

Amusement park

survival guide

Get the most fun out of your park visit. Use these tips to plot your day and avoid the pitfalls of long lines and water-soaked mementos. BY JULIE COLLINS ILLUSTRATIONS BY JEN RENNINGER



Before you throw on that weekend uniform—a sweatshirt and jeans—and head for the amusement park, give your wardrobe a second thought.

Susan Wilson of Hulett, Wyoming, did, but only after her husband, Wayne, got drenched on a Disney World water ride. “Wayne was wearing jeans, and for the next two hours he could squeeze water out of them,” she recalls. Their kids got a laugh out of it, but Wayne was so uncomfortable, he bought new shorts for the rest of the trip.

On any given day at an amusement park, you’re bound to encounter a few obstacles to a good time—from water-soaking rides and spilled cups of soda to soaring temperatures and cranky kids. But if you’re prepared, you can fend off minor and major mishaps and make a memorable day of it.

BEFORE YOU GO

To ensure a stress-free outing, these tips are worth following:

SCOUT THE LOCATION. Whether you spend just one day or build your whole vacation around an amusement park, spend some time searching the Web for deals and details before you head off. While you're online, take time to learn about the attractions and rides that the parks offer, says Arthur Levine, theme park expert for the online About.com network (www.themeparks.about.com).

If your plans include one of the large amusement parks and resorts such as Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, or Six Flags Magic Mountain in Valencia, California, review the types of rides and features that attract you the most. Not too far from Walt Disney World is the elaborate Islands of Adventure theme park where water rides compete with a collection of roller coasters for children's attention.

At Universal Studios Florida, stunt shows and rides feature popular movie themes such as

"E.T. Adventure" and "Back to the Future."

Within the same 5-10 mile radius is Sea World's Discovery Cove park, a haven for sea creatures and a place where you can swim with the dolphins. Not far from Six Flags Magic Mountain is Knott's Berry Farm (see page 146) and Legoland, known for their Lego-like structures and a wide variety of live shows for kids. It also boasts more than 50 rides—many of which have no height or age requirement.

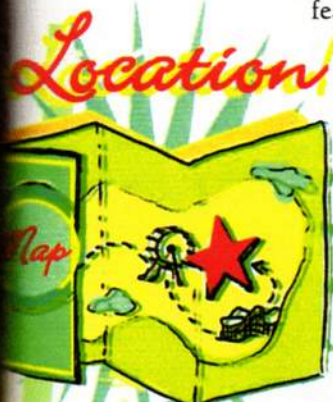
PICK YOUR PLEASURE. To get the kids prepared to make some tough choices—after all, they can't get on every ride at every park—let them plan which ones to

hit first. Research also gives parents a chance to check out ride restrictions, such as age and height, and make decisions ahead of time about who rides what—keeping in-park squabbles to a minimum.

If the Web site features maps of the parks, print them and get familiar with the layout in advance, instead of waiting to get your bearings upon arrival. Make copies for each family member, and mark the emergency care facilities and common meeting places on each copy.

GROUND RULES AND SAFETY TIPS. The night before you get to the park is a good time to go over the rules—yours and the park's. Remind youngsters that they should always be in sight of one or both parents. If older kids are allowed to go off on their own, arrange a meeting time and place to catch up with the family. Use washable ink to write your cell phone number on younger children's arms—a visible means to help park employees contact worried parents. Another idea: Put a few business cards that have your name, address, and cell phone number in your children's pockets.

PACK AND TOTE THE ESSENTIALS. Treat your excursion the same way you would a hiking trip. For the Wilsons, this involves equipping each family member—including daughter Lauren, 11, and son Kellen, 9—with a fanny pack containing water, snacks, a disposable camera, and spending money. Also stow a map of the >> on 146



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park, a phone card, or a mobile phone. Mom or dad may want to keep a first-aid kit that includes pain relievers, bandages, and sunscreen. Also consider carrying along instant cold compresses, which can be applied at the first sign of overheating or injury, and wet wipes for cleaning up sticky hands. To tackle every water ride in the park, take along self-sealing plastic bags to keep items dry—including wallets.

DRESS FOR WEATHER CHANGES. Levine stresses that comfortable shoes are a must. Plan for cooler, warmer, or wetter weather than predicted. You may be able to stash extra clothing in a rental locker rather than carry it.

You may not be able to prevent sweaty palms on particularly hair-raising rides, but you can ward off sweat caused by high temperatures or humidity by wearing clothing made of synthetic-blend fabrics, such as those in Nike Dri-Fit or Adidas CoolMax apparel, which wick moisture away from the body and dry quickly. If you plan to visit an amusement and water park, Levine recommends taking a swimsuit.

AT THE PARK

As much as you prepare for your big day, once you get through the park gates there are more strategies to make the day run smoothly.

SET TIMES TO EAT. To save money, you've packed a variety of snacks and drinks, but snacks won't sustain your family throughout the whole day. The Wilsons

make it a point to eat a nourishing breakfast before they head for the park. (Be careful not to eat too much prior to the roller coaster ride!).

Nibble on simple snacks throughout the morning and early afternoon. "We take time to sit down and have a lemonade, some ice cream, or a yummy snack," Susan says. "This eliminates the cost of buying a full meal there, and the kids still get their Mickey Mouse ice cream bar." If you decide to eat lunch in the park, try to avoid the rush hours between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., and have dinner outside the park.

ARRIVE EARLY. Plan to arrive when the park opens. "Lines are the bane of park-goers," Levine says. "The best advice is to zig when everybody is zagging." Some parents say in order to beat the crowds they quickly head for the back of the park upon entering and work their way forward so they move in the opposite direction of the majority of park-goers. Others find the most popular rides first thing in the morning to avoid lines that swell later in the day. Another tip is to turn left when you enter the park. Statistics show that people instinctively turn right; a left will put you in a lighter crowd. >> on 148



FAMILY-FRIENDLY PARKS

These venues are charmers that draw big crowds by offering something different from other amusement park fare.

Hersheypark
Hershey, Pennsylvania
717/534-3900; 800/HERSHEY
www.hersheypark.com
Originally a playground for Hershey chocolate factory workers and their families, today Hersheypark is open to the public, offering roller coasters and water rides for the whole family. Within the park, visit the 11-acre ZooAmerica, and Midway America, a re-creation of an old-time amusement park and country fair. Stop at Chocolate World, located

next to the park, for a free tour of how chocolate is being made.

Magic Springs and Crystal Falls
Hot Springs, Arkansas
501/624-0100;
www.magicsprings.com
Combine a full-scale water park and a 22-ride amusement park for a day's worth of fun in Hot Springs National Park. Magic Springs, the amusement park, is home to Timberwood Amphitheater, where big-name performers take the stage in the summer. In addition, the water park, Crystal Falls, features a waterslide complex, an interactive family splash zone, and a river with rapids and waterfalls.

Knott's Berry Farm
Buena Park, California
714/220-5200; www.knotts.com
What began as a chicken dinner restaurant on a berry farm 70 years ago has become an amusement park featuring six theme areas chock-full with rides and attractions. The original area, Ghost Town, is an 1880s California boom town teeming with cowboys, gunfights, and gold-panning. Camp Snoopy features the beloved Peanuts gang plus 30 kid-tested and approved rides. The park even dresses up for the holidays, morphing into "Knott's Scary Farm" for Halloween and "Knott's Merry Farm" from Thanksgiving through Christmas.

