

Submission for AHSIP newsletter.

Tips for the Forum in Orlando:

We are staying at the **Disney Coronado Springs Resort**. This is a full service resort (pool, exercise facilities, restaurant & food court) as well as a convention center. There are free buses to all Disney attractions and shopping areas.

## **Planning Ahead:**

Get a good Disney Guidebook if you want to maximize your enjoyment. There are lots of extras that you can sign up for if you plan ahead. Take a “behind the scenes tour” to learn how Disney World operates (no kids allowed on most of these tours). Disney Institute offers courses in practically every aspect of their operation (cooking, animation, customer service, etc.) Some of the best restaurants may book well in advance, so it’s a good idea to make at least some evening plans ahead of time. But even planning your day in the parks is worthwhile and having a good guidebook is essential. They give you great tips (like what to see first before the lines form, and how to use the Fast Pass systems to spend less of your day waiting on lines).

The side trips are worth it, if you have the time and energy. There’s a lot to see and do in Florida. Great beaches, great attractions. You can’t see it all in a short time. What’s contained in this brief article are some of the recommended things that my own visitors have enjoyed.

Orlando is the land of the free brochure. You can be swamped with a blizzard of glossy trifolds if you aren’t careful. There’s one free booklet (about T.V. Guide Size) called **See Orlando** that contains coupons and a summary of all the major attractions (ticket prices, hours of operation, etc.). If you spot one of those, it’s worth grabbing.

Orlando is also the land of timeshare resorts. On or off Disney property (but especially off of it), you will be approached by people offering you all sorts of freebies (tickets, dinners, etc.). If you are interested in a timeshare, then by all means go to the ½ day seminar and get your free gift. Otherwise, just politely say “no thanks” or they’ll attach themselves like barnacles!

**REMEMBER where you park!!!** If you drive yourself to any of our local theme parks, the #1 thing to remember is where you parked the car. It will save you untold embarrassment. Keep an eye on the small children too.

## **Getting There From the Airport:**

**Rental Cars:** All major rental car companies operate from airport locations. If you want to see other parts of Orlando or Florida and/or visit the non-Disney attractions, the cost of a rental car may be well worth the money to have the added convenience.

**Airport Shuttle: Mears Shuttle Service** is the cheapest and most reliable of the airport-to-hotel operators. You can obtain information at (407) 423-5566. They **do not** make reservations for airport to hotel travel – the service runs 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week, so just go to the Mears counter when you leave baggage claim. Current prices to the Disney Coronado from Orlando International Airport are: \$15 one way; \$27 round trip if paid in advance.

**Cabs:** Taxi service from the airport to the Disney area is quite expensive and I can only recommend it if you are traveling in a group so that the per-person charge is reasonable. Meter charges alone routinely run in excess of \$50.

## Things to do: Disney area

**The Hotel:** The **Coronado Springs hotel** has a great “themed” pool with an extensive waterslide, an outdoor playground, walking/jogging path and an exercise room.

**Theme Parks:** Disney World has 5 theme parks: **Magic Kingdom, EPCOT Center, MGM Studios, Animal Kingdom and Disney Quest** (an indoor amusement park). It also has 3 Water Parks: **Typhoon Lagoon, Blizzard Beach, and River County at Fort Wilderness Campground.**

**Night Life:** There is a nighttime entertainment complex called **Pleasure Island** (7:30 pm till 2:00 am) with clubs featuring comedy, rock, techno, 80's and jazz. There's an **AMC theater's** multiplex at Disney's West Side. **Cirque Du Soleil** presents their show (La Nouba) nightly at their specially built theater at the West Side. It's worth every penny! Disney's **Boardwalk** has a high-energy piano bar and a dance-club where they usually have swing music. **House of Blues** concert space is considered to be the best in town. The acts change nightly so check in advance and see who's playing. I recommend reserved seating off the floor (“mosh pit”) unless you really like your fellow concert-goers.

**Shopping:** **Disney Village** and **Disney West Side** are two shopping areas with restaurants and a variety of stores carrying souvenirs, clothing, artwork, memorabilia, and more. Too much to list.

