

June 2008: Family Vacation - South and Midwest

2. Disney World

Tuesday June 17: Magic Kingdom I: First off, the best way to see Disney World is by arranging a package deal, which includes staying at a "resort" hotel, passes to the parks, and meal cards. The park is surreal enough, but the "resort" hotels are worse. The place is decorated with large fibreglas, uh, things, like these giant boots (we stayed at the "country" part of the "All-Star Music Resort").



The first thing you see when you open the door is the towels arranged in a Mickey figure. And it keeps going. The pools at the "Music

Resort" are laid out in a piano and a guitar (the pools are no deeper than 4 feet, so my kids aren't really interested). Character figures are everywhere. Of course there's a Disney merchandise gift store in the hotel. The waffles at breakfast are Mickey Waffles. Well, you get the idea.



First day is the Magic Kingdom. It will take two days to see this. We start with Adventureland, Frontierland, and Liberty Square.



Obligatory photo at the Main Gate, before joining the herd. True to usual, we bypass most of the herd by getting on the train to Frontierland.

Faith spots a little travelling band - a guitar, a banjo, and... a sousaphone. The banjo and guitar are wired, so they must be using a wireless pickup, but the area is too big for a central receiver. I'm guessing they must have a cell type arrangement. Same thing for the square dancing exhibitions.



Near the Haunted Mansion. It said "enhanced"; I thought it was much the same as Anaheim, except for the one room with Escher-like staircases with glowing footprints, which I thought was not really appropriate.

Side view, from the riverboat.



Up the treehouse. Here it is still Swiss Family Robinson; it hasn't been "upgraded" to Tarzan. Modern Disney Corp. seems impelled to upgrade everything. The Tiki Room has been altered to include the Aladdin and Lion King parrots, comedy, and more contemporary music. Not an improvement, and not just from a nostalgia viewpoint.

On the top deck of the riverboat. Hopefully we will be on a real one in Nashville. Strange, it has a real engine, but the paddle is fake, and never stops turning, even at the dock. But it runs in a track. So I'm guessing the engine pulls the boat along the track, instead of any real water propulsion.



A view of the river, with the riverboat, and the Haunted Mansion.

During the day, there was a parade. For some reason, this sparked our imagination, since we took *lots* of pictures of it.

Recognition of their beginnings - Walt Disney at his cartoonist draughting table.





As a former bandsman myself, I appreciate seeing High School Marching Bands. This one came from Wisconsin (where we will be in 2 weeks)

Disney's success "all began with a mouse". And is supported by continuous lobbying and abuse of copyright law.



The floats are as elaborate and detailed as the permanent attractions.

The theme of the parade, and really of the current "Million Dreams" season, is "if you just believe, your wishes will come true". Here's some characters singing that theme, whose dreams did *NOT* come true!



There was also a parade at night. I was at Disneyland to see the original Main Street Electrical Parade when I was small. The current SpectraMagic parade inherits from it, with more recent technology.

After the SpectraMagic parade, we popped in to see Small World, which is a "storefront" attraction, rather than the large outdoor focus it is in Disneyland. Otherwise the same. The dolls have fresh paint. When we came out, the fireworks were just beginning! We stood in Fantasyland with shells firing off the building to our right, and shells exploding in the sky almost overhead to the left. Great! We were on the wrong side of the castle to see Tinkerbell do her thing, but we saw the wire as we left. Charity says she would like to do that job.

Wednesday June 18: EPCOT I: The second big reason Walt Disney established Walt Disney World in central Florida was EPCOT.* The Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. There are two parts. The part nearer the gate is perhaps an elaboration of what Tomorrowland was originally, with technology displays hosted by big technology companies, notably Siemens. The larger part is a "showcase" of about ten nations, each with a little enclave of (stereo)typical architecture, dining, and gift shops. Today we saw perhaps half of the first part. EPCOT is really big.

(* The first big reason is that there was lots of empty land. That's not so much true anymore.)

