

What Time of Year Should We Visit?

Crowd levels at Walt Disney World vary seasonally, so one of the most important decisions you'll make is deciding when to go.

Spring

Spring is a great time to visit. Except around spring break and Easter, crowds are manageable—not as sparse as in fall, but smaller than in summer. While park hours don't run as late as they do in summer, they're generally longer than in either fall or winter. And the weather is sublime, with highs in the 70s, lows in the 60s, and less rainfall than in any other season.

Summer

The good news about summer is that everything is open and operational, and the parks run very long hours. The bad news is that it's hot and crowded—so crowded that the wait for many rides can be as long as 90 minutes. If you have preschoolers, babies, or senior citizens in the party, avoid summers like the plague. But if the schedules of school-aged kids dictate that you must visit in the summer, the first two weeks of June and the last two weeks of August are your best bets.

Fall

Fall has lighter crowds than summer, and the weather is often great. There are, however, disadvantages to a fall visit. You have to work around the fact that older children are in school. The parks run shorter hours in fall; the Magic Kingdom, Animal Kingdom, and Hollywood may close as early as 5 PM, although Epcot always remains open later. Earlier closings mean that some of the special evening presentations, such as the evening parade in the Magic Kingdom, are scheduled only on the weekends.

Fall is the season for two of Walt Disney World's most popular events: Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party at the Magic Kingdom (with selected dates beginning just after Labor Day) and the Epcot Food & Wine Festival. These events are doing exactly what Disney designed them to do—drawing people in during slower times. Consult www.disneyworld.com to buy tickets early, or to note the party dates if you want to avoid them.

Late summer and early fall make up hurricane season in Florida, so there is some risk that you'll schedule your trip for the exact week that Hurricane Laluna pounds the coast. Fortunately, Orlando is an hour inland, meaning that coastal storms usually only yield rain, and, should worst come to worst, Disney has "ride out" plans (i.e., a hurricane policy) to ensure your safety. Furthermore, there are more rainy days in summer than there are in the fall, so, in general, the advantages of autumn touring far outweigh the disadvantages.

Winter

Winter is a mixed bag. The absolute worst times are holidays. Christmas and New Year's can pull in as many as 90,000 visitors per day, and even extended hours can't compensate for crowds of this size. But if you avoid the holiday weeks, winter can be an ideal time to

visit. With the exception of the weekends around Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Presidents' Day, January and February aren't crowded—and they're pleasantly cool. The first two weeks of December, when the Christmas decorations are already up but the crowds have not yet arrived, are wonderful options. The parks run the same shortened hours in winter that they run in fall, but since the crowds are so much lighter, you'll still have time to see everything you want.

Off-Season Touring Caveat

Some parents have written in to say that they like taking the kids to Orlando during the off-season, but that they've heard this is when Disney is most apt to close attractions for refurbishing. It's a valid point. On a recent trip in January, I found five attractions closed for refurbishing, including Big Thunder Mountain in the Magic Kingdom and Star Tours at Hollywood. But I still believe it's better to tour during the off-season. Here's why: during that same January week, the most popular Magic Kingdom attractions, such as the Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh and Splash Mountain, were posting wait times as short as 20 minutes, about a third of what they normally are, so even taking closings into account, you'll still ride more and wait less during the off-season. If your kids have their hearts set on a certain attraction, you can avoid last-minute disappointments by checking www.disneyworld.com to see what's scheduled to be closed during your trip.