

Five Decades of Magic at Walt Disney World Resort

Walt Disney World Resort opened Oct. 1, 1971, to guests – and an entire world – eager to see how Walt Disney’s genius had pixie-dusted the trackless flatlands of Central Florida into a Magic Kingdom. Ten thousand guests, their smiles as wide as the October skies, streamed into Walt’s fairytale park on that historic day, ready to be transported to a world of fun and fantasy, where teacups spin, elephants fly and life’s cares melt away at the gates.

“May Walt Disney World bring joy and inspiration and new knowledge to all who come to this happy place ... a Magic Kingdom where the young at heart of all ages can laugh and play and learn together.”– Official Dedication, Oct. 25, 1971

These words were spoken by Walt’s brother, Roy O. Disney, at the official grand opening of Walt Disney World. Mickey Mouse, sporting the world’s largest bass drum at the time, led 5,000 marchers in a festive parade through the five lands of Magic Kingdom Park. Guests were also treated to a high-stepping marching band 1,076 performers strong.

Walt did not live to see that day, but after years of planning and construction (and Roy postponing retirement to help see it through), his much-anticipated “Florida Project” was open and ready to welcome the world. From one theme park, two resort hotels and two golf courses, Walt’s dream today is a world unto itself including four theme parks, two water parks, more than two dozen resort hotels, Disney Vacation Club properties, Disney’s Fort Wilderness Resort & Campground, 63 holes of championship golf, ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex, Disney’s BoardWalk entertainment enclave and Disney Springs, a waterfront entertainment, dining and shopping district.

And now 50 years and millions of memories later, Walt Disney World Resort is on the brink of an exciting new era of family entertainment as it kicks off the next 50 years. All of it inspired by the ultimate dreamer, Walt Disney.

Here’s a look at some of the many milestones in the 50-year history of The Most Magical Place on Earth:

1965

Nov. 15 – Walt Disney and his brother Roy publicly announce plans for Disney World in a press conference held in downtown Orlando, Florida.

1966

Oct. 27 – Walt Disney records a film outlining plans for the Florida Project – including details for Disney World and the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT).

1967

May 30 – Groundbreaking officially kicks off construction of Walt Disney World Resort. Walt Disney’s brother, Roy O. Disney officially named the project “Walt Disney World” to ensure the world will always remember the man behind this historic dream.

1970

Jan. 16 – **The Walt Disney World Preview Center** opens in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., becoming the first location to welcome guests on Walt Disney World property. It features scale models and artist renderings for many of the diverse experiences being created for the “Vacation Kingdom of the World.”

1971

Oct. 1 – Walt Disney World officially opens to the public. Phase one includes **Magic Kingdom Park**, **Disney’s Contemporary Resort** and **Disney’s Polynesian Village Resort**. The resort is a showplace of innovation, featuring a transportation system of monorails, watercraft, trams and motor coaches, as well as a centralized computer network and other groundbreaking systems supporting the many guest offerings and attractions.

Oct. 25 – The **Electrical Water Pageant** debuts, bringing twinkling lights and a colorful synthesizer soundtrack to become a guest favorite along the waters of Seven Seas Lagoon and Bay Lake.

Nov. 19 – **Disney’s Fort Wilderness Campground** opens, nestled among acres of scenic pine and cypress forest and evoking the timeless beauty of the American frontier.

1973

Dec. 15 – Walt Disney World Resort expands with a new hotel, now known as **Shades of Green**, and a new attraction, **Pirates of the Caribbean**, in Adventureland.

1974

June 30 – The **Hoop-Dee-Do Musical Revue** premieres at Disney’s Fort Wilderness Resort. Today, it is one of the longest-running dinner shows in American history.

1975

Jan. 15 – Tomorrowland expands with **Space Mountain** and **GE Carousel of Progress** opens, further enhancing Tomorrowland with the latter currently holding the record for longest-running stage show in the history of American theater.

March 22 – **Lake Buena Vista Shopping Village** opens with 28 shops and four restaurants. It will evolve over the decades and become The Marketplace at Disney Springs.

June 7 – Walt Disney World Resort honors America’s bicentennial with **America On Parade**. With 50 floats and more than 200 performers paying tribute to America’s history, people and traditions, it stands as the largest daily parade ever staged in a Disney park.

