

Money Saving Tips for a Walt Disney World Vacation

Many of you are planning a trip at some point in the future to Walt Disney World (WDW). My family went in October of 2003, and although it was a major financial investment, it could have ended up costing a lot more. Now, I am not an expert on WDW, and I do not know all the ways to save, but I do have some helpful information to get you started.

There are many components of a WDW Trip. In an attempt at a somewhat organized approach, I will break it down into three categories: **Before you Go, Getting There and Once You're There**. Since there is a lot of information to cover, this will be a two-part series. Part 1 will include Before You Go and one tip for Getting There. Part Two, which will appear in the next issue, will talk more about Getting There and Once You're There.

Before You Go

Two things are involved here - research and flexibility. If you are even thinking about a trip in the next 2 years or so, start researching now. Talk to acquaintances. People who have taken their families are a great resource. In my case, a fellow club member (thank you Mary Pristas!) told me about a great offer she was getting directly from WDW on a package deal. Package deals include several components of your trip, for instance hotel and park passes. Some may even include meals. Check with a travel agent or AAA to see about package rates that include airfare. Sometimes it is cheaper to buy your airfare, hotel and park passes separately. Packages might involve more deposit money and carry higher cancellation fees, should you need to change your plans. As you familiarize yourself with rates on airfare, hotels, park passes, etc., you will start to see why flexibility can save you money.

In our case, being flexible meant going an entire year earlier than we had planned. The package we took advantage of was such a good deal, we were able to afford a deluxe "on property" hotel with suite accommodations -a full kitchen, separate bedroom and a pull-out sleeper sofa in the living room. If we had waited, we might not have been able to have our trip be as comfortable and relaxing for our family as it was. Next month, I will talk about how much money having a kitchen or even a small refrigerator in your room can save you!

We also were flexible with timing of the trip. Off-season or "Value Season" (Labor Day though before Thanksgiving, after Thanksgiving through mid-December, and January until the weekend before Presidents day) rates are much cheaper and there are more special offers and promotions available. For instance, one night at the All Star Resorts (a Disney Resort) in late February is \$109. The same room in early February is \$77, and you might be able to take advantage of a Disney discount code on top of that. Our decision to go to Disney World when our children are young allowed us to take advantage of an off-season promotion, since we were not too concerned about taking the kids out of school for a week.

Researching costs well in advance also gives you important planning information. You'll be better informed about how much you'll need to start saving (and/or how much to borrow, as that is definitely an option), the range of accommodations available and you will be able to make some decisions about your goals for your vacation. For instance, do you want to go every year or two, or is one trip every 5 years or longer more your goal? That will have a big impact on how much you can spend on a WDW vacation. Will it be important for your family to see all the WDW parks, or are do you want to concentrate on just two or three?

So, where can you find good information about WDW and how much it will cost? Two of my favorite resources were The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World and Mousesavers.com. I borrowed last year's Unofficial Guide from a friend, then bought the most recent shortly before our trip. It was the best planning tool I had. If you read it cover to cover, you will learn about each theme park (Disney and other Orlando options), find rate and quality information on all area hotels and restaurants and learn a lot of time and money saving tips for visiting the different attractions.

One of my favorite money saving tips from this book was about the gray market for rented strollers. We went to Epcot on our last day at about 5PM. We hadn't needed a stroller up to that point, but the kids were pretty tired and it was a bit rainy. I asked at the stroller rental place and learned the fee was \$15 per day for a double stroller. That's not too bad if you need it all day, especially since you can keep the receipt and get one for free in the same day at another Disney park. But, if you only need it from 5PM until 9PM, that sounded pretty expensive. Then I remembered what I had read, and asked another park-goer, who was returning theirs, if I could pay him \$5 and take his. Since he only forfeited the \$1 deposit (in the form of a Disney Dollar, which can only be spent for anything Disney-related) and because there are no rules against it, he was happy to get \$5 and I was pleased to have saved \$10. By the way, if your children are very young and you know you will need a stroller most times, bring your own. Not only will it save you money, you will have more room to carry your "stuff" (snacks, water, diapers, sunscreen, etc., etc.). The rental strollers are nice and roomy for the kids, but offer no storage space.

