

**Planning**  
**Affordable Disney Vacations**  
**Step by Step**

Brought to you by

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Greetings Disney Vacation Planners!

Hi I'm Nancy Bobby and the "owner" of [The Affordable Mouse](#), a website and blog devoted to providing information about how to plan a vacation to Walt Disney World..."The Happiest Place on Earth"...and not spend a fortune in the process.

I started [The Affordable Mouse](#) because my family and I have been in love with Disney World since our first visit in 1998. So much so that we, like many others, have traveled back again and again, in order to continue to experience the special magic that makes Disney so unique among theme parks.

But in order to be able to visit often...12 visits and counting as of this publication...I have learned to find as many tips, tricks, ideas and suggestions as I could, about how to have an affordable Disney vacation. To visit often, we need to make the most of our time AND money!

There is a LOT of information out there, via the internet, guidebooks, podcasts, videos, and word-of-mouth. As a result, I have spent hundreds of hours learning all that I could about how to save money at Disney.

But as I have shared this information with friends who were visiting Disney World for their first vacations, I learned that most people don't have that kind of time to research. So I started [The Affordable Mouse](#) to allow me to share what I have learned, and provide others the information that they need to plan a family vacation to Walt Disney World that they can afford.

This guide is a simple collection of steps to follow, in order to make the most of your trip and have it be as inexpensive as possible. The key to an affordable Disney vacation is planning....and this guide will take you by the hand and walk you through all the steps you will want to do to save money....and time....on your own Disney vacation.

I hope that you find it helpful, so that you and your family can make the most of every magical moment you share on your vacation to Walt Disney World.

And now, as Mickey Mouse would say: "On with the show!"

*Nancy* 😊

## Step 1: Decide When to Take Your Disney World Vacation

Let's start at the beginning, because you can't do any other Disney vacation planning until you do this: decide when you are going to go.

I think you can't really decide this until you take an honest look at yourself, your family, and everyone's tolerance for things like crowds, heat, rain, as well as your budget to a certain extent.

Let's look at a common scenario: If you have children, you may need to plan around school vacations: summer, Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring breaks etc. If you do this, it is important to realize that everyone else will probably be doing that as well. So, these are the times that will be most crowded. Is that ok for you and your family? These are the times that can also be the most expensive, or offer the fewest discounts. What is your budget like?

Are your children in school? Will going during the school year compromise their school work and grades? Many people choose to visit Disney World during the school year, precisely to avoid the hot weather and crowds, but if you are considering this, make sure you discuss this with your child's school and/teacher.

Consider how you feel about weather as well. Do you mind heat and humidity? If you do, then you should probably not consider a vacation during the summer months. Florida humidity is brutal if you are not used to it, and vacations during this time of year require careful logistics to keep everyone from having "meltdowns".

The thing is, there is no right or wrong answer to any of these questions, just what is right for you and your family. Everyone has a different comfort level when it comes to this. Only you know what is best for your family.

So your first action step then, is to decide when to go. Consider the following when doing this:

- ✓ Look at school and work holidays to see what you have available.
- ✓ Try to plan as far ahead as possible, 6 -9 months in advance is optimal.

- ✓ Try to allow some flexibility at this point in your planning: have a general idea of the time of year, or the month that you want to visit, but if possible, don't choose an actual week/days. Having some degree of flexibility may allow you to save money down the road when booking your hotel room and transportation, since even within a season some days of the week will be less expensive than other.

## **Step 2: What Do You Want To See and Do at Walt Disney World?**

Now let's discuss the things that you and your family are interested in seeing on your visit to Walt Disney World. It may seem odd, when planning your vacation, to not immediately choose your hotel...but frankly if you can have an idea of what parks your family will be most interested in (meaning where you will spend most of your time) then you can plan your accommodations to be as convenient as possible. And it is also helpful at this point, so that you can have an idea of how long you want to be at Walt Disney World as well.

For example, do you and your family really enjoy animals and plan to spend a lot of time at Animal Kingdom? If so, then choosing an Epcot area hotel would not be the most convenient...or best use of your time.

You can, and should, try to tie this into the time of year you plan to visit. For example, will you be visiting during the fall months when the Epcot Food and Wine Festival and Mickey's Not So Scary Halloween Party at Magic Kingdom are held? Think about your family and their interest in attending these events. Little ones will love the Halloween Party, and you may want to be convenient to the Magic Kingdom to make it easier to attend.

So you want to get a general idea of what is at each of the parks, and what events will be occurring during the time that you plan to be there. But what is the best way to do this?

I know how overwhelming this part can be because there is just SO MUCH to do at Disney World. So you will need some good [planning guides](#) to give you an overview of what is available at the parks to help you decide.

What I have always done, and what I recommend to my family and friends is this:

1. Go to [www.disneyworld.com](http://www.disneyworld.com) and order their free planning DVD. You will need to sign up for a log-in on their site: do it. You will then get lots of Disney vacation planning information and will be on their email list for promotions and special offers. You may even get a special “email code” that will give you a discount on various hotels. (These are pretty coveted, so if you get one that is helpful to you, lucky you! 😊 )
2. Get a good [Disney vacation planner](#). There are a number of them, each with differing points of view. Many people actually get more than one. It just depends on how much reading you want to do. 😊 My favorite, especially if you want to save money, is the [Ultimate Disney World Savings Guide](#).

With the information you will find on the DVD and in the books, start making a list of your favorites. It doesn't have to be complete, you just want to get an idea what appeals to everyone. This is a really important step if you have children, as the more involved your kids feel about planning this trip the happier they will probably be ON the trip!

So your next action steps:

- ✓ Register at [www.disneyworld.com](http://www.disneyworld.com)
- ✓ Invest in one or two [Disney vacation planners](#) that suite your family and your personality
- ✓ Research what the parks have to offer, and make a list of what will be most important for you and your family to see.
- ✓ Determine, to the best of your ability, the parks where you will be spending most of your time, so that you can first consider hotel/resort locations that will be as convenient to these as possible.

### Step 3: How Long Will You be at Walt Disney World?

Now you will want to decide how long you plan to stay at Disney World, because you can't book your vacation until you know how long you are going to be there!

So first of all, you need to look at your available time, work schedules, school vacations, etc. This is the first step: seeing how much time you have to work with. If you have school-age children this can be challenging, as your availability may be limited. You really need to know your options.

Next, since you now have an idea of the parks, attractions, and events you want to see while at Walt Disney World, let's now discuss how much time it is going to take to do everything you want to do!

As with most everything on a Disney vacation, the answer depends on a number of factors. 😊 Let's talk about 3 of them.

1. **Time of year.** As I have mentioned before, certain times of the year are more crowded. The more crowded the parks are, the harder it will be to do everything you want to do.
2. **Weather.** If you are visiting from May through September (at least) you can expect very hot and humid conditions in central Florida. And while some hardy folks arrive at the parks first thing on a hot summer's day and carry on without taking a break for the entire day and evening, I have never been able to do that....and I really like hot weather! We have found that everyone is much more pleasant during those conditions with a mid-day break in air conditioning or at the hotel pool. But if you do that, it does take time away from the parks...so again, it may take a bit longer to see and do everything you want to do.
3. **The age of your children.** Little ones need a break, especially in hot weather. Nothing ruins the magic quicker than crying children. Do them...and yourselves....a favor and leave the parks to rest and relax a bit. And allow extra time to see what you want to see.