July 1 – The **WEDway PeopleMover** (now known as Tomorrowland Transit Authority PeopleMover) is added to Tomorrowland, providing new views along its highway in the sky.

July 14 – Preliminary plans for **EPCOT** are announced.

1976

June 20 – **Disney's River Country** water park opens next to Fort Wilderness. The popularity of River Country eventually inspires Disney's Typhoon Lagoon and Disney's Blizzard Beach water parks.

1977

June 11 – The Magic Kingdom is aglow as **The Main Street Electrical Parade** makes its first Florida appearance, which followed its 1972 debut at Disneyland park in California.

1979

Oct. 1 – After years of planning, construction begins on EPCOT.

1980

Sept. 23 – **Big Thunder Mountain Railroad** opens in Frontierland, expanding the mountain range at Magic Kingdom Park.

1981

Oct. 1 – A year-long **Tencennial Celebration** begins, bringing new entertainment to Magic Kingdom Park. Later in the year, the EPCOT Preview Center opens on Main Street, U.S.A.

1982

Oct. 1 – **EPCOT** opens with five Future World pavilions – Spaceship Earth, Universe of Energy, World of Motion, Journey Into Imagination and The Land – and nine World Showcase pavilions representing Mexico, China, Germany, Italy, The American Adventure, Japan, France, United Kingdom and Canada.

Disney expands its legacy of work with **Make-A-Wish** as the first wish is granted at Walt Disney World Resort. Since 1982, more than 176,000 life-changing wishes have been granted for children facing critical illnesses in partnership with more than 250 wish-granting organizations around the globe.

1983

Dec. 16 – The first **Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party** is held at Magic Kingdom, starting a tradition of popular Disney After Hours events, combining special entertainment and offerings with extra time in the park.

Dec. 25 – The **Walt Disney World Christmas Parade** is broadcast live from Magic Kingdom on ABC, going on to become a holiday tradition and growing to include parades and performances from both Walt Disney World Resort and Disneyland Resort.

1984

May 11 – The **Disney Dreamers & Doers** program begins recognizing young people who demonstrate excellence in their schools, families and communities. Since 1984, Walt Disney World Resort has recognized nearly 14,000 students from public and private schools across Central Florida.

Sept. 7 – EPCOT World Showcase expands with the opening of the **Morocco** pavilion.

1986

Jan. 15 – **The Living Seas** (now The Seas with Nemo & Friends) opens at EPCOT, home to more than 200 species of sea life in a 5.7 million-gallon “ocean” of saltwater.

1987

Jan. 25 – The iconic **“I’m Going to Disney World!”** commercial debuts. New York Giants quarterback Phil Simms is the first to shout the now-famous phrase following his team’s Super Bowl XXI victory.

1988

June 3 – EPCOT World Showcase expands with the opening of the **Norway** pavilion.

June 28 – **Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort & Spa** opens as the flagship of Walt Disney World Resort hotels. It’s followed Oct. 1 by **Disney’s Caribbean Beach Resort**.

1989

May 1 – **Disney’s Hollywood Studios** opens with Tinseltown glamour, major entertainment attractions and behind-the-scenes looks at movie-making.

May 1 – The nighttime entertainment complex **Pleasure Island** opens with a glittering array of restaurants and themed nightclubs. It will close in 2008 to make way for Disney Springs.

June 1 – **Disney’s Typhoon Lagoon** water park opens, featuring a 95-foot-high mountain, eight water slides and a 2.5-acre wave pool.

1990

November – The first phase of the EPCOT Resort Area opens with the debut of **Disney’s Yacht Club Resort** (Nov. 5) and **Disney’s Beach Club Resort** (Nov. 19). The following year brings **Walt Disney World Swan Hotel** (Jan. 13) and the **Walt Disney World Dolphin Hotel** (June 4). All within walking distance of the theme park, the collection of resorts significantly expands lodging and convention options.

1991

November – The **Disney Harvest** program launches. Today this program annually collects more than 823,000 pounds of prepared, unserved food from throughout Walt Disney World Resort for distribution to more than 40 Orlando-area nonprofits served by Second Harvest Food Bank.

Dec. 20 – Disney Vacation Club launches with the opening of its first resort, now called **Disney’s Old Key West Resort**.

1993

April 23– The Walt Disney Company dedicates 8,500 acres of land purchased at the Osceola-Polk County line to The Nature Conservancy to preserve for future generations as the **Disney Wilderness Preserve**.

