ROOMS AT THE ALL-STAR RESORTS Though the layouts of All-Star Resorts' Movies, Music, and Sports sections are different, the buildings are identical three-story, three-winged structures. The T-shaped buildings are further grouped into pairs, generally facing each other, and share a common subtheme. For example, there's a *Toy Story* pair in the Movies section. In addition to being named by theme, such as *Fantasia*, buildings are numbered 1 to 10 in each section. Rooms are accessed via a motel-style outdoor walkway, but each building has an elevator.

Parking is plentiful, all in sprawling lots buffering the three sections. A room near a parking lot means easier loading and unloading but also unsightly views of the lot during your stay. The resort offers a luggage service, but it often takes up to an hour for your bags to arrive.

The sure way to avoid a parking-lot vista is to request a room facing a courtyard or pool. The trade-off is noise. The sound of cars starting in the parking lot are no match for shrieking children or hooting teenagers in the pool. But don't count on a good view of the pool, even if your room faces it directly. The buildings' themed facade decorations are placed on their widest face—the top of the T—which is also the side facing the pool or courtyard. In some cases, as with the surfboards in the sports section, these significantly obstruct the view from nearby rooms. Floodlights are trained on these facades and if you step out of your room at night to view the action below, looking down may result in temporary blindness.

The sort of traveler you should dictate the room you request at All-Star Resorts. If you choose the resort because you'd rather spend time and money at the parks, opt to be near the bus stop, your link to the rest of the World. Note that buses leave from the central public buildings of each section, which are near the larger, noisier pools. If you're planning to return to your room for an afternoon nap, request a room farther from the pools. Also consider an upper-story room to minimize foot traffic past your door. On the other hand, if you choose All-Star for its kid-friendly aspects, consider roosting near the action. A bottom-floor room provides easy pool access, and a room looking out on a courtyard or pool allows you to keep an eye on children playing outside.

For travelers without young children (infants excluded), the best bets for privacy and quiet are buildings that overlook the forest behind the resort, buildings 2 to 4 in All-Star Sports and 4 to 7 in All-Star Music. Interior-facing rooms in these buildings (and their partners) also fill the bill, since they overlook courtyards farthest from the large pools. The courtyards vary with theme but are generally only mildly amusing.

If you're traveling with children, opt for a section and building with a theme that appeals to your kids. Often, that will be a film—movies are the lifeblood of the Disney empire—but it might be a sport. If you're staying in Home Run Hotel, don't forget the ball and gloves to maximize the experience (just keep games of catch away from the pool). Older elementary- and middle-school children probably will want to spend hotel time in or near the bigger pools or arcades in nearby halls. Periodically, cadres of teenagers—too cool for their younger siblings—effectively commandeer the smaller secondary pools. Playgrounds are tucked behind building 9 in All-Star Music and behind building 6 in All-Star Sports. Rooms facing these are ideal for families with children too young or timid for the often-chaotic larger pools. In All-Star Movies, the playground is nearer to the food court than to any rooms.

The following tip from a former All-Star Resorts cast member from Fayetteville, Georgia, illustrates just how big these resorts are:

Please tell your readers that rooms at the far end of the Mighty Ducks building of All-Star Movies are closer to All-Star Music food court, pool, and buses than to All-Star Movies' own facilities. Follow the walkway from the Ducks building north to All-Star Music's Melody Hall.

The same reader also mentioned that All-Star Sports guests are usually the first to be picked up on the Disney bus route, even when the same bus services all three All-Star Resorts. During busier times of the year, Sports passengers can completely fill the first bus dispatched, resulting in longer waits at the other All-Star Resorts. Each All-Star Resort generally has its own separate bus for the return trip.

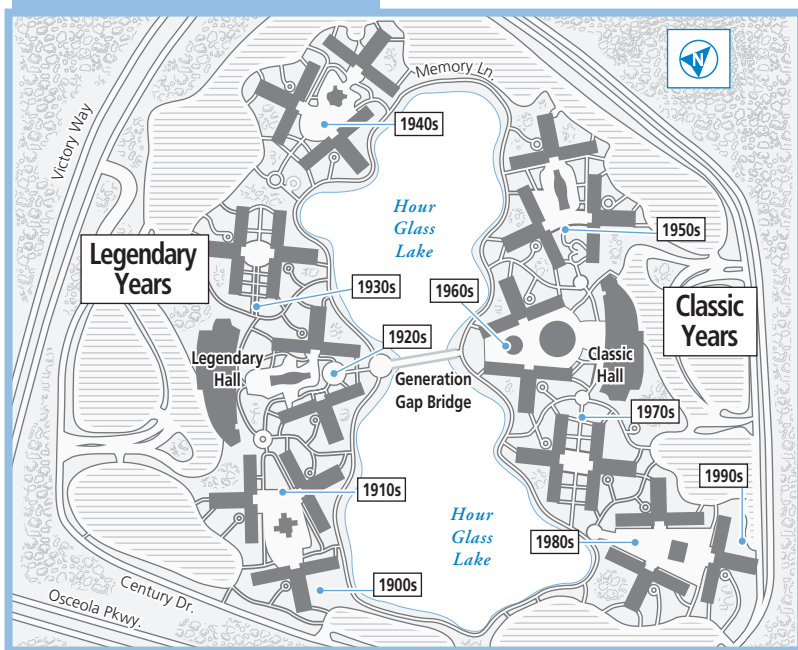
Disney's Pop Century Resort

POP CENTURY RESORT

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Kid-friendly theme	Small guest rooms
Low (for Disney) rates	No full-service dining
Large swimming pools	Large, confusing layout
Food courts	No character meals
Convenient self-parking	Limited recreation options
Fast check-in	

Located on Victory Way near the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex, Pop Century is the newest Disney Value resort. It's to be completed in phases, but the first section, scheduled to open in December 2001, was actually opened in early 2004. The second phase, which would complete the planned 5,760 guest rooms, is still in limbo.

Pop Century Resort



Pop Century is an economy resort; rooms run about \$80 to \$140 per night. In terms of layout, architecture, and facilities, Pop Century is almost a clone of the All-Star Resorts (that is, four-story, motel-style buildings built around a central pool, food court, and registration area). Decorative touches make the difference. Where the All-Star Resorts display larger-than-life icons from sports, music, and movies, Pop Century draws its icons from decades of the 20th century. Look for such oddities as building-sized Big Wheels, Hula-Hoops, and the like, punctuated by silhouettes of people dancing the decade's fad dance.

The public areas at Pop Century are marginally more sophisticated than the ones at the All-Star Resorts, with 20th-century period furniture and decor rolled up in a saccharine, those-were-the-days theme. Food courts, bars, playgrounds, pools, and so on emulate the All-Star Resorts model in size and location. A Pop Century departure from the All-Star precedent has merchandise retailers thrown in with the fast-food concessions in a combination dining-and-shopping area. This apparently is what happens when a giant corporation tries to combine selling pizza with hawking Goofy hats. (You just know the word *synergy* was used like cheap cologne in those design meetings.) As at the All-Star Resorts, there is no full-service restaurant. The resort is connected to the rest of Walt Disney World by bus, but because of the limited dining options, we recommend having a car.

Guest rooms at Pop Century are small at 260 square feet. The decor is upbeat, with print bedspreads and wall art depicting pop

memorabilia from decades past. Light-finish wood-inlaid furniture and dark, patterned carpet provide an upscale touch, but these are not rooms you'd want to spend a lot of time in. Bathrooms are tiny, and counter space is a scarce commodity. Worst of all, we've received many complaints from readers to the effect that the soundproofing between rooms is inadequate. A lake separating the resort's two halves offers water views not available at the All-Star Resorts.

A reader from Dublin, Georgia, thinks we're underrating the Pop Century Resort:

I am a Disney fanatic from Georgia. I have stayed in all the resort hotels except BoardWalk and can't believe you don't like Pop Century. It is now my favorite. (1) It is far superior to the All-Stars but the same price. (2) There is a lake at a Value resort and a view of fireworks. (3) The courtyards have Twister games, neat pools, and a Goofy "surprise fountain" for little children. (4) The memorabilia is interesting to us over 18 years old. (5) I love the gift shop, food court, and bar combo. (6) There are frozen Cokes in the refillable-mug section. (7) Bus transportation is better than anywhere else, including Grand Floridian! (8) You can rent surrey bikes. (9) The rooms have real soap instead of the All-Stars' yucky, gloppy stuff. (10) The layout is more convenient to the food court. (11) I never hear construction noise, and the noise from neighbors is not worse than anywhere else. (12) Where else do the [cast members] do the shag to oldies? Also, the shrimp lo mein is the best bargain and among the best food anywhere.

Don't know what it is about Pop Century fans, but they seem to have a propensity for making lists—take this Waukeo, Iowa, family:

We loved Pop Century Resort; it was perfect for our family: (1) It was cheap enough that we had plenty of money left over for other fun things at Disney. (2) The shrimp lo mein was one of the most awesome fast-food items we've had at Disney. (3) Although the rooms are a little small and the lighting isn't the best, the resort is affordable enough that without tax two rooms at the Pop Century are in the same price range as one room at other resorts. (4) It's not far from any park at Disney, nor from Downtown Disney. (5) The combo food court—shopping area really works: my grandparents (seniors ages 66 and 64) can eat breakfast in the food court while my brother, sister, parents, and I shop. (6) Food is actually pretty affordable for Disney. (7) Great pools that are not too far from our rooms; plus, there's lots of room so that parents and grandparents can watch the kids swim. (8) You can request a room on the first floor, near the parking lot. They were really accommodating when we explained that I had to have a rather heavy oxygen tank brought to our room, so it would be easier on us to stay on the first floor. (9) Check-in takes probably the least amount of time that I have ever seen at a Disney resort. (We've stayed at Port Orleans French Quarter, Port Orleans Bayou, Caribbean Beach Resort, All-Star Movies, and a hotel outside the World.)

A young couple from Montreal gives Pop Century a thumbs-up:

We stayed at the Pop Century Resort and we absolutely loved it! We don't have children yet, but we became kids ourselves when we saw

the huge icons representing Disney's characters, like Lady and the Tramp. The food court was great; we always had many choices, at decent prices, especially for breakfast: waffles, pancakes, buns, eggs, fruits. . . . I also found many gifts for my family at the resort's store, which had a large selection of WDW souvenirs.

A group of four adults from Tigard, Oregon, offers this:

We stayed at the Pop Century Resort, and while the rooms were small and noisy, the A/C worked well and the bus transportation was fantastic. We never waited longer than ten minutes for a bus.

But a mom from St. Louis gave the Pop Century a mixed review:

The Pop Century hotel was nice but very crowded. Also, the room was noisy. We stayed in the 1990s complex and could hear loud noise coming from the pool until midnight each night we stayed. Overall, the food court was very good, stocked with lots of different food options. The dining area was clean, with lots of room and vibrant colors. Bus service was great; we rarely waited for a bus to the parks at all. Even despite the loud noises at night, I would stay at the Pop Century again because of the charming decor and fun atmosphere, the convenient large food court, [and] great bus service to the theme parks. You cannot beat the value.

From a Kentucky mom of three:

We stayed at All-Star Movies two years ago and had a much better experience than at Pop Century. Even though the rooms are the same size, I think they used even less soundproofing for the Pop Century rooms.

A dad from Ajax, Ontario, offers this:

I was pleased with Pop overall, but the smaller room (compared to, say, Port Orleans or Coronado) makes a BIG difference—particularly if you have children.

A multigenerational family from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, liked Pop Century, with one exception:

Because we were traveling with our grandson, we thought staying at Pop Century would be a fun place for him, with the larger-than-life icons and bright colors. I thought the resort was a good value and comfortable, and the rooms were large enough. I had heard that the soundproofing wasn't very good, but I didn't think it was too bad. The pools were great. The worst thing about the trip was the food court—crowds and rude guests were the problems. After a hot day and crowds in the parks, you came back to grab something to eat and found yourself being jostled by the crowd. And the crowds made it impossible for the cast members to keep the tables and drink area anywhere near clean.

A dad from Tonawanda, New York, agrees about the dining:

The Pop Century food court after park closing is an absolute zoo. If you can, avoid eating a late counter-service dinner here and get one in the parks.

Likewise, from a Kentucky family of four:

The Pop Century food court seemed to run out of ice early in the evening, and they'd shut down drink dispensers early. There were still lots of people up late coming back from the parks, and it created huge bottlenecks for drinks.

A Granite Falls, North Carolina, couple isn't sweating the small stuff, though:

On this trip, we stayed at Pop Century, which gets a lot of criticism at certain planning Web sites. This was our third stay there, and while it is small and not as comfortable as the Polynesian (or any other Deluxe hotel), it provides us with a clean place to sleep at night and transportation to the parks, and the price allows us to visit WDW every year!

This comment from a Springfield, Massachusetts, family of four:

Pop Century Resort was outstanding! We stayed in the 1950s building with an Epcot view. This had to be the best-value room in all of Walt Disney World. For the off-season AAA discount rate of \$64.99 per night, we were able to watch the IllumiNations fireworks from our hotel room with Spaceship Earth in the background!

And, finally, a reader named Melanie (who didn't mention where she was from) had the following experience:

We decided to stay at the Pop Century. I called them directly to ask a few questions so I would be prepared when I called Disney reservations. I told the person who answered that I had heard the hotel was noisy. She said, "The hotel is not noisy, just the kids who stay here." HA!

GOOD (AND NOT-SO-GOOD) ROOMS AT THE POP CENTURY RESORT Guest rooms don't have private patios or balconies. If you bring a lawn chair, however, you can sit on the railed walkway that serves as the guest-room access corridor on each floor. The best rooms for both view and convenience are the lake-view rooms in buildings 4 and 5, representing the 1960s. These rooms are subject to highway noise from Victory Way and Osceola Parkway across the lake. If work resumes on the other half of Pop Century, these rooms will also contend with the sights and noise of construction. A safer short-term bet, though with a less compelling view, would be east-facing rooms in the same building, that is, rooms facing the registration and food-court building. Next-best choices would be the east-facing rooms of building 3 in the 1950s, and of building 6 in the 1970s. Avoid south-facing rooms in 1980s building 7 and 1990s building 8. Both are echo chambers for noise from nearby Osceola Parkway.