Having said all of that, in general, how long would it take to visit each park, if you wanted to “see everything”?

To see all four parks completely, you should plan for at least 5 **full** days. Note the emphasis on **full**. If any of the above conditions apply to your plans, expect to need more time. And if you want do any of the “extras” then allow a bit more time still.

On our first family trip, we went for a week. It was the middle of the summer so we planned our days in “half-days”, and roughly our itinerary worked out like this:

- Magic Kingdom: 2 half-days and 2 evenings
- Hollywood Studios: 1 half-day and 2 evenings
- Epcot: 2 half-days and 2 evenings
- Animal Kingdom: 2 half-days
- 1 evening left over for whatever we wanted

This is a suggestion only, but worked out well for us, allowed us those much-needed breaks to rest and cool off and we were able to see pretty much everything we wanted.

Now based on your family’s list of “must-sees” this could be different.

So your next action steps are:

- ✓ See what kind of vacation leave you have and see what time of year is going to work best for everyone’s schedule
- ✓ Get an idea, based on your “must-see” list, how long you will need for your vacation to Disney World

## Step 4: What is Your Budget?

Now let's focus on the final step prior to researching where you will stay: How much can you afford to spend?

In many ways, if you are trying to really have an affordable Disney vacation, this is the most important step, as you really need to have a budget in mind at the very beginning, or this trip can quickly escalate into anything but affordable.

Be honest with yourself and be realistic. Not having an extravagant budget does not mean you can't have a fabulous vacation! On the contrary, that is what [The Affordable Mouse](#) is all about! 😊

But having an idea at the beginning, of what you can truly afford to spend will help you greatly in your subsequent planning. Whether you can afford \$2000 or \$10,000, knowing your budget will then help all the other pieces fall into place.

You may decide to splurge in some areas, and scrimp in others and that is fine! Only you will decide which are the areas of your Disney vacation that are most important for you to splurge on and where you will need to save. There is no right or wrong way to do it....as long as you can afford it.

*(Because, no matter how much this vacation means to you and your children, you want to be able to sleep at night knowing that it is well within your budget. No magic is worth the stress of worrying how you're going to pay for it!*

*A Disney World vacation does not have to be as expensive as you may think, and this guide will show you lots of ways to save money. So make your budget what you can TRULY afford, and then build your vacation to meet your budget...rather than the other way around.)*

This is also the time, now that you know approximately when you are going and for how long, to see if there are any Disney promotions that you can take advantage of, such as savings on packages, free dining, or room discounts. Don't book yet, because you want to compare with other options to see if the "deal" is the right one for you...but see what is out there first.

So for your action plans for this step:

- ✓ Determine your approximate budget
- ✓ Decide of the various aspects of your vacation (accommodations, transportation, tickets, food), which are the most important (the things you are willing to spend more on) and which are less important (those that you can scrimp on). For example: stay at a nicer hotel, but save money on food. Or splurge on table service meals every night, but drive instead of fly.
- ✓ See if Disney is offering any special promotions for the time you plan to visit that may apply to you. You may want to contact a [Disney specialist travel agent](#) to get a quote for what your vacation would cost with the current promotions. (*A travel agent can be of great help here, and their services are free to you!*) Note the details, but do not book yet.

OK? We are laying the groundwork here, so that next we can start researching the first "big" thing: where you will stay!

## Step 5: What Are Your Accommodation Options?

We are now going to focus on the next steps of planning an affordable Disney vacation, choosing your accommodations. This is a huge part of any vacation budget, so it is important to take some time to research your options to decide what is best for your family.

Keep in mind as well, that I would **hold off on actually booking any accommodations just yet, until you have the chance to research your transportation options** as well...since the costs/convenience of one can greatly affect the other. Now you certainly don't HAVE to do it this way, but if you want to make sure you are getting the best price you possibly can...then I would make sure I had all the pieces to the puzzle first. 😊

Now, on to where to stay. Walt Disney World offers an almost dizzying variety of choices, from the many Disney properties, to off-resort hotels, to a vast supply of vacation homes and condos.

How do you choose?

And perhaps even more to the point: what is the best choice to save money?

The answer to both questions is the same: it depends. 😊

Most people think that it is always cheaper to stay off-property, and that is just not always the case. There are a number of variables that will come into play here: time of the year, size of your family, and need for transportation while there, will all factor in your decision.

As we have already discussed, the busier times of year will be more expensive...and you may possibly have less choices, especially if you are not planning far ahead. Disney will not typically offer as many promotions for these times of year as they will for the slower times. So off-site may be your best choice during peak season...but again, not always...

You need to look at the size of your family: if you have a number of children that will require more than one motel room, then a larger “suite”, villa, or rental home may be the most economical as compared to renting multiple rooms. The Walt Disney resort has some properties that can accommodate larger groups of people, and it is not unusual for Disney to have some pretty sweet discounts and packages on this “level” of accommodation. In other cases, some hotels/motels, both on and off property, may offer specials where two rooms could be cheaper than one room in a different location. You will also want to look beyond the traditional hotel/motel option and consider renting a vacation home, condominium, or time-share. If you need the additional space, do the math: it can be a definite cost-saver.

But you will also want to consider how you are going to get around while at Disney World. You can stay with Disney and use their free resort transportation, consisting of buses, monorail, or boats. If you end up off-site then you will need a way to get to the parks. You can see if your hotel/motel has a free shuttle. If not, or if you are staying in a private property, then you will need to factor in the cost of renting a car or van.

In the next few chapters, we will discuss each of your options in more detail. Your action steps right now:

- ✓ If you have not already decided generally when you want to go, how long you want to stay, the parks/attractions/events you are most interested in, and how much you want to spend.....well now is the appropriate time.
- ✓ Begin to research options for accommodations. Look at the [Disney website](#) for information about Disney resort properties and [get some price quotes](#) just to give you some perspective on what to expect, and a comparison for non-Disney properties.

## **Step 6: A Disney World Vacation Home Might be Right for You**

In this chapter, we are going to look at an increasingly popular option for affordable Disney vacations: [Disney World vacation homes](#) and [Disney World condos](#).

Why might this be a good option for you?

To begin with, this option will probably have a lot more space for your family, and for many families this is an important factor, and can very likely be a cost savings, since family size for many folks means multiple hotel rooms. With a vacation home or condo rental however, you will be able to sleep anywhere from 4 to 16 people comfortably. More space, and the same or less money than a hotel room means a better overall value.

Another potentially huge cost savings will be having access to a kitchen....along with everything you could possibly need including, dishes, pots and pans, glasses, coffee pot, can opener, bake wear, and a whole lot more. Being able to easily prepare and eat in for some meals can be a huge cost savings for your vacation since you can make meals and snacks at a fraction of what you would pay at the theme parks.

There is an additional “hidden” benefit as well that is perhaps overlooked at first...but truly appreciated by those who choose this option...the privacy/relaxation factor. What? Relax on a Disney vacation? Yup! Many rental properties are located in gated communities, and so they have this secluded “get away from it all” feeling that you just cannot find at a Disney resort property or really any hotel/motel property for that matter. You can relax and unwind in your personal pool or spa, take advantage of your home’s theatre, or play video games in the game room...for as long as you like, at no additional cost.

