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- › [Message Boards](#)

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- › [Beach & Water Sports](#)
- › [Cruise](#)
- › [Cultural Immersion](#)
- › [Outdoor & Adventure](#)
- › [Road Trip](#)
- › [Theme Park](#)
- › [Winter Sport](#)

Lifestyles

- › [Disabled](#)
- › [Family](#)
- › [Gay & Lesbian](#)
- › [Honeymoon](#)
- › [Senior](#)
- › [Single](#)
- › [Student](#)
- › [Women](#)

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Seven House Rental Agencies That Make Disney Feel Like Home

By **Jason Cochran**
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In most guidebooks, the home rental option is relegated to a single box or a few wan paragraphs. That makes zero sense to me. For value, renting a home is quite simply the best way to go. The very first night I spent at a vacation home, stretching out on a leather sofa and watching a TV as big as a lap pool, speaking as loudly as I wanted and heading to the kitchen for periodic snacks, I dreaded having to return to the battery hen arrangement of a hotel ever again. Frankly, I'm not sure why people still want to use hotels. Probably because they don't know how sublime vacation homes are, or that many can be rented by the night. They seem too good to be true. Probably because most guidebooks only give the option a single box or a few wan paragraphs.

Relax. Staying in a vacation home in the Orlando area isn't like crashing in someone's house; rather, properties are usually decorated with the simple elegance of a hotel room, an empty shell waiting for (in fact, designed for) you to fill. Each management company requires the homes it rents to meet a certain standard, which could mean cable TV in every room, high-speed Internet, a screened-in pool, or a garage converted into a screening room or game room. And every management company takes care of the nitty-gritty for you, such as laundering sheets before your arrival or wheeling out the trash bins on garbage day.

Almost all of these homes are located just a few miles from the property line of the Disney resort -- most rental companies have a policy dictating just how far from Disney their homes are permitted to be (but do ask, just in case). Many homes take about as long to reach by car as Disney's cheapest motel rooms at the All-Star and Pop Century resorts, except for about the same amount of money, you get an entire home and not a dorm room packed with two double beds. You will also often find lifesaving perks such as video game consoles, entertainment centers, billiard rooms, and heated pools and hot tubs -- often included in the price.

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There are generally two kinds of homes. Condos are units that are attached to other units; these may have their own plunge pool, but more often they share a communal, hotel-style pool at a common clubhouse. Houses are free-standing and are generally about 30% more expensive than condos. They will almost always have private full pools, usually screened to keep out insects.

A good home rental is not to be confused with a timeshare. These are truly homes you rent, no strings attached. If you go with the following companies, you shouldn't have to endure a pitch to buy real estate (although most of them will be happy to tell you how to buy one of their houses if, and only if, you approach them for information on your own).

Rental agencies

When it comes to renting a home, your biggest concern should be whether your chosen company is reputable. Shoddy maintenance is bad enough, but giving your money to an outfit that doesn't deliver anything would be a catastrophe.

Rental companies represent properties in various neighborhoods, and none of them expect you to instantly know which area is best for you. A good rental agency will match your needs and budget to the most suitable property. All of these companies have pictures of each individual property available online, so all you really have to do is see something you like, point at it shouting "That one!," and then make sure it's in a location that you approve of. Don't let them talk you into something 10 miles from Disney if you'd rather be 3 miles away.

Your credit card will usually be charged a deposit (\$300 is standard) about a month ahead of time. You'll also have to pay a one-time fee before your arrival that goes toward insurance or cleaning; \$50 to \$80 is normal, which makes stays of a single night less economical. Because it's not as easy to rent out a house as it is a hotel room, some companies are pretty tight about cancellations, too, so make sure you know if there will be a deadline for changes. All of these companies provide plenty of photos of each property online. There's no reason you should rent a place without seeing it first; make sure you're satisfied that it's what you want.

Everything represented by **All Star Vacation Homes** (7822 W. Irlo Bronson Hwy., U.S. 192, Kissimmee; tel. **800/572-5013**, 800/592-5548, or 407/997-0733; www.allstarvacationhomes.com; AE, DISC, MC, V), a thoroughly professional company, has a pool, even the condos, and everything is within 4 miles of [Walt Disney World](#) (although the company is opening units near the Convention Center, too, making it a rare outfit that caters to [Universal](#) devotees as well). Furnishings, by an in-house design team, are handsome, with lots of woods and fabrics that make most of its properties feel notably clean and new. Three-bedroom units sleeping up to eight, with a dedicated kids' room and flower beds out front, start at an incredible \$119 a night, or about half of what it costs to squeeze six into Disney's cheapest family suite. Its website has ample information about each property, including photos and floor plans. Its cheapest options are its Condos and Town Homes (two to three bedrooms, tons of space, from \$109), and of its three categories of stand-alone houses (Estate, Resort, and Luxury), Luxury is the most affordable, with a three-bedroom, two-bath house starting at \$189, and a giant five-bedroom running \$219. Full six-bedroom Luxury houses are \$249 -- you can split that among 14 people if you've got a full house. Homes in the Windsor Hills area generally have an equal number of bathrooms to bedrooms, and the Formosa Gardens homes sit on a third of an acre, which is spacious for Florida. Prices go up as you add treats such as indoor/outdoor stereo systems, whirlpools, multiple master bedrooms, and so forth. To sweeten the deal, All Star often offers a free rental car with a 7-night stay, which takes care of another major expense, and its website frequently spotlights new properties that are going for 10% off.

