

# *the best of* ORLANDO

Discover your inner child in Orlando, the theme park capital of the world. **Norah Casey** guides you through the maze of magical lands and kingdoms to give you her top picks – and Harry Potter tops the list.



I've been to Orlando only twice. The first time Dara was six years old and it was magical. We spent long days at Walt Disney World introducing him to his favourite characters and enjoying the spectacle of the world of Disney magic coming to life around us. Each evening we returned for the fireworks where Tinker Bell swooped overhead from Cinderella's Castle while Jiminy Cricket orated the Star Bright show. Dara was mesmerised by Buzz Lightyear and Woody at the time so we waiting patiently for him to arrive for the daytime parade and the after dark one just so he could wave frantically convinced that Buzz recognised him by the third or fourth handshake. To add to the fantasy of the trip we stayed at a Disney hotel, the Animal Kingdom Lodge, where you could swear you were transported to the African bush with giraffes, gazelles and zebra wandering past our balcony in the morning. Although it was manufactured it was done in that perfect Disneyesque way where (apart from the food)

everything is glossy and believable. And while we might have groaned at the thought of yet another breakfast with Chip 'n' Dale, Goofy and Pluto it was hard not to smile at the clatter of kids shrieking and clapping along with the cheesy songs.

So now here we were on a return visit and expectations were high. The teenagers were excited and weeks of planning and poring over the complicated variety of theme parks, roller coasters, experiences and events resulted in a plan to spend a full day at Walt Disney World and a full day at Universal Studios & Islands of Adventure – especially the new Harry Potter experience newly opened weeks beforehand. On other days we combined visits to some of the other parks like Epcot, Sea World and LEGOLAND. So here is our rating scale of the top things to do in Orlando and keep in mind that we were a mix of adults and teenagers. Also it is worth noting that the top attractions are owned by three big players – Universal Parks & Resorts; Disney; and Sea World Parks.



# UNIVERSAL THEME PARKS



## 1 UNIVERSAL STUDIOS & UNIVERSAL ISLANDS OF ADVENTURE (UNIVERSALORLANDO.COM)

### WIZARDING WORLD OF HARRY POTTER (HOGSMEADE & DIAGON ALLEY)

By far the best experience for all of us was the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure are technically two separate theme parks but they are side by side and almost everyone buys a ticket for both. The Harry Potter experience incorporates the older Hogsmeade on the Islands of Adventure side and the newer Diagon Alley on the Universal Studios side. We did both.

This was nothing short of amazing – whether you’re a Potterhead or not you will love it. A perfect replica of the Hogwarts Express – boarded at Platform 9¾ at King’s Cross Station took us from one side of the park to the other. Inside the old fashioned carriages the likeness to the real thing is spooky – outside the window Hagrid bellows something as he swoops by, while in the corridor you see the shadows and hear the voices of Harry and Hermione. Diagon Alley is recreated with meticulous detail and you’re transported into the magic of the books. We drank Butter Beer (very like liquid butterscotch) in the Leaky Cauldron, ate all-flavour jelly beans – spent hours in Ollivanders “Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC” (where the wand chooses you). The teenagers both purchased real-life working wands for just under \$50. With the help of some nice witches they made some magic happen in the Harry Potter areas with the swish of wands and the right spell – “Wingardium Leviosa” being a popular option! And although they figured

out quickly that if they flicked the wrist a certain way the sensor at the end of the wand made lanterns light up, skeletons dance and fountains pour water, it was still the closest to being a wizard you could get.