**Obligatory photo at the entrance.
That's the emblematic "Spaceship
Earth" globe.**



Not too many pictures here. I wish I had taken a few of the high-tech vegetable gardens in one exhibit, which included pumpkin vines growing on trellises with the pumpkins supported by nets as they grew. Or constrained to grow into Mickey head molds! We saw a few attractions, then went to lunch at the Coral Reef, where you dine in front of an aquarium tank. When we came out, an electrical storm was off in the distance. Then, just as we arrived for our next attraction, they all shut down! I suspect their computers got upset, and they had to restart the databases, which would take a Long Time for an elaborate system like WDWWorld. So we sat around for a bit, then gave up to look at another attraction (what turned out to be essentially a children's museum) while we waited. When we went outside, it had started to rain! Of course, we had no rain gear.



But when we were done with our rides, it had stopped, and by the time we had walked to the back of the park for our French restaurant dinner, it had pretty much dried off! While we were eating our dinner (nobody wanted escargot or frog legs), it started up again, and continued while we tried to find a place (outside, of course) to watch the IllumiNations fireworks spectacle. By the time the show was over and we finally got out of the park and onto the air-conditioned bus, we were pretty much soaked. I think that's when I developed my cold.

Thursday June 19: Animal Kingdom: This is a cross between a zoo, a safari ride, and a Disney-style amusement park. The zoo was fine, but if you've been to the Tucson zoo, you've been to the zoo part of Animal Kingdom. In spite of the Kenya train ride to the petting zoo.

The central focus of Animal Kingdom is the "Tree of Life", which is a big dead fake tree with animals and insects molded on the trunk.





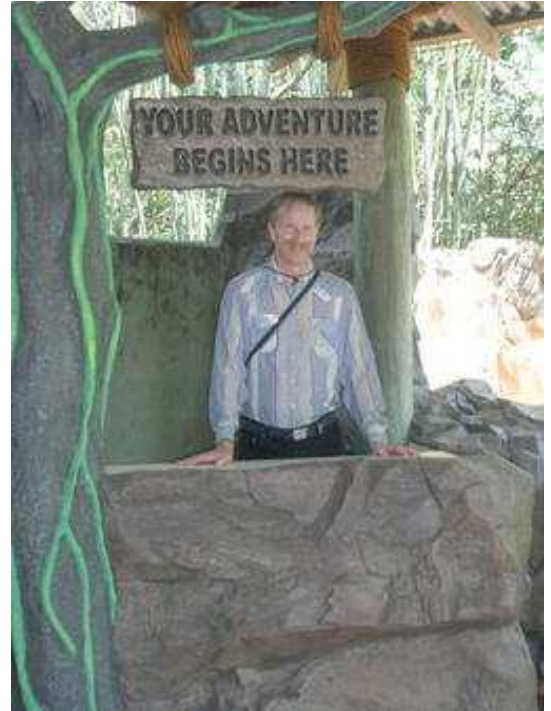
The safari ride is actually quite good. Here is a kudu, real close to the road. Every night they gather all the animals back to the stables (which we saw during the train ride).

And here is a white rhino. The "story" or "plot" (or "message") for the safari ride was "Poaching is Bad". The safari guide (truck driver) would communicate with the "warden" via radio, and we "helped" intercept a poacher band (using automatic rifles, by the sound effects) and rescuing a baby elephant. We saw the truck with the animatronics baby elephant, but I guess the sight of captured poachers would be too much for the soft American audience.



Lunch at Rainforest Cafe. In Anaheim, Rainforest Cafe is a really large restaurant in Disney Downtown. Here, it is in the park, and the same size as the one at Arizona Mills mall in Chandler, AZ.

I couldn't resist...



After lunch, we go to Dino Land. The Big Ride is a silly time-travel thing of fetching a dinosaur from 65Myears ago, just at the moment that the meteor hit, that exterminated the dinosaurs. For a theory with very tenuous factual basis, the Disney people strongly promoted it.

For instance, here is a kid ride, very much like the gimballed roller coaster at the Pima County Fair, but the theme is "Meteor-Caused Extinction is Funny".



In the gift shop at Dino Land (yes, every theme area has to have at least one gift shop), Faith assembles a Disney-theme potatohead. They also had trappings for Star Wars theme potatoheads. I guess there is a marketing link between Lucasfilm and Disney.

