



Magical Gatherings: What, who and how to plan

Planning a trip for a large group of people can create massive logistical headaches – something that helped inspire Disney's new Magical Gatherings program.

Magical Gatherings is designed to alleviate the complications sometimes associated with planning a vacation for a large group of people. It helps visitors use online tools to plan a multi-household vacation.

"I have a large family, and trying to plan a trip can be a huge pain," said Barbara Higgins, Director of Operations Integration at Walt Disney World.

The aim of this program, now six months old, is to simplify the process of planning such a trip.

According to Disney, many more people are choosing to travel with their extended family or with groups of friends. The Magical Gatherings Web site makes it easier to book hotel rooms, dinner reservations and even to plan special events for groups of eight or more. These events, called Grand Gatherings, range from character breakfasts with Goofy to Safari Dinners at the Animal Kingdom.

In addition to the web tools and planning kits, Disney has made less obvious changes to its facilities. For example, it switched restaurant tables from oval to square or rectangular. This small modification allows them to accommodate larger parties more comfortably.

Six months in, Disney says the program is going "very well," and it expects the trend to continue. As a whole, the tourism industry is rebounding, says AAA and the U.S. Dept. of Commerce.

With this in mind, Disney last week launched "The Happiest Homecoming on Earth," a celebration honoring Disneyland's 50th anniversary. This 18-month-long global event began May 5 with the announcement that Walt Disney World will be introducing new rides and attractions, as well as importing some from other Disney parks.

These include: "Cinderellabration" a musical continuation of the Cinderella story from the Tokyo park; "Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show" imported from Euro Disney; "Soarin'" a flight simulation over California that debuted at Disneyland; and "Expedition EVEREST," a mountain ride in which guests will be chased by the mythical Yeti.

Other festivities on Disney World's summer calendar include a return of "Star Wars Weekends" where people can meet actors from the Star Wars movies; A celebration of ESPN's 25th anniversary that will feature sports personalities and special broadcasts; and JoJo and Goliath, stars of Disney Channel's "JoJo's Circus" have joined "Disney's Stars and Motor Cars" parade.

Magical Gatherings can be accessed at www.disneyworld.com/magicalgatherings.



The Magical Gatherings Web site, top; families taking part, a Grand Gathering fireworks cruise, and character interaction, below.

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