

1) Thrill Seekers, Riding the Rides

Theme Park Planning Advice

Here are some tips to help ease your theme park experience.

1. Both Disney and Universal offer programs that let visitors spend shorter times in line (usually no more than 15 minutes). Because even on a slow day you'll still be sharing a theme park with thousands of people, and some of the best new rides can attract long lines, do take advantage of these timesavers. Disney's system is better than Universal's because Disney's FASTPASS system is free, whereas Universal Express will cost you extra (anywhere from \$25 to \$50 above your ticket price). The only time this doesn't hold true is if you're staying at one of Universal Orlando's three resorts: The Portofino Bay Hotel, the Hard Rock Hotel, and the Royal Pacific Resort. Guests at these hotels get front-of-the-line access to all of Universal's rides and shows -- some may find it worth spending more money to stay at these hotels to get this fabulous perk.

2. Here's a statistic to chew on: Only 48% of Orlando visitors arrive in the city toting with kids. And Orlando's the top honeymoon destination in the United States. Yep, you read that right. If you're a group of adults or a couple looking for a little grown-up fun without be being surrounded by a sea of kids (admittedly a relative concept because even 48% can add up to millions of tiny visitors), the best theme parks in the city are Disney's **Epcot** (www.disneyworld.com), Universal's **Islands of Adventure** (www.universalorlando.com) and SeaWorld's **Discovery Cove** (www.discoverycove.com). Of course, many of you will want to spend your time exploring your inner child at all the other parks, so if you want to ride Pirates of the Caribbean at Magic Kingdom (I did), I won't tell anyone.

3. If rain is in the forecast, here's a suggestion: Because of the number of outdoor shows and attractions at SeaWorld, Islands of Adventure, and Animal Kingdom, those parks are best enjoyed in good weather. If it pours, your best bets are Universal Studios Florida, Epcot and Disney-MGM Studios; many of these parks' prime attractions are indoors.

4. Always check the online calendars available on each theme park website when planning your itinerary. As park opening hours in the fall tend to be more limited than they are during high season, it pays to do some scouting so that you can maximize your time in each park (and

leave yourself some downtime so you don't end up blistered and sore at the end of the day). If you're going to spend \$67 per person -- more, if you add up taxes, parking and food -- for a day in the park, you should get your money's worth.

The Hit List

If you want to relax and take your time as you explore the theme parks, but don't want to miss any new additions or absolute musts, then here are 2 to 3 attractions in each park that are either new enough or spectacular enough that you don't want to miss them:

At Disney (www.disneyworld.com)

Magic Kingdom: The recently updated **Pirates of the Caribbean** features a very realistic looking and sounding animatronic version of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow -- Yo ho! If you haven't ridden **It's a Small World** in a while, that ride got facelift that's made it much brighter, though the familiar song still drones on and on; you'll either hate it or love, but riding it is a must. And, finally, don't miss the splendid Mickey's PhilharMagic, the first 3-D attraction

Epcot: The **Mission:Space** ride now has a stationary option for those who don't want to be spun around. The non-stationary version gave me a migraine (literally), but I must admit that I find the tamer option to be rather bland. If you have kids, be sure to hit **Turtle Talk with Crush** in the Living Seas (and even if you're without little ones, adults should be impressed with the technology that allows the animated Finding Nemo star to chat with visitors in real time. Finally, do not miss The Land's phenomenal **Soarin'**, a flight "simulator" that rapidly climbed to the top of my list of favorite Epcot rides thanks to its multi-sensory aspects.

Disney-MGM: Though the park has a new car-related stunt show, I found it too oriented to the automotive set, though if that's your speed, then by all means check out the **Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show**. Otherwise, the two best adrenaline options in this park are the incredibly atmospheric (and scary) **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror**, and the indoor and exciting **Rock 'n' Roller Coaster Starring Aerosmith**. One sleeper: The **Magic of Disney Animation** not only has a delightful film on the animation process, but also lets you take a free group drawing lesson with an actual animator. Even those of us who can't draw a straight line managed to produce pretty good versions of such Disney characters as Winnie the Pooh and

Minnie Mouse (one couple I encountered spent almost an entire happy afternoon at the drawing boards).

Animal Kingdom: The big news at this park was last year's introduction of the **Expedition Everest** coaster and I can say it's definitely a winner, especially for those who don't like coasters that turn you upside down. The theme work is typical Disney fabulous and the ride itself has enough thrills that even the adrenaline junkie I was traveling with was happy. If you want to start off your day with a buzz, then do take in the delightful **It's Tough to be a Bug**, and don't miss the park's **Kilimanjaro Safaris** ride, where if you get lucky, you'll be treated to very close-up views of numerous types of wildlife.

At Universal Orlando (www.universalorlando.com)

Universal Studios Florida: The hilarious **Shrek 4-D** is my favorite of all the 3-D multi-sensory attractions in Orlando -- works great for both kids and adults. The theme work on the spooky and adrenaline-pumping **Revenge of the Mummy** indoor coaster is first-rate. And I must confess a fondness for the shoot 'em up style of **Men in Black Alien Attack**, though I consistently lose to the 10-year-olds who always seem to be able to hit every laser target that I can't.

Universal Island's of Adventure: If your day happens to be a warm one and you need to cool off, try **Dudley Do-Right's Ripsaw Falls**, which won't get you quite as soaked as **Popeye and Bluto's Bilge Rat Barges**, but offers a much bigger rush. The **Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man** is my favorite in Orlando -- this mix of 3-D, track ride and sensory effects is a perfect showcase for everyone's favorite web-slinger. Finally, the coaster crazies among you should be satisfied with a ride on the **Hulk Coaster** (though it gave me a headache) or one of the two dueling coasters that make up **Dueling Dragons**. Cowardly me opted for the ice coaster, but true devotees say the fire coaster nets you a better rush.

At SeaWorld (www.seaworld.com)

Kids will be thrilled by the addition of more rides to the child-oriented **Shamu's Happy Harbor** play area, including a kiddy coaster that parents are encouraged to ride with their kids. Adults will adore the thrilling **Kraken** coaster -- at least one coaster junkie I ran into named it his favorite in the city. Everyone in the family will enjoy the new shows that SeaWorld's added to its stellar roster, include a new Shamu show called **Believe** and a great dolphin show, **Blue Horizons**.