You will find that there are many vacation rental options that are close to Disney World, ranging from small condos to large houses that can

accommodate multiple families. They will all be fully furnished and most have multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, again making for a much more comfortable vacation stay than the average hotel room. Linens are usually provided, along with a starter supply of paper and other basics. It's a home away from home, so to speak.

I always advise anyone planning a Disney World vacation to consider renting a [Disney World vacation home](#) or condo. For a lot of folks, this is clearly the most affordable option, and most people who do this are thrilled with how their vacation turns out.

Action step:

- ✓ Take a look at the [options for a vacation home or condo](#) and see if any are right for your family.

## Step 7: Should I stay ON Disney property or OFF Disney property?

This is probably the single most frequent question I get from folks planning a Disney World vacation. And the answer that I give depends on a number of things.

(You should probably see a pattern here by now 😊 )

Let's talk about why you would want to **stay off-site** first. To start, you *may* save money, possibly a good deal of money, or at least get larger/better accommodations for the same price. (Note that I said "may", because depending on the time of year and if Disney has any promotions...and a couple of other factors as well...this may not always be the case.) If you have a larger family, where a standard size hotel room is not going to do it for you, this can be important if you will be getting more than one room. And, you may also find it easier to find rooms in your price range if you are planning on traveling during peak travel times, or if you are trying to book all this at the last minute.

Other things that will come into play here however, are things like transportation to the parks and meals. You will want to see if the off-property hotel you are considering offers things like free breakfast, or free park shuttles...or will you need to rent a car?

The transportation part should be looked at very carefully in fact. Traveling to and from the parks can be a challenge, depending on the available shuttle service: some hotels share shuttles, or charge for their use. If you want to take afternoon breaks from the parks, you may want to consider renting a car, but if you do, realize that there will be a parking fee, and if visiting on peak holidays, the parking lots may be closed to non-Disney guests.

Now why would you want to **stay on-site**? Well, the already-mentioned transportation issue is a big one. Disney "perks" like "Extra Magic Hours" are a nice way to get additional time in the parks. Plus Disney offers the Disney Dining Plans, as well as those increasingly frequent [promotions](#) that should never be overlooked when planning affordable Disney vacations.

Then there is “the Magic factor”. ☺

Arguably the most important thing that a Disney property provides, that you will not have if you stay off-site, is that 24/7 immersion in the Disney “magic”. Of course, for many folks, that may be the biggest disadvantage! After all, how often can you stand to hear “It’s a Small World” in one day? It may be that for your family, having a break from all that pixie dust may be a very good thing indeed.

Now you should also take a look at the “non-Disney” hotels that are located on Disney property: there [several in the Downtown Disney area](#), as well as the distinctive [Walt Disney World Swan and Walt Disney World Dolphin](#) located near Epcot and Hollywood Studios. These hotels, while not owned by Walt Disney World, still offer a number of those great Disney perks, but without the corresponding Disney property cost. It’s a nice compromise if you are trying to save money but would still like the Disney ambience.

Both on-Disney and off-Disney properties have their pros and cons, and as you can see there really is no one perfect-for-all solution. Even for your own family, the best choice for an affordable Disney vacation may be different depending on the year, season, month, or even week.

Action steps:

- ✓ Research the non-Disney properties that are available...and there are many! Make sure to look at what the property offers:
  - Transportation to the parks?
  - Free breakfast?
  - Suites if you need/want one
  - In-room refrigerator
  - See if you qualify for a discount through AAA, AARP, or other organization
- ✓ Check out the [Walt Disney Swan and Dolphin](#) to see what specials they are offering, as they often run promotions. If you are a teacher, health care professional, or member of AAA, AARP, or other organizations, see if there are any discounts that may apply to you.

## Step 8: Walt Disney World Resort Properties 101

OK, you have looked at [rental properties](#), and [non-Disney hotels](#). What if you want to stay in the heart of the “magic”?

Well, you have a lot of choices! 😊

Briefly, Disney basically has four categories of hotel accommodations: Value, Moderate, Deluxe, and Deluxe Villas.

While there are clearly some differences among these categories in terms of size, location, amenities, and cost, all Disney resort properties share in a number of “perks”. Disney resort guests all have access to free transportation to and from Orlando International airport, and between theme parks and hotels. In addition, resort guests can participate in Disney’s “Extra Magic Hours” at the parks, as well as the Disney Dining Plans. And depending on the time of year, Disney may also offer some very attractive package deals that include free days, park tickets, and even free dining....all of which can weigh very heavily when planning affordable Disney vacations.

As to the resorts themselves, **Value resorts** such as All-Star Music or Pop Century offer fun themes, food courts, smaller rooms, and the lowest prices on Disney properties. They are also typically located farthest away from the theme parks. An important note here are the All-Star Music suites that enable a larger family to stay in one “room” although again, you will have to do a cost comparison to see if this is most economical to you.

The **Moderate resort** category, as the name implies, is “in-between”. These resorts, like the Caribbean Beach, or Port Orleans also have food courts, have slightly larger rooms, and are usually a little closer to the parks.

The **Deluxe** category hotels, which include properties such as the Polynesian, Yacht and Beach Club, and Disney’s flagship Grand Floridian, are the closest to the parks, have the largest rooms and most luxurious amenities, and do not typically include the “food court” option. They are also the most

expensive....most of the time. I say this because they are also the properties that, when Disney offers resort discount promotions, are most likely to be discounted the heaviest because they do not book up as quickly. This is where having some flexibility as to when you are traveling can be beneficial: it is certainly possible to be able to stay at a deluxe resort during non-peak times for less money than a moderate during peak times.

The final category is the **Deluxe Villas** which are really a “different” category entirely, because they are Disney Vacation Club properties that are not booked by vacation club owners. These properties can be perfect for larger families since they include one and two bedroom villas that have kitchens. Again, depending on the time of year and potential promotion available, a Deluxe Villa can be the most affordable option for your family.

So as you begin to finalize this part of the process, compare your needs as to size, location, and budget with the options available for the time of year and promotions that are available. It is really important, if you want to have the most affordable Disney vacation possible, to do this part of your research and do the math. You may be surprised about what is actually the most cost-effective: it is not always the option you think it will be. 😊

Finally, your last stop before booking should be to compare different pricing options...no matter if you are staying on or off Disney property.

As already mentioned, be sure to also check for discounts through organizations like AAA, AARP, and if you are a teacher look into that as well: the [Walt Disney World Swan](#) and [Walt Disney World Dolphin](#) often offer good promotions for teachers. And get quotes on several different options to see what is most affordable. A [Disney specialist travel agent](#) can help.

Action steps:

- ✓ Explore all of your options
- ✓ Compare your choices
- ✓ See where you can get the best prices

- ✓ Have your top two or three choices, but look at transportation options (coming up next!) before you make your final decision, as that may affect your final choice

## **Step 9: Getting to Walt Disney World: Do You Plan to Fly?**

Now that you have determined when you are going to go to Disney World...and are ready to book your accommodations, the next major thing to decide is how you are going to get there. And as with many aspects of this process, you have some choices...and the most affordable choice is not always the most obvious.

Once upon a time, if you wanted to travel to Walt Disney World, you either flew if you wanted to save time, or drove if you wanted to save money. Then energy/gas prices started to climb, and now the best travel option for an affordable Disney vacation is not as obvious.

