

DISNEY'S EVOLVING NEW

Since various components of Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando began to come to life over the past seven months, visits there have, in some ways, reflected a microcosm of life during the pandemic.

In March 2020, Disney World and its California counterpart, the Disneyland Resort, closed their doors to visitors indefinitely. Disneyland would not reopen its parks until April 2021 due to state restrictions, but officials in Florida began planning a phased reopening as the spring of 2020 progressed.

On May 20, the Disney Springs shopping and dining district reopened with new safety procedures and limited offerings for guests. Theme parks took a little longer. Park officials worked with the Orange County Economic Recovery Task Force to come up with reopening plans in late May.

In July, there would be a phased reopening of parks, starting with Magic Kingdom and Animal Kingdom on the 11th and Epcot and Hollywood Studios on the 15th.



A sign outside Gasparilla Island Grill at the Grand Floridian Resort & Spa has a QR code that directs guests to online ordering. (TW photo by Jamie Biesiada)

Since then, Disney has worked to reopen more of its Orlando campus, and park capacity has increased to 35% from 25%. Some restrictions have been loosened; for instance, guests can now remove masks for a quick photo.

At any stage, the park, recognizable yet changed, would have left a visitor from the “before times” perplexed at best.

Today, guests make reservations to visit any given park on a specific day; spontaneity is not an option until 2 p.m., when park-hopping opens up. Arriving guests have their temperature screened before being admitted. They must wear face masks at all times, except when actively eating or drinking while stationary. Crowds are thinner, thanks to limited capacities to promote social distancing. Lines into shops are spaced out by distance markers on the ground. Parades and fireworks displays have been paused.



Temperature checks are required for entry into Disney's theme parks.

Many well-known elements are absent or closed. Instructional ground markings and plexiglass barriers abound.

“It is both really familiar and totally disorienting at the same time,” said Robert Niles, editor of Theme Park Insider. “I think a lot of people are grateful to have any kind of theme park experience at this stage, even if they can’t have the complete experience just yet. It’s why Disney and Universal are selling out to [their limited] capacities at this point. But I also think many more people are waiting for the full experience, and when that becomes available, they’ll be back in the market.”



‘[Parks now are] both really familiar and totally disorienting at the same time.’

—Robert Niles, Theme Park Insider

It’s not known which of the new policies, procedures and regulations will live on beyond the pandemic.

Disney has not made any announcements about permanent policy changes at this point, but industry insiders have some idea of what to expect down the road.



All attractions have social distancing ground markers, seen here outside the Haunted Mansion in the Magic Kingdom. (TW photo by Jamie Biesiada)

Niles said he believes Disney and its theme park peers will be quick to get rid of face mask and physical distancing requirements as soon as possible.

“That’s the unpopular stuff, and that’s the stuff that really limits [Disney’s] ability to operate at a more profitable capacity,” he said.

Some theme park operators are already making moves to reduce mask requirements. Dennis Spiegel, founder and president of theme park consultancy International Theme Park Services, pointed at Cedar Point in Ohio. The park will no longer require guests wear masks on rides.

In the larger industry, mask requirements will likely differ from park to park.

“They are going to be required in some places and not required in others,” he said. For instance, some parks may mandate face masks indoors, but not outside. “Eventually, I think they will go away, unless we have some horrendous recurrence.”

And there will likely continue to be a portion of theme park guests who will choose to wear masks going forward, he predicted.



Transportation and many attraction ride vehicles have barriers in place to keep parties separated. (TW photos by Jamie Biesiada)

One thing that is certain to remain is the increased use of mobile phones for transactions such as ordering food and other sales.

“Frankly, these were things they were working on before, and the pandemic accelerated their development,” Niles said. “They’re here now, and they’re going to stay.”

Further evidence of that came when Disney recently reconfirmed that its Genie service, a digital trip-planning tool originally announced in August 2019, is still forthcoming. It will allow guests to optimize their days, both in advance and on the fly when in the parks.