**Restaurants:** The hotel has two restaurants: **Maya Grill** (with a Yucatan theme & Nuevo Latino cuisine specialities \$\$\$) and a really good **food court** (\$, \$\$). The theme parks all have a range of restaurants. If you want to eat at one of the nicer ones (e.g., **Alfredo's** in Epcot's Italy Pavillion), make a reservation as soon as you get into the park, or arrange it in advance through the hotel switchboard. There are several restaurants at **Disney's West Side** including **Wolfgang Puck's, House of Blues, Planet Hollywood, and Bongos** (Cuban food). All of the Disney Hotels have at least a food court. Some have some very nice fine dining restaurants. Personal favorites are at the **Wilderness Lodge** and the **Animal Kingdom Lodge** both of which have a choice of all-you-can-eat or fine dining restaurants. **Chef Mickey's** and the **California Grill** are both at the Contemporary Hotel and are also well worth the trip. **Spoodles at Disney's Boardwalk** is a tapas-style Mediterranean restaurant. Pleasure Island/Disney Village have several restaurants including **Fulton's Crab House**, and light meals at the **Jazz Club** (inside Pleasure Island). There's a **Ghiradelli Chocolate** place for great hot fudge sundaes in the Village too. **McDonald's** has a huge restaurant there too, right next to the Lego store. There's an even bigger McDonald's near the hotel on one of the main highways on Disney property – if you just have to take the kids there... There are plenty of “character” meals offered at various restaurants in the hotels. The dinner at **Chef Mickey's** is among the best of these – lots of characters come by the table and the food is really good. To reserve in advance at any Disney restaurant, call **(407) WDW-DINE**.

**Other hotels:** One favorite passtime for visitors with a little “extra” time on their hands is to visit the high-end hotels on Disney property. Favorites include the **Contemporary, Grand Floridian, Polynesian, Wilderness Lodge, Boardwalk**, and the **Animal Kingdom Lodge**. Depending on park occupancy, you may not be let in just to “look around” so if you're interested in seeing some of these places, it's best to make reservations for a meal at one of the restaurants.

## Other Amusement Parks – Orlando area:

**Universal Studios & Islands of Adventure:** I-4 towards Orlando (North East). Two big parks, can easily fill two days. Great roller-coasters and movie-themed rides.

**Universal City Walk:** A huge nightclub and dining complex. Jazz, Reggae, Rock and Motown are available in the clubs. Cajun, Caribbean, nouvelle cuisine, American, and South American food are available in the restaurants. A great night out with reasonable pricing. Reserve ahead at **Emeril's** restaurant. **Hard Rock Café** has a concert venue – check in advance to see who's playing.

**Sea World:** Lots of marine animal shows plus a walk-through shark tank! One huge roller coaster & a log ride. Busch has owned Sea World for about a decade and it has turned into a premier attraction under their guidance. Lots of teaching and fun mixed together.

**Gatorland:** A genuine Florida attraction. Learn about alligators, crocodiles, snakes, and a bit of what Florida wildlife really was.

**Wet & Wild:** A truly impressive water park. Lots of tubes and slides! Bring sun screen!!! Generally considered better than the **Disney Water Parks** because the slides are longer and there are more of them. **Disney's** parks are definitely cleaner and usually not as crowded.

## Top Restaurants in the Area:

These are just the best in fine dining in the area. There are too many good restaurants to list. These are all \$\$\$ or \$\$\$\$ establishments, but they are all well rated and they give good value for the money.

**Columbia Restaurant:** Celebration Town (just East on 192 from Disney) now has its own branch of the oldest restaurant in Florida. They serve Spanish/Cuban cuisine. Try the 1905 salad and their special Sangria! If you really want to experience this in the original setting, go to the original restaurant in Ybor City – just about 1 hour West of town on I-4. The one in Celebration is newer (just a few years old) but the food and ambiance are top flight! Family owned and managed.

**Charley's Steak House:** You'll see this one listed on those "top 10" lists in the airline magazines. Get the steak, of course. Short cab ride from our hotel.

**Arthurs 27:** Yes, Orlando has a 5-star gourmet restaurant. Atop the **Wyndham Palace at Walt Disney World Resort**, this place overlooks the Disney parks and, if you ask in advance, they'll set you up with a great view of the fireworks to go along with your meal! I recommend letting the chef choose for you. Pick an entrée and leave the rest to the staff. Great for a really special occasion while you're here. Dress up.

**California Grill:** Atop **Disney's Contemporary Hotel**. This is nouvelle cuisine with a show kitchen, a great view and a casual atmosphere. Great wine list.

