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The Happiest Place on Earth

Walt Disney frequently got letters from fans who wanted to visit the studio where his beloved movies were made. Disney knew that a film studio wasn't that interesting. While visiting amusement parks with his two daughters, he got the idea to create a theme park of his own. On what was previously an orange grove in Anaheim, California, in1955, Disneyland was born, creating what would become the most visited amusement park in the country.

Screaming roller coasters, cartoon characters, and more food than a person could ever try await at Disneyland. There’s something for everyone, There are few places where visitors come from such a variety of places, and yet all have something in common. Having fun! Cultural, social, and financial differences fade in importance as each guest takes what they value most from the park. For some, it's the rides and attractions. For others, it's the beloved characters that roam the grounds, while others trade pins or scour the park for hidden Mickeys.

Language barriers melt away as smiles and laughter, the universal languages, are spoken. Problems are left outside the front gate. It’s hard to worry about mortgages, work woes, or current political events while wearing mouse ears and eating a churro. Peace summits should be held on the spinning teacup ride with its maniacally cheerful music. Many of the world’s problems could be solved in that way.

My first trip to the park was one of the best memories of my childhood. As an eight-year-old, I wasn't aware that the car in Mr. Toad's Wild Ride was attached to a track. I sat behind the steering wheel and thought I was responsible for us crashing into walls that opened at the last moment to the wildly careening car. My brother's laughing and my mom's cries of "Watch out!" heightened my panic. I was so relieved when the ride was over and never got behind the steering wheel of any more rides that day choosing the passenger seat instead.

I don’t remember having to wait in long rides, but I know I must have. This was before the days of cell phones when kids didn’t need entertainment or to stare at a screen every second. There were enough things to look at to keep a child occupied. The smells of popcorn, caramel apples, and Micky Mouse shaped chicken nuggets wafted through the air, promising endless possibilities of treats.

Fantasy Land is reached by crossing a moat and passing through Sleeping Beauty's castle. Young children can take a spin on King Arthur's Carousel, fly over London and Neverland on a mini pirate ship, and go down the rabbit hole into Wonderland with Alice. Cotton candy tasted better here than at the fair at home. This part of the park is ideal for the very young. Nothing scarier than the Yeti on the Matterhorn, and everything ties into favorite Disney movies. It was magic.

No limits is part of Disneyland’s allure. Not on imagination, not on fun, not on choices. Even a jaded teenager is drawn into the fantasy. There's no room for being sullen, standoffish, or too cool to do things one wouldn't be caught dead doing in the real world.

Tomorrow Land appealed to the older child. Here's where the fast rides were. Staff members wore orange, polyester jumpsuits that were supposed to represent clothes of the future, but only served to stick in my mind that I would never get a job at a place that required me to wear a stupid uniform. A Christmas visit to relatives in Los Angeles included a trip to Disneyland in my teens. That sounds like a fun idea until one is in the park on a day when attendance is so high that the gates are closed. Standing in line all day to get onto three rides is no one's idea of fun. At the advice of our LA family member, my cousin and I spent a third of our day waiting to get onto Peter Pan’s Flight.

"When will you ever ride it again?" he'd asked. "It's the coolest of the 'kid' rides, and you might as well do it one last time while you're still technically kids."

His argument seemed logical, none of us looking forward far enough to when we would have children ourselves and have ample opportunity to go on Peter Pan. The long wait wasn’t fun, but the thrill of joining Peter pan on his flight made up for the inconvenience. It was a mini time machine, and for those few minutes, we were kids again experiencing the thrill of flight, the fear of Captain Hook, and the allure of Mermaid Lagoon.

Waiting in line for Space Mountain was a little more bearable since we knew we were in for a thrill, but it didn't stop us from wishing we had our time back from waiting for Peter Pan. The cartoon character themed surroundings were not as thrilling as they'd been when we were younger, but we spent out time critically eyeing the exaggeratedly teased 80's hairstyles of our fellow gen X'ers, sympathizing with those who had chosen fashion over practicality in their dress. My cousin was grumpy and cold in her plastic Jellies with no socks while I was cozy and comfortable in my red Converse High Tops. Teens love things to look at and a lot going on, and Disneyland offered that and more. It was people watching gluttony and possibly one of the only times in that period of my life I didn’t complain about being bored.

Anything is possible at that age, and anything is possible in Disneyland. Riding the Jungle Cruise turns the mind to actual safaris, It's a Small World is like a menu of future places to visit in the world, and Autopia is a thrilling first experience of driving one's own car. It's the perfect juxtaposition of young minds yet unaware of the realities of what things cost and unlimited opportunities. As an adult, I've checked very few places off the mental list of future vacation spots so casually assembled as an adolescent visiting Disneyland, but the memory of confidently making unrealistic plans still makes me smile.