INDEPENDENT HOTELS OF THE DOWNTOWN DISNEY RESORT AREA

THE SEVEN HOTELS OF THE DOWNTOWN DISNEY RESORT AREA (DDRA) were created in the days when Disney had far fewer of its own resorts. The hotels—the Holiday Inn at Walt Disney World, Doubletree Guest Suites, Regal Sun Resort, Hilton, Royal Plaza, Best Western Lake Buena Vista Resort Hotel, and Buena Vista Palace Hotel & Spa—

AMENITIES AT DOWNTOWN DISNEY RESORT AREA HOTELS

NAME	CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS	DINING	KID-FRIENDLY	POOL(S)	RECREATION
Best Western LBV Resort	—	★★½	★★★★	★★½	★★
Buena Vista Palace	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★
Doubletree Guest Suites	—	★★	★★★★	★★½	★★½
Hilton WDW	—	★★½	★★½	★★★	★★½
Holiday Inn at WDW	<i>N/A for all—hotel is being extensively refurbished.</i>				
Regal Sun Resort	★★½	★★½	★★★★	★★★	★★★
Royal Plaza	★★½	★★	★★½	★★½	★★★

are chain-style hotels with minimal or nonexistent theming, though the Buena Vista Palace, especially, is pretty upscale. All were hit hard by the tourism slump in recent years, and several of the larger properties shifted their focus to convention and business travelers. Now that Disney has trouble filling its own massive inventory of rooms, DDRA properties are struggling to refurbish or re-create themselves while clinging tenaciously to the Disney World connection.

The main advantage to staying in the DDRA is being in Disney World and proximal to Downtown Disney. Guests at the Hilton, Regal Sun Resort, Buena Vista Palace, and Holiday Inn at Walt Disney World are an easy 5- to 15-minute walk from Disney Marketplace on the east side of Downtown Disney. Guests at the Royal Plaza, Best Western Lake Buena Vista Resort Hotel, or Doubletree Guest Suites are about ten minutes farther by foot. Disney transportation can be accessed at Downtown Disney, though the Disney buses take a notoriously long time to leave due to the number of stops throughout the shopping and entertainment complex. Although all DDRA hotels offer shuttle buses to the theme parks, the service is provided by private contractors and is somewhat inferior to Disney Transportation in frequency of service, number of buses, and hours of operation. Get firm details in advance about shuttle service from any DDRA hotel you're considering. All these hotels are easily accessible by car and are only marginally farther from the Disney parks than several of the Disney resorts (and DDRA hotels are quite close to Typhoon Lagoon water park).

All DDRA hotels try to appeal to families, even the business and meeting hotels. Some have pool complexes that rival those at any Disney resort, whereas others offer a food court or all-suite rooms. A few sponsor Disney character meals and organized children's activities; all have counters for buying Disney tickets, and most have Disney gift shops. In addition, we've seen some real room deals in the DDRA, especially off-season. To help you decide if the DDRA is right for you, here are descriptions. Also take a peek at the combined Web site for the DDRA hotels at www.downtowndisneyhotels.com. Finally, check the comparative chart on the previous page.

Best Western Lake Buena Vista Resort Hotel ★★★★★

THE 18-STORY, 325-ROOM Best Western Lake Buena Vista completed a substantial renovation in 2003 of all guest rooms and public areas. The

improvements help compensate for its offering fewer of the extras common to most other DDRA properties. A breakfast buffet and dinner service of American fare are available in the Trader's Island Grill, while the Parakeet Café offers sandwiches and snacks. The poolside Flamingo Cove Lounge provides its own menu of pub standards as well as alcoholic refreshment. The pool is small though pleasantly landscaped, and there's a kiddie pool. Also offered are a fitness room, game room, and playground. Although there are no organized children's programs, the resort can arrange for child care.

Buena Vista Palace Hotel & Spa ★★★★★

ALTHOUGH IT HAS NO DISNEYESQUE THEME, the sprawling Buena Vista Palace (family-hotel profile on page 250) can compete with Disney's best resorts as far as the number and variety of amenities. Plus, it's larger and it offers a bit more of everything than most other Downtown Disney resorts. The Buena Vista Palace's 1,014 rooms and suites are spread over 27 acres and four towers, and the spa and fitness center is one of the most comprehensive on Disney World property (60 spa services and treatments, including private outdoor whirlpools). Dining options abound, including the Outback Restaurant (not affiliated with the chain of the same name), specializing in steaks and seafood; Watercress Café (breakfast buffet, plus American fare); and a poolside snack bar. The Watercress Café also hosts a Disney character brunch each Sunday. Visit the Lobby Lounge for cocktails and conversation. The wet set will enjoy three tropical-themed pools, a whirlpool, and a sauna. Two lighted tennis courts, jogging trails, a white-sand volleyball court, and an arcade and playground round out the recreational offerings.

We've stayed in both the main building and tower rooms and found each to be clean, spacious, and full of amenities. Rooms are quiet, with ample lighting, and the bedding is above average. Bath and grooming areas are better than most. Balconies are smallish but have pretty views of the landscaping and the Downtown Disney area. The only complaint we have is that the check-in area is too small, limiting the staff's ability to handle more than a few people at once. If possible, check in during off-hours to avoid long waits.

Regular room prices start at around \$180—comparable to prices at a Disney Moderate resort—and we've found Internet-only rates here for as little as \$99 per night, making the hotel one of the best bargains in Orlando. (Rates do not include a \$17-per-night resort fee.) Overall, the Buena Vista Palace is certainly one of the top couple of hotels in the Downtown Disney area.

Doubletree Guest Suites ★★★★★

THIS GIANT WHITE BUNKER of a hotel is the only all-suite establishment on Disney World property. What Doubletree Guest Suites lacks in atmosphere and creative attributes, it makes up for in convenience and comfort. Located within walking distance of Downtown Disney, the 229 suites are spacious for a family, although the decor is startling, with no apparent theme. No rooms have balconies, though ground floors offer patios.

2000 Hotel Plaza Boulevard
 ☎ 407-828-2424 or
 800-348-3765
www.lakebuenavistaresorthotel.com

1900 Buena Vista Drive
 ☎ 407-827-2727
www.buenavistapalace.com

2305 Hotel Plaza Boulevard
 ☎ 407-934-1000
www.doubletreeguestsuites.com

Amenities include a safe, hair dryer, refrigerator, microwave, coffeepot, fold-out bed, two TVs (bedroom and living room), and even a black-and-white TV-radio in the bathroom.

Children will enjoy the kids' check-in desk and complimentary chocolate-chip cookie and small playground. The heated pool, children's pool, and whirlpool spa are moderate in size, and traffic noise from I-4 can faintly be heard from the pool deck. The tiny fitness center (more like a fitness closet), pool table, four tennis courts, and outdoor bar are adjacent to the pool. High-speed Internet and a business center in the lobby (includes fax, printer, two computers, and copier) are convenient for those on working holidays. The Market (open 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.) offers groceries, drinks, ice cream, and sundae for those late-night munchies; Evergreen Cafe, a new eco-friendly restaurant, serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Babysitting service is available.

Hilton Walt Disney World ★★★★★

THIS UPSCALE HILTON is the nicest hotel in the Downtown Disney Resort Area, challenged only by the Buena Vista Palace. It's also the only DDRA hotel offering Disney's Extra Magic Hours program to its guests. Rooms are a cut above others in the DDRA. Dining on-site includes the Covington Mill Restaurant, offering American sandwiches and pasta; Andiamo, an Italian bistro; and Benihana, a Japanese steak house

and sushi bar. Covington Mill hosts a Disney character breakfast on Sundays. The two pools are matched with a children's "spray pool" and a 24-hour fitness center. An exercise room and game room are available, as is a 24-hour market. Babysitting is available, but there are no organized children's programs. (See page 251 for family-hotel profile.)

A Denver family of five found the Hilton's shuttle service lacking:

Transportation from the Hilton, provided by a company called Mears, was unreliable. They did a better job of getting guests back to the hotel from the park than getting them to the park from the hotel. Shuttles from the hotel were randomly timed and went repeatedly to the same parks—skipping others and leaving guests to wait for up to an hour.

Regal Sun Resort ★★½

LOCATED ACROSS FROM DOWNTOWN DISNEY and formerly known as the Grosvenor, the Regal Sun has recently reopened following an extensive refurbishment. The first noticeable improvement is the lobby, now made bright and airy. Check-in service is friendly, but we've had reports of minor issues, which we think are attributable to the staff still getting the hang of a new computer system. The rooms are larger than most and renovated as well,

with new furniture and bedding along with in-room refrigerators. Pool-facing rooms in the hotel's wings have exterior hallways that overlook the pool and center courtyard; these hallways can be noisy during summer months. Elevators are available, but they're unusually slow—it's probably faster to walk to the second and third floors, assuming you're up for the exercise.

1751 Hotel Plaza Boulevard
☎ 407-827-4000
www.hilton-wdvw.com

1850 Hotel Plaza Boulevard
☎ 407-828-4444
or 800-624-4109
www.regalsunresort.com

Royal Plaza ★★★★★ (tower rooms); ★★★★ (garden rooms)

THE ROYAL PLAZA REOPENED IN 2006 after an extensive renovation, motivated in part by damage sustained during the 2004 hurricane season. The old generic decor has been replaced with stylish, muted blues in standard rooms and vibrant yellows, rich reds, and warm wood tones in the hotel's tower rooms. Bathroom space in the standard rooms is on the smaller side, while tower rooms have more than enough elbowroom. Each room has a small sitting area, a desk, and high-speed Internet access. New soft goods, including towels, curtains, and pillow-top mattresses, are upgrades from previous versions.

The Giraffe Café serves American breakfast, lunch, and dinner; the attached Giraffe Lounge is the main hotel bar, though Sips is open seasonally poolside. The pool itself is comfortable and pleasant, though not flashy or particularly kid-oriented. Four lighted tennis courts and an exercise room are available.

Service at the Royal Plaza is very good, with many of the original employees having returned after the two-year renovation. We've thrown a number of unique situations at this staff over the years, all handled with the grace and aplomb of seasoned professionals. The Royal Plaza's main competition in the Downtown Disney area seems to be the Buena Vista Palace (see page 205), which offers slightly larger rooms of similar quality and more amenities, frequently at lower rates. Because of this, establishing the right price for its rooms is going to be crucial for the Royal Plaza over the next year or so. You'd choose the Royal Plaza if the cost were comparable and you had even the slightest feeling that you might need help from the hotel staff during your trip. Discounts are often available at **Mouse Savers.com**.

On the first and second floors, ask for rooms X49 to X64. Tower rooms X02 to X07, 14, 16, and 17 are also good. The other rooms on the first two levels are subject to more foot traffic, noise from public spaces, and guests entering and leaving the main building. While they'll have less traffic, tower rooms not listed above can pick up noise from the elevators and ice machines on each floor.

CAMPING AT WALT DISNEY WORLD

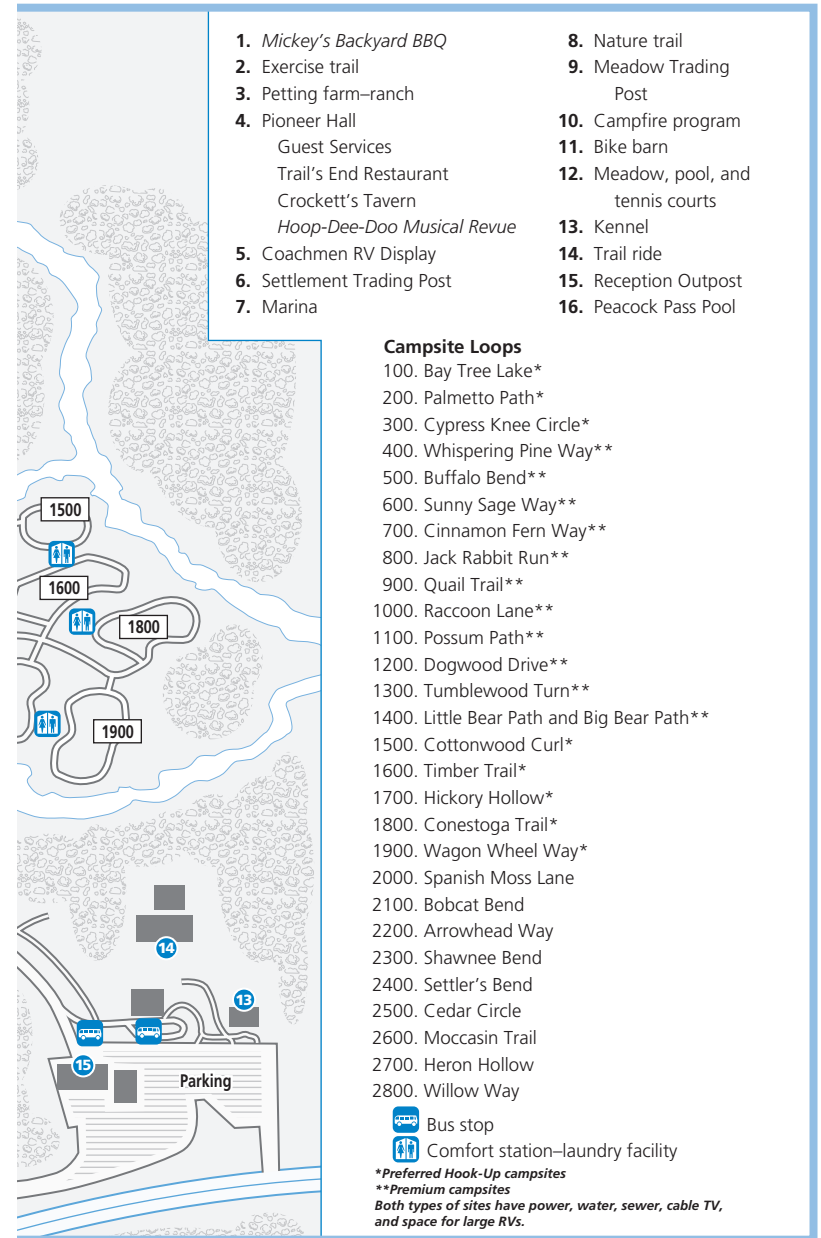
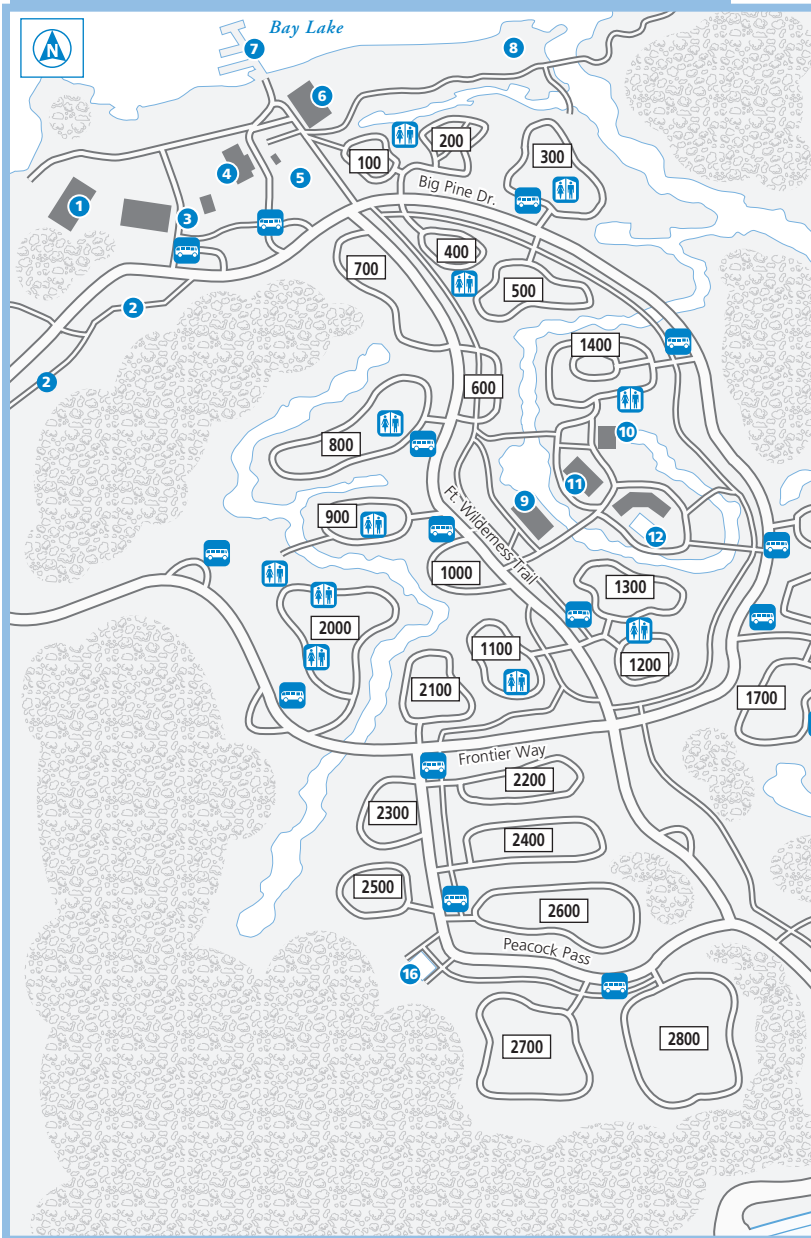
FORT WILDERNESS RESORT & CAMPGROUND is a spacious area for tent and RV camping. Fully equipped, air-conditioned prefabricated log cabins are also available for rent.

