

JEWISH TRIBUNE

The Trusted Voice of the Canadian Jewish Community

March 23 . 2006 — Adar 23, 5766

Kicking back with the family in Orlando

By Neilia Sherman
Tribune Correspondent

There is no doubt that the Disney empire has made Orlando the hugely popular destination that it is today. Numerous travel surveys have shown it to be the number one family vacation destination in North America. Part of the appeal is the array of attractions, accommodations and services that have emerged to support the 'Disney Vacation Experience.'



Having breakfast with a cartoon character at the Nickelodeon Hotel

Of primary importance on such a trip, is to have a home base where you and your family can relax after a hectic day navigating the various parks and attractions. We stayed in regular hotel rooms for years but now with two rambunctious boys, a room with two double beds just doesn't cut it anymore. On a recent trip to Orlando we experienced luxurious accommodations that were so lavish that our kids just didn't want to leave – even for Disney.

Vacationers are starting to realize that they can have much more than a hotel room in a hot tourist spot like Orlando where the accommodation choices are so abundant. We found All-Star Vacation Homes to be an excellent choice.

These homes are owned by individual investors – they are not part of a time-share development.

Each rental properties is within a few miles of Disney and they range from upscale condos to seven-bedroom estate homes with all the amenities you need for a home away from home. Ours had a huge screened-in pool, a games room, a modern eat-in

kitchen/family room with a big screen TV and a laundry room. At 3,500 square feet it was bigger than the house we live in.

But surprisingly the cost to accommodate a family at a hotel can be more – especially if you rent more than one room. If you split the cost with family or friends this alternative will work out way cheaper than a tiny hotel room.

Having our own heated pool with a hot tub was heaven. We swam before and after our outings and what a great way it was to unwind and bond as a family. For those who keep kosher or have restrictive diets, a house is the way to go. We stored a week's worth of groceries in the large fridge and freezer and saved a bundle by making our lunches.

Our trip was about two weeks before Christmas and Disney was in full seasonal attire.

Eventually our kids started to worry that Chanukah wasn't being represented. So we were very happy to walk into the American Pavilion at Epcot in time to see a dignified lady give a complete presentation on the Festival of Lights. My youngest had his hand up answering questions the entire time.

Then we walked outside just in time to see some costumed soldiers leading the children in pledging allegiance to the flag. Without blinking an eye, my little guy lined up his hand of his heart to take part in this American ritual.

One of Epcot's newest rides is called Soarin, and it is well worth trying, as it takes motion simulation technology to new heights. I recommend using the fast-pass system for this one – you obtain a pass that allows you to cut the line during a specific time frame, usually a couple of hours after you obtain the pass.

I've never been hang gliding but I think this ride must come very close to the feeling. You are strapped into rows of seats which then lift into the air. Feet dangling, riders gaze down at a quick moving scene of California's legendary sights.

For those who keep kosher, with a little planning you can eat kosher food while visiting the Disney Parks. Any sit-down restaurant in the Disney Parks or Hotels will provide a kosher meal if ordered at least 24 hours in advance. A credit card is necessary to guarantee the meal.

Although there is nothing like Disney, one of my big frustrations is how little we actually were able to see with a 5-year-old and a 12-year-old with different interests. Both kids were nervous about trying the scarier attractions so there was a lot of splitting up and meeting later. Also it is just so big; Disney requires resolve and stamina. That is why we also like to slow down our pace and visit Orlando's other unique attractions.

Cypress Gardens, Florida's first theme park is a perennial favourite of Canadian snowbirds and a place where you can see the whole park in one day. The low-key rides at Cypress bring a welcome change of pace. We rode the Island in the Sky; a circular gazebo-type structure lifts us high above the grounds and rotates slowly providing a breathtaking view of the gardens, lake and wildlife.

Seaworld also has a back-to-the-basics feel. Although there are some thrill rides here, my kids were enchanted with the shows that used animals as the main characters and somehow trained them to 'act' on key. We also got drenched by Shamu the whale and learned about various types of sea creatures at exhibits throughout the park.

Other popular diversions during our nine-day trip included seeing a Magic Basketball Game, watching old-fashioned alligator wrestling at Gatorland and exploring scientific oddities at Wonderworks, which is built to look like it is standing on its head. We were all impressed with the amazing feats of the Arabian nights horse show and had a great time at Planet Hollywood in Downtown Disney.

We spent our last two nights in Orlando at two different hotels that also offer a great family experience.

First we moved into the newly renovated Nickelodeon Hotel. Our suite had all you would need for a short stay. There was a living room with a kitchenette, a kid's room with bunk beds and Nintendo and a bedroom with TV number 3 for the parents. But the main draw is that this place is all about Nick. The characters from the popular children's television network are everywhere – drawn on the walls of the kids' rooms, in statue form on the grounds and live at the character breakfasts. Also there is nightly entertainment where kids can have a ball watching their parents get slimed and participating in messy games onstage.

The final night of our trip was spent at Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge. While the rooms were on the small side for a family of four, the place made up for it with the unique African flavour that permeated the entire building. The lobby is decorated with a thatched ceiling, hand-carved furniture and animal print rugs. The buffet had African style dishes that were healthy and delicious. The whole place exudes warmth and genuinely helps children to feel connected to Africa and the animal world.

Our room had a balcony, which faced an outdoor Savannah. The whole family was able to enjoy a peaceful time watching giraffes, hippos, and lions while they hung out around the water hole.

Animal Kingdom seemed quite different than the other parks. Smaller in size and with animals and African culture at the forefront, it was easy to navigate and offered unique rides and shows. One highlight was the Festival of the Lion King extravaganza, which was interactive with amazing dancers and singers and perfectly timed for kids attention spans. The other unforgettable experience was a ride called Kilimanjaro Safari. You board a safari truck that traverses a 100-acre savannah, while your tour guide points out some of the 34 species of birds and animals that live on the savannah.

There are authentic bumps and hills along the way and radio messages of crises ahead to add to the fun. With real animals in view, it is easy to suspend belief. This is probably the closest that most of us will come to a real safari.

As on most vacations, when we look back, we remember the silly little things: trying on giant Mexican sombreros at Epcot, standing under the mini-waterfall in our very own pool, taking pictures with the cast of Aladdin and watching my five year old's eyes light up when he met Sponge Bob in the flesh. Just hanging out as a family for

nine straight days without once having to hear the words "I'm bored" was the ultimate vacation for me.

Helpful information :

www.AllStarVacationHomes.com

1-888-249-1779

Prices for Luxury homes with private pools that sleep 8-14 people range from \$169 to \$339 per night, while a large condo in a gated community can run as low as \$109 per night.

For Disney kosher meals, call 407-WDW-DINE 72 hours in advance.

Kosher meals are also available at select locations without advanced notice.

Westgate Palace offers two-bedroom condos with full kitchens that are available through Chabad Orlando for special rate of \$119 nightly. Buffet kosher meals and daily prayer service are available at Chabad, right across the street.

Call 407.354.3660 or email reservations@JewishOrlando.com.