Flying is still probably the most popular choice for transportation, but getting the best price will require diligence and hopefully the ability book well in advance of your vacation. You will probably get the lowest airfares 4 months out and then again possibly 6-8 weeks in advance. If you wait and book within the last 2 weeks, you will pay the most. Consider, if your travel plans allow it, to fly on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Saturday for the cheapest fares, and avoid Friday and Sunday nights. Traveling during holiday seasons or weekends? Do not wait, and book as soon as you can: waiting will probably mean paying more...if you even get a seat.

As to airlines, I suggest doing comparisons through the major travel sites like [Expedia](#) and [Travelocity](#). Realize though that some of the “discount” airlines like Southwest or Jet Blue may not be reflected in your options, so be sure to get a quote directly with them as well. And register on the website of each of the airlines you are considering: you may get special email offers, and with Southwest especially, their “DING” program often provides some pretty sweet discounts...but you need to be prepared to grab them fast, as they usually are good for only a few hours.

What about airports? Most folks fly into Orlando International Airport, and if you do that and are staying with Disney, you can use their Magical Express buses to travel to your resort, thereby eliminating the need for airport transfers.

But this is not always the most economical, and personally I always take a look at nearby airports like Tampa, and Jacksonville. Many folks also like to fly into Sanford, which is a smaller, regional airport that some smaller airlines use. Clearly, doing this will necessitate the cost of a rental car, so you need to do the math to see if your airfare savings will be negated by the cost of renting a car...but sometimes, especially during holiday travel, it is just worth it. Same thing goes for at home: if you can, see if you have other airport options to fly out of and see if you can get a better price using them if you do.

Make sure you consider additional “fees” such as cost for checked luggage, or additional booking fees that may be added if you are using sites like [Travelocity](#). When choosing an airline these days, those extra bag fees can add up, especially if you have to pay the fee and THEN your bag comes in at over 50 lbs. Many folks have found it to be cost effective to just ship items directly to their resort hotel ahead of time, to be waiting there when they arrive.

When it comes to booking airfare, your best way to have an affordable Disney vacation is to plan ahead!

Action steps:

- ✓ Start to check out airfare for your travel dates. See how many options you have.
- ✓ Look at neighboring airports to see if you have more/better options for airfare and times.
  - If this seems a possibility, do a quick estimate for car rental to get you to/from Disney World: Is it still a savings?
- ✓ See if you get better rates through [Travelocity](#) or [Expedia](#)
- ✓ Make note of cost for extras like checked bag fees.
- ✓ See which airlines seem to be the lowest in general and sign up for any programs they have, like Southwest’s DING.
- ✓ Check to see if you have any frequent flier miles that you can use

## **Step 10: Have You Thought About a Train to Disney World?**

On our first visit to Disney World with our then 7 year old daughter, we made the decision to take the train. I had grown up traveling by train when I was young and loved the sense of adventure. And since we live in the Baltimore/Washington area, we had the ability to use Amtrak's Autotrain, which allowed us to take our car with us. We wanted to have a car, and found out that doing this was a great way to help us have an affordable Disney vacation. We took the train down, and drove home at the end of our trip and found out we loved the train! On our second trip we again used the Autotrain, only this time we drove down and took the train home (it was VERY nice to relax and not worry about driving at the end of a Disney World vacation!).

So if you are interested in doing this and you live on the East Coast of the US, what should you know?

First of all, you will have a couple of options as to trains as well as seats/accommodations. If you choose the basic train, you will make a number of stops along the way, so be sure to look at the travel time on Amtrak's schedule to see how long it will take...and realize that it may actually take a bit longer than estimated. It is nice if you can time the trip for overnight so you wake up the next morning in Florida, ready to go! There are several stops that are close to Disney World: Sanford, Orlando, and Kissimmee. From each of these stations you can arrange for a taxi to take you to your hotel, or from Sanford and/or Orlando, you can rent a car.

For the Autotrain, it goes from Lorton, VA to Sanford, FL in about 15-16 hours, departing around 4 p.m. and arriving the following morning. While this version may seem pricier, it will include the cost of transporting your car, as well as dinner and continental breakfast the following morning. Plus you have the added bonus of being able to bring with you as much "stuff" as you want for no additional charge, provided it can fit in your car. 😊

With both options, you have the choice of just buying a seat, or a compartment. While seats are clearly the least expensive option, you will want to make sure you will be comfortable sleeping pretty much upright for the night, and that you don't mind not having any real privacy for the duration of your trip.

But if you plan ahead, a compartment may be an affordable option. Compartments come in various "sizes" to accommodate different family needs, often including toilets, and always including dinner and continental breakfast. This is what we chose and it was so much fun and very relaxing. We brought games, read, talked, enjoyed the scenery, and watched dvds.

If you decide to go by train, be sure to watch Amtrak's site regularly, and check out their specials. Once you book, continue checking, since if your cost goes down, they will usually refund the difference.

Traveling by train is a totally unique experience. If you have never done it before and find that this is an affordable option, I highly recommend it!

Action steps:

- ✓ Visit [Amtrak's website](#) and see what trains are available from your location.
- ✓ Put in your travel dates to see schedules, and pricing options.
- ✓ If considering the Autotrain, be sure to estimate any additional cost to get to/from the Lorton, VA station (overnight hotel, gas etc.)
- ✓ If considering the regular train, also get cost estimates to get to/from the train station in Florida: car rental, shuttle/limousine, or taxi

## **Step 11: What You Should Know if You Want to Drive**

Are you considering driving to Walt Disney World? While many folks may dread the idea of traveling long distances with their family, there can be a number of reasons why this might be the perfect transportation choice for the most affordable Disney vacation for your family.

First of all, you will probably save money. At one time I would have said “always” but as gas prices have risen if you absolutely want to go the cheapest way, you will need to compute the cost of gas (and possibly a night or two in a motel along the way) vs. the cost of airfare. There are certainly times, depending on potential available airfare, that you could fly cheaper. But, most of the time, especially if you have a large family, driving to Florida will save you money.

And not just on the gas vs. plane tickets issue will you save money: by driving, you will have your car available, so no rental car is necessary. Having your car will allow you to pack things like food, snacks, water, and pretty much anything else you can think of. With the food and water especially, it will be a savings for you to bring them from home, especially since bringing snacks will save you money in the parks. And if you are bringing little ones, bringing your own stroller will save you the cost of renting one while at Walt Disney World.

Now what are some ways to make this drive a pleasant “family time”? Plan ahead for activities: put together “travel bags” with different games for the kids. Many folks bring out a new item every hundred miles or so. Built-in DVD players can be a godsend for keeping little ones entertained: see how many Disney movies you can watch on the way! Plan frequent stops to stretch legs and let off some energy. Play “road games”. Bring along books on CD, as this can be a great way to pass time much faster than you realize.

Depending on how long of a trip it will be, you might find it helpful to plan a stop in a hotel/motel along the way. We always found that doing this helped to “break up” the trip and make it a far more enjoyable time than it would have been if we had driven straight through. Of course for many, it works best to drive straight through! It is purely a matter of what is best for your family.

Driving to Walt Disney World can present some challenges, but it can also be an adventure and a wonderful way to create some special family memories, and save money in the process.