Tent/Pop-Up campsites provide water, electricity, and cable TV and run from \$43 to \$73 depending on season. **Preferred Hook-Up** campsites for tents and RVs have all of the above plus sewer connections and run from \$57 to \$91 per night. **Full Hook-Up** campsites accommodate large RVs and run from \$62 to \$96 per night. **Premium** campsites add an extra-large concrete parking pad and run from \$72 to \$106 a night.

All sites are level and provide picnic tables, waste containers, grills, and high-speed Internet (additional fee). No fires are permitted except in the grills. Pets are permitted in some Premium, Full Hook-Up, and Preferred loops.

1905 Hotel Plaza Boulevard
☎ 407-828-2828 or
800-248-7890
www.royalplaza.com


Fort Wilderness Resort & Campground



- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Mickey's Backyard BBQ | 8. Nature trail |
| 2. Exercise trail | 9. Meadow Trading Post |
| 3. Petting farm-ranch | 10. Campfire program |
| 4. Pioneer Hall | 11. Bike barn |
| Guest Services | 12. Meadow, pool, and tennis courts |
| Trail's End Restaurant | 13. Kennel |
| Crockett's Tavern | 14. Trail ride |
| Hoop-Dee-Do Musical Revue | 15. Reception Outpost |
| 5. Coachmen RV Display | 16. Peacock Pass Pool |
| 6. Settlement Trading Post | |
| 7. Marina | |

Campsite Loops

- 100. Bay Tree Lake*
- 200. Palmetto Path*
- 300. Cypress Knee Circle*
- 400. Whispering Pine Way**
- 500. Buffalo Bend**
- 600. Sunny Sage Way**
- 700. Cinnamon Fern Way**
- 800. Jack Rabbit Run**
- 900. Quail Trail**
- 1000. Raccoon Lane**
- 1100. Possum Path**
- 1200. Dogwood Drive**
- 1300. Tumblewood Turn**
- 1400. Little Bear Path and Big Bear Path**
- 1500. Cottonwood Curl*
- 1600. Timber Trail*
- 1700. Hickory Hollow*
- 1800. Conestoga Trail*
- 1900. Wagon Wheel Way*
- 2000. Spanish Moss Lane
- 2100. Bobcat Bend
- 2200. Arrowhead Way
- 2300. Shawnee Bend
- 2400. Settler's Bend
- 2500. Cedar Circle
- 2600. Moccasin Trail
- 2700. Heron Hollow
- 2800. Willow Way

 Bus stop

 Comfort station-laundry facility

*Preferred Hook-Up campsites

**Premium campsites

Both types of sites have power, water, sewer, cable TV, and space for large RVs.

FORT WILDERNESS RESORT & CAMPGROUND

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Informality	Isolated location
Children's play areas	Complicated bus service
Best recreational options at WDW	Confusing campground layout
Special day and evening programs	Lack of privacy
Campsite amenities	Very limited on-site dining options
Shower and toilet facilities	Limited automobile traffic
<i>Hoop-Dee-Do Musical Revue</i> show	Crowding at beaches and pools
Convenient self-parking	Small baths in cabins
Off-site dining via boat at Magic Kingdom	Extreme distance to store and restaurant facilities from many campsites

Campsites are arranged on loops accessible from one of three main roads. There are 28 loops, with loops 100 to 2000 for tent and RV campers, and loops 2100 to 2800 offering cabins at \$265 to \$410 per night. RV sites are roomy by eastern-U.S. standards, with the Premium and Full Hook-Up campsites able to accommodate RVs more than 45 feet long, but tent campers will probably feel a bit cramped. (Note that tent stakes cannot be put into the concrete at the Premium sites.) On any given day, 90% or more of campers are RV-ers.

Fort Wilderness Resort & Campground arguably offers the most recreational facilities and activities of any Disney resort. Among them are two video arcades; nightly campfire programs; Disney movies; a dinner theater; two swimming pools; a beach; walking paths; bike, boat, canoe, golf-cart, and water-ski rentals; a petting zoo; horseback riding; hay rides; fishing; and tennis, basketball, and volleyball courts. There are two convenience stores, a restaurant, and a tavern. Comfort stations with toilets, showers, pay phones, ice machine, and laundry facilities are within walking distance of all campsites.

Access to the Magic Kingdom is by boat from Fort Wilderness Landing, and to Epcot by bus with a transfer at the Transportation and Ticket Center (TTC) to the Epcot monorail. An alternate route to the Magic Kingdom is by internal bus to the TTC, then by monorail or ferry to the park. Transportation to all other Disney destinations is by bus. Motor traffic within the campground is permitted only when entering or exiting. Get around within the campground by bus, golf cart, or bike, the latter two available for rent.

For tent and RV campers, there's a fairly stark trade-off between sites convenient to pools, restaurant, trading posts, and other amenities, and those that are most scenic, shady, and quiet. RV-ers who prefer to be near guest services, the marina, the beach, and the restaurant and tavern should go for loops 100, 200, 700, and 400 (in that order). Loops near the campground's secondary facility area with pool, trading post, bike and golf-cart rentals, and campfire program are 1400, 1300, 600, 1000, and 1500, in order of preference. If you're looking for a tranquil, scenic setting among mature trees, we recommend loops

1800, 1900, 1700, and 1600, in that order, and the backside sites on the 700 loop. The best loop of all, and the only one to offer both a lovely setting and proximity to key amenities, is loop 300. The best loops for tents and pop-up campers are loops 1500 and 2000, with 1500 being nearest a pool, convenience store, and the campfire program.

With the exception of loops 1800 and 1900, avoid sites within 40 yards of the loop entrance. These sites are almost always flanked by one of the main traffic arteries within Fort Wilderness. Further, sites on the outside of the loop are almost always preferable to those in the center of the loop. RV-ers should be forewarned that all sites are back-ins and that although most sites will accommodate large rigs, the loop access roads are pretty tight and narrow.

Rental cabins offer a double bed and two bunk beds in the only bedroom, augmented by a Murphy bed (pulls down from the wall) in the living room. There's one rather small bathroom with shower and tub.

The prefab log cabins (classified as Moderate resorts in the Disney hierarchy) are warm and homey, but the stem-to-stern interior wood paneling and smallish windows make for pretty dark accommodations at night. Neither the lighting fixtures provided nor the wattage of their bulbs are up to the job of lighting the cabins once the sun goes down.

All cabins offer air-conditioning, color televisions with VCRs, fully equipped kitchens, and dining tables. Housekeeping is provided daily. Most readers are crazy about the cabins. Some representative comments follow.

A Wappingers Falls, New York, family writes:

We stayed at Fort Wilderness in a cabin because

- *We wanted a separate bedroom area.*
- *We wanted a kitchen.*
- *Our kids are very lively and the cabins were apart from each other so we wouldn't disturb other guests.*
- *We thought the kids might meet other children to play with.*

The cabins worked out just right for us. Although the kids did not meet any other children to play with, they had a ball chasing the little lizards and frogs, kicking around pinecones, sitting on the deck to eat ice pops, and sleeping in bunk beds. We went to the campfire twice (we brought our own marshmallows and sticks). Our cabin was a short walk to our bus stop and two "blocks" away from the pool and laundry. I loved the dishwasher, the generous storage space, the extra towels, the air-conditioning, and the daily cleaning service. There was no canned music or fake bird calls in the trees, just peace and quiet.

This Massachusetts mother of two preschoolers needed more storage space:

We liked Fort Wilderness a lot, but the cabins need a full-sized dresser. It was a pain having to live out of two suitcases all week.

From a Downers Grove, Illinois, family of five:

While we all enjoyed the cabins and resort, we spent a LOT of time waiting for buses and ferries, more than we remember waiting a few

years ago. They've recently made some changes to the bus routes, and while we liked having a stop at the Meadow area, there was always a long wait for a purple bus to take us back to the cabin when returning from the parks (from both depots). They need a separate bus route just for the cabins, since many of the campers have cars and/or golf carts, an expense we didn't want after spending so much for the cabin. This factor may make us consider a different resort/villa for our next trip unless the bus system for the cabins is improved.

A Rochester, New York, dad agrees:

If you're staying at Fort Wilderness Cabins, we would highly recommend getting a golf cart. There is a lot going on at the campground itself, and the bus system can be cumbersome. Also, our 3-year-old wasn't always up for the walk—just getting from our cabin to the main loop was a lot for her.

A mother of two from Albuquerque, New Mexico, offers this:

Regarding Fort Wilderness: We stayed in a cabin and liked having all the space and the full kitchen. I was very disappointed in the pools, restaurant, and service, however. I had expected a Disney-resort pool, and instead there were only two relatively small concrete holes in the ground. The pool nearest our cabin (still a quarter mile away!) never even had a lifeguard. I had hoped to be able to send the kids to the pool without us when we needed some adult time to ourselves, but with the distance and lack of lifeguards, there was no way to do that.

The restaurant (one mile away) was good, but it was an all-you-can-eat-buffet with adult prices for ages 10 and over at about \$25. I'm unwilling to pay \$25 for my 10-year-old daughter to eat one chicken wing and Jell-O very often. We only ate there once. I guess they figured that if you had a kitchen or were camping, you were committed to cooking every meal. It would have been nice after a tiring day to get a light meal or salad.

Though the cabins are especially popular, RV and tent campers love Fort Wilderness, too. First from a Marietta, Georgia, multi-generational family:

I do wish you would stress more the advantages of using Fort Wilderness. With sites for any size/type of camper/tent, it is FAR more affordable than any hotel inside the park. Additionally, you could theoretically (although not likely) prepare all of your own meals. We usually had breakfast, packed snacks, and returned for lunch and dinner every day. We were able to decrease our food budget and devote it to a character lunch and tea at the Grand Floridian. Additionally, Fort Wilderness provides a place for kids to ride bikes, two 24-hour pools, nightly movies, sing-alongs, s'mores roasts, and direct access to the Magic Kingdom. Honestly, the "comfort stations" are nicer than the bathrooms you see on the HGTV shows. If you want to see the fireworks any night you're not in the park, make your way to the beach for a terrific view. It's an affordable alternative in a nonaffordable "world."

A mother of two from Mechanicsville, Virginia, puts Fort Wilderness on a pedestal as well:

The quality of camping at Fort Wilderness is second to none! The sites are level, the activities great! This is one of the few ways that a family on a fixed income can enjoy a true WDW vacation. Even those who don't own a camper can make the investment in simple camping equipment (that can be used repeatedly) and enjoy a week at the World for as low as \$41 per day for lodging, not to mention the savings on dining. When staying here, you can bring your own food. You can pack sandwiches for the parks and barbecue at dinner. Every site has a charcoal grill.

Now, the most important thing—the family time. This is the only resort where you are encouraged to go outside and play! Your kids are not stuck in a hotel room, at the pool, or at an arcade. You can bike, swim, visit two arcades, hike the nature trail, ride a horse, rent a boat, play volleyball, go to the beach, attend a free character sing-along and marshmallow roast followed by a classic Disney movie that many younger families never knew existed (we were introduced to Snowball Express and Robin Hood), enjoy multiple playgrounds, play tennis, rent a golf cart, walk around at night to see the festively decorated campsites (many Disney-themed), take a romantic carriage ride, take your first pony ride, find the armadillo that lives next to the bathrooms in the 1300 loop, and see a wild turkey. Don't forget the fishing or the great view of the fireworks from the beach or the up-close water light parade. It may not be for everyone, but for a family who thinks they can't afford the Disney experience, this is a GREAT option. With all of this stuff, much of it free or very affordable, who needs the parks? We visited last June and never set foot in a park.

Bus service at Fort Wilderness leaves a lot to be desired, so much in fact that we wouldn't stay there unless we had our own car. To go anywhere you first have to catch an internal bus that makes many, many stops. If your destination is outside Fort Wilderness, you then have to transfer to a second bus. To complicate things, buses serving destinations outside the campground depart from two locations, the Reception Outpost and Pioneer Hall. This means that you have to keep track of which destinations each transfer center serves.

Finally, if you rent a cabin or camp in a tent or RV, particularly in fall or spring, keep abreast of local weather conditions. This is not the place to be in a tornado.

A number of independent campgrounds are within 30 miles of Walt Disney World. Here are the closest:

Kissimmee-Orlando KOA ☎ 407-396-2400; www.kissorlandokoa.com. 96 licensed sites; approximately six miles to Walt Disney World US 192 (Maingate) entrance.