Less certain is whether the current park reservation system, which the company uses to strictly manage capacity, will remain.

The system has been helpful to travel advisors in providing structure to clients’ vacations, said Anastasia Bender, a Travel Leaders affiliate and Disney specialist based in Phoenix. But in the long term, she hopes the system disappears.

“Overall, I think a lot of people do like to start their day in one park and then move over to another,” she said. “I like that more flexible option.”

Kassie Coy, a fellow Disney specialist and Travel Leaders affiliate based in Warsaw, Ind., agreed with Bender.

“A vacation is supposed to be fun and relaxing, and I sometimes feel like having all the structure that we have now for Disney is a bit much,” she said.

Niles said park reservations seem particularly “up in the air.” Still, while it does limit guests, it also gives Disney a tool to control capacity without having to rely on perhaps more unattractive options such as annual pass lockout dates.

The pandemic has also given Disney and its competitors a chance to rethink how capacity impacts guest experience.

“It is ‘how many people can you legally shove in here before the fire marshal shuts us down?’ versus ‘how many people can we put in here without beginning to degrade the guest experience?’” Niles said.

It’s a question that was considered before the pandemic, he said, but is particularly applicable as people emerge into the world after more than a year of isolation. There will be, to at least some extent, resistance to crowd levels that Disney drew prepandemic.

“I, for one, am hoping that they don’t turn it back to the free-for-all that it was before,” he said.

Another pandemic staple that’s almost certain to remain is heightened cleaning and sanitization.

“Cleanliness has always been a hallmark of Disney’s theme parks, but lately, the parks have been even more clean, if that’s possible,” said Kristen Buckshire, owner of Travel Ease in Cape Coral, Fla.



Kristen Buckshire, owner of Travel Ease in Cape Coral, Fla., in Epcot.

Greg Antonelle, who owns Windermere, Fla.-based MickeyTravels with his wife Elyssa, agreed. He also believes the hand sanitizer stations positioned around the park have become part of guests’ habits and will remain even once the pandemic has receded.

Antonelle also said he believes that even once face masks are no longer required, Disney will keep selling masks in the park.



The Folo by Travel Weekly

Checking in on Walt Disney World

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This week on the Folo by Travel Weekly podcast: Checking in on Walt Disney World

Senior editor Jamie Biesiada and Greg Antonelle, the co-owner of MickeyTravels travel agency, discuss Walt Disney World capacity and which protocols might stay, the popularity of villa and suite bookings, and a visit to Disneyland. Plus, new attractions and old favorites – and the burning question: How long would you wait in line to ride the PeopleMover? Listen here, or subscribe on your favorite podcast player.

When the parks reopened, one other service that had become ingrained in the Disney experience was missing: FastPass+. The service let guests reserve times to visit certain popular attractions to avoid extremely long lines.

Antonelle doesn't think FastPass+ as guests knew it will return. He predicts the parks will adopt a system like MaxPass at the Disneyland Resort, which lets guests reserve ride times one at a time for a per-person price each day.

Buckshire said FastPass+ has been on everyone's minds. She, like Antonelle, speculated that a paid service could be coming.

Agents are reporting solid sales to Disney now and are looking to 2022 as an especially good year.



'We all feel good that people are ready to really roar back.'

—Dennis Spiegel, International Theme Park Services

Right now, Spiegel said, parks are behaving "cautiously, parting the waters and moving forward. But I think we all feel good that people are ready to really roar back, and when the dam does break, it's going to be wild."