Action steps:

- ✓ To determine if driving will be a cost-effective choice for transportation to Florida, you will need to estimate the costs that would be associated with driving.
  - Consider if you will drive straight through or stop along the way. If you think you will want to stop, get some cost estimates for booking a hotel/motel along the way. [Expedia](#), [Travelocity](#), or [Hotels.com](#) will provide you with your options. Note that in some cases, if you find a motel where you want to make a reservation, you will need to pay for the room when you book...in other cases you only put a credit card down to reserve but it is not charged until you arrive. Know which it is, and if you will pay upfront, be sure you check the cancellation policy.
  - If you don't have any kind of roadside assistance, consider joining [AAA](#). You will have access to many benefits, including discounts that may make the cost of joining well worth it.
  - Check out [GasBuddy.com](#) to see where you can get the best prices on gas for your travel route.
  - If you don't already have one, consider investing in a [GPS device](#). Again, the upfront cost will be made up with the benefits of having your travel route mapped out, along with valuable information on gas stations, restaurants etc. along the way.

- ✓ Be sure to consider the “non-money” aspect of this: while driving may be cheapest, but will driving long distances with your family make everyone crazy in the process? Sometimes...you need to spend a bit more to keep everyone happy. And that is ok. 😊
- ✓ Don't book transportation yet until you factor in transportation costs while at Disney World. We're going to talk about that next! 😊

## Step 12: Getting Around at Walt Disney World

So once you get to Walt Disney World, how are you going to get around? What kinds of transportation options do you have for an affordable Disney vacation?

Unless you are driving and will have your car with you, your options will depend on whether you are staying on Disney property and can take advantage of Disney's free transportation from the airport and to the theme parks. If not, you will need a rental car and/or rely on other transportation options.

If [staying with Disney](#), you will have access to a great transportation system consisting of buses, boats, and monorails. Disney's Magical Express provides travel from Orlando International Airport to and from each of the Disney resort properties. Especially nice with this, is the fact that you can even have Disney handle your luggage, allowing you the chance to get to the parks quicker. All of this is no-cost, reliable, and relatively hassle-free. While there are circumstances where Disney transportation is not the most efficient use of time (the buses do typically service more than one resort property at a time, and going from one hotel to the next can be time consuming), by and large, if you are staying on Disney property and don't plan to go off property, you really don't need the additional cost of a rental car.

If staying off-property or in a vacation home, then you will need to make other arrangements. Many [hotels near Disney World](#) offer free shuttles to the theme parks. But you will still need to get there from the airport if flying. And if there is no free shuttle, then you will need a rental car.

Taxis and limousine services can prove, believe it or not, to be an affordable option to get from the airport, as can a shared airport shuttle. As for getting around once you are at your hotel, there are a lot of choices for rental cars.

If you decide to rent a car at the Orlando airport, you will have the choice of 8 different car rental companies. In addition, you will find that there are car rental locations on-site in Disney World as well as at several hotels in Downtown Disney. This makes renting a car for a day or two, if you would like to visit neighboring theme parks, convenient and hassle free.

The best way to get a good rate for a car rental is to be persistent and check the rental companies' rates on a regular basis. Register for the "preferred renter" option at each company in order to save time when picking up your car, and to get money-saving discounts. Don't be afraid to book with a company when you see a good rate: if you get a better one later on, there is no penalty for cancellation. Doing this can, over time, save you several hundreds of dollars if you are keep trying. Be sure to check sites like [Travelocity](#) and [Expedia](#) to compare rates. And feel free to check the cost for a larger vehicle than you think you need: sometimes the companies have more requests for small cars than they can handle, and so the larger vehicles are seriously discounted as a result.

One thing to keep in mind with all of this: if you have plans to visit any other theme parks, or wish to eat at non-Disney restaurants, you will need a car, or arrange for a taxi.

Action steps:

- ✓ Compare what you have learned about transportation to Florida, and while at Disney World with your top accommodations choices. Look at the different options previously discussed and see what ends up being the best choice for your family...from both a cost and convenience/happiness point of view...because both matter. 😊
- ✓ Determine if you will need a car while at Walt Disney World. As already stated, if staying off-Disney property (and you won't have access to a hotel/theme park shuttle) or if you wish to travel off Disney property more than one or two times, you will probably need a car.

- If you will need a car while in the Orlando area, then be sure to factor in the cost of renting a car while there if you decide not to drive.
- ✓ If you don't need a car at Disney, then do a comparison of transportation options to get you to Florida (plane, train, or automobile) and decide which will be the best choice for your family.
- ✓ Once you decide the best place for you to stay, the best way to get to Walt Disney World and get around while there...then it's finally time to [book your hotel/vacation home](#). You will also want to **book your transportation** if you can...or at least determine what you will book, and make plans for when you will.
  - If flying, start monitoring airfare for your chosen airline(s).
  - If taking the train, reserve with Amtrak as far in advance as possible, and monitor periodically to see if any specials could be applied to your reservation.
  - If driving, make a decision about motels along the way(and book if possible)
  - If renting a car, start monitoring rental car rates, get on the preferred renter list for several rental companies, and book when you get a great rate/code. And then keep checking, and re-book if you get a better rate...because you may!

## Step 13: Is the Disney Dining Plan Right for Your Family?

Now that we have covered some of the major and most expensive portions of your trip...lodging and transportation...let's talk about food.

One of the best ways to help have a truly affordable Disney vacation is to [plan your meals economically](#). One of the most popular ways to get the most out of your food budget, if staying with Disney, is to use the Disney Dining Plan.

On the Disney Dining Plan (DDP), if you have reserved a Disney package, you can have the option of pre-paying for most, if not all of your meals, by choosing one of several plans. (Please note that having a Disney package is a requirement, unless you have Annual Passes or are Disney Vacation Club members.)

With the Quick Service Dining Plan, you get two quick service meals and two snacks per person, per day, and one resort refillable mug per person, per package. With the basic Dining Plan, you will have one table service, one quick service, and one snack per person, per day. And finally, there is the Deluxe Dining Plan, offering 3 table or quick service meals and two snacks per person, per day, plus a refillable mug for each person per package.

So basically, there is a Plan for whatever your budget is. 😊

Since we enjoy a table service meal each night, our family has purchased the basic Dining Plan on each of our last several trips and it is a huge saving for us. We use the counter service meal (entrée, drink, and dessert) for lunch, the table service meal (entrée, drink, dessert) for dinner, and we use the snack credits for either breakfast...or eat light in our room. For us, it is usually way more food than we can usually eat, and so we often get our dessert at dinner "to go" since we are so full. Other times we choose fruit and/or muffins for our lunch or dinner desserts and use these for snacks later or breakfast. We have experimented with the plan a number of different ways, and no matter how we do it, we eat very well, have food left

over to bring home (snack credits purchase great edible “souvenirs” J), and we save money.

How then does the Dining Plan help us have an affordable Disney vacation?

Currently, the basic plan costs from \$41.99 to \$46.99 (depending on the time of year) per adult/per day, which for our family of 3 is usually less than we would have spent out of pocket just for dinner itself. So clearly, it is a huge cost-saver for us.

Will it be for your family? Possibly, depending on your family size, eating habits, time of year etc. In other words, like most other things related to planning an affordable Disney vacation, you'll need to do the research and then do the math. ☺ Compare all levels of the Dining Plan: if you have small children, you may find the Quick Service Plan to be more suited to your family's needs than the basic or Deluxe Plan.