The level of authenticity at Diagon Alley is incredible – it’s like stepping into that magical world created by JK Rowling – the detail is closer to the books than the movie which is even more gratifying. And if, like me, you’re a fan, then you will find yourself reliving your memories and it’s impossible not to wander in and out of the shops and look beyond the facades to see if Borgin & Burkes in Knockturn Alley is just how you imagined. Is The Leaky Cauldron as you thought it would be? What does Pumpkin Juice really taste like? Gringotts Bank looks like I imagined it and at the Gringotts Money Exchange you’ll find a goblin animatronic behind the counter where you really can swap your Muggle money (dollars) for equivalent Gringotts Bank Notes which you can use to pay for anything in the Wizarding World (and the rest of the resort). It all added to the magic. Diagon Alley opened in July 2014 and we arrive just a few weeks later when queues were up to seven hours long (and you can’t buy a fast pass to skip them). The best advice we received was to start at the older experience in Islands of Adventure, Hogsmeade, first thing in the morning and arrive over to Diagon Alley via the Hogwarts Express in the late afternoon. It turned out to be spot on as the early morning crowds had headed for the newer attraction and there were no queues at all when we arrived around 5pm.

Universal was by far the better theme park for every experience. I’m not a roller coaster fan but the adrenaline junkies in the group got their fill of the best of the best. For us namby panby thrill seekers Universal had some amazing rides – top of the list The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman followed by Men in Black: Alien Attack.

## WALT DISNEY WORLD THEME PARKS (WWW.DISNEYWORLD.COM)

### 1 MAGIC KINGDOM

Although it’s a little tired now it is still an amazing experience, especially if you have children. It’s huge and it’s expensive if you don’t pre-book. Definitely plan to view the Festival of Fantasy Parade (and the night time Electrical Parade and fireworks). Top rides include Splash Mountain in Frontierland; Space Mountain in Tomorrowland and some of the lovely storybook experiences in Fantasyland (even for grown-ups!). Disney tickets are complex and varied so check out the website for deals and multiple tickets for Disney resort parks.

### 2 DISNEY’S HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS

An enormous movie set with live shows, backstage tours and rides. You can experience what it’s like to be part of the action and even get on stage. This park is all about the cinema magic, offering a behind-the-scenes look at Hollywood-style The American Idol Experience.

### 3 EPCOT

For the budding astrophysicist, biology buff and science geek – great place to learn about the planets, the stars, and the intricate workings of the human body.

### 4 ANIMAL KINGDOM

We loved this when my son was younger – it’s a bit tame when the kids are older but still you can go on safari and the rides are fun and because it’s Disney you will even get to see dinosaurs.

### 5 TYPHOON LAGOON

Go snorkelling and throw yourself into a day of water slides, rafting, and having fun in the surf pool.

### 6 BLIZZARD BEACH

Bit more relaxed than Typhoon Lagoon and lots of places to lounge about while the kids splash around.



### RAGLAN ROAD

If you’re heading to Orlando be sure to book a table at Raglan Road – Irish chef Kevin Dundon’s restaurant in Downtown Disney. Firstly because the food is great, lots of Irish staples, but plenty more besides and also because it’s an experience

in itself eating in a place that was created by Irish entrepreneurs (I was unexpectedly proud that us Irish had staked a claim in the heart of Disney). We dined there twice and really enjoyed the food, the music and the dancing. We were even persuaded to join in. Raglan Road Irish Pub, 1640 E Buena Vista Drive; telephone: 407-938-0300; email: hello@raglanroad.com



# SEAWORLD PARKS

(WWW.SEAWORLDPARKS.COM)



## 1 SEAWORLD (ORLANDO)

Make a plan to be there for the main performances and see Killer Whales, Bottlenose Dolphins, penguins, seals and sea otters. We've been a few times and the trick is to get there early and plan to see as many shows as possible. And be prepared to get wet!



## 3 AQUATICA

Yet another waterpark with slides, rides, rapids, and rivers – claim to fame is the Dolphin Plunge, where you fly through underwater tubes in a pool of dolphins, other rides take you through waters with tropical fish.



## 5 ADVENTURE ISLAND

Right across the street is the water-themed Adventure Island, more of a lazy-day spot where you can float down the Rambling Bayou river – but it does have a few of the more action-orientated slides and caters for younger kids.



## 2 DISCOVERY COVE

The main features here are the dolphins and "Sea Venture" – an underwater walking tour. Discovery Cove is a bit more laid-back and the big draw is that you can swim with dolphins or snorkel in The Grand Reef teeming with tropical fish.