1994

Jan. 16 - The inaugural **Walt Disney World Marathon** steps off, eventually growing into the popular *run* Disney races today.

April 29 - The inaugural **EPCOT International Flower & Garden Festival** debuts. In the years to follow, festivals dedicated to food & wine, the arts and holidays join the lineup.

June 12 - Disney's Hollywood Studios expands with the opening of its first new themed area, Sunset Boulevard, bringing more shops, dining and entertainment to the park...along with the haunted thrills of **The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror** (July 22).

Walt Disney World Resort continues to expand lodging options with the openings of: **Disney's Wilderness Lodge** (May 28), **Disney's All-Star Sports Resort** (April 29) and **Disney's All-Star Music Resort** (Nov. 1).

The **African American Chamber of Commerce of Central Florida** is established with Walt Disney World Resort as a founding trustee. Walt Disney World's support and sponsorship of the Chamber includes hosting the its crowning celebration for Central Florida's most dynamic businesses and entrepreneurs, the Eagle Awards.

1995

April 1 - **Disney's Blizzard Beach** water park debuts, offering winter-themed fun in a water park setting, including a 12-story drop down the high-speed waterslide Summit Plummet.

April 22 - The **Disney Conservation Fund** forms to provide support for respected conservation organizations saving wildlife and protecting the magic of nature. To date, the fund has directed \$100 million to support nonprofit organizations working with communities to save wildlife, inspire action and protect the planet.

July 15 - **Disney's Wedding Pavilion** opens on the shores of Seven Seas Lagoon, part of a vast expansion of options for weddings and vow renewals. Today, Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons offers a wide range of nuptial and honeymoon planning around the globe.

1996

Feb. 9 - **Disney Institute** opens, bringing more than 60 interactive programs to guests seeking fun and self-enrichment in customized vacation experiences. In the years to follow, Disney Institute evolves into a renowned training and professional-development organization that helps organizations be more successful using business insights and best practices of Disney parks and resorts.

July 1 - **Disney's BoardWalk Inn and Villas** open along with their lively namesake boardwalk that brings new restaurants and nightspots to the EPCOT Resort Area.

Oct. 1 - Walt Disney World Resort celebrates its **25th anniversary** with a year-long celebration, new entertainment and Cinderella Castle decorated as a giant birthday cake.

1997

March 28 - **ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex** opens. The 220-acre complex includes multiple outdoor playing fields, baseball/softball diamonds, a track & field complex, a fieldhouse and a 9,500-seat ballpark. Over the years it will grow to encompass two additional fieldhouses, an ESPN broadcast center and even more outdoor playing fields. It will also serve as an official training site for various American and international

professional teams, as well as host of several major sporting events such as the Invictus Games, the 2020 MLS is Back Tournament and the 2020 NBA restart of the regular season.

Aug. 1 – **Disney’s Coronado Springs Resort** opens. With 1,900 guest rooms and a 220,000-square-foot convention center, it is the largest of the Disney resort hotels that cater to meetings and events.

1998

April 22 – **Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park** opens on Earth Day. At 500 acres, it is Disney’s largest park and home to approximately 1,800 animals representing 200 species. The park’s icon, the Tree of Life, is a tribute to nature, featuring more than 300 intricately carved animal images.

Oct. 15 – “**Fantasmic!**” premieres at Disney’s Hollywood Studios in the newly-constructed Hollywood Hills Amphitheater. The larger-than-life show features more than 50 live performers, massive sets, a brilliant display of lights, lasers, fireworks, and water animation all set to rousing music.

1999

March 18 – Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park expands with **Asia**, a new themed area featuring Kali River Rapids and the Maharajah Jungle Trek that introduces tigers and other animal species to the park.

Oct. 1 – The **Millennium Celebration** begins at EPCOT. The 15-month event marks the debut of the popular nighttime spectacular, IllumiNations: Reflections of Earth, that will run for 20 years. Also new is Millennium Village, celebrating the cultural achievements of 25 countries, and the Tapestry of Nations parade. The celebration also brings pin trading to the forefront for Disney collectors everywhere.

2001

April 16 – **Disney’s Animal Kingdom Lodge** opens, featuring spectacular views of lush savannas home to more than 200 animals. The resort is also home to one of the largest collections of African art in the United States.