In Disneyland, there is the Matterhorn bobsled ride. In Disney World, this is moved to Animal Kingdom, turned into a roller coaster, and dressed up with Mt. Everest, Himalaya, and Yeti themes. Here is a Tibetan (Indian? Nepalese?) shrine prop. You don't actually see the Abominable Snowman here, like you do in the Matterhorn. The roller coaster is a bit weak, too - we think it went upside down inside the dark mountain, but weren't sure. Want roller coasters? Go to Knott's Berry Farm or Magic Mountain. Don't stand in the hour-long wait line here (we didn't - FastPass is a great concept!).





We pretty much finish this park early, and hop the bus for EPCOT, and dinner at the German biergarten. Great food (girls won't eat sausage or saurkraut), the waiter is from Bavaria, and there is a live band playing drinking songs and polkas for entertainment, really good. At one point, he plays an Alpenhorn - I didn't think you could get a fixed-length air column to modulate to so many notes!

Oh, yes, it starts raining as we leave Animal Kingdom, and quits as we leave EPCOT.

Friday June 20: EPCOT II: We go back to try and finish the Showcase of Countries. Like usual, we get a late start. It's hard to get back to the hotel late every night and try to get up early every morning... Anyways, the countries are arranged in a circle around a lake, so going around anticlockwise:

CANADA

The attraction is a CircleVision film of Canada. Very beautiful country. Too much snow. No hint of their Quebec problem or their runaway political correctness laws.



Stairs up. There's a shop up here, nothing else. The building that looks like the Parliament House (?) has stuff in the windows, but nobody is home.



Waterfall at the top of the stairs

ENGLAND

No real attraction, several interesting shops. Narnia got big play, and the Beatles.



Where we had our 1.5 hour lunch. Mom was very frustrated that someone would park their stroller right in front for her picture.



I'm not quite sure why Americans are so fascinated by antique British phone boxes. There were several about.

FRANCE

Another CircleVision film. Beautiful country. The natives can't/won't speak English, so why visit? Too bad their secular culture can't hold back the muslim incursion.



Very picturesque and restful.



Where we had our expensive lunch Wednesday.

MOROCCO

Morocco's attraction was a modern fusion band (electric base, guitar, and a couple of other odd electrified instruments) and a belly dancer (in pants rather than a harem getup), some restaurants, and a maze-like souk (market, gift shops).



Gate to the "city".



Delightful little atrium with a fountain in it. Beautiful mosaic tilework.

JAPAN

The big attraction was the Mitsukoshi store. Which I guess is a BIG thing in Japan. It's a pretty big thing here. Lots of real Japanese stuff, some cheap, some definitely not.



Pagoda and part of the store.



When we arrived, there were three drummers banging away on the porch of the pagoda.

UNITED STATES

Here, there is a big building made to look like Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Inside is a big theatre with a screen and a series of Animatronics sets that rise from the stage, in which Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain go on a quick American history tour from the Revolution to roughly the present. The message is "America is the best place." Arguably true.

We come out of the show to find the strongest rainstorm yet going on. For a while, we stand around with everyone else, hoping it will let up. But it doesn't, so we scramble over to the gift shop and wait some more. No change. So we get some Disney World rain ponchos and continue the day.

ITALY

Some shops and restaurants here. But probably the most interesting architecture.



In the inner patio is the Neptune Fountain and a raised platform (dancing? band?), with a view of the bell tower and the representation of the Doge's Palace in Venice.



Neptune Fountain, with three girls with their rain ponchos. It finally quit raining, and the ground was just steaming with evaporating puddles.

GERMANY

Shops and restaurants again. Shops include authentic cuckoo clocks and beer steins.



Town Square, looking at the Biergarten restaurant where yesterday's dinner was.



Last night, we saw this train rig, but it wasn't running, and most of the cars looked like they were derailed. Now it is running.

CHINA

We got to China just before the CircleVision film started, which is the same CircleVision film I saw years ago in Disneyland. I think one of the beautiful valleys in the film is now destroyed by submersion behind a government dam. The gift shop was truly amazing, both for the quantity and quality of goods (Charity wishes import stores in Tucson were as authentic) and for the prominent and unapologetic display of pro-Mao Zedong materials.



The area in front of the Temple, entrance to the film theatre.



Another interesting thing: scale models of the funeral armies buried with the ancient emperors.

NORWAY

The big attraction here is the Maelstrom boat ride, which includes trolls. Kinda sappy. The movie at the end was good, about Norway, and how the heirs of the Vikings now fight the sea and bad weather on their oil rigs.