Sherwood Forest RV Resort ☎ 800-548-9981; www.mhcrv.com. 531 licensed sites; approximately four miles to Walt Disney World US 192 (Maingate) entrance.

Tropical Palms Encore SuperPark and Cottages ☎ 407-396-4595; www.tropicalpalmsrv.com. 441 licensed sites; approximately 2.5 miles to Walt Disney World US 192 (Maingate) entrance.

Disney Lodging for Less

Mary Waring, *Webmaster at MouseSavers.com* (see page 28), *knows more about Disney hotel packages than anyone on the planet. Here are her money-saving suggestions.*

BOOK “ROOM-ONLY.” It’s frequently a better deal to book a room-only reservation instead of buying a vacation package. Disney likes to sell vacation packages because they’re easy and profitable. When you buy a package, you’re typically paying a premium for convenience. You can often save money by putting together your own package. It’s not hard: just book room-only at a resort and buy passes, meals, and extras separately.

Disney now prices its standard packages at the same rates as if you had purchased individual components separately at full price. However, what Disney doesn’t tell you is that components can usually be purchased separately at a discount—and those discounts are not reflected in the brochure prices of Disney’s packages. (Sometimes you can get special-offer packages that do include discounts; see below.)

Keep in mind that Disney’s packages often include extras you are unlikely to use. Also, packages require a \$200 deposit and full payment 45 days in advance; plus, they have stringent change and cancellation policies. Generally, booking room-only requires a deposit of one night’s room rate with the remainder due at check-in. Your reservation can be changed or canceled for any reason until five days before check-in.

Whether you decide to book a Disney vacation package or create your own, there are a number of ways to save:

- **Use discount codes to reduce your room-only rate.** Disney uses these codes to push unsold rooms at certain times of year. (In the past two years, however, these codes have become scarcer.) Check a Web site like **MouseSavers.com** to learn about codes that may be available for your vacation dates. Some codes are available to anyone, while others are just for Florida residents, Annual Pass holders, and so on.

Discount codes aren’t always available for every hotel or every date, and they typically don’t appear until two to six months in advance. The good news is that you can usually apply a code to an existing room-only reservation. Simply call the Disney Reservations

Center at ☎ 407-W-DISNEY (or contact a Disney-savvy travel agent) and ask whether any rooms are available at your preferred hotel for your preferred dates using the code.

- **Use discount codes to reduce your vacation package rate.** Disney occasionally offers packages that include resort discounts or value-added features such as a free dining plan. For those who like the convenience of packages, these offers are well worth seeking out. You’ll need to present a discount code to get the special package rates. Check a Web site like **MouseSavers.com** to get more information. As with room-discount codes, package-discount codes aren’t available for every hotel or every date, and they typically don’t appear until two to six months in advance. You can usually apply a code to an existing package reservation. Again, call the Disney Reservations Center at ☎ 407-W-DISNEY (or contact a Disney-savvy travel agent) and ask whether any rooms are available at your preferred hotel for your preferred dates using the package code.
- **Be flexible.** Buying a room or package with a discount code is a little like shopping for clothes at a discount store: if you wear size XX-small or XXXX-large, or you like green when everyone else is wearing pink, you’re a lot more likely to score a bargain. Likewise, resort discounts are available only when Disney has excess rooms. You’re more likely to get a discount during less-popular times (such as value season) and at larger or less-popular resorts. Animal Kingdom Lodge and Old Key West seem to have discounted rooms available more often than the other resorts do.
- **Be persistent.** This is the most important tip. Disney allots a certain number of rooms to each discount; reportedly this averages 100 rooms per night per code. Once the discounted rooms are gone, you won’t get that rate unless someone cancels. Fortunately, people change and cancel reservations all the time. If you can’t get your preferred dates or hotel with one discount code, try another one (if available) or keep calling back first thing in the morning to check for cancellations—the system resets overnight, and any reservations with unpaid deposits are automatically released for resale.

HOW to EVALUATE a WALT DISNEY WORLD TRAVEL PACKAGE

HUNDREDS OF WALT DISNEY WORLD PACKAGE VACATIONS are offered each year. Some are created by the Walt Disney Travel Company, others by airline touring companies, independent travel agents, and wholesalers. Almost all include lodging at or near Disney World

plus theme-park admissions. Packages offered by airlines include air transportation.

Prices vary seasonally; mid-March through Easter, summer, and holiday periods are the most expensive. Off-season, forget packages: there are plenty of empty rooms, and you can negotiate great discounts, especially at non-Disney properties. Similarly, airfares and rental cars are cheaper off-peak.

unofficial TIP
If you consider a non-Disney hotel, check its quality as reported in independent travel references such as the *Unofficial Guides*, AAA directories, Mobil guides, or *Frommer’s* guides.

Almost all package ads are headlined “5 Days at Walt Disney World from \$645” (or such). The key word is *from*: the rock-bottom price includes the least desirable hotels; if you want better or more-convenient digs, you’ll pay more—often much more.

Packages offer a wide selection of hotels. Some, like the Disney resorts, are very dependable. Others run the gamut of quality.

Checking two or three independent sources is best. Also, before you book, ask how old the hotel is and when the guest rooms were last refurbished. Locate the hotel on a map to verify its proximity to Disney World. If you won’t have a car, make sure that the hotel has an adequate shuttle service.

Packages with non-Disney lodging are much less expensive. But guests at Disney-owned properties get Extra Magic Hours privileges, free parking, and access to the Disney transportation system. These privileges (except Extra Magic Hours for Hilton guests) don’t apply to guests at the independent hotels of the Downtown Disney Resort Area (Buena Vista Palace Hotel & Spa, Regal Sun Resort, Doubletree Guest Suites Resort, Hilton, Holiday Inn at Walt Disney World, Royal Plaza, and Best Western Lake Buena Vista Resort Hotel).

Packages should be a win-win proposition for both buyer and seller. The buyer makes only one phone call and deals with one salesperson to set up the whole vacation (transportation, rental car, admissions, lodging, meals, and even golf and tennis). The seller, likewise, deals with the buyer only once. Some packagers also buy airfares in bulk on contract, not unlike a broker playing the commodities market. By buying a large number of airfares in advance, the packager saves significantly over posted fares. The practice is also applied to hotel rooms. Because selling packages is efficient and the packager often can buy package components in bulk at discount, the seller’s savings in operating expenses are sometimes passed on to the buyer, making the package not only convenient but also an exceptional value.

In practice, however, the seller may realize all the economies and pass on no savings. Packages sometimes are loaded with extras that cost the packager almost nothing but run the package’s price sky-high. Savings passed on to customers are still somewhere in Fantasyland.

Choose a package that includes features you’re sure to use. You’ll pay for all of them whether you use them or not. If price is more important than convenience, call around to see what the package would cost if you booked its components on your own. If the package price is less than the à la carte cost, the package is a good deal. If costs are about equal, the package probably is worth it for the convenience. Much of the time, however, you’ll find you save significantly by buying the components individually.

WALT DISNEY TRAVEL COMPANY MAGIC YOUR WAY PACKAGES

DISNEY’S MAGIC YOUR WAY travel-package program mirrors the admission-ticket program of the same name. Here’s how it works: You begin with a base package room and tickets. Tickets can be customized to match the number of days you intend to tour the theme parks, and

range in length from one to ten days. As with theme-park admissions, the package program offers strong financial incentives to book a longer stay. “The longer you play, the less you pay per day,” is the way Disney puts it, borrowing a page from Sam Walton’s concept of the universe. A one-day adult base ticket (with tax) costs \$79.88, whereas if you buy a seven-day ticket, the average cost per day drops to \$34.69. You can purchase options to add on to your base tickets, such as hopping between theme parks; visiting water parks, DisneyQuest, or ESPN Wide World of Sports; and buying your way out of an expiration date for any unused ticket features.

With Magic Your Way packages, you can avoid paying for features you don’t intend to use. No longer must you purchase a package with theme-park tickets for your entire length of stay. With Magic Your Way you can choose to purchase as many days of admission as you intend to use. On a one-week vacation, for example, you might want to spend only five days in the Disney parks, saving a day each for Universal Studios and SeaWorld. With Magic Your Way you can buy only five days of admission on a seven-day package. Likewise, if you do not normally park-hop, you can now purchase multiday admissions that do not include the park-hopping feature. If you don’t use all your admissions, you can opt for the No Expiration add-on, and the unused days will be good forever. Best of all, you can buy the various add-ons at any time during your vacation.

Before we deluge you with a boxcar of options and add-ons, let’s define the basic components of Disney’s Magic Your Way package:

- One or more nights of accommodations at your choice of any Disney resort. Rates vary with lodging choice: the Grand Floridian is the most expensive, the All-Star and Pop Century the least expensive.
- Magic Your Way Base Ticket for the number of days you tour the theme parks.
- Unlimited use of the Disney transportation system.
- Free theme-park parking.
- Official Walt Disney Travel Company luggage tag (one per person).

Magic Your Way Dining Plans

Disney offers dining plans to accompany its Magic Your Way ticket system. They’re available to all Disney-resort guests except those staying at the Swan, the Dolphin, the hotels of the Downtown Disney Resort Area, and Shades of Green, none of which are Disney-owned or -operated. Guests must also purchase a Magic Your Way package, have Annual Passes, or be members of the Disney Vacation Club (DVC) to participate in the plan. Except for DVC members, a three-night minimum stay is typically also required. Overall cost is determined by the number of nights you stay at a Disney resort.

As a family of five from Waldron, Michigan, learned, you must purchase a Disney package vacation to be eligible for a dining plan:

We read through the Unofficial Guide and noticed that it said not to book a package during slow season. We were overwhelmed with the decisions that we had to make, so we booked the resort first, then

the tickets, and then we wanted the dining plan. Well, they wouldn't add the dining plan on because we had already booked everything. I talked with other families who have been to Disney, and not once did anybody mention that we needed to book everything all at once.

MAGIC YOUR WAY PLUS DINING PLAN Introduced in 2005, this dining plan provides, for each member of your group, for each night of your stay, one counter-service meal, one full-service meal, and one snack at participating Disney dining locations and restaurants, including room service at some Disney resorts (type “Disney Dining Plan Locations 2010” into your favorite Internet search engine to find sites with the entire list). For guests age 10 and up, the price is \$39.99 per night; for guests ages 3 to 9, the price is \$10.99 per night, tax included. Children younger than age 3 eat free from an adult’s plate.

The counter-service meal includes a main course (sandwich, dinner salad, pizza, or the like), dessert, and nonalcoholic drink, or a complete combo meal (a main course and a side dish—think burger and fries), dessert, and nonalcoholic drink, including tax. The full-service sit-down meals include a main course, dessert, a nonalcoholic drink, and tax. If you’re dining at a buffet, the full-service meal includes the buffet, a nonalcoholic drink, and tax. The snack includes items normally sold from carts or small stands throughout the parks and resorts: ice cream, popcorn, soft drinks, fruit, chips, apple juice, and the like.

For instance, if you’re staying for three nights, each member of your party will be credited with three counter-service meals, three full-service meals, and three snacks. All those meals will be put into an individual “meal account” for each person in your group. Meals in your account can be used on any combination of days, so you’re not required to eat every meal every day. Thus, you can skip a full-service meal one day and have two on another day.

Disney’s top-of-the-line restaurants (dubbed “Disney Signature” restaurants in the plan), along with all the dinner shows, count as two full-service meals. If you dine at one of these locations, two full-service meals will be deducted from your account for each person dining.

In addition to the preceding, the dining plan comes with several other important rules:

- Everyone staying in the same resort room must participate in the plan.
- Children ages 3 to 9 must order from the kids’ menu, if one is available. This rule is occasionally not enforced at Disney’s counter-service restaurants, enabling older children to order from the regular (adult) menu.
- In-room minibars and refillable mugs are not included in the plan.
- A full-service meal can be breakfast, lunch, or dinner. The greatest savings occur when you use your full-service meal allocations for dinner.
- The meal plan expires at midnight **on the day you check out** of the Disney resort. **Unused meals are nonrefundable.**
- The dining plan is occasionally unavailable when using certain room-only discounts.

QUICK SERVICE DINING PLAN This new plan includes meals, snacks, and nonalcoholic drinks at most counter-service eateries in Walt Disney World. The cost is \$29.99 per day for guests age 10 and up, \$8.99 per day for kids ages 3 to 9. The plan includes two counter-service meals and two snacks per day, plus one refillable drink mug per person, per package (eligible for refills only at counter-service locations only in your Disney resort), and 30 minutes of play at a Disney-resort arcade. The economics of the plan are difficult to justify unless you’re drinking gallons of soda or coffee to offset Disney’s inflated prices.

MAGIC YOUR WAY DELUXE DINING PLAN Another new plan, this one offers a choice of full-service or counter-service meals for three meals a day at any participating restaurant. In addition to the three meals a day, the plan also includes two snacks per day and a refillable drink mug. The Deluxe Plan costs \$69.99 for adults and \$19.99 for children for each night of your stay. Cranking it up another notch, there are even more extravagant dining plans associated with Magic Your Way Premium and Platinum packages, both described a little later.


In addition to food, all the plans include deal sweeteners such as a free round of miniature golf, a certificate for a 5-by-10-inch print from Disney’s PhotoPass, a sort of two-for-one certificate for use of Sea Raycers watercraft, a “commemorative” luggage tag, and such.

Disney ceaselessly tinkers with the dining plans’ rules, meal definitions, and participating restaurants. For example, it’s possible (though not documented) to exchange a sit-down-meal credit for a counter-service meal, although doing this even once can negate any savings you get from using a plan in the first place.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN EVALUATING THE PLUS DINING PLAN If you prefer to always eat at counter-service restaurants, you’ll be better off with the Quick Service plan. Other poor candidates for the Plus plan include finicky eaters, light eaters, families who can’t agree on restaurants, and those who can’t get reservations at their first- or second-choice sit-down restaurants.

When the dining plan was first introduced, it included an appetizer and gratuity for each full-service meal, making it a pretty good deal for many families; by our estimate, savings of up to 13% per person per day were possible in some of Disney’s best restaurants. As a result, the dining plan was one of the most requested of Disney’s package add-ons.

Alas, with the initial success of the plan, Disney saw an opportunity to make more money. In 2008, Disney eliminated the appetizer and gratuity from the plan, increasing the cost of a full-service meal by at least 15% to 18% for the gratuity alone, and an additional 15% to 20% per appetizer per person. (To be fair, many appetizers are

 **unofficial TIP 13**
The Plus dining plan costs \$39.99/day for adults and \$10.99/day for kids ages 3–9. Combining two of your table-service options, you can eat one meal higher on the hog at Disney’s more upscale eateries. Maximizing the value of the dining plan requires research and planning, but the money you can save is worth the time and effort. The average counter-service meal runs \$8–\$10 for an adult, and the price of the more expensive dishes at many Disney restaurants can total more than the daily cost of the Plus plan.

large enough to share.) Some of the pricier entrees were modified or eliminated from menus.