Related to the Dining Plan, there are a few additional things you should know:

1. Disney has offered for the past few years, a package promotion in late summer/early fall that includes the Disney Dining Plan for FREE. Yup, you have that right: FREE FOOD. This is seriously a huge cost-saver, and if your schedule allows traveling at that time of year, you should really consider it. Now there are no guarantees, but this seems to be a consistent pattern at this point, and one that you may want to consider.
2. While you don't have to pay for the Dining Plan when you reserve your package, and so technically it is not something you need to decide early in the planning process.....and **this is important**.....IF you are planning to get the Basic Plan and so will have table service meals...you absolutely need to think about what restaurants you will want to eat in, and make your reservations (Advanced Dining Reservations) well in advance. Disney currently starts accepting ADRs 6 months in advance, and if you are visiting during any of the busy seasons...or during Free Dining...if you don't reserve well in advance, you risk not eating where you want. I just can't stress this part

enough...when it comes to Disney table service restaurants during high-traffic seasons, the early bird definitely gets the worm.

Action steps:

- ✓ If you [booked a Disney package](#), look at the Disney Dining Plan and see if it can save you money. Estimate your meal costs without one of the plans, and then compare it to what you will pay with the DDP. Make sure that the plan level you choose is the right one for your family: ie. If you have little ones, is the Basic Plan, with a table service meal every day the right one for you? And if you are traveling during peak season (or during Free Dining) are you able to book Advanced Dining Reservations (ADRs) 4-6 months before your vacation?
- ✓ If you decide to book one of the Dining Plans, remember to call Disney or [your travel agent](#) to have it added to your reservation. The Disney Dining Plan must typically be added prior to your arrival at Walt Disney World.

## Step 14: Tips for Saving Money on Food at Walt Disney World

The last step discussed the Disney Dining Plan. If you are not staying on a Disney package....or determined that the DDP was not cost effective for you....or want to save more money on food...there are still a number of ways that you can [reduce your Disney vacation food budget](#).

At this point, I do want to say that you CAN spend a lot on your meals on your Disney vacation...but you don't HAVE to. Here then, in no particular order, are 10 ways that you can cut your meal costs that will go a long way towards making this vacation affordable for you.

1. Cook/eat some meals in your room. If you are staying in a vacation home, villa, condo, or even a hotel suite, you will probably have access to a kitchen. Use it to do some simple cooking. Even if you have a traditional hotel room, you should be able to have a small refrigerator: get some milk, juices, and even some lunchmeat and cheese to keep in it. We have done this and had cereal in the morning before leaving for the parks, and made some sandwiches to bring with us for a quick, easy, and inexpensive lunch.
2. Bring your own snacks, juices, water etc. Not having to pay park prices on these things will save you a lot of money...plus it is so much more convenient to just grab a bottle from your backpack instead of standing in a long, hot line.
3. Consider sharing meals, especially if you have little ones who don't eat much. Disney portions are usually quite large and sharing...whether between 2 kids, or an adult and child...will not leave anyone hungry. This works, by the way, whether you are eating counter service or table service.
4. Speaking of table service, are you planning some sit-down meals? Look for buffets, as you will get more for your money! Or think about having your table service meals for lunch: you will still get a lot of the same delicious food options but at lunch prices rather than dinner prices.

5. Consider foregoing table service meals altogether and just eat quick service. Many families find that this is the best way to go with small children, as there are no long waits for food, and the meals tend to be more “kid-friendly”.
6. Eat some meals away from Disney. Non-park restaurants may be less expensive than those you find in the parks.
7. Consider off-site hotels that offer free breakfast.
8. If staying off-site, ask your hotel for local restaurant discount coupons or promotions. Or invest in a local Entertainment Book for restaurant coupons.
9. Check local Florida/Orlando websites for discount coupons for eating establishments.
10. As mentioned last time: If offered, try to book a Disney Package during any Free Dining promotion. It will save you a LOT of money.

OK, so there you go, 10 easy ways that you can pare down your food budget on a trip to Disney World. Clearly, all will not apply in all situations, but you should be able to use a few on your vacation, and when it comes to trying to have an affordable Disney vacation, every little bit helps! 😊

Action steps:

- ✓ Go through the above list and see if any of these tips will work for you. Make a list of what you will need to bring or have in your room to make this work.
- ✓ If you won't have access to a full/part kitchen, try to at least have a small refrigerator. Many Disney resort properties already have refrigerators, in others you will need to request one. Make arrangements to add this to your reservation if necessary.
- ✓ Start making a list (and buying when you have coupons or they are on sale) of the water, drinks, or snacks you will want to bring with you. If you plan to buy them while there at a grocery store, determine where/how you want to do this.
- ✓ I have an ebook that is written just about this subject! [Magical Meals: A Guide to Affordable Dining at Walt Disney World](#) is all about understanding dining at Disney...and how to eat affordably. 😊

## Step 15: Saving Money with Discounted Disney Tickets

Up until now, we have been talking about aspects of your vacation that need to be thought about as early in the process as possible. Ideally, many, if not most of the previous steps should be researched, decided, and in many cases booked from 4-6 months before your vacation. If you are planning to travel during a high-traffic season, like the Christmas holidays, closer to 6 months is best.

From here on out, I'll be talking about some other aspects of your vacation that are part of your vacation budget, but don't have to be decided on quite so early.

Today's post will deal with tickets, another major expenditure...which is why you want to make sure you are not spending more than you have to. 😊

Basically, there are two parts to this discussion:

1. Where you can get Disney parks tickets.
2. Where you should NOT buy [Disney parks tickets](#).

Let's briefly discuss the first one:

You can purchase Disney World park passes through Disney, or through an [authorized Disney ticket broker](#). Those are the only two avenues you should consider if you want to be confident that you are getting actual Disney park tickets.

If you are purchasing a [Disney resort package](#), your tickets will be part of that package, so you are good to go! But if you are booking your room individually (no package) at a Disney resort, or staying off-site at a non-Disney hotel, vacation home, villa, or condo, then you will need to buy theme park tickets.

And you will want to get them in advance, as you don't want to buy them at the gate: they will cost you more that way!

You can order your park tickets through the Disney website. Or you can get [Disney theme parks tickets](#) from a broker. There are a number of reputable brokers that you can purchase tickets from safely, and save some money. Not a huge amount of money, but enough to make it worth it, especially if you will be staying for several days, and have a number of people in your party.

The company that I have personally used, and recommend highly is [Undercover Tourist](#). Their prices are great, their service is even better, and they are completely reputable. I would not recommend them otherwise. And [their website](#) does a great job of breaking down the Magic Your Way ticket structure and that which is pretty helpful. 😊

As to where you [should NOT buy Disney theme parks tickets](#)? Well, every place else....

I really can't emphasize this part enough. Be very, very careful here, as unfortunately, many, many people get burned every year trying to save money on tickets, only to find that their "tickets" were worthless.

So steer clear of eBay, Craigslist, or any website or seller that offers prices that seem too good to be true...because they probably are. Look at the fine print as well, and make sure you are not agreeing to sit through a lengthy timeshare presentation in order to get those tickets...unless you really want to lol.

If you want to learn more, you can a basic overview on my [Discounted Tickets](#) page. In addition, I discuss [how to determine a reputable Disney ticket broker in this post](#). And to learn about where you should not buy Disney tickets and why, [you can read more here](#).

