

FREE DISNEY GUIDE

The Walt Disney World First-Timer's Checklist

Everything you need to plan before, during, and after your first Disney World trip. By Mike Spampinato, Disney Dad and Authorized Vacation Planner.

What This Guide Will Save You:

- + 20+ hours of planning research
- + Hundreds of dollars in avoidable costs
- + The stress of forgetting something critical
- + Standing in lines you could have skipped

I've planned hundreds of Disney World vacations. Every first-time family I work with says the same thing afterward: "We had no idea it was this complicated." This guide is the complete pre-trip blueprint I give my clients. Print it out, check things off as you go, and you'll arrive at Disney World prepared like the families who've been ten times.

8 to 12 Months Before Your Trip

This is the most critical planning window. The best resorts, dining reservations, and pricing all favor early bookers.

Choose Your Dates Strategically

- Confirm school calendars and time-off requests
- Check Disney's crowd calendar (avoid Spring Break, Thanksgiving week, Christmas through New Year's)
- Identify your top 2 backup date ranges in case your first choice prices high
- Consider mid-January, late August, or early December for best price-to-crowd ratio

Pick Your Resort

- Set your nightly budget (Value: \$150 to \$280, Moderate: \$280 to \$480, Deluxe: \$550 to \$1,300)
- Decide priorities: pool, theming, walking access to parks, dining options
- Book directly through Disney OR through an Authorized Vacation Planner (free service)
- Confirm room request preferences (near elevator, ground floor, specific view)

Buy Your Tickets

- Calculate how many park days you need (5-day tickets are usually best value)
- Decide whether you need Park Hopper (most first-timers do NOT)
- Buy through Disney direct OR a trusted reseller like Undercover Tourist for ~\$10/ticket savings
- Make Disney Park Pass reservations for each day immediately after purchase

Book Flights and Ground Transport

- Compare MCO (Orlando International) and SFB (Sanford) for flight pricing
- Book flights 6 to 9 months out for best fares
- Arrange ground transport: rental car, Mears Connect shuttle, or rideshare from MCO
- Note: Disney's Magical Express ended in 2022, you'll need your own transport

60 to 90 Days Before Your Trip

The Critical 60-Day Window

Dining reservations open exactly 60 days before your check-in date for resort guests. Set an alarm for 5:55 AM Eastern on your 60-day mark and be on My Disney Experience at 6:00 AM sharp. The most popular restaurants (Cinderella's Royal Table, California Grill, Be Our Guest) book within minutes.

- Download the My Disney Experience app and link all tickets, resort reservation, and family members
- List your top 5 dream dining reservations in priority order
- Have backup dining choices ready in case your first picks are taken
- Book Be Our Guest, Cinderella's Royal Table, California Grill, 'Ohana, or Topolino's Terrace if they're priorities
- Set a reminder to keep checking the app, cancellations open spots throughout the day

Plan Park Days

- Assign each day to a specific park based on Disney's crowd predictions
- Plan one rest day or pool day if your trip is 5+ nights
- Decide which evenings you want for fireworks (Magic Kingdom: nightly; EPCOT: nightly)
- Build a rough touring plan: which rides first, which after lunch, which at night

30 Days Before Your Trip

- Complete online resort check-in via the My Disney Experience app
- Confirm transportation arrangements (rental car pickup, shuttle reservations)
- Check Disney's website for any new entertainment offerings or seasonal events
- Confirm all family member tickets are linked correctly in the app
- Review your dining reservations and screenshot them for backup
- Sign up for PhotoPass / Memory Maker if you want it (\$169 to \$199)

7 Days Before Your Trip

Final Logistics

- Verify everyone's MagicBand+ or MagicBand pre-orders have arrived (or plan to use phone)
- Confirm ride and dining priorities with family, set realistic expectations
- Pack ponchos for Florida afternoon thunderstorms (especially May to October)
- Print or screenshot all confirmations: flights, resort, dining, tickets
- Charge all electronics, power banks, and devices
- Stock up on prescription medications and any specialty items kids need

Pack Smart

- Comfortable broken-in walking shoes (you'll walk 8 to 12 miles per day)
- Portable phone charger / power bank (20,000mAh recommended for family)
- Sunscreen, lip balm with SPF, hats, sunglasses
- Light layers and a poncho for unexpected weather
- Refillable water bottles (Disney gives free ice water at quick-service)
- Snacks (Disney allows outside food: no glass, no alcohol, no large coolers)
- Small first-aid kit: band-aids, moleskin, ibuprofen, antacids

The Night Before & Morning Of

Night Before First Park Day

- Set alarm for 6:55 AM (Lightning Lane Multi Pass opens at 7:00 AM)
- Decide first ride priority (Seven Dwarfs Mine Train, Slinky Dog Dash, or Flight of Passage)
- Charge all phones and power banks to 100%
- Lay out park outfits, including sunscreen and necessities
- Confirm rope drop strategy: at park entrance 45 to 60 minutes before official opening

Morning of First Park Day

- 7:00 AM SHARP: Open My Disney Experience, book your first Lightning Lane Multi Pass
- Eat a real breakfast, counter-service in the parks isn't great for breakfast
- Apply sunscreen before leaving your resort
- Pack water bottles, snacks, sunscreen, ponchos, power bank
- Arrive at park entrance 30 minutes before official opening (45+ on busy days)

In-Park Daily Strategy

- Hit your highest-priority ride within the first 30 minutes after rope drop
- Use Lightning Lane Multi Pass strategically, book your next selection the moment you scan in
- Take a midday break at your resort (12 to 3 PM is hottest and most crowded)
- Eat counter-service for lunch to save time and money
- Return to the park for evening: cooler weather, shorter lines, better atmosphere
- Stay for fireworks (especially Magic Kingdom's Happily Ever After)
- Don't try to do everything, one magical day beats four exhausting ones

The 10 Biggest First-Timer Mistakes (Avoid These)

- X Booking too few park days.** Two days isn't enough for Disney World. Plan 4 to 5 minimum.
- X Skipping Disney's resort hotels for the first trip.** First-timers get the most out of the immersive on-property experience.
- X Not booking dining at exactly 60 days.** Restaurants book within minutes. Wait a day and your top picks are gone.
- X Buying Park Hopper unnecessarily.** First-timers do NOT need Park Hopper. You'll have plenty in one park per day.
- X Skipping Lightning Lane on busy days.** On crowded days, paying for Lightning Lane Multi Pass is worth every penny.
- X Trying to do every park in every day.** Disney World is enormous. Pace yourself. One park per day is the sweet spot.
- X Forgetting Florida weather realities.** It WILL rain in the afternoon May to September. Pack ponchos. Plan around it.
- X Eating only in the parks.** Counter-service is fine. Save money and appetite for one or two table-service experiences.
- X Not using a Disney Vacation Planner.** Authorized planners are free (Disney pays them). You get expertise at zero cost.
- X Burning out by day 3.** Plan a midday rest. Plan a pool day. Families who pace themselves have the best trips.

READY TO TURN THIS INTO YOUR ACTUAL DREAM TRIP?

I plan Disney vacations for free. Disney compensates Authorized Planners directly, so you pay nothing extra. Same prices as booking direct, plus expert strategy built around your family.

START YOUR FREE PLAN AT lifetimeofmagic.com

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