These changes should make every family reconsider the economics of the dining plan. Our research indicates that the plan still saves the typical family around \$4 to \$7 per person per day, assuming the family uses every meal credit. But skipping a single full-service meal during a visit of five or fewer days can mean the difference between saving and losing money. In our experience, having a scheduled sit-down meal for every day of a weeklong vacation can be mentally exhausting, especially for kids and teens. One option might be to schedule a meal at a Disney Signature restaurant, which requires two full-service credits, and have no scheduled sit-down meal on another night in the middle of your trip, allowing everyone to decide on the spot whether they're up for something formal.

Many of the most popular restaurants are fully booked as soon as their reservation window opens, so book your restaurants as soon as possible, typically 90 to 180 days before you visit. Then decide whether the dining plan makes economic sense. For more on Advance Reservations—the term is Disney-speak (hence the capital letters) and not exactly what it implies—see Part Ten.

If you're making reservations at restaurants in Disney hotels other than your own, a car allows you to easily access all the participating restaurants. When you use the Disney transportation system, dining at the various Disney-resort restaurants can be a logistical nightmare. Those without a car may want to weigh the immediate services of a taxi (typically at \$10 to \$12 each way across Disney property) versus a 45- to 60-minute trip on Disney transportation each way.

For an in-depth discussion of the various plans, including number-crunching (with algebra, even!), visit **Touring Plans.com** (click “Dining” on the home page, then “Disney Dining Plan”).

Readers who tried the Disney dining plan had varying experiences. A mother of two from Marshalltown, Iowa, volunteered the following:

The dining plan is great in theory, but it had way too much food and used too much valuable park time for the table-service meals. We won't use it again.

From a Minnesota family of three:

We purchased the basic Disney Dining Plan, and I my wife and I were almost overwhelmed by the amount of food we received. I skipped a counter-service meal one day, which allowed my son to use [the meal credit] for breakfast from the resort food court the next day.

A St. Louis family of three comments:

We purchased the dining plan and would never do it again. Far too expensive, far too much food, and then you have to tip on top of the expense. Additionally, table-service meals were hard to use for us, reservations hard to obtain. Much easier to purchase what you want, where and when you want. (Intended to use a counter-service meal at

McDonald's at Epcot for 12-year-old. Found out you had to get the large [nine-piece] nuggets, the large fries, a large drink, and a McFlurry in order to use the counter-service meal. Most adults I know wouldn't eat that much food, let alone a 12-year-old!) Food is a “gotcha” at Disney, but the dining plan proved to be a poor choice for us.

A Toronto family says gratuities add up:

Families should be warned that tips in Disney table-service restaurants can add up quickly in a week. The tip for our party of five at Le Cellier alone was \$45.

A father of two from Danbury, Connecticut, however, gave the plan a thumbs-up.

We had the dining plan, so all of our meals were on the property. We were pleasantly surprised at both the service and quality of food. The entertainment during the meals, especially at the 50's Prime Time Cafe and Whispering Canyon, really added to the meals.

A Belmont, Massachusetts, dad likes the Quick Service Dining Plan:

If you intend to eat Disney food, the counter-service meal plan is a good option. We didn't want the full plan because the restaurants seemed overpriced, and the necessity of reservations months in advance seemed crazy and a bar to flexibility. You get two counter-service meals (entree/combo, dessert, drink) and two snacks (food item or drink) per person per as part of the plan, and even though kids' meals are cheaper, there is no distinction when you order—kids can order (more-expensive) adult meals.

But a reader from The Woodlands, Texas, laments that the plan has altered the focus of her vacation:

For me, the Disney Dining Plan has taken a lot of the fun out of going to Disney World. No longer are we free to enjoy the parks and fit in meals as a secondary matter. Now, dining for each day must be planned months in advance unless one is to eat just hot dogs, pizza, and other walk-up items. As heretical as it may sound, I'm actually less inclined to go to WDW now. I want to have fun. I don't want to be locked into a tight schedule, always worrying about where we need to be when it's time to eat. I don't want to eat when I'm not hungry just because I have a reservation somewhere. Eating has become the primary consideration at WDW, not the parks and entertainment.

Along similar lines, a Bethany, Connecticut, dad adds this:

We took the dining plan and were disappointed. It was a lot of work to coordinate. We made travel plans six weeks prior to departure and were unable to procure reservations in our favorite restaurants (or they were at inconvenient times—9:50 p.m. at Boma). I would have canceled the meal plan but was told I'd also have to cancel the entire reservation, which would have entailed risking the airfare (airline package deal). I heard similar complaints from other patrons in the park. Fortunately, your guidebook gave

us alternate places to eat. Unless you go at a very low-attendance time or make reservations three months out, I recommend against the dining plan.

A Midland Park, New Jersey, family of four says ditto:

With so many people now using the dining plan, it seems that if you were to book a last-minute trip or miss one of your reservations, you might not be able to get a table-service meal at all—reservations were hard to come by, even though I called two months before our trip!

A mom from Orland Park, Illinois, comments on the difficulty of getting Advance Reservations:

I purchased the dining plan for this trip and must say I will never do that again. It's impossible to get table reservations anywhere good—the [restaurants] that are available are available for a reason. We found ourselves taking whatever was open and were unhappy with every sit-down meal we had, except for lunch at Liberty Tree Tavern. I do not enjoy planning my day exclusively around eating at a certain restaurant at a certain time, but that is what you must do six months in advance if you want to eat at a good sit-down restaurant in Disney. That is ridiculous.

As this reader from San Jose, California, explains, guests who are not on the dining plan need to know how the plan has affected obtaining Advance Reservations:

The Disney Dining Plan has almost eliminated any chance of spontaneity when visiting any of the sit-down restaurants. When planning 90 days out for the off-season, I was told by the Disney rep to make all my priority-seating reservations then because the restaurants are booked by people on the dining plan. In fact, I was told that most of the sit-down restaurants don't even take walk-ins anymore. Sure enough, even though I was well over 90 days away from my vacation, a lot of my restaurant choices were unavailable. I had to rearrange my entire schedule to fit the open slots at the restaurants I didn't want to miss.

Pesky Technicalities and Administrative Problems

Readers report experiencing a host of problems with both understanding and using the Disney Dining Plan. A dad from Tonawanda, New York, opines:

The dining plan is great, but unfortunately, not enough guests actually read the literature about it and become confused, leading to long, slow lines at some counter-service locations.

A family of four from Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, observes:

The impact of the Disney Dining Plan was amazing. It created longer lines at the registers because they were programmed to ring up each thing individually, or so it seemed. For instance, for a Mickey Meal, the checkout guy had to push buttons for chicken nuggets, applesauce, milk, and fries—not just one button for the entire meal. It took the guy about seven minutes to figure it and process us. Meanwhile, people stood there gazing up at the menu trying

to figure out how they could fit their meals into their dining plans. It was incredibly frustrating for those of us who paid with cash and had no interest in the overpriced plan. One mother did say that with her three boys, she was spending more time in the restaurants eating than on the rides, so hey—maybe it isn't such a bad thing after all!

A woman from Atco, New Jersey, warns:

The Disney Dining Plan does not always work for snacks, even though vendors have signs posted stating they accept the card. We were told many times, "Oh, the machine isn't working today."

An Atlanta reader has this to say:

The downside to our stay was [using credits] at the fast-food counter at Coronado Springs. I thought I was prepared. . . . NOT! Servers didn't seem to know what was included as a snack or what comprised a meal with the dining plan. It was a very frustrating experience. We spent the majority of our [credits] at the parks or other resorts.

Many families purchase the dining plan without understanding how limited the menu choices are for kids age 9 and under. First from a West Chester, Ohio, mom:

We had only one complaint in our six days there, and that was with the Disney Dining Plan. All three of our girls are under 9 and had to choose "Kid's Picks" wherever offered. We did not come across any offerings like hamburgers, hot dogs, or pizza the whole time we were there. My kids couldn't even get pizza at Pizzafari in Animal Kingdom! They were so sick of mac and cheese and chicken nuggets after day two that going out to eat wasn't that exciting for them. We were given a hard time by food-service workers when we asked about substituting something different, and we were turned down 50% of the time. On our last day, a sympathetic employee told us we could get any counter-service food we wanted and just not tell the cashier that it was for a child (apparently, for counter service, Disney doesn't keep track of whether it is for an adult or child). It did work for us on that last day, but I wish we would have known that sooner. Hope this info will help some families with young kids.

A Pittsburgh mother of three recounts a similar experience:

I have one negative comment about the Disney Dining Plan. For adults, it was great. The problem was with the kids' meals: there was no variety at all at the table-service or counter-service restaurants. My two kids were actually sick of eating macaroni and cheese and chicken fingers. The amount of food they get is also very small—OK for my 4-year-old but not for my 9-year-old, who ended up eating off my plate; otherwise, I would have had to buy something extra to fill him up. Plus, we went to a pizza place in Animal Kingdom park, and there was NO pizza on the [dining plan's] kids' menu. No pizza at a pizza place?

From a family of five:

We had the dining plan and wish we had gone to the cafeteria and asked for details on exactly what a meal consisted of. For instance,

for breakfast you could have an omelet or waffle and drink, or you could have a pastry, a piece of fruit, and two bottled drinks. The kids' meals were adequate, but you'd be in trouble if your child didn't like chicken nuggets.

From a Midwestern reader:

We could almost relate our dining experience to that of a person who receives food stamps—very restricted and always at the mercy of someone else for food selection. We spent close to \$1,000 on food and were extremely frustrated with the entire experience. I would prefer to be able to eat whatever I want rather than be restricted to certain food items at certain places.

From a Wisconsin father of two:

On the last day of our visit, we were still learning about acceptable substitutions. For example, at breakfast you can have two drinks (coffee and OJ). You can also do this for lunch, but you have to give up your dessert. In the 90-degree heat, I would have gladly given up my fattening dessert to have a bottle of cold water to bring along.

The dining plan left a family of five from Nashville, Tennessee, similarly dazed and confused:

What was annoying was the inconsistency. You can get a 16-ounce chocolate milk on the kids' plan, but only 8 ounces of white milk at many places. At the Earl of Sandwich, you can get 16 ounces of either kind. A pint of milk would count as a snack (price \$1.52), but they wouldn't count a quart of milk (price \$1.79) because it wasn't a single serving. However, in Animal Kingdom, my husband bought a water-bottle holder (price \$3.75) and used a snack credit. The kids' choices' were limited as well, maybe one or two per restaurant.

Readers also report difficulties in keeping their accounts straight. A Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, father of three says you have to watch vendors like a hawk:

We had a problem with a vendor who charged us meal service for each of the ice-cream bars we purchased. This became evident at our final sit-down meal, when we didn't have any meal vouchers left. Check the receipts after every purchase! You could save yourself a lot of hassles.

A Havre de Grace, Maryland, mom had a similar experience:

I did want to tell you that we used the dining plan and found it to be not at all user-friendly. There was a lot of confusion on how many meals were on which card, and each place charged differently. It was very frustrating to use. Anyone else using this plan should make sure they put the correct number of meals on the correct cards.

A mom from Shawnee, Kansas, found the dining plan too complex on the restaurants' end:

A comment on Disney Dining—a great savings for us, but it seems like it was tough on the servers at the restaurants. It always took FOREVER for everything to be settled. They just seemed to really dislike dealing with the plan.

Reader Tips for Getting the Most Out of the Plan

A mom from Radford, Virginia, shares this tip:

Warn people to eat lunch early if they have dinner reservations before 7 p.m. Disney does not skimp on food—if you eat a late lunch (where, by the way, they feed you the same ungodly amount of food), you WILL NOT be hungry for dinner. Also, depending on where you go, different Disney employees give you different answers on what counts as a snack. One employee told us anything under \$5, and another one said anything under \$3. Hint: Use the snacks as your breakfast once you get in the park—we did this the last two days and it worked out great!

A mom from Overland Park, Kansas, has children with dietary restrictions:

Our children are allergic to dairy products, and I found the staff were pretty willing to provide a nondairy dessert option so the kids didn't feel left out.

A mom from Brick, New Jersey, found that the dining plan streamlined her touring:

We truly enjoyed our Disney trip, and this time we purchased the Dining Plan. This was great for the kids because we did a character-dining experience every day. This helped us in the parks because we didn't have to wait in line to see the characters. Instead, we got all of our autographs during our meals.

From a Missouri family of four:

Regarding dining, we found the Dining Plan worthwhile but probably not a fantastic bargain. I felt pressure to spend all of our credits—we went crazy our last day there! It was particularly hard to spend the kids' counter-service credits. We would not have been likely to order many desserts, but they come with the meals—leaving the cost of the desserts off, we probably didn't save much money.

Magic Your Way Premium Package

With the Magic Your Way Premium Package you get lodging; Magic Your Way Premium tickets with Park Hopping and Plus Pack features; breakfast, lunch, and dinner, including character meals and dinner shows; unlimited golf, tennis, fishing excursions, and water sports; select theme-park tours; Cirque du Soleil show tickets; unlimited use of child-care facilities—everything you can think of except for alcoholic beverages. (Note: The length of the Magic Your Way Premium Package must equal the total number of nights you stay at a Disney resort, plus one day. Package length cannot be customized to fit your touring plans.)

Disney, needless to say, has built a nice profit into every component of the Magic Your Way Premium Package. If you don't use all features of

unofficial TIP
For all Magic Your Way plans, everyone in the room must be on the same package and ticket options. All tickets must be used within 14 days of first use, unless the No Expiration option is purchased.

the plan and did not purchase the No Expiration option on your tickets, Disney makes out even better.

PLATINUM PACKAGE REPRISE The favorite of high rollers who want to prepay for everything they might desire while at Walt Disney World, the Platinum Package gets you lodging; tickets; breakfast, lunch, and dinner in full-service restaurants; unlimited golf, tennis, boating, and recreation; unlimited dinner shows and character breakfasts; primo Cirque du Soleil seats; private in-room child care; unlimited use of child-care facilities; personalized itinerary planning; dinner at Victoria & Albert's restaurant; a spa treatment; a fireworks cruise; admission to select tours; reserved seating for *Fantasmic!*; and (here's the kicker) nightly turndown service! Everything you can think of, in other words, except alcoholic beverages. Per diem prices for the Platinum Package are \$209 for adults and \$144 for kids in addition to the cost of a standard Magic Your Way package—but anyone who buys this package doesn't give a Goofy fart what the prices are anyway.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

COMPARING A MAGIC YOUR WAY PACKAGE with purchasing the package components separately is a breeze.