Action steps:

- ✓ Take a look at your ticket options to determine whether you will want a Park Hopper (visit more than one park/day) or one Park/Day ticket. See how many days you want to get tickets for. And decide if the Water Parks and More option makes sense for your family. (If you are

traveling during the winter months....it may not.) You can get a good overview of the ticket structure on [Disney's website](#) and at [Undercover Tourist](#).

- ✓ Pay special attention to the Non-Expiration option, as you may want to consider buying more days on your park passes than you will need....if you plan to return to Disney World.
- ✓ Do a cost comparison between a [discount broker](#) and buying from Disney directly. Make sure you are comparing "apples to apples": for example, be sure tax and any shipping costs are included. (FYI: Undercover Tourist does not charge shipping)
- ✓ Order your tickets, or set a reminder for yourself to order them no later than a month prior to your trip.
- ✓ When your tickets arrive, be sure to make copies of the backs of them if you don't receive that already. Bring the copy on your trip and keep it in a safe place....in case your tickets are lost or damaged, so that they can be replaced. Otherwise, if you lose your tickets, you are out of luck!

## Step 16: Pre-Trip Checklist to Save You Money at Disney World

Up to this point we have been discussing the steps for planning an affordable Disney vacation that need to be done well in advance. As I have shared frequently already, if you want to save money, you need to plan ahead. 😊

Now, it's time to get ready to go! Finally, after months of planning, you're going to Disney World! Woohoo! 😊

Before you go though, there are some things you will want to think about. Doing these things now, before you leave can save you quite a bit of money when you are at Walt Disney World. Some would disagree with me on this, but this is a time when I frankly do "sweat the small stuff" ...simply because I know that if we are going to save money....and time....on our vacation, I like to be prepared.

Now there is no need to obsess about this, it's just a great idea to be like a Boy Scout.

So your action steps involve the following:

- ✓ Check the weather and pack accordingly. Please don't assume that Florida is always sunny and hot. The summers frequently have rain showers, and winter can actually get cold! Not packing for the weather will mean that you end up buying ponchos, scarves, hats, gloves, sweatshirts, and possibly even coats at Disney....and I can promise that is NOT affordable at all.
- ✓ Go to the [Disney World website and check the park hours](#). Even better, print them out so that you know when you can visit each park. If you will be staying on Disney property and can take advantage of Extra Magic Hours, note that as well. No point in being able to get in the parks an hour early if you sleep in those mornings!
- ✓ While you're on the Disney website, make note of which attractions/rides are closed during your visit. Part of planning an affordable Disney vacation is making the most of your time. Don't waste your time walking to rides that aren't even open.

- ✓ Get some snacks etc. to bring with you. Whether for the trip, in your hotel, or even to bring with you to the parks, bringing snacks from home can definitely save you money...and possibly be healthier as well.
- ✓ I'm a list maker and when it comes to a trip like this, I think having a list is one of the best ways to make sure you keep costs under control. Lists mean you are less likely to forget things....and remember, anything you forget, you will have to buy there. Whether it is clothes, or Advil, if you have to buy it at Disney, it's gonna cost you a lot more.
- ✓ Do you have little ones? Consider bringing your own stroller...or rent one from a stroller company in the Disney area. Renting strollers at the Disney parks will definitely cost you more. Just keep that in mind.

## Step 17: Fun and Cheap (or Free) Things to do at Disney World

When talking about Disney vacations, it is easy to get so caught up in all the attractions, rides, major shows etc. that one can easily overlook the many fun things to do at Walt Disney World that are free...or almost free.

One thing that I have tried to do with [The Affordable Mouse](#) is to show that, while Disney CAN be expensive, it does not HAVE to be. This step will show you just how many things you can do at Disney World that won't cost you additional money beyond what you are spending for room, food, tickets, and transportation.

OK, in no particular order then:

1. **Check out the Disney resorts.** Whether you are staying on or off Disney property, you owe it to yourself to visit the resorts. Each of them offer a wealth of fun and interesting themes, and you may be amazed at how much time you can spend just wandering around and taking in all that they have to offer. Plan your visit around dinner if you like and try out some of the restaurants or food courts at the resorts too!
2. Related to number 1, but really in a category all it's own: visit the **Animal Kingdom Lodge** to animal watch. There are a number of animal observation stations where, believe me when I say that you can spend a lot of time being mesmerized by all of the animals there.
3. **Visit the Boardwalk.** Not necessarily the resort (although it is great) but the actual Boardwalk where all kinds of fun and interesting things are happening. Yes, they are not all technically free, but relatively speaking, the cost of renting a bike or surrey for example is minimal compared to how much fun you will have!
4. Take time to **smell the roses**...literally. We have been to Walt Disney World 11 times and counting and every time we visit we STILL see/find something that we never saw before. Disney loves detail, and some of my favorite memories center around exploring gardens, topiaries and

such that sometimes just get passed by in the rush to get to the next ride before the line gets too long.

5. **Ride the monorail.** It's a must do on every vacation we have at Disney World. And for more fun, ask the Cast Member on duty if you can ride "up front". If you are the first one to ask, they may say yes and I can tell you, that is one fun ride. Plus your kids will get a "Co-Pilot" certificate as well.
6. **Pin trade.** Yes I will readily admit that pin trading CAN get out of hand and cost a lot of money, but really for a minimal investment, your kids (and you) can start a really fun and interesting hobby. We began our collection during the Millennium Celebration when it was raining every day and night...so we just pin traded. Castmembers love to pin trade with park guests and kids get a real kick out of trying to get specific pins. You don't have to make it heavy-duty or expensive to start. Set a budget of one or two pins/per day, or get some on [Amazon](#) or eBay before you arrive. And then have fun!
7. Epcot has the **KidCot fun stops** where children create fun masks and activities at each of the World Showcase countries. What a great way for kids to create, and learn a little about each nation...without them even realizing they are learning!
8. **Ride a Segway.** Yes you can sign up for an actual tour that is not particularly cheap, but you can get a quick "lesson" ...and photo op...at Innoventions at Epcot. Just keep in mind there is a height limit on this and parents sign an "injury waiver" beforehand.
9. **Ride the boats** that go from Epcot to Hollywood Studios, or around World Showcase Lagoon. Fun and a great way to cool off when it's hot.
10. **Pools. Pools. Pools.** Oh and then there are the pools. Unless you are visiting during the cold weather months, most of the Disney resorts have fabulous pools, and some are open to "pool hopping": just make sure you *check with your resort* first if you plan to try out another pool, as some resorts are closed to pool hopping. And even if you are not staying at a Disney resort, most Florida hotels realize the importance of pools for their guests, and provide some really fun pools.

Action step:

- ✓ Make a list of the kinds of cheap or free things that you think your family might enjoy.
  - If you think pin-trading will be an activity that your kids will enjoy, look at eBay, [Amazon](#) or [DisneyStore.com](#) to see if you can find some that are cheap to bring with you, to get the trading started. Your children can trade these away for more valuable ones!
  - If you want to be able to play a few carnival games or rent a bike at the Boardwalk, be sure to budget some extra cash for this.

## Step 18: Keeping the Souvenir Budget Under Control

It should be no big surprise that “souvenirs” can be huge budget busters and are one of the quickest ways I know to kill any hopes for an affordable Disney vacation. Especially if you have little ones, the cries for “Buy me this” and “I want that” can be very hard to ignore. So here are a few things that we have found that help keep our souvenir spending from getting out of hand.