MouseSavers.com is a great on-line source of up-to-the-minute deals for anything Disney, including WDW discount codes for hotels and park passes and special deals on off-site hotels. You can sign up on the website for a monthly

newsletter, which is sent to your e-mail address on the 15th of each month. They also send periodical "Hot Deal" announcements. I got one last week announcing a discount code that can save 25-30% off room rates at select WDW resorts from 2/12/04 through 4/17/04. It's a lot of fun to read these newsletters...the woman that runs the site visits WDW frequently and get invited to all press events, like the openings to new attractions.

Several others good books are the Birnbaum Guide (which I borrowed from the library to save money) and the Disney PassPorter, which I received a past year's copy of for free through a special alert sent from the MouseSavers newsletter. The PassPorter is particularly useful as an organizer for all your trip documents and it provides a daily log for your reservations information and recording your spending. Another good website is DisBoards.com (thanks for this tip, Maureen McAllister!). You can participate in discussion forums to learn money saving information from other WDW visitors, and they provide good tips for discerning the advantage and disadvantages of room-only versus package reservations for WDW resorts. WWW.travelocity.com, WWW.orbitz.com and WWW.expendia.com are also good resources for room rates and airfare information.

Getting There

You will need to decide whether to drive, fly or take a train. This is a very individual decision, and at different times of the year, depending on fares, one of these might be a better price option. For now, I will leave you with just one tip on getting there: Southeast Airlines from Allentown to Sanford, which is about 45 minutes north of Orlando. We got tickets for \$59 each way - \$532, including all fees and taxes, for all four of us! Please check out Southeast Airlines fares at WWW.FlySeal.com...these fares are not included on Travelocity.com or the other travel sites.

Hopefully, Part One got you started with some tips on finding good information. I can't stress enough how important it is to do your research. I provided some good references in the form of books and websites, and don't forget to talk to everyone you know who has gone. Not only will this save you money, you'll have a much better idea of what to expect once you get to WDW.

At this point, I'd like to talk a little more about getting there. If you'd like to fly, remember to check out fares on Southeast Airlines out of Lehigh Valley International (www.flyseal.com). Also check the discount travel websites like Travelocity.com, Orbitz.com and Expedia.com. Don't forget to check your balances in any frequent flyer programs or credit card travel programs, for example American Express Rewards. One word of caution – be sure to book far in advance. Airlines only have a certain number of seats eligible for frequent flyer rewards travel. You also may want to look into Priceline.com. I have never purchased airline tickets through this source, but I do understand that you need to be really flexible about which days you can fly and times of flights. You might have several stops and plane changes and, depending on the age of your children and your specific situation, this could get pretty stressful!

Driving from here to WDW is definitely an option. Some drawbacks are the time you'll spend in the car, the price of gas, and the cost of hotels and meals on the way. You will, however, save the cost of a rental car once you are there. One good alternative might be the auto train. I spoke with a friend who traveled this way to WDW in October. They drove to Virginia (the car trains are too large to fit through the tunnels north of Virginia), which was about 3 hours. There they (and their car) boarded the train and completed the trip in 17 hours. She has young children, and they loved it. She suggested you check at Amtrak.com several times in advance of booking your trip, since they run different specials, depending on the time of year. You can opt for a sleeper car, which they did, or ride in a regular train car. Although the sleeper car is more expensive, arriving well rested might be worth the additional expense. They also enjoyed the privacy. You need only pack a small overnight bag, and can store the rest of your luggage in your car.