**Roy's Ohana:** A new restaurant in town, not to be confused with "Ohana's" at Disney's Polynesian resort (which is also good). Roy's Ohana is Pacific Rim cooking with amazing service and an extensive wine list. Great desserts. North of I-4 off of Sand Lake Road exit – just about 7 miles from Disney.

## Other Area Attractions:

**NASA/Cape Canaveral:** Check the launch schedule – maybe you'll get lucky and see a shuttle going off. If not, actually visiting the **Kennedy Space Center** is a terrific way to spend a day. They have added several high quality exhibits in recent years, including I-MAX movies and a walk-through space shuttle. The tour is great and there's nothing like standing next to a Saturn V rocket to give the little spaceman in all of us a thrill. **Merritt Island Nature Preserve** is nearby. Great walking tours of a coastal wetland. The spaceport is located about 1.5 hours East on SR 528.

**Airboat Rides:** You can find these dotted all over the landscape – where there's water, there's gators and airboat rides. The best local ones are out on East Lake Toho (short for Tohopekaliga) at the **East Lake Fish Camp**. There's plenty of room for them to get going out there. Good fishing out there too (10 lb bass). Nighttime airboat rides available too. Shine the light & see the gators!

**International Drive:** Lots of restaurants, shopping (**Belz Factory Outlets, Mercado, Pointe Orlando**) and smaller attractions (**Masters of Magic, Wonderworks, Titanic Exhibition**).

**Warbirds:** **Fantasy of Flight** and the **Warbird Air Museum** are in the area. The **Warbird Air Museum** has several restored and project aircraft. It's located behind the Kissimmee municipal airport. **Fantasy of Flight** is about ½ hour West of town on I-4.

**Opryland Hotel:** A bit of Nashville just across the highway from Disney. It's a brand new hotel (not yet open as of this writing). If its anything like the one in Nashville, it'll be worth a visit.

**Winter Park:** The posh side of Orlando. **Park Avenue** is filled with boutiques and restaurants.

## Side Trips away from Orlando:

**Silver Springs:** Up North in Ocala National Forest (off of Highway 27). The real deal – this is where all the great Tarzan movies were filmed. It looks today like it did then. Lots of critters, river and swamp to explore.

**Busch Gardens:** West on I-4, North on I-75, about 1 hour away in Tampa. This is where you'll find the most roller coasters and a good zoo.

**Ybor City:** Off of I-4 West just this side of **Tampa**. Follow signs to the historic district. This is the “old city” where cigars are still hand made. Antique shops, eclectic newer stores, and the original **Columbia Restaurant**. Night life has really picked up here after they turned the nightclub strip into a pedestrian mall. Also famous for one of the Nation's first use of face-recognition security systems. Nice place to stop on the way home from **Busch Gardens** or **Tampa**.

**Tampa/St. Petersburg:** The **Dali Museum** in St. Petersburg has a fantastic collection of his works. If you only do one side trip away from Orlando, this is the one I recommend. Open late on Thursdays, afternoons on Sundays. You can combine this with a trip to the beach in **St. Pete**, or a visit to **Ybor City's historic district**. Tampa and St. Pete both have numerous marinas. Tampa has a great performing arts center featuring road companies of most Broadway shows. Tampa is 1 hour West of Orlando. St. Pete is another ½ hour or so on the causeway towards the Gulf Coast.

**Tarpon Springs:** A Greek sponging village. Still very active in sponge harvesting. Much of the area is given over to shopping and restaurants. North of Tampa on the Gulf Coast. About an hour north of Tampa.

**Everglades:** Several hours South, but if you've never seen a “river of grass” and you want to imagine Conquistadors slogging their way through swamps, this is the place to see! Gators roam wild here, so stay with the tour group! Take the scenic route South on SR 27 to get a taste of Florida's Cracker past.

**St. Augustine:** Oldest city in the country! A mixture of influences, wonderful old fort. A good day trip North & East from Orlando. Or spend the night at a B&B (but reserve well in advance).

**Miami:** It's a 4-hour drive South, but Miami is a unique city. Calle Ocho is the heart of the Cuban Community. South Beach has its famous Art Deco hotels & nightclubs. Best lodging is in South Beach or Miami Beach.

**Fort Lauderdale:** This is one of the wealthy communities on the Atlantic Coast. Great shopping in the historic district and along the beach. Also one of the best ocean fronts in the State. Visit the **Auto Toy Store** for your choice of exotic vehicles to take home. An hour or so North of Miami.