1. Pick a Disney resort and decide how many nights you want to stay.
2. Next, work out a rough plan of what you want to do and see so you can determine the admission passes you'll require.
3. When you're ready, call the Disney Reservations Center (DRC) at ☎ 407-W-DISNEY and price a Magic Your Way package with tax for your selected resort and dates. The package will include both admissions and lodging. It's also a good idea to get a quote from a Disney-savvy travel agent (see pages 118 and 119).
4. Now, to calculate the costs of buying your accommodations and admission passes separately, call the DRC a second time. This time, price a room-only rate for the same resort and dates. Be sure to ask about the availability of any special deals. While you're still on the line, obtain the prices, with tax, for the admissions you require. If you're not sure which of the various admission options will best serve you, consult our free Admissions Option analyzer at TouringPlans.com.
5. Add the room-only rates and the admission prices. Compare this sum to the DRC quote for the Magic Your Way package.
6. Check for deals and discounts for packages, room-only rates, and admission.

When you upgrade to a Magic Your Way Premium Package, you load the plan with so many features that it's extremely difficult to price them individually. For a rough comparison, price the plan of your choice using the previous steps. To complete the picture, work up a dining budget, excluding alcohol. Add your estimated dining costs to the room-only quote and admissions quote, and compare this to the price of the plan.

THROW ME A LINE!

IF YOU BUY A PACKAGE FROM DISNEY, don't expect reservationists to offer suggestions or help you sort out your options. Generally, they

respond only to your specific questions, ducking queries that require an opinion. A reader from North Riverside, Illinois, complains:

I have received various pieces of literature from WDW, and it is very confusing to figure out everything. My wife made two telephone calls, and the representatives from WDW were very courteous. However, they only answered the questions posed and were not eager to give advice on what might be most cost-effective. [The] WDW reps would not say if we would be better off doing one thing over the other. I feel a person could spend eight hours on the phone with WDW reps and not have any more input than you get from reading the literature.

If you can't get the information you need from Disney, contact a good travel agent. Chances are the agent can help you weigh your options.

PACKAGES FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

WE'VE ALWAYS EVALUATED PACKAGES from a dollars-and-cents point of view, paying scant attention to other consideration such as time, economy, and convenience. A reader from Westchester County, New York, finally got our attention, writing:

I fully understand your position not to recommend the [Premium] plans in your guide, because they are not a good buy by financial comparison. However, when one books six rooms, as I have, with guests ages 4 through 59, including a wife, grandchildren, children, sons- and daughters-in-law, and a nanny, the thought of trying to find out what way each family segment would like to go and then arranging for it on a daily basis is a scary scenario. With the Premium Plan, they can go where they want, eat where they want, and Gramps and his roommate don't have the hassle.

A Mobile, Alabama, couple, also enthusiastic about the Premium Plan, offers these thoughts:

Our last trip was for our honeymoon, and we purchased the Premium Magic Your Way Plan. We really enjoyed most of the restaurants we ate at, and we loved being able to order anything we wanted from the menus, but I wouldn't recommend this plan to anyone who is impatient or whose goal is to see the parks. While we had plenty of time to see and do the things we wanted to do, if we had been there for a week or less I probably would have been frustrated with how much time it took to eat three table-service meals a day, once you calculate the secondary time expense of traveling to the restaurant (which may or may not be in the park you're in at the moment). There was one time in particular where we finished eating lunch and basically had to go check in for dinner almost immediately! But if a person has plenty of time, the Premium Plan can be fun, and the Cirque du Soleil tickets were a big bonus—we loved the show!

Purchasing Room-only Plus Passes versus a Package

Sue Pisaturo of Small World Vacations (www.smallworldvacations.com), a travel agency that specializes in Disney, also thinks there is more involved in a package-purchase decision than money.

Should you purchase a Walt Disney World package, or buy all the components of the package separately? There's no single answer to this confusing question.

A Walt Disney World package can be compared to a store-bought prepackaged kids' meal, the kind with the little compartments filled with meat, cheese, crackers, drink, and dessert: you just grab the package and go. It's easy, and if it's on sale, why bother doing it yourself? If it's not on sale, it still may be worth the extra money for convenience.

Purchasing the components of your vacation separately is like buying each of the meal's ingredients, cutting them up into neat piles and packaging the lunch yourself. Is it worth the extra time and effort to do it this way? Will you save money if you do it this way?

You have two budgets to balance when you plan your Disney World vacation: time and money. Satisfying both is your ultimate goal. Research and planning are paramount to realizing your Disney vacation dreams. Create your theme-park touring plan prior to making a final decision with regard to the number of days and options on your theme-park passes. Create your dining itinerary (along with advance dining reservations, if possible) to determine if Disney's dining plan can save you some money.

HOTELS *outside* WALT DISNEY WORLD

SELECTING AND BOOKING A HOTEL OUTSIDE WALT DISNEY WORLD

LODGING COSTS OUTSIDE DISNEY WORLD vary incredibly. If you shop around, you can find a clean motel with a pool within 5 to 20 minutes of the World for as low as \$40 a night. Because of hot competition, discounts abound, particularly for AAA and AARP members.

There are three primary out-of-the-World areas to consider:

1. INTERNATIONAL DRIVE AREA This area, about 15 to 25 minutes northeast of the World, parallels Interstate 4 on its eastern side and offers a wide selection of hotels and restaurants. Prices range from \$56 to \$400 per night. The chief drawbacks of this area are its terribly congested roads, countless traffic signals, and inadequate access to west-bound I-4. While International's biggest bottleneck is its intersection with Sand Lake Road, the mile between Kirkman and Sand Lake roads is almost always gridlocked. We provide tips for avoiding this traffic in Part Eight (see "Sneak Routes," page 397).

Regarding traffic on International Drive (known locally as I-Drive), these comments are representative. From a Seattle mom:

After spending half our trip sitting in traffic on International Drive, those Disney hotels didn't sound so expensive after all.

A convention-goer from Islip, New York, weighed in with this:
When I visited Disney World with my family last summer, we wasted huge chunks of time in traffic on International Drive. Our hotel was

in the section between the big McDonald's [at Sand Lake Drive] and Wet 'n Wild [at Universal Boulevard]. There are practically no left-turn lanes in this section, so anyone turning left can hold up traffic for a long time. Recently, I returned to Orlando for a trade show and stayed at a hotel on International Drive near the convention center. This section was much saner and far less congested. It's also closer to Disney World.

Traffic aside, a man from Ottawa, Ontario, sings the praises of his I-Drive experience:

International Drive is the place to stay when going to Disney. Your single-paragraph description of this location failed to point out that [there are] several discount stores, boutiques, restaurants, mini-putts, and other entertainment facilities, all within walking distance of remarkably inexpensive accommodations and a short drive away from WDW. Many of the chain motels and hotels are located in this area, and the local merchants have created a mini-resort to cater to the tourists. It is the ideal place to unwind after a hard day visiting WDW. I have recommended this location for years and have never heard anything but raves about the wisdom of this advice.

I-Drive hotels are listed in the *Orlando Official Accommodations Guide* published by the Orlando–Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau. For a copy, call ☎ 800-255-5786 or 407-363-5872, or see www.orlandoinfo.com.

2. LAKE BUENA VISTA AND THE I-4 CORRIDOR A number of hotels are along FL 535 and west of I-4 between Disney World and I-4's intersection with Florida's Turnpike. They're easily reached from the interstate and are near many restaurants, including those on International Drive. The *Orlando Official Accommodations Guide* lists most of them. For some traffic-avoidance tips, see "The I-4 Blues" (page 382) in Part Eight, Arriving and Getting Around.

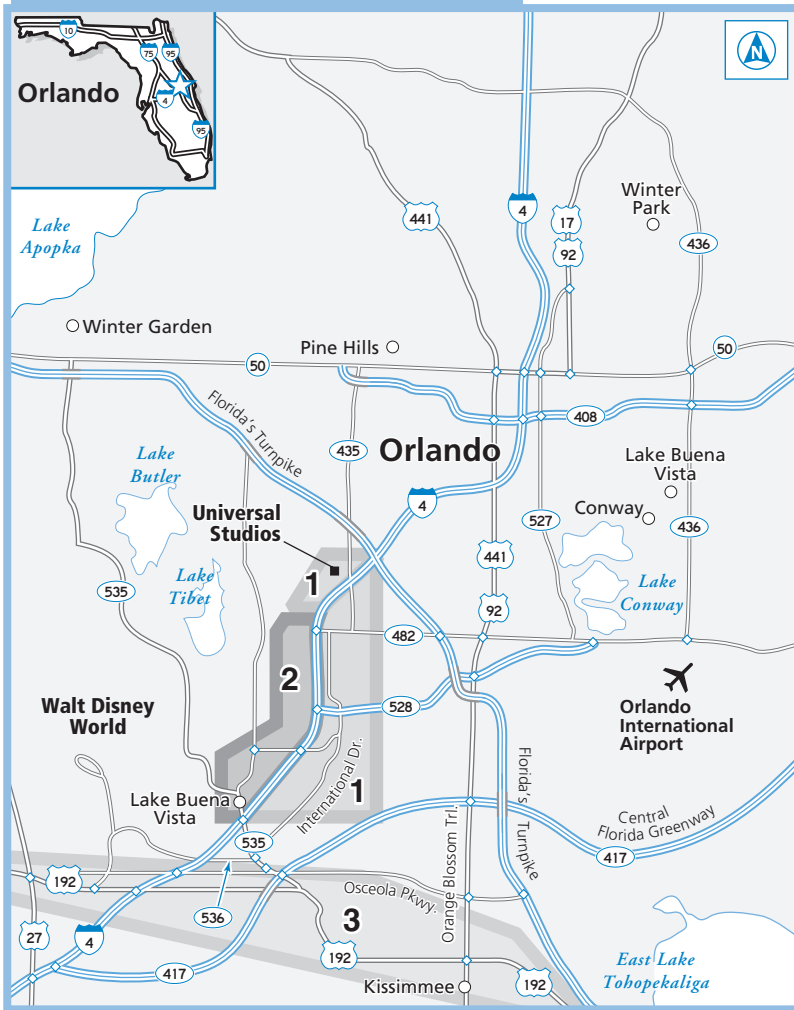
3. US 192/IRLO BRONSON MEMORIAL HIGHWAY This is the highway to Kissimmee to the south of Disney World. In addition to large, full-service hotels, there are many small, privately owned motels that are often a good value. Several dozen properties on US 192 are nearer Disney parks than are more expensive hotels inside the World. The number and variety of restaurants on US 192 has increased markedly, compensating for the area's primary shortcoming. Locally, US 192 is called Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway. The section to the west of I-4 and the Disney "Maingate" is designated Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway West, while the section from I-4 running southeast toward Kissimmee is Irlo Bronson Highway East.

A senior citizen from Brookfield, Connecticut, was pleased with lodging in the US 192–Kissimmee area:

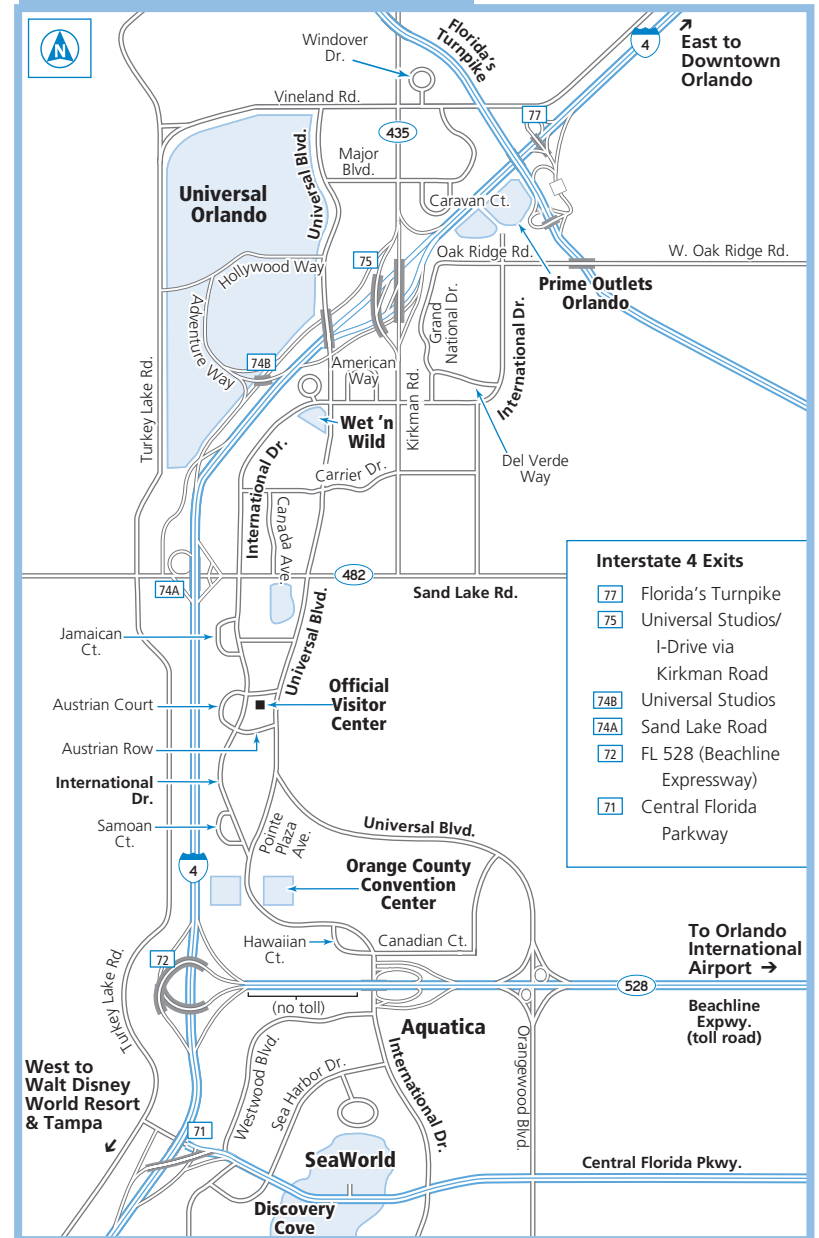
We were amazed to find that from our cheaper and superior accommodations in Kissimmee it took only five minutes longer to reach the park turnstiles than it did from the Disney accommodations.

Continued on page 234

Hotel Concentrations around Walt Disney World



International Drive Area



Continued from page 229

Hotels on US 192 and in Kissimmee are listed in the “Choose Kissimmee” visitors guide. Order a copy by calling ☎ 800-327-9159, or view it online www.floridakiss.com.

DRIVING TIME TO THE PARKS FOR VISITORS LODGING OUTSIDE WALT DISNEY WORLD

OUR HOTEL INFORMATION CHART on pages 268–285 shows the commuting time to the Disney theme parks from each hotel listed. Those commuting times represent an average of several test runs. Your actual time may be shorter or longer depending on traffic, road construction (if any), and delays at traffic signals.