The village.



Reproduction of the iconic Norse Lutheran "Stake Church". Inside was a tiny Viking history museum, including a tableau of King Olaf who (forcibly) introduced Christianity to his kingdom.



Viking Charity.



Viking Faith. Did I mention that Vikings were a big thing here?

And that was all we had time for. Jerri got a "passport" book (sound familiar?) that she was supposed to get stamped at each country, so she wanted to do Mexico, even though there really wasn't anything we wanted to see there (don't know how typical this attitude is among gringo Zonies). As it was, the park was closing, so we had to skip Mexico. And the rest of the front part - Imagination, Space, Energy, and the (GM) Test Track. You really can't do EPCOT even in two days! Even if you get up earlier and it doesn't rain on you.

Saturday June 21: Disney Hollywood: If you've been to Universal Studios in L.A., this is a Disneyfied Universal Studios. There's a ride through scenes from famous movies (and the Disney tour guides are interactive; they obviously love it). There's a Indiana Jones stunt show (which we saw during the... rain).



The Star Wars stuff is here, rather than in Tomorrowland. Interestingly, THIS weekend in June is the annual Star Wars emphasis, kind of a Disneyfied Con. Lots of characters walking around. In the Star Tours ride, Darth Vader, Darth Maul, and two stormtrooper escorts emerge from a service door in the line right where we are! Darth Maul glared at Charity.

There is a common strategy in these parks, where the most popular rides have their exits through a gift shop. The Star Tours ride ends, and scads of people dump into the Star Wars gift shop. Too many people inside; it's practically shoulder-to-shoulder, so three of us step outside while mommy the Star Wars fiend shops. It's pouring rain again. I'm getting really tired of Florida.

The three of us leave to get our Tower of Terror FastPasses and do some scouting. By the time we get to the other side, start walking back, and meet mommy, it's time for the Beauty and the Beast musical show. So we're sitting there in the audience with everyone else, and a tech comes on stage to do a mic check. Someone calls for an encore, so he grins and does "Check Check One Two Three" again. Someone cheers. So he starts singing! Another tech comes along, and cautiously joins in. They stop when the supervisor comes on stage with another tech. Soon all four are singing a capella, and it's dawning on people that this was a setup, and this is really a singing group. Which it is! We applaud for their talent



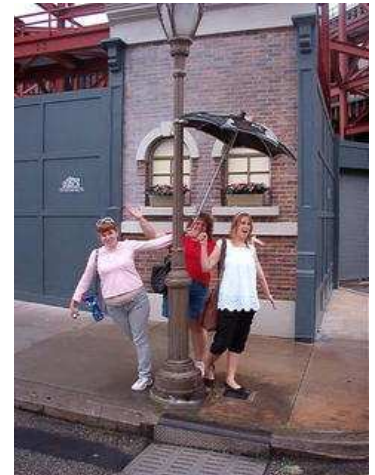
and the well-done setup. Then real techs show up and remove the mics, and the show begins. An abbreviated musical theatre version of the film. Very nice.



It is now time for our lunch appointment at the "Hollywood and Vine" buffet restaurant.

Time for our FastPass at the Tower of Terror. The FastPasses get us past the outside line to the equally long inside line. About 20 minutes in all. Essentially, the Tower of Terror is a gravity drop ride, not as tall as the one at Knott's Berry Farm, but it bounces. The big difference is the "Twilight Zone" theme and "story" behind why the elevator is haunted. Silly, but it makes it more than just a ride.

On our way to the Backlot tour, we pass some more Star Wars sets, and this "Singing in the Rain" set, with real rain. My girls are Gene Kelly fans, so they have to play with it. We also take in a 3D Muppet film.



The "famous" mouse-ears water tower. The backlot tour starts with a demo of special effects (a PT-109 battle scene, with actors drawn from the audience) and proceeds to buses threading through old props, like Herbie here, and a stage where we are part of a disaster with

flaming oil trucks and gushing water. The usual Universal Studios tour stuff.



It is dark, the park will be closing soon, so we do one last thing, and to my mind, the best - the Walt Disney biographical exhibit, showing his progression from childhood, WWI ambulance driver, cartoonist, animator, and director of a growing film, television, and marketing empire. Culminating in Disneyland and then Disney

World. A look into the mind that originally created this wonder. Of course, it's all in new hands now; not sure how Walt would have done things.