## 4 BUSCH GARDENS (TAMPA BAY)

If you fancy a trip further afield head for the original theme park – much more sedate. Water rides, roller coasters (try the Sheikra with a 70mph 90-degree drop) and other tamer offerings. The park has nearly 3,000 animals and live shows.

# INDEPENDENT PARKS & ACTIVITIES



## 1 GATORLAND

As the name suggests – lots of alligators, catch one of the shows if you can, you can also get up close to snakes and exotic birds – we really liked this park – small enough to do in a couple of hours. [gatorland.com](http://gatorland.com)

## 2 LEGOLAND

My son was always a fan so although it's about 45 minutes south of the main theme parks it is worth the trip if there is a Lego lover among you. It has lots of rides and a water park but really it's the Lego that's the attraction! [legoland.com](http://legoland.com)

## 3 INDOOR SKYDIVING – IFLY

If you're in search of something different then both kids and adults can learn to fly in this vertical wind tunnel – no leaping from an airplane, it's all safe but exhilarating too. [iflyworld.com](http://iflyworld.com)

## 4 FANCY BEING A CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATOR?

If there's a rookie CSI among you this interactive exhibition transports you into the world of the TV series with autopsy stations and forensic labs. As a new recruit you get to try your hand at forensic challenges, bullet casings, DNA matching and the like. [csiexhibit.com](http://csiexhibit.com)

## 5 CHOCOLATE KINGDOM

I kid you not, there is a thing called Chocolate Kingdom. Not as yummy as it sounds, as we discovered, because it's an educational experience about the journey from cocoa bean to chocolate bar – but there is a prince and a dragon and lots of chocolate to buy and eat! [chocolatekingdom.com](http://chocolatekingdom.com)

## 6 MYSTERY DINNER SHOW

So you might have been to these before but while in Orlando it is best to go with the fantasy flow and make the evenings as surreal as the days. This is pretty funny and the more of you there are the better – especially kids. Don't go for the food but be ready to ham it up for extra prizes (and there is unlimited beer and wine included in the price). [sleuths.com](http://sleuths.com)





## A NEW GENERATION OF HOTELS

**T**his time round the consensus was that we should find a hotel that offered some respite from the full-on Orlando theme-park experience – a haven to return to at the end of long and busy days. Orlando and the surrounding areas are teaming with hotels (some 450) and we were weeks and weeks poring over options and checking prices. Through a travel writing connection I came across a gem of a hotel that had only just opened, the B Resort & Spa. I had never heard of this small but growing chain of contemporary lifestyle hotels but I am so glad we found it. This is a grown up, stylish four-star with a great location on Lake Buena Vista (very close to Disney theme parks), it was also a great price and it just worked in lots of ways. The tech savvy teens loved the free Wi-Fi (excellent signal) and the B Resort partners with a cloud-based concierge app, Monscierge, which gives real-time information on the local area. You can download the app when you check in or use the large digital touch screens in the lobby areas. The real-life concierge was also incredibly helpful going to great lengths to plan the day ahead, and we pre-ordered many of the theme park tickets from the

lobby area. There are other touches which add to the experience. For instance vibrant local art is displayed in the main public areas which transformed bland corridors – most days we lingered over one piece or another. The sameness of the décor of some hotel chains make me feel like I could be anywhere – The B is different. The rooms were large and comfortable; nicely designed furnishings and space.

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The hotel's restaurant, American Q, is also a bit different, with the centre piece being a 1951, cherry-red, Ford F1 pickup truck. Think line-dancing and cowgirl/ cowboy waiters and a barbeque concept developed by the famous New York restaurateur Jeffrey Chodorow (China Grill Management). The spa wasn't opened when we visited but it has now and features Aveda products.

The B Hotels and Resorts group have hotels in downtown Savannah, a newly-open one on the beach in Fort Lauderdale and one planned to open in 2015 on the marina at Marathon on Florida Keys. Let's hope they extend their reach to Europe soon. *B Resort & Spa, 1905 Hotel Plaza Blvd, Lake Buena Vista, Florida 32830 tel: 407 828 2828; bhotelsandresorts.com*