Because of its attention to detail, All Star is my favorite rental agency in Orlando, and although its prices are slightly higher than its competitors, they're still far lower than most hotels. Check the remaining renters if you don't find something suitable. These companies have slightly less rigorous standards in terms of furnishings, reflected in slightly lower prices. These renters also may each represent houses in the same developments, so be sure to shop around as you may get different prices at the same developments.

The family-run **Alexander Holiday Homes** (1400 W. Oak St., Suite H, Kissimmee; tel. **800/621-7888** or 407/932-3683; www.floridasunshine.com; AE, DISC, MC, V) has been renting since 1989, when the industry was in its infancy. It reps around 200 properties now, all of them within 12 miles of Disney, but most much closer. All of its privately owned homes come with at least two TVs and a DVD player or VCR. Its three-bedroom, two-bath homes start at \$132 a night, and no property will deprive you of access to a pool, be it shared or private. Although its website spotlights deals as low as \$65 for two-bedroom condos with shared pools and \$80 for three-bedroom private homes, normal rates are more like \$95 and \$127, respectively. During peak season, it requires bookings of at least a week; otherwise, stays of three to four nights are often possible.

Another up-front business, **Florida Sun Vacation Homes** (7802 W. Irlo Bronson Hwy/U.S. 192, Kissimmee; tel. **800/219-1281** or 407/938-0228; www.floridasunvacationhomes.com; AE, DISC, MC, V) rents homes ranging from two to seven bedrooms in the Disney area (the Windsor Hills and Windsor Palms developments in particular), with prices starting at \$69 in low season and popping to \$139 in high season. Three-bedrooms start at \$89. All of its properties have a pool or a spa (or both). Its website is refreshingly frank about extra fees (one-time clean fees of around \$75 are usually mandatory) and any minimum stays that exist for each property (3 nights is common). The company also rents condos in the Vista Cay development near the Convention Center. Like many companies, it asks that you reserve and pay at least 6 weeks in advance.

In business since late 1999, **Award Vacation Homes** (2303 Hamlin Terr., Clermont; tel. **800/338-0835** or 352/243-8669; www.awardvacationhomes.com; AE, DISC, MC, V) has an inventory that is thickest around Highway 27, a newly developed corridor found 10 to 15 minutes west of Walt Disney World via U.S. 192 (via the Western Way back entrance, completed in 2006). Its houses are relatively new, which is an advantage, and their neighborhoods are serviced by grocery stores that are not overpriced for tourists, which is another perk, though they're also just a twitch farther from Disney than some people prefer. Strangely, European tourists don't seem to mind, so your temporary neighbors may be from overseas. For three-bedroom, two-bath places, rates start at \$132 and peak at \$155, depending on the week. Six-bedroom homes are \$200 to \$236.

Founded in the late '90s, **VillaDirect** (6129 W. Irlo Bronson Hwy., Kissimmee; tel. **877/259-9908** or 407/397-1210; www.villadirect.com; AE, DC, DISC, MC, V) now claims some 550 Orlando-area properties of varying styles and quality on its roster. Its office is open seven days a week, and about 70% of its inventory is located within four miles of the border of Disney property, particularly along the U.S. 192 corridor southwest of Animal Kingdom.

IPG Florida Vacation Homes (9550 W. U.S. 192, Clermont; tel. **800/311-7105** or 863/547-1050; www.ipgflorida.com; AE, DISC, MC, V) deals mostly with homes in Legacy Park, Highlands Reserve, Windsor Palms, and the Villas at Island Club, south or west of Disney. I find its furnishings a little cheaper and its service a little more mechanical than its competitors, but I can't fault the company for its 24-hour welcome center, or its comparable value: two-bedroom condos from \$120 to \$160, and three-bedroom homes with private pools from \$140 to \$200. With this company, "luxury" homes cost less than "exquisite" ones.

Although I find its website lacking in that it won't give a price breakdown until very late in the booking process, **Lowery's Vacation Homes** (7864 W. Irlo Bronson Hwy., Kissimmee; tel. **866/397-0088**; www.moremouse.com; AE, MC, V) has plenty of inexpensive and tasteful properties in the same developments as the companies above. It's a good fallback in busy seasons.

This article is an excerpt from *Pauline Frommer's Walt Disney World & Orlando, 1st Edition*, available in our online bookstore now.

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Note: This information was accurate when it was published, but can change without notice. Please be sure to confirm all rates and details directly with the companies in question before planning your trip.