She said the auto train was definitely more expensive than flying, but they avoided the cost of a rental car and enjoyed the convenience of having their own car and car seats. One tip here: if you fly and plan to rent a car, bring your car seats along. Thanks to Linda Puia, who did this, we knew to check the car seats, instead of lugging them onto the plane. Our children were big enough that the airplane seatbelts secured them safely, and we didn't have the hassle of carting them through the airport. This saved us about \$30 per day, the cost of renting car seats through the rental car company. If you plan to rent a van, check to see if car seats are provided for no cost, as I have heard that some rental car companies do this.

Finally, be sure to check package prices, which include airfare, hotel, tickets and even rental car, through a travel agent or any travel clubs you have joined (AAA, Costco, etc.). You'll need to compare the prices they provide against the cost of purchasing individual components on your own. In our case, we were able to save money by purchasing our airfare separately and going directly through WDW for a special resort and park ticket package.

There are many options for purchasing your park tickets. The most expensive is to wait until you arrive and buy them at "the gate". Do some research online through www.mousesavers.com, www.wdwig.com, www.disboards.com and Disney's official site, www.disney.com. All of these sites will tell you what special rates are available on park tickets. You'll also have to do some research on the different types of passes available. The most expensive are Ultimate Park

Hopper Passes, which entitle you to unlimited use of all Disney theme parks and venues (e.g. Pleasure Island). The least expensive is a one-day park only pass. You'll need to research these options and make some decisions about what is right for your family. It's important to note that some people will sell you passes with leftover days. These can be found on ebay and at some roadside places on the way to WDW. Be careful! This is not allowed by WDW, only the original purchaser can use the remaining days on a pass, however they have not actively enforced this in the past. I'd hate to be trying to use one of these illegal passes on the day they decide to start cracking down. Also, there is no way to tell if the seller is telling the truth about the number of days remaining on the passes. So, be sure to buy your passes from a reputable source.

Another way to save money when you stay at a WDW resort hotel is to buy one annual pass. Although these passes are more expensive, if you buy just one, you can qualify for reduced rates on your Disney resort accommodations and discounts at some restaurants. Depending on the length of your stay, you can more than make up for the extra expense of one annual pass. You'll need to pay attention to when the annual pass rates are released. Annual passholder rates apply to only a limited number of rooms. Sign up on www.wdwig.com to get on their mailing list for this information and access to other WDW discounts.

This brings up another very important decision you will need to make – staying at a Disney resort or an “off-site” hotel. For every person that would never stay anywhere other than a Disney resort, you'll find one that wouldn't ever stay anywhere but “off-site”. You need to weigh the advantages of each. Disney certainly provides a range of accommodations, from about \$75 per night up to \$500 per night. Another consideration, especially during peak season, is that Disney resort guests can take advantage of early hour. Each day, one of the parks opens one hour earlier for WDW resort guests.

Off-site hotels can be much cheaper, and often you can find a very luxurious hotel only five minutes from the Magic Kingdom for \$100 per night. Budget accommodations can be as low as \$35 per night, and you can find some very acceptable hotels in this price range. If you have a large family, and everyone likes to eat a lot, you can save money at an off-site hotel, where kids could eat for free. You are also more likely to take advantage of a myriad of Orlando restaurants, which are much more affordable than their Disney counterparts. Many hotels, such as Holiday Inn Family Suites, offer a small kitchen area with a microwave and refrigerator, giving you more dining-in options. Although most hotels offer shuttle service to the parks, these can be unreliable and you might want to rent a car for this reason, and to take advantage of area restaurants.

Many Disney resort guests do not feel they need a car, but we found the transportation system to be lacking, and chose to keep our car for our entire stay. We found that rental car was the best option for our family. Since we flew into Sanford, it provided our transportation to and from the airport, to the grocery store and to the parks. Although Disney transportation is available to all parks and venues from Disney resorts, we heard a lot of stories from aggravated families. It took one family 1 ½ hours to get from our hotel to Blizzard Beach. We drove there in 10 minutes, could easily leave for some rest time in the afternoon and drive to another park that evening. If you stay at a WDW resort, you get a parking pass that is good at any park, so you never have to pay to park. If you use valet parking at your hotel, they will charge you per day, and tips can add up. We used valet parking occasionally, but many days we chose to self-park. We were only charged for valet parking on the days we used this service. These are the types of things you need to look at when making the decision about needing a car. We rented a midsize and got a pretty good deal – about \$200 for 8 days. Again, check out available discounts through AAA, Costco, frequent flyer programs, etc.

