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The Best of Walt Disney World

by Cara Goldsbury, Author of *The Luxury Guide to Walt Disney World: How to Get the Most Out of the Best Disney Has to Offer*

So you're headed to Walt Disney World ... but where to start? Disney offers such a wealth of fantastic resorts, restaurants, and top-drawer entertainment experiences it can be difficult to choose which fantasy you wish to indulge. How best can you plan a visit in which each day comes with the finest Disney has to offer? Here are a few tips that can make the difference between a mediocre trip and a fantastic one:

Best Time of Year for a Disney Vacation

If at all possible plan a trip to Disney during the slower seasons of the year when you'll find half-filled parks, little waiting in line, and lower hotel rates. If you can stand the guilt and your children are good students, take them out of school, whatever, to avoid the busiest times of the year. If not, the summer months or holidays are certainly better than nothing and, with a bit of planning and a lot of energy, can be more than enjoyable. These are the least busy times of the year: Just after New Year's Day to the first week of February (avoiding the Martin Luther King holiday weekend in January); the third week of August to the beginning of October; the month of November excluding Thanksgiving weekend; just after Thanksgiving and again the week preceding Christmas week, a special time when the parks and resorts are festively decorated for the holidays.

Best Deluxe Resort

Disney's flagship resort, **The Grand Floridian**, with its red-gabled roofs and Victorian elegance, draws inspiration from the grand Florida seaside "palace hotels" of 19th-century America's Gilded Age. Just a short monorail ride to the Magic Kingdom, it spreads along the shore of the Seven Seas Lagoon, offering spectacular views of Cinderella's Castle and the Wishes fireworks display.

Best Home Away From Home Property

Disney's Home Away From Home Resorts are a great choice for those who want a vacation with all the amenities including a full kitchen, living room, and a bath for each bedroom. For outstanding atmosphere choose the Villas at Wilderness Lodge with its Bay Lake location and national park character or the new Beach Club Villas conveniently located next-door to Epcot's International Gateway. But look for the new Animal Kingdom Villas, now under construction, to boot both of these off the list.

Best Resort For Access to the Parks

Disney's Contemporary, Polynesian, and Grand Floridian Resorts offer monorail access to the Magic Kingdom, Epcot, and the Ticket & Transportation Center.

Best Resort For Nature Lovers

Wilderness Lodge is Disney's dramatic depiction of an early 1900s national park resort. In its awesome eight-story lobby are walls of ponderosa pine logs, a massive 82-foot tall fireplace, and two authentic 55-foot Pacific Northwest totem poles. Outside is a breathtaking scene of sparkling waterfalls, rushing creeks, towering pines, and Disney's very own geyser. And it's all only a boat ride away from the Magic Kingdom.

Best Resort Pool

Stormalong Bay, the eye-popping free form, mini-water park complex at Disney's Yacht and Beach Club, is simply divine. Three acres of winding, watery delight, it offers sandy bottom pools, a giant "shipwreck" water slide, a tidal whirlpool, bubbling hot tubs, a kiddie pool with its own slide next to the beach, and enough waterway to float lazily in inner tubes to your heart's content.

Best Resort Lounge

California Grill Lounge on the 15th floor at Disney's Contemporary Resort offers unrivaled views of the Magic Kingdom and the Seven Seas Lagoon along with cocktails, sushi, and a view of the Wishes fireworks display. NOTE: If you're only coming for drinks it can be difficult to get a seat around fireworks time. You'll need to check in first at the second-floor podium.

Best Disney Attractions For Thrill Seekers

For a shot of adrenaline head to Disney-MGM Studios, where thrill junkies beeline it to the Tower of Terror for a 13-story bungee-style plummet. Next-door is the Rock 'n' Roller Coaster that rockets from 0 to 60 mph in less than 3 seconds then loops and corkscrews in the dark through a Hollywood night. It's a *scream* come true!