The commuting times in “How the Hotels Compare” show conclusively that distance from the theme parks is not necessarily the dominant factor in determining commuting times. Among those we list, the hotels on Major Boulevard opposite the Kirkman Road entrance to Universal Orlando, for example, are the most distant (in miles) from the Disney parks. But because they’re only one traffic signal from easy access to I-4, commuting time to the parks is significantly less than for many closer hotels.

Note that times in the chart differ from those in “Door-to-Door Commuting Times” in Part Eight. The door-to-door chart in Part Eight compares using the Disney Transportation System and driving your own car *inside* Walt Disney World. These times include actual transportation time plus tram, monorail, or other connections required to get from the parking lots to the entrance turnstiles. The hotel chart’s commuting times, by contrast, represent only the driving time to and from the parks, with no consideration of getting to and from the parking lot to the turnstiles.

Add to the commuting times in our “How the Hotels Compare” chart a few minutes for paying your parking fee and parking. Once you park at the Transportation and Ticket Center (Magic Kingdom parking lot), it takes 20 to 30 minutes more to reach the Magic Kingdom via monorail or ferry. To reach Epcot from its parking lot, add 7 to 10 minutes. At Disney’s Hollywood Studios and Animal Kingdom, the lot-to-gate transit is 5 to 10 minutes. If you haven’t purchased your theme-park admission in advance, tack on another 10 to 20 minutes.

GETTING A GOOD DEAL ON A ROOM OUTSIDE WALT DISNEY WORLD

HOTEL DEVELOPMENT AT WALT DISNEY WORLD has sharpened competition among lodgings throughout the Walt Disney World–Orlando–Kissimmee area. Hotels outside the World struggle to fill their rooms, and the recession has only made things worse. Unable to compete with Disney resorts for convenience or perks, off-World hotels lure patrons with bargain rates. In high season, during holiday periods, and during large conventions at the Orange County Convention Center, even the most modest property is sold out.

Here are strategies for getting a good deal on a room outside Walt Disney World. The list may refer to travel-market players unfamiliar

to you, but many tips we provide for Disney World deals work equally well almost anywhere you need a hotel. Once you understand these strategies, you’ll be able to routinely obtain rooms for the lowest possible rates.

1. ORLANDO MAGICARD Orlando Magicard is a discount program sponsored by the Orlando–Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau. Cardholders are eligible for discounts of 12% to 50% at about 50 hotels. The Magicard is also good for discounts at some area attractions and a dinner theater. Valid for up to six persons, the card isn’t available for larger groups or conventions.

To obtain a free Magicard and a list of participating hotels and attractions, call ☎ 800-643-9492 or 407-363-5872. On the Web, go to www.orlandoinfo.com/magicard; the Magicard and accompanying brochure can be printed from a personal computer. If you miss getting one before you leave home, obtain one at the Convention and Visitors Bureau Information Center at 8723 International Drive. When you call for your Magicard, also request the *Orlando Official Vacation Guide*.

2. EXIT INFORMATION GUIDE Exit Information Guide (EIG) publishes a book of coupons for discounts at hotels statewide. It’s free in many restaurants and motels on main highways leading to Florida. Because most travelers make reservations before leaving home, picking up the book en route doesn’t help much. If you call and use a credit card, EIG will send the guide first class for \$3 (\$5 U.S. for Canadian delivery). Contact Exit Information Guide at 4205 NW Sixth Street, Gainesville, FL 32609; ☎ 352-371-3948 or 800-332-3948; www.travelerdiscountguide.com.

3. HOTEL SHOPPING ON THE INTERNET Hotels use the Internet to fill rooms during slow periods and to advertise limited-time specials. Hotels also use more-traditional communication avenues, such as promoting specials through travel agents. If you enjoy cybershopping, have at it, but hotel shopping on the Internet isn’t as quick or convenient as handing the task to your travel agent. When we bump into a great deal on the Web, we call our agent. Often she can beat the deal or improve on it (perhaps with an upgrade). A good agent working with a savvy, helpful client can work wonders.

See the chart on the next page for Web sites we’ve found most dependable for discounts on Disney-area hotels.

The secret to shopping on the Internet is, well, shopping. When we’re really looking for a deal, we check all the sites listed in the chart. Flexibility on dates and location are helpful, and we always give our travel agent the opportunity to beat any deal we find.

We recommend choosing a hotel based on location, room quality, price, commuting time to the parks (all summarized in the chart on pages 268–285), plus any features important to you. Next, check each of the applicable sites that follow. You’ll be able to ferret out the best Internet deal in about 30 minutes. Then call the hotel to see if you can save more by booking directly. Start by asking the hotel for specials. If their response doesn’t beat the Internet deal, tell them what you’ve found and ask if they can do better.

OUR FAVORITE ONLINE HOTEL RESOURCES

www.mousesavers.com	Best site for hotels in Disney World.
www.dreamsunlimitedtravel.com	Excellent for both Disney and non-Disney hotels.
www.2000orlando-florida.com	Comprehensive hotel site.
www.valuetrips.com	Specializes in budget accommodations.
www.travelocity.com	Multidestination travel superstore.
www.roomsaver.com	Provides discount coupons for hotels.
www.floridakiss.com	Primarily US 192–Kissimmee area hotels.
www.orlandoinfo.com	Good info; not user-friendly for booking.
www.orlandovacation.com	Great rates for condos and home rentals.
www.expedia.com	Largest of the multidestination travel sites.
www.hotels.com	Largest Internet hotel-booking service; many other sites link to this site and its subsidiary, www.hoteldiscounts.com .

SO WHO OFFERS THE BEST DEALS ON THE NET? *Unofficial Guide* statistician Fred Hazelton analyzed more than 81 million rate quotes from Internet sellers, individual and chain-hotel Web sites, and hotel reservations departments for 350 Disney and Orlando-area hotels. The idea was to determine which sellers had the best deals most (or a high percentage) of the time.

We picked the sellers in the chart on the next page based on how often a given seller's rate was lower than all its competitors. For example, a success rate of 70% means the seller beat all competitors who market the same hotels 70% of the time. The numbers can be tricky, though. A seller that offers hotels not sold by others is obviously going to have the best deals on those properties most of the time, and consequently score high. Conversely, a seller that lists a large number of hotels also sold by many competitors will offer the best price a lower percentage of the time.

We collected rates from most of Web sites with rates for hotels in and around the Orlando-Kissimmee area; we also obtained rates from hotel front desks and hotel Web sites. When we compared the rates from all sellers, we found that the rates offered **www.hotels.com** and **www.skoosh.com** beat out all others about half of the time. *Skoosh*, however, offers a much smaller selection of hotels than biggies like *Expedia* and *Travelocity*. The best of the large Web sites (and best overall) was **www.hotels.com**, with a 27% success rate. Although it doesn't have the best rates frequently, **www.octopustravel.com** offers substantial savings when it does. Also note that hotel front desks and hotel Web sites offered the lowest rate about two-thirds of the time (65% and 60%, respectively). The Web site **MouseSavers.com**, which specializes in discount codes for hotels, is not listed because the site doesn't actually sell rooms. To use the codes, you quote the relevant code to an actual seller—the Walt Disney Travel Company, for example.

One thing we noticed when getting rates from all the different sellers is that no one seller offered the best rate all the time. Rankings are ordered from top to bottom, best to worst.

During our research on hotel rates we noticed that there is a period where the rates are almost always at their lowest. It happens between 45 and 60 days before the date of arrival. We collected more than 108 million rate quotes, covering all possible dates of arrival and starting at 300 days before the date of arrival. As the date gets closer we record the changes in the price and see that the lowest available price for a hotel room occurs in that 45- to 60-day window about 80% of the time. This means that no matter when you book your hotel room, you should always check to see if a lower rate is available about 60 days before your date of arrival. We checked this result with experts in the hotel industry and discovered that hotel companies typically discuss their occupancy rates about 45 to 60 days in the future. So if a hotel is experiencing lower-than-expected occupancy rates, it is most likely to adjust its prices around the 60-day mark.

While *Expedia* is often able to offer better deals on some larger properties (for example, *Hilton* and *Doubletree*), some Disney-centric travel sites, such as **www.dreamsunlimitedtravel.com** and **MouseSavers.com**, form special relationships with specific hotels that can result in unusually juicy discounts. Because the megasites like *Orbitz*, *Expedia*, and **www.hotels.com** have neither the time nor inclination to nurture such relationships, they can't obtain these sweetheart deals. At the Buena Vista Suites, for example, *Dreams Unlimited's* rate was more than 10% lower than *Hotels.com's* already discounted rate.

The chart below summarizes how much you can expect to save on average from each of the Internet sellers listed previously. (Only those for which we have a minimum of 1,000 observations are included.)

Method 1: Average percentage by which the seller beats its nearest competitor.

Method 2: Average percentage by which the seller beats the highest rate advertised.

Other tools in the hotel-hunting arsenal are **Travelaxe.com**, **Kayak.com**, and the *Unofficial Guide's* own Web site, **TouringPlans.com**. *Travelaxe*

SELLER	%AGE OF DAYS ON WHICH SELLER HAS LOWER RATE	AVERAGE SAVINGS (METHOD 1)	AVERAGE SAVINGS (METHOD 2)
www.hotels.com	27%	8%	9%
www.skoosh.com	20%	5%	7%
www.orbitz.com	17%	3%	10%
www.worldres.com	14%	2%	15%
www.hotelclub.com	11%	8%	9%
www.travelworm.com	3%	1%	7%
www.octopustravel.com	2%	11%	17%
www.hotelkingdom.com	2%	6%	9%
www.expedia.com	2%	2%	2%
ALL OTHERS	2%	4%	5%

and Kayak are hotel search engines that look at hotelier Web sites to find the cheapest rate for more than 200 Disney-area hotels. Travelaxe does this through free software you can download to your PC (it won't run on Macs), while Kayak is a traditional Web site with no download needed. Both sites offer filters such as price, quality rating, and proximity to a specific location (Walt Disney World, SeaWorld, the convention center, airport, and so on) to allow you to narrow your search. Both sites also scan for the best rates in cities throughout the United States.

TouringPlans.com uses both Travelaxe and Kayak to tell you which Web site has the best rate for most of the hotels covered in this book up to 300 days in advance, with prices updated nightly. These nightly rates are added to our database of more than 108 million hotel quotes covering the Walt Disney World area since 2005. We use this massive archive of historical prices to predict, for any given hotel and Web site, whether the rate you're quoted today is likely to go up, down, or stay the same over the next week. That lets you know whether you should lock in at that price or whether you'd be better off bidding your time. And how do you know whether a rate is good? TouringPlans.com does something we've not seen on any other Web site: It tells you the highest, lowest, and average price paid over the past 90 days for the same room and length of stay. By giving you historical context around the rate you're quoted, you'll easily be able to determine whether it's a fantastic deal, just average, or not worth considering.

4. IF YOU MAKE YOUR OWN RESERVATION Always call the hotel in question, not the chain's national toll-free number. Often, reservationists at the toll-free number are unaware of local specials. Always ask about specials before you inquire about corporate rates. Don't hesitate to bargain, but do it before you check in. If you're buying a hotel's weekend package and want to extend your stay, for example, you can often obtain at least the corporate rate for the extra days.

CONDOMINIUMS AND VACATION HOMES

VACATION HOMES ARE FREESTANDING, while condominiums are essentially one- to three-bedroom accommodations in a larger building housing a number of similar units. Because condos tend to be part of large developments (frequently time-shares), amenities such as swimming pools, playgrounds, game arcades, and fitness centers often rival those found in the best hotels. Generally speaking, condo developments do not have restaurants, lounges, or spas. In a condo, if something goes wrong, there will be someone on hand to fix the problem. Vacation homes rented from a property-management company likewise will have someone to come to the rescue, though responsiveness tends to vary vastly from company to company. If you rent directly from an owner, correcting problems is often more difficult, particularly when the owner doesn't live in the same area as the rental home.

In a vacation home, all the amenities are contained in the home (though in planned developments there may be community amenities available as well). Depending on the specific home, you might find a small swimming pool, hot tub, two-car garage, family room, game room, and even a home theater. Features found in both condos and

vacation homes include full kitchens, laundry rooms, TVs, DVD players/VCRs, and frequently stereos. Interestingly, though almost all freestanding vacation homes have private pools, very few have backyards. This means that, except for swimming, the kids are pretty much relegated to playing in the house.

Time-share condos are clones when it comes to furniture and decor, but single-owner condos and vacation homes are furnished and decorated in a style that reflects the taste of the owner. Vacation homes, usually one- to two-story houses located in a subdivision, very rarely afford interesting views (though some overlook lakes or natural areas), while condos, especially the high-rise variety, sometimes offer exceptional ones.

The Price Is Nice

The best deals in lodging in the Walt Disney World area are vacation homes and single-owner condos. Prices range from about \$65 a night for two-bedroom condos and townhomes to \$200 to \$500 a night for three- to seven-bedroom vacation homes. Forgetting about taxes to keep the comparison simple, let's compare renting a vacation home to staying at one of Disney's Value resorts. A family of two parents, two teens, and two grandparents would need three hotel rooms at Disney's Pop Century Resort. At the lowest rate obtainable, that would run you \$82 per night, per room, or \$246 total. Rooms are 260 square feet each, so you'd have a total of 780 square feet. Each room has a private bath and a television.

Renting at the same time of year from **All Star Vacation Homes** (no relation to Disney's All-Star Resorts), you can stay at a 2,053-square-foot, four-bedroom, three-bath vacation home with a private pool three miles from Walt Disney World for \$219—a savings of \$27 per night over the Disney Value-resort rate. With four bedrooms, each of the teens can have his or her own room. Further, for the dates we checked, All Star Vacation Homes was running a special in which they threw in a free rental car with a one-week home rental.