On to a subject closest to my heart – dining! When I read in The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World that the average family of five can easily spend over \$170 per day for food, drinks and snacks, I knew we would have to do it differently! There are many ways to spend much less money on the food portion of your trip, if you do some careful planning and preparation. First, bring your own water to the parks! Bottled water costs \$2.50 at the parks, and your family will need to consume a lot of water to stay hydrated. You can stop at a supermarket on the way to your hotel and buy bottled water, or you can bring along a Brita water bottle with a filter. We did both, drank the bottled water at the hotel and carried full Brita bottles to the parks in our backpacks. When they were empty, we refilled them at the numerous water fountains. The water at the parks does taste musty, so this was a good option. We carried some re-freezable icepacks in a soft-sided insulated lunch bag, and our water stayed nice and cool. This can realistically save you \$5 to \$10 per day for each family member! I found the Brita filtered water bottles at Walmart for about \$8 or \$9 each. Also be sure to bring some snacks for at the park. We brought Gogurts (stored next to the icepack), chewy granola bars, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, crackers etc. Just be careful not to make your backpack too heavy. You'll need some room for the camera, first-aid kit (good blister prevention supplies, sunscreen, bug spray, antibacterial hand wipes etc.) and rain ponchos.

If you can afford a suite with a kitchen, I would highly recommend this option. We more than paid for this luxury by eating a few meals in our room. I didn't want to overdo this, since I was on vacation, too! But we went to the store for snacks, beverages, milk, juice, cereal, PB&J, and enough ingredients for a few easy dinners. We saved hundreds of dollars, and avoided a lot of time fighting long lines. It was nice to know if we got back late from the parks and wanted a snack,

we could have it right in the comfort of our room. Even if you don't have a full kitchen, most of the resorts will allow you to rent a refrigerator for \$10 per day. Since breakfast can easily cost \$25 or \$30 dollars at a restaurant, having some cereal, milk, juice and fruit in your room will save a lot of money. Be sure, though, to buy or bring some plastic utensils, bowls, plates and cups. We found Winn Dixie and Publix where both fairly accessible to the WDW resorts and cheaper than the closer Goodlings supermarket. Goodlings will deliver groceries to your room, if you don't have a car, or you might take a taxi to the store.

We attended quite a few of the character meals. Although expensive (about \$45 for a family of four, before tip for breakfast, more for dinner), they were well worth it for our family. We didn't have to wait in any long lines to get character autographs...they came to us at our table! For breakfast, we reserved the latest time available. We ate a light breakfast in our room, got to the parks for early hour or as soon as they opened and took advantage of lighter crowds. By 11:00 or 11:30, we were ready for a break and a big meal. The character meals are always buffets with cold and hot items, and they always have plenty of fruit (we usually grabbed a few pieces to take with us – perfectly acceptable to do). On the day we went to a character dinner, we returned from the parks for lunch in the room, a swim and a rest. Be sure to obtain a "priority seating" well in advance, since these meals are very popular. Most can be made 90 to 120 days in advance by calling (407) WDW- DINE.