1. I am a big fan of setting a daily spending budget...even for kids. On our first trip, our daughter was seven, and we set aside some money each day that was “hers” to spend as she wished. It was not a lot, I promise you, but having her own money to use, meant that when she used it up, she was done for the day. No complaining, whining, or begging. Once it was gone, it was gone. And it worked. 😊
2. There are a lot of quite inexpensive options for souvenirs! Pressed pennies, postcards, pencils, pins all are quite affordable and can actually be the start of a new collection for a child that gets added to on each vacation. Kids love to collect things!
3. Consider bringing some “souvenirs” with you, or have a box shipped to your hotel. Many families have found that kids love to get a surprise from Mickey when they wake up every morning, and these little surprises can minimize the need to beg for things in the parks. [Disneystore.com has an outlet division](https://www.disney.com/outlet) as well as a [theme park merchandise section](https://www.disney.com/theme-park-merchandise), and they have regular sales with some great bargains.
4. Two words: character autographs. Hugely popular, and really, about as cheap as you get! Bring something other than a book, like a tee shirt, or hat and give the character a sharpie to sign with: instant souvenir that will be cherished for years.
5. Take your own pictures, or give your camera to a castmember to photograph your entire family. You don't have to pay for Photopass pictures to get your entire group in a picture.

These are just a few ideas, but believe me a little creativity, can go a long way towards keeping your souvenir budget in check. Fun does not have to

be expensive! The best souvenirs you will come home with will be your memories...and those don't cost a thing....but are truly priceless.

Action steps:

- ✓ Consider if your child will be old enough to have a daily budget, and decide the best way to handle this with him/her. Many families have used small Disney gift cards or Disney dollars. Or you can set aside \$5 bills or whatever amount you want to use. Make it "official" and put it in an envelope for them each day.
- ✓ Interested in pressed pennies? Make sure you bring some nice shiny ones with you from home!
- ✓ If you plan to bring "souvenirs" from home, start shopping early when things are on sale. Again, the [Outlet at Disneystore.com](http://Outlet.at.Disneystore.com) is a great source for Disney-themed items that your child will cherish...at a fraction of the cost of what you will pay at the parks.
- ✓ Think ahead of time about having the characters autograph items other than books...and purchase those items when they go on sale. Make sure you have some sharpies for the autographs!
- ✓ Get some extra storage devices for your camera at home, or bring your computer to upload pictures. You want to have plenty of space on your camera for all the pictures you want. And probably the biggest mistake we still seem to make here? Having batteries go dead. Buy more batteries than you think you could possibly need...or invest in a battery re-charger, and remember to recharge every night!

## Step 19: Keeping the Magic Alive When You Get Back

Well, you're home. Hope you had a wonderful time and if you are like we are, you are already thinking about your next trip... 😊

Once your trip is over, we're not technically talking about planning an affordable Disney vacation any longer, but most folks return from a magical trip and want to "keep the magic going". With that in mind, what are some affordable ways to do that?

Well, let's talk about all those pictures you took to start. 😊

Don't just upload them to your computer and leave them there! And don't print them all out and then keep them in a shoebox!

Pick out your favorites and create "photo" gifts for your family or yourself! Calendars, mugs, mousepads and more can create smiles for your loved ones for a long time. My personal favorite: slideshows of my favorite pictures become my computer's screensavers and remind me of wonderful vacations every time my computer goes to sleep.

And don't forget to [frame a few of your favorite pictures too](#)! I have a line up on my mantel from each of our family trips to Disney World and it is so special to see how we have all changed over the years...especially our daughter.

Have you ever thought of [creating a scrapbook](#)? While this can be an expensive and detailed hobby, it does not have to be. In fact, it can be as simple as you like. Collect "things" from your trip: park passes, maps, room keys, confetti, napkins, you name it! Be creative. Add some character autographs and your favorite pictures, jot down some of your best memories, and voila: you now have a treasured memory book that you can look at time and time again to relive your wonderful Walt Disney World vacation.

Then there are your videos. One of the fun things that we have done is to schedule a video night...but instead of renting a movie, we watch our

vacation. Pop some popcorn and make a night of it reliving the Disney fun. We have shared so many laughs remembering fun Disney World times!

Don't underestimate your desire to have some reminders of Mickey at home! Fortunately there are many inexpensive ways to add a little touch of Disney to your house, or to your children's rooms. Mugs, pot-holders, antenna toppers and ice cube trays are fun reminders of great Disney memories. And many children will treasure special Disney items like dress-up clothes, snow globes, and even posters. If you get back home, and realize that there was something you wanted to get at the parks but didn't, [Disneystore.com has a Theme Park division](#) where you will find some of those favorite items....and probably cheaper than if you got them at Disney World.

Lastly, I also like to keep the magic alive with music. I tend to buy CDs of park music while I am there, but you can also download Disney music from iTunes, or buy the songs when listening to a Disney podcast or streaming webcast. Burn a CD of your favorites, and you can visit the parks any time you want...even when sitting in a traffic jam!

## Step 20: Final Thoughts

Planning an affordable Disney vacation is a lot of hard work, but very rewarding, because once you realize that you can visit the “happiest place on earth” for less money than you thought....then you know you can go back again! Maybe it doesn’t have to be the trip of a lifetime. Now that you have been once, you probably have started to make a list of things that worked well for you, and things that were not effective. You know what your family likes and does not like. Great! Next time, your trip will be even better because you will be experienced! 😊

I hope that you have found this Step by Step Guide to Planning Affordable Disney Vacations to be helpful. If you have any questions, need advice or suggestions, or want to share a great affordable Disney vacation tip of your own, I would love to hear from you! As a [Disney Travel Specialist](#), I am also available to provide you with a quote...at no obligation. (And there is never a fee to use a travel agent! 😊 ) You can always email me at [nancy@theaffordablemouse.com](mailto:nancy@theaffordablemouse.com) or visit our [Facebook page](#), “Like” us, and say hi!

And if you have any friends who would enjoy the information at [The Affordable Mouse](#), then please ask them to join in the fun. The more the merrier!

Have a magical day!!!

## Affordable Disney Vacation Resources

[The Affordable Mouse](#) offers lots of great ideas, tips, suggestions and a growing collection of money-saving ideas for a Disney vacation. In addition, following are some of the places that you can look\* to help you plan an affordable Disney vacation:

[Disneyworld.com](#)

Phone numbers:

- Guest Information (407) 939-6244
- Walt Disney World Dining (407) 939-3463

[Undercover Tourist](#)

[Vacation Home Rentals](#)

[Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin](#)

[Amazon.com](#)

[DisneyStore.com](#)

\* While I include these links as a reference for you, in the interest of full disclosure, please note that some of the above vendors will pay me a small commission for purchases made through my link. However, please also know that I refer them only because I have personally used them in the past, or I know of someone who has.

### A Few Other Great Disney Blogs You May Enjoy

There are a lot of interesting websites and blogs about Walt Disney World. Following are just a few of my favorites:

[Chip and Co.](#)

[Meltdown Free Disney](#)

[The Disney Driven Life](#)

[WDW Fan Zone](#)

[Cooking With Mickey](#)

[Disney Dispatch](#)

[Theme Park Mom](#)

[ZannaLand](#)

**Notes:**