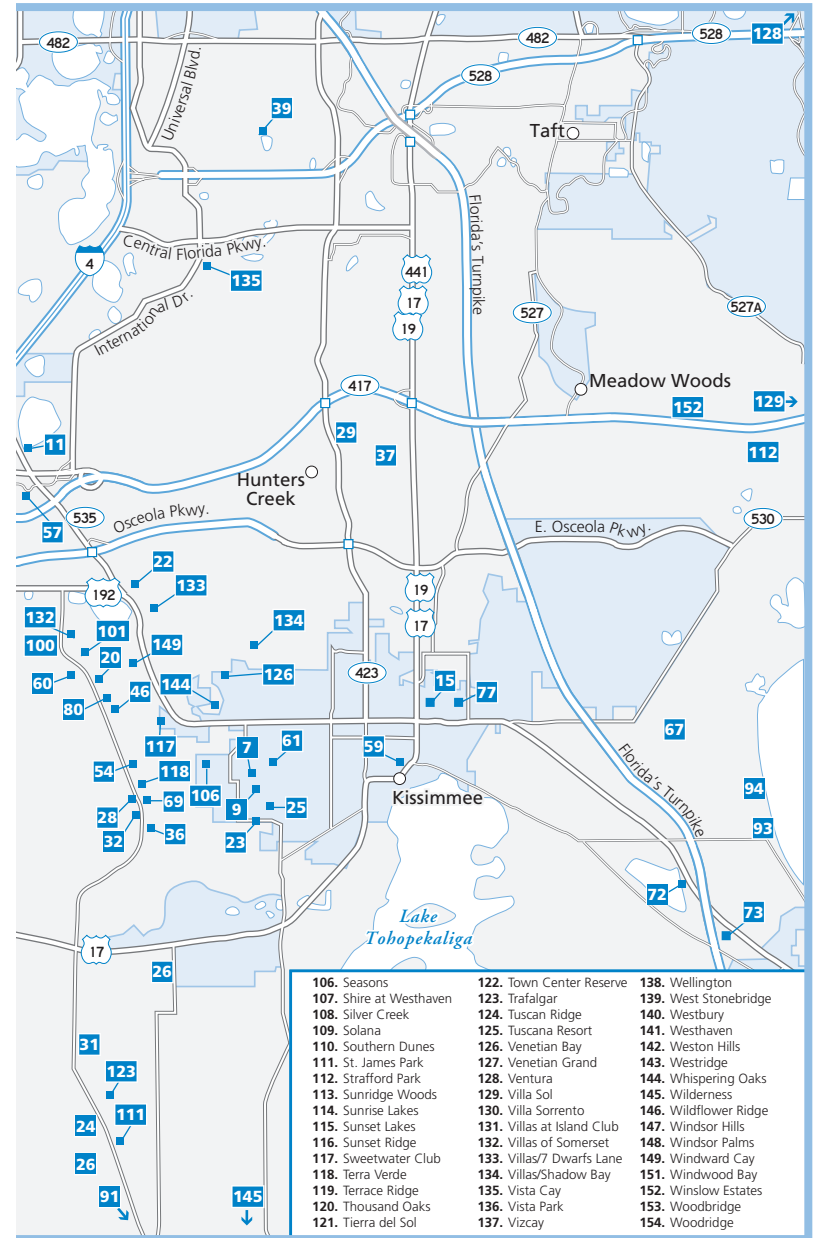
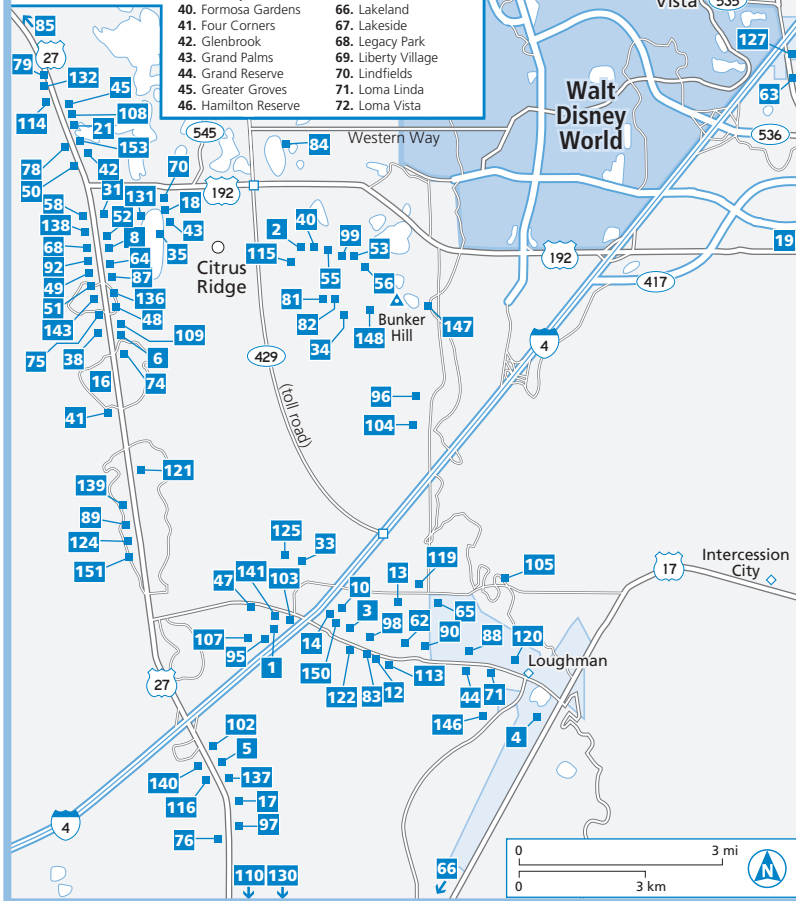
But that's not all—the home comes with the following features and amenities: a big-screen TV with PlayStation, DVD player, and VCR (assorted games and DVDs available for complimentary check-out at the rental office); a CD player; a heatable private pool; five additional TVs (one in each bedroom and one in the family room); a fully equipped kitchen; a two-car garage; a hot tub; a laundry room with full-size washer and dryer; a fully furnished private patio; and a child-safety fence.

The home is in a community with a 24-hour gated entrance. Available at the community center are a large swimming pool; a whirlpool; tennis, volleyball, and half-court basketball courts; a children's playground; a gym and exercise room; a convenience store; and a 58-seat cinema.

One thing we like about All Star Vacation Homes is that its Web site (www.allstarvacationhomes.com) offers detailed information, including a dozen or more photos of each specific home. When you book, the home you've been looking at is the actual one you're reserving. (If you want to see how the home previously described is furnished, for instance,

Rental-home Developments near WDW

- | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. AbbeyWesthaven | 20. Chatham Park | 47. Hamlet at Westhaven | 73. Magic Landings | 92. Regal Palms |
| 2. Acadia Estates | 21. Cear Creek | 48. Hampton Lakes | 74. Magnolia Glen | 93. Remington Golf |
| 3. Ashley Manor | 22. Club Cortile | 49. High Gate Park | 75. Manors/Westridge | 94. Remington Point |
| 4. Aviana | 23. Country Creek | 50. High Grove | 76. Marbella | 95. Retreat/Westhaven |
| 5. Aylesbury | 24. Countryside Manor | 51. Highlands Reserve | 77. Meadow Woods | 96. Reunion |
| 6. Bahama Bay | 25. Creekside | 52. Hillcrest Estates | 78. Millbrook Manor | 97. Ridgewood Lakes |
| 7. Bass Lake Estates | 26. Crescent Lakes | 53. Indian Creek | 79. Mission Park | 98. Robbins Rest |
| 8. Bass Lake US 27 | 27. Crystal Cove | 54. Indian Point | 80. Montego Bay | 99. Rolling Hills |
| 9. Bellavida | 28. Cumbrian Lakes | 55. Indian Ridge | 81. Oak Island Cove | 100. Royal Oaks |
| 10. Bentley Oaks | 29. Cypress Lakes | 56. Indian Ridge Oaks | 82. Oak Island Harbor | 101. Royal Palm Bay |
| 11. Blue Heron Beach | 30. Davenport Lakes | 57. Indian Wells | 83. Oakpoint | 102. Royal Palms |
| 12. Briargrove | 31. Doral Woods | 58. Island Club West | 84. Orange Lake | 103. Sanctuary at Westhaven |
| 13. Bridgewater Crossing | 32. Eagle Pointe | 59. Kissimmee | 85. Orange Tree | 104. Sandy Ridge |
| 14. Bridgewater Town Ctr. | 33. Elliotts Landing | 60. Laguna Bay | 86. Palm Parkway | 105. Santa Cruz |
| 15. Buenaventura Lakes | 34. Emerald Island | 61. Lake Berkley | 87. The Palms | |
| 16. Calabay Parc | 35. Esprit/Fairways | 62. Lake Bluff Lake Buena Vista | 88. Paradise Woods | |
| 17. Calabay Tower Lake | 36. Fiesta Key | 63. Lake Davenport | 89. Pines West | |
| 18. Calabris | 37. Flamingo Lakes | 64. Lake Wilson | 90. Pinewood | |
| 19. Cane Island | 38. Florida Pines | 65. Preserve | 91. Poinciana | |
| | 39. Floridays | 66. Lakeland | | |
| | 40. Formosa Gardens | 67. Lakeside | | |
| | 41. Four Corners | 68. Legacy Park | | |
| | 42. Glenbrook | 69. Liberty Village | | |
| | 43. Grand Palms | 70. Lindfields | | |
| | 44. Grand Reserve | 71. Loma Linda | | |
| | 45. Greater Groves | 72. Loma Vista | | |
| | 46. Hamilton Reserve | | | |



- | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 106. Seasons | 122. Town Center Reserve | 138. Wellington |
| 107. Shire at Westhaven | 123. Trafalgar | 139. West Stonebridge |
| 108. Silver Creek | 124. Tuscan Ridge | 140. Westbury |
| 109. Solana | 125. Tuscana Resort | 141. Westhaven |
| 110. Southern Dunes | 126. Venetian Bay | 142. Weston Hills |
| 111. St. James Park | 127. Venetian Grand | 143. Westridge |
| 112. Strafford Park | 128. Ventura | 144. Whispering Oaks |
| 113. Sunridge Woods | 129. Villa Sol | 145. Wilderness |
| 114. Sunrise Lakes | 130. Villa Sorrento | 146. Wildflower Ridge |
| 115. Sunset Lakes | 131. Villas at Island Club | 147. Windsor Hills |
| 116. Sunset Ridge | 132. Villas of Somerset | 148. Windsor Palms |
| 117. Sweetwater Club | 133. Villas/7 Dwarfs Lane | 149. Windward Cay |
| 118. Terra Verde | 134. Villas/Shadow Bay | 151. Windwood Bay |
| 119. Terrace Ridge | 135. Vista Cay | 152. Winslow Estates |
| 120. Thousand Oaks | 136. Vista Park | 153. Woodbridge |
| 121. Tierra del Sol | 137. Vizcay | 154. Woodridge |

go to the home page and enter the property code **2-8144 SP-WP** in the search box at the top right. Choose the first link in the search results; on the next page, scroll down until you see the home with the property code above. Click the link for photos and a floor plan.)

On the other hand, some vacation-home companies, like rental-car agencies, don't assign you a specific home until the day you arrive. These companies provide photos of a "typical home" instead of making information available on each of the individual homes in their inventory. In this case, you have to take the company's word that the typical home pictured is representative and that the home you'll be assigned will be just as nice.

How the Vacation-home Market Works

In the Orlando–Walt Disney World area, there are almost 19,000 rental homes, including stand-alone homes, single-owner condos (that is, not time-shares), and townhomes. The same area has about 112,000 hotel rooms. Almost all the rental homes are owned by individuals who occupy them for at least a week or two each year; the rest of the year, the owners make the homes available for rent. Some owners deal directly with renters, while others enlist the assistance of a property-management company.

Incredibly, about 700 property-management companies operate in the Orlando–Walt Disney World market. Most of these are mom-and-pop outfits that manage an inventory of ten homes or less (probably fewer than 70 companies oversee more than 100 rental homes).

Homeowners pay these companies to maintain and promote their properties and handle all rental transactions. Some homes are made available to wholesalers, vacation packagers, and travel agents in deals negotiated either directly by the owners or by property-management companies on the owners' behalf. A wholesaler or vacation packager will occasionally drop its rates to sell slow-moving inventory, but more commonly the cost to renters is higher than when dealing directly with owners or management companies: because most wholesalers and packagers sell their inventory through travel agents, both the wholesaler/packager's markup and the travel agent's commission are passed along to the renter. These costs are in addition to the owner's cut and/or the fee for the property manager.

Along similar lines, logic may suggest that the lowest rate of all can be obtained by dealing directly with owners, thus eliminating middlemen. Although this is sometimes true, it's more often the case that property-management companies offer the best rates. With their marketing expertise and larger customer base, these companies can produce a higher occupancy rate than can the owners themselves. What's more, management companies, or at least the larger ones, can achieve economies of scale not available to owners in regard to maintenance, cleaning, linens, even acquiring furniture and appliances (if a house is not already furnished). The combination of higher occupancy rates and economies of scale adds up to a win-win situation for owners, management companies, and renters alike.

Location, Location, Location

The best vacation home is one that is within easy commuting distance of the theme parks. If you plan to spend some time at SeaWorld and the Universal parks, you'll want something just to the northeast of Walt Disney World (between the World and Orlando). If you plan to spend most of your time in the World, the best selection of vacation homes is along US 192 to the south of the park.

Walt Disney World is located mostly in Orange County but has a small southern tip that dips into Osceola County, which, along with Polk County to the west of the World, is where most vacation homes and single-owner condos and town houses are located. Zoning laws in Orange County (which also includes most of Orlando, Universal Studios, SeaWorld, Lake Buena Vista, and the International Drive area) used to prohibit short-term rentals of homes and single-owner condos, but in recent years the county has loosened its zoning restrictions in a few predominantly tourist-oriented areas. So far, practically all of the vacation-rental homes in Orange County are in the **Floridays** and **Vista Cay** developments.

By our reckoning, about half the rental homes in Osceola County and all the rental homes in Polk County are too far away from Walt Disney World for commuting to be practical. That said, an entrance to Walt Disney World off the FL 429 four-lane toll road halves the commute from many of the vacation-home developments arrayed around the intersection of US 192 and US 27. FL 429 runs north–south from I-4 south of Walt Disney World to Florida's Turnpike. You might be able to save a few bucks by staying farther out, but the most desirable homes to be found are in Vista Cay and in developments no more than four miles from Disney World's main entrance on US 192 (Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway), in Osceola County.

To get the most from a vacation home, you need to be close enough to commute in 20 minutes or less to your Walt Disney World destination. This will allow for naps, quiet time, swimming, and dollar-saving meals you prepare yourself. Though traffic and road conditions are as important as the distance from a vacation home to your Disney destination, we recommend a home no farther than 5 miles away in areas northeast of Walt Disney World and no farther than 4.5 miles away in areas south of the park. Bear in mind that rental companies calculate distance from the vacation home to the absolute nearest square inch of Disney property, so in most instances you can expect to commute another three or more miles within Walt Disney World to reach your ultimate destination.

Shopping for a Vacation Home

The only practical way to shop for a rental home is on the Web. This makes it relatively easy to compare different properties and rental companies; on the downside, there are so many owners, rental companies, and individual homes to choose from that you could research yourself into a stupor. There are three main types of Web sites in the home-rental game: those for property-management companies, which showcase a given company's homes and are set up for direct bookings;