A few final suggestions on dining: We bought meal vouchers before we went from www.Dealpass.com. You can obtain them through this website by paying \$139 for a one-year membership, ordering the vouchers for \$11 each and then canceling your membership in the first 30-day trial period. Just don't forget to cancel! Although you can buy these on ebay, DON'T. They are getting them for \$11, then selling them for anywhere from \$18-20 each and higher. I also heard they are available from Lillian Vernon for 11.50 with no membership fee to worry about later canceling. These vouchers include many counter-service restaurants at all the parks and are good for a non-alcoholic drink, main dish, side dish and dessert. We used these on three occasions. We would use two, and get enough food to feed all four of us. Two times they saved us around \$5 or \$6. At Epcot, we enjoyed a wonderful \$40 meal for \$22 -not bad! You can find restaurant menus and reviews, including the parks' counter-service establishments, in many guidebooks and online. With a little research, these vouchers can provide quality meals at great savings. Even without meal vouchers, counter-service restaurants can be a good value. You might try a strategy we found helpful. Since our kids love cheeseburgers, we always asked for an extra roll and ordered double cheeseburgers. There was never a charge for this, and we would buy two combo meals (with French fries and a drink - ask for extra cups). The serving sizes were very generous and four of us ate for the price of two. No one likes to throw away the kids' leftovers, especially when you are paying \$8 to \$10 for a burger and fries!

Packing for Disney World is very important in any money saving strategy. Make sure to bring all the items you might need to avoid having to buy more expensive things once you arrive. I got the kids rain ponchos at Kmart. This worked out great since the Disney ponchos, although not overly expensive, are all yellow. We bought blue and didn't feel we might lose our kids in the sea of yellow. Sweatshirts and clothing for cooler days and evenings is essential. Although the weather was warm for our entire trip, you never know when you might need warmer clothing. I'd rather have it and not need it then have to pay top dollar once there. Another tip we liked was shipping a box with items we would need directly to the hotel. It saved carrying too much luggage and, since many of the items were used on the trip, they didn't need to be shipped home. I bought many of our snack items on sale here, for example Disney fruit snacks. These were a hit – Buzz Light Year and Disney Princesses seemed to cover the bases. You simply need to address your package to yourself, indicating you are a guest, and include your arrival date. They will hold your package until you arrive. I also shipped extra coffee and some adult beverages in plastic containers (it isn't a good idea to pack beverages when flying). Having a cocktail in the room while we got ready for an evening out instead of at the restaurant saved a significant amount of money.

Packing "souvenirs" and bringing them with you can also save money. I found Mickey and Minnie Pez dispensers and hid them away until the kids were begging for us to buy them something. I also bought plain sweatshirts at Walmart and Disney iron-on patches at a craft store. Instead of buying \$25 "Disney" sweatshirts, I paid about \$6 and the kids were thrilled. We also bought light-up twirly things (I am sure they have a name, but I can't recall it!) at the local Disney store on sale. We brought these to the fireworks, and when the kids saw all the other children with them, we already had them in our backpack. You can shop online at Disneystore.com and buy end-of-summer clearance pajamas, t-shirts, bathing suits, sandals, etc. I didn't tell the kids about these, and brought them out one at-a-time during the trip.

Of course it is hard to avoid all the souvenirs offered, especially since most of the popular rides have you exiting through souvenir shops! We bought pressed penny souvenir booklets, about \$7.50 at the hotel gift shop, and the kids collected pressed pennies. Each souvenir shop had at least one machine with 3 different designs, and it cost \$.50 plus a penny. The kids loved this and it's really neat to watch the penny go through the machine. This got us through many shops without lots of whining. Be sure to bring shiny pennies for this. On our final day, we bought pin "Lanyards" with 4 starter pins (\$22 for the lanyard and pins), two to keep and two to trade. Pin trading is huge at WDW, and most "cast members" (Disney employees), wear a lanyard and are willing to trade their pins. This was so much fun, I wish we had done it

sooner. It really helped our 5-year olds get through a long evening at Epcot and provided a keepsake they will always treasure.

As you already know, a Walt Disney World vacation will be a significant investment. But with research and careful planning, you can save a significant amount of money and still have the vacation of a lifetime with your family. Be careful not to get so caught up in saving money at the "expense" of having an enjoyable trip.

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