Sunday June 22: Magic Kingdom II: Last Day! We return to the Magic Kingdom to do the Tomorrowland and Fantasyland stuff we didn't do Tuesday.

Of course, by this time, we are feeling stomped upon, like Faith here, as Charity sorrowfully regards the fate of her sister.



We get a bit of a late start, in part trying to figure out how to expend the last bits on our meal cards. Then, the bus driver picks up an overflowing load from the three "All Star" resort hotels, and thinks he's going to Animal Kingdom! So that takes more of our time this morning, before we end up in the right place.

First thing, we hop the train to Adventureland, and the Pirate ride, which is only a 30 minute wait this early in the day. Similar to the Pirate ride in Anaheim, but I think they sacrifice some authenticity and interest quality in their attempt to fit as much Jack Sparrow and Davie Jones as they can.

Then we head back toward Tomorrowland. Being a geek myself, this is my favorite part, although I think EPCOT has stolen Tomorrowland's thunder. We see the Carousel of Progress. This is an Animatronics tribute to technological change in the past hundred years, so the tableaux in which the characters are praising the way technology has made their lives so easy are 1910, 1920, 1940... and they've updated the last one to be around 2000. I note with interest that a central technology of this last scene appears to be voice-recognition X10, for home control!

Then the People Mover, which is a slow tram-like transportation system. It would be fun to see something like this in Tucson, but vandalism and the threat of liability would kill it. And outside of Space Mountain, for which we now get FastPasses, there isn't much left to do in Tomorrowland. We just don't have a taste for the Toy Story Buzz Lightyear shooting arcade ride.

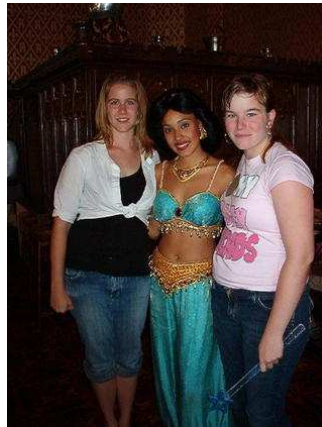
So we go to Fantasyland. Nobody wants to do the Winnie the Pooh ride, but we *do* want to ride the teacups. When the ride finishes... it's raining. So on go the ponchos, and we do a few more rides - including our favorite - the Peter Pan ride. So many of these Fantasyland rides are just Disneyfied county fair fright rides,

complete with black-lit figures that jump out as you pass by. The Peter Pan ride is one that creates the illusion that your car (boat?) is flying. I like that.

And now it's lunchtime. 19 years ago, Jerri and I came to Disney World for our honeymoon, and we dined at the King Stefan's feast. In Anaheim, the Castle is for show, a gate to Fantasyland, and also contains a walk-through Cinderella story. Here, the Castle is a banquet hall.



So after getting our photo with Cinderella, we are given magic wands and conducted upstairs to this dining room. Turns out the afternoon meal is also a "character" meal, with the Disney princesses hobnobbing with the guests.



Our (expensive) meal finished, we return to the rain. This is the backside of the Castle, with the banquet hall windows. There is also a hat store nearby; there are lots of hat stores in Disney World, but we hear this is the only one that stitches names on to hats. So Charity and Faith get pirate Mickey ears.



The Dumbo ride; last one in Fantasyland. In the rain, even.

Here we are with the fake castle in the background and the sun finally shining overhead. It's been fun. On the way out of the park, we spend time (and money) in the Emporium gift shop, and we're done with Disney.



Back at the hotel "early", two girls get talked into trying the shallow guitar pool with the Three Amigos.

Disney World Summary: There's too much. You can see Animal Kingdom in a day, and you can see Hollywood in a day. You can see most/all of the Magic Kingdom in two days, but they are long days, and it would be nice to stretch it out a bit and actually *relax*. It takes at least three days to see EPCOT. But that's a *LONG* time to spend at Disney World. Maybe if we had stayed two more days and took things more leisurely and ended the day earlier, and maybe tried out some of the water parks and miniature golf places, it might have been even more fun. As it is, it *was* fun... but hectic. Here's hoping the rest of the adventure will be more relaxing.

Back to Florida: See Part 1