Best Way to Spend an Evening Without the Kids

If you're a registered guest of a Disney resort, drop off the kids at one of their child care centers where they are given dinner along with classic Disney movies, arts and crafts, and video games. If your child is under 4 or not potty trained, call Kid's Nite Out at 407-827-5444 for in-room childcare. Then head to one of Disney's world-class restaurants. For fine dining in a stunning setting combined with virtually flawless service choose Victoria and Albert's at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort. Here you'll dine on white linen covered tables set with Royal Doulton china and crystal wine glasses to the strains of enchanting harp music.

Best Way to Spend an Evening Away From the Parks

The addition of the West Side and Pleasure Island to Disney Marketplace created what is now known as the wildly successful Downtown Disney, a combination of over 70 scene-setting restaurants, shops, and nightclubs. During the day it's a perfect getaway from the parks, but at night after the parks close, Downtown Disney comes alive. At Disney Marketplace you'll find A-plus shopping, the largest Disney Store in the world, and the volcano-smoking Rainforest Cafe. Pleasure Island is a nighttime mecca with 8 clubs and a nightly New Year's Eve celebration. And then there's the West Side, loaded with dining and entertainment venues including Wolfgang Puck Cafe, House of Blues, Gloria Estefan's Bongos, Cirque du Soleil, and Disney Quest.

Best Restaurant For Kids

Dine among crashing waterfalls, lush tropical foliage, and dripping vines while being bombarded with thunderstorms and noisy Audio-Animatronic wildlife at the Rainforest Cafe. Or head to the Whispering Canyon Cafe at Disney's Wilderness Lodge for an all-you-care-to-eat blow-out of rib-stickin' barbecue served piping hot in iron skillet accompanied by plenty of hootin' and hollerin'. Kids love the crazy show put on by the hobby horse-racing waiters outfitted in western attire who can't resist making a huge production out of serving food, birthday celebrations, and those unfortunate enough to leave for the restroom.

Best Disney Resort Restaurant

The California Grill on the 15th floor of Disney's Contemporary Resort is a definite highlight for any connoisseur of cutting-edge cuisine. The immense windows present an unbeatable panorama of the Magic Kingdom and the Seven Seas Lagoon and on many nights picture-perfect views of the Wishes fireworks show. From pristinely fresh sushi to the exceptional New American Cuisine to sensational desserts and the outstanding California wine list, this place has it all.

Best Theme Park Restaurant

In Epcot's France Pavilion is **Bistro de Paris**, a charming Belle Époque dining room with an air of exclusivity. Filled with gilded mirrors and crimson banquettes, its billowy white drapes frame windows that overlook the World Showcase Lagoon. Servers with delicious French accents roll out sensational dishes prepared with only the freshest ingredients. Afterward order a dessert of crepes prepared and flamed at your table while lingering over cordials and coffee in anticipation of the nightly Illuminations spectacle.

Best Way to View the Epcot Fireworks Presentation

Each evening boatloads of visitors depart from the dock of Disney's Yacht Club and head to Epcot where, from a prime position under the bridge between the United Kingdom and France, is a view of the Illuminations fireworks spectacular that can't be beat. Cruises are offered nightly with your choice of either a pontoon boat or a beautiful reproduction of a 1930s Chris Craft. Call 407-WDW-PLAY.

Best Way to Spend a Lazy Afternoon

When your muscles are aching and your body is screaming for rest after days at the parks, sooth your jangled nerves at Disney's Grand Floridian Spa. Immerse yourself in luxury with one or two feel-good treatments guaranteed to rejuvenate and swiftly get you back on your feet and ready for another long day of walking. For the ultimate in romance consider the Grand Romantic Evening where, in a candle-lit couple's room, each person receives an aromatherapy massage.

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Cara Goldsbury is the author of *The Luxury Guide to Walt Disney World: How to Get the Most Out of the Best Disney Has to Offer*. Visit her at www.wdwluxuryguide.com.