Oct. 1 – **100 Years of Magic** Celebration commences, honoring the 100th anniversary of Walt Disney’s birth. New parades debut in all four parks, a 122-foot-tall Sorcerer Mickey hat becomes an icon for Disney’s Hollywood Studios, where Walt Disney: One Man’s Dream also opens to take guests on a journey through the life of Walt Disney.

2004

December – **Disney’s PhotoPass** launches, offering guests an innovative way to view and retrieve professionally captured photos online.

2005

May 5 – Walt Disney World joins in the “**Happiest Celebration on Earth,**” with Disney parks around the world saluting the 50th anniversary of Disneyland Resort in California. Opening as part of the celebration: **Soarin’** at EPCOT and the Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show at Disney’s Hollywood Studios.

2006

April 7 – **Expedition Everest** opens, bringing new thrills to Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park.

Oct. 1 – **“The Year of a Million Dreams”** begins at Walt Disney World and Disneyland Resorts. A new “Dream Squad,” randomly selects guests to win an array of prizes. These include priceless, “dream come true” experiences like a night’s stay in the new **Cinderella Castle Suite**.

2008

Jan. 17 – The first **Disney Dreamers Academy** event brings 100 exceptional African American high school students from around the U.S. to a four-day, immersive, transformational mentoring experience at Walt Disney World Resort. Becoming an annual event, the free program has since encouraged more than 1,000 participants to pursue their dreams and make a difference in the lives of others.

2011

September – The luxury residential resort community **Golden Oak at Walt Disney World Resort** welcomes its first residents. Designed by Disney Imagineers, the community offers distinctive neighborhoods, expansive nature preserves and concierge-style resident services.

2012

May 31 – **Disney’s Art of Animation Resort** opens with a new style of accommodations – Family Suites for parties of up to six people.

Dec. 6 – **New Fantasyland** opens at Magic Kingdom Park. The 26-acre expansion of the original land initially includes three new attractions and Be Our Guest Restaurant. Other phases of the new land include Seven Dwarfs Mine Train that opens May 28, 2014.

2013

MagicBands and the **My Disney Experience mobile app** launch for all guests, bringing innovative new enhancements to help guests plan and experience Walt Disney World Resort.

2015

Sept. 29 – Culminating a three-year reimagining of what was previously Downtown Disney, **Disney Springs** comes to life. The retail, dining and entertainment district will continue to grow, encompassing four “neighborhoods” all themed to Florida towns of the early 20th century.

2016

April 12 – A 48,000-panel, five-megawatt **Mickey-shaped solar array** debuts near EPCOT. The facility is able to produce enough power equal to 1,000 residential rooftop systems.

2017

May 27 – **Pandora – The World of Avatar** opens as an entirely new themed land at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park, featuring two attractions, dining, retail and instantly iconic floating mountains.

2018

June 30 – **Toy Story Land** opens at Disney’s Hollywood Studios, allowing guests to play with their favorite toys in Andy’s backyard in three attractions.

2019

July 9 – **Gran Destino Tower** opens with 500-plus new guest rooms along with new dining and convention spaces, completing a multiyear transformation of Disney’s Coronado Springs Resort.

Aug. 29 – **Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge** opens at Disney’s Hollywood Studios. The 14-acre land invites guests to experience their own *Star Wars* stories like never before. One of the most ambitious and technologically advanced attractions created for a Disney park, **Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance** opens Dec. 5 inside the land.

Sept. 29 – **Disney Skyliner** takes flight. This grand, state-of-the-art gondola system connects EPCOT and Disney’s Hollywood Studios to four Disney Resort hotels.

Dec. 16 – **Disney’s Riviera Resort** opens, a Disney Vacation Club property inspired by Europe and imagined by Disney.

December – A new 270-acre, **57-megawatt solar facility** goes online, generating enough renewable clean energy to operate two of Walt Disney World Resort’s four theme parks annually.

2020

March 4 – **Mickey & Minnie’s Runaway Railway** opens at Disney’s Hollywood Studios, the first ride-through attraction in a Disney park dedicated to Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse.

2021

Oct. 1 – **“The World’s Most Magical Celebration”** will begin, saluting the 50th anniversary of Walt Disney World Resort. The 18-month event will feature new experiences at all four theme parks and beyond, with shimmering EARidescent décor.

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