Taking your own child to Disneyland is a game-changer. You aren't the kid anymore, and now you are the one who has to weigh the pleading look of a child against the overpriced t-shirt, or ice cream cone with a double-digit price tag. But you're there to have fun, to relive your own childhood experience and you'll figure out how to pay for it later. Toon Town is an unfamiliar land, and home to Disney characters this new generation knows with the advent of technology that has made watching movies a daily event and not a special occasion trip to a movie theater or Sunday night viewing of The Wonderful World of Disney like it was for me. I’m confused by these things my child knows that I do not.

We hit Fantasy Land first, where I did, indeed have reason to visit Peter Pan's ride, my youngest son, too little to appreciate the charm of Disneyland or even understand where he was, held it together until the cast member who lifted the bar to release us from the ride asked if he was having fun, which caused him to let out a single, heartfelt wail expressing his dismay at this overwhelming day. On Chip and Dale's ride, his older brother, who was the right age for the mini roller coaster, was exuberant.

"I was screaming, but I had a smile on my face!” he exclaimed, beaming as he exited the ride.

Toon Town is where Mickey and Minnie’s houses are located. Kids can wind through a line inside the homes to get a chance to meet the royal couple of Disneyland. Blank autograph books can be purchased to have the characters sign. I got more excited than the kids did when the figures from their favorite books and movies strolled by. It was worth waiting in line, and the smiles and photo opportunities were well worth the wait.

An adult without kids in Disneyland is an entirely different creature than the one in the real world weighed down with work and grown-up responsibilities. Walking through the gates sets a jovial mood as visitors enter Main Street USA, modeled after a 20th-century Midwest town, this thoroughfare offers old-time saloons where bartenders in striped white and red shirts slide mugs of sarsaparilla down the bar, a penny arcade, a candy emporium to rival Willy Wonka’s factory, and horse-drawn carriages to give rides up and down the small-town street. Immediately upon entering the Happiest Place on Earth, no opportunity is wasted to surround visitors with the sights, sounds, and smells of Disney. Mickey Mouse's face is recreated in flowers on a grassy hill, bright banners hang from street lamps, and music weaves in with the sound of walking feet, cheerful chatter, and the excited voices of children.

Here, an adult can ride a carousel without looking or feeling out of place. The jungle ride is a legitimate adventure, no matter what one's age. A caramel apple is a messy, delicious treat, and who cares how undignified you look eating it? There is no upper or lower speed limit. You can run excitedly from one attraction to the next, or you can park yourself on a bench and soak in the environment and watch what’s going on. The benefit of advanced years is understanding how special these moments are. It’s rare not to catch the eye of a fellow guest from time to time and share the moment of a child encountering a favorite character, or noticing one of the tiny details that make the park so enchanting.

It's crowded, it's loud, the lines are long, but everybody is smiling. Here, the guests are treated like royalty. Park employees are always cheerful, and they exist to make each person's experience the best ever. Working the Haunted Mansion is a Goth teen's dream job. These morose cast members never go out of character. "You can move to this line," a sallow-faced young man droned in a monotone when I questioned how a Fast Pass worked. That kind of interaction wouldn't cut it at Starbucks or a fast-food chain, but here, both customer and employee are happy with the creepy exchange. Some people aren't well suited to "Have a nice day," and a smile and Disney has a home for them.

Pin trading is a fun activity. One can buy a pack of pins at a particular shop in Frontier Land and then keep their eyes open for pins they would like to trade for. Trades can be made with other guests, which can spark up conversations and friendships, but they are usually done with staff members. All Disneyland employees start their day with an assortment of pins on their uniforms. They must stop whatever they are doing if a guest wants to look at the pins they are wearing and possibly trade for one the guest has. Some people have hundreds of pins from many visits and multiple trades. This is a genius way that the park has for engaging people in more than just rides and attractions.

A guest could visit Disneyland, not go on a single ride all day, and at the end, still have had more fun than they could have imagined. There are performances, parades, and light shows. In addition to pin trading, there are hundreds of small Micky Mouse heads hidden in the park. Finding them becomes addictive and points out little details of the park that are missed when rushing through to get on rides.

Mouthwatering is the only word to describe the scents. The food at Disneyland covers every type of edible one can put in their mouth. Each land has a themed menu to match: space food in Tomorrow Land, down-home cooking in Critter Country. One of the most expensive and coolest restaurants in the park is actually inside a ride. One might not notice while boating through the Pirates of the Caribbean ride the tables set up in the swamp. Hanging moss and glowing lightning bugs create the atmosphere at the Blue Bayou restaurant where real diners become part of the scenery.

Disneyland is part of America's history. People who have been there have personal memories, and people who haven't have a shared desire. It belongs to all of us. It's the Happiest Place on Earth, and it's there for you. No matter how bad things are, just knowing it exists, that people are riding rides, walking down Main Street, and hugging Mickey is enough to bring hope and possibly a smile to anyone's face.