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# The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/business/florida-coronavirus-disney-world-reopening.html>

## *Disney World Opens Its Gates, With Virus Numbers Rising*

Thousands of giddy visitors streamed into the Florida resort, as Disney tried to prove it can safely operate at a highly dangerous time.



Visitors leaving the Magic Kingdom at Disney World, after the theme park reopened on Saturday. Disney would not say how many people it let inside, but the grounds did not feel crowded. Credit...Eve Edelheit for The New York Times



**By Brooks Barnes**

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LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — The Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, a Magic Kingdom hair salon where little girls get [styled like Disney princesses](#), remained closed this weekend. Buzz Lightyear was only able to wave from a distance. Parades and fireworks? Scratched.

And the coronavirus continued its rampage through Florida, with officials reporting [more than 15,000 new infections](#) on Sunday, a daily record for any state, including New York.

None of which stopped Sonya Little and thousands of other theme park fans from turning out — in masks in the scorching Florida heat — for the reopening of Walt Disney World. After closing in March because of the pandemic, the mega-resort near Orlando began tossing confetti again at 9 a.m. on Saturday. Two of its four major parks, the Magic Kingdom and the Animal Kingdom, welcomed back a limited number of temperature-checked visitors, with some attractions and character interactions unavailable as safety precautions. Epcot and Disney’s Hollywood Studios were set to reopen on Wednesday.

Disney’s parks have always been about leaving your troubles behind, a sunny outlook some might find improbable during a pandemic. The reopening amounts to a breathtaking effort by a [corporation to prove that it can safely operate](#) — entertaining families and employing tens of thousands of workers — at a highly dangerous time.

“I’m so overwhelmed with emotion,” a weeping Ms. Little said, as she stood on Main Street USA wearing Minnie Mouse ears. “The last few months have been so hard. We have just felt so defeated. Being here gives me the strength to go on.”

With that, Ms. Little, 45, who flew to Orlando from Birmingham, Ala., with her friends Tammy Richardson and Kristi Peek, adjusted her face mask and set forth for Fantasyland.

Throughout the opening morning, the scene near Space Mountain in Tomorrowland was relaxed as most visitors took care to socially distance and Disney employees, each wearing a mask and a face shield, kept a close eye. Disney would not say how many people it let inside, but the grounds did not feel crowded. At midday, the park — usually the busiest in the world, with about 21 million visitors last year — was a surreal sight: [sparsely populated plazas