Disney continues building for the future at Epcot

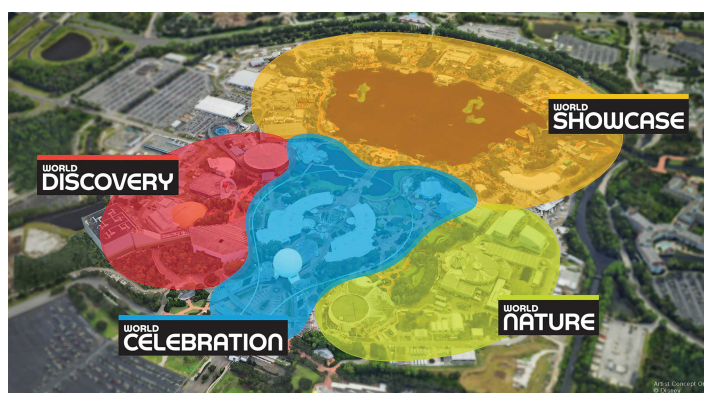
Despite an unheard-of months-long closure in 2020 and operating only at a limited capacity since last summer, the Walt Disney World Resort continues to invest in new projects, including an ambitious overhaul of Epcot.

Some projects have been tabled, such as a previously announced Mary Poppins attraction that was to be housed in the U.K. pavilion. But the new Remy's Ratatouille Adventure in the France pavilion is set to open in 2021, and three new movies debuted around Epcot last year.



Remy's Ratatouille Adventure will open in Epcot on Oct. 1. Guests can see part of the expanded France pavilion today. (TW photo by Jamie Biesiada)

Work is very obviously continuing at other parts of Epcot. The area that will become three new neighborhoods — World Nature, World Discovery and World Celebration — is riddled by construction fences. And new barges sit in the center of World Showcase Lagoon, which will eventually act as fountains during the day and the centerpieces of a new nighttime spectacular titled “Harmonious.”



Epcot will be split into four distinct neighborhoods when work on its transformation is complete.

Scott Malwitz, executive creative director at Walt Disney Imagineering, said the park's redesign was largely informed by what Epcot is at its core and what it means to guests.

“We kind of boiled it down to this aspirational aspect,” he said. “It’s infused with optimism and hope. It talks about innovation. It talks about a lot of things, but it’s really about the people, and that we’re better when we come together. We’re better when we celebrate innovation. We’re better when we celebrate each other. When we celebrate culture.”

Malwitz said that Disney is infusing its intellectual property — such as the “Ratatouille” film — to cater to changing guest appetites and introduce stories that are relevant to guests and the park experience, while also retaining what already works.

“We want to resonate, and yet we want to be respectful of where we are on this continuum of realism [and] magic,” he said.

New attractions and activities are the lifeblood of theme parks, said Dennis Spiegel, president and founder and president of International Theme Park Services.

“It’s what drives attendance, and we live on repeat visitations,” he said. “We have to add new rides, attractions, experiences. Whether they’re indoor, outdoor, live shows, roller coasters — it’s what drives the people to the park, and it’s what brings them back.”



Imagineers inspect vehicles for the upcoming the Guardians of the Galaxy: Cosmic Rewind coaster.

When the pandemic first hit, theme parks, including Disney, largely put projects on hold, said Robert Niles, editor of Theme Park Insider. But that's changing, especially at Disney and Universal, where funding comes from large corporate bank accounts.

"At this point, forward-looking businesses are seeing the other side," Niles said. "They're seeing that people are going to come back and travel. Maybe not this year, but perhaps next year or the year after that, and they want to collect their share of that business."

For travel advisors, that's good news.

Greg Antonelle, who owns Windermere, Fla.-based MickeyTravels with his wife, Elyssa, said Disney has always done a good job promoting new attractions. That, in turn, helps drive client interest in the parks.



Greg and Elyssa Antonelle, owners of MickeyTravels in Windermere, Fla., with Walt Disney World Resort president Jeff Vahle in the Magic Kingdom.

Kristen Buckshire, owner of Travel Ease in Cape Coral, Fla., agreed.

“Disney has always had a strong focus on innovation, and it’s always been a core value for them,” she said. “I do think we will see a surge in repeat guests who may have experienced a shorter trip during the pandemic and are anxious to return for the full experience over the next few years. We are seeing most days fill to the set capacity right now, so I think Disney’s strategy will pay off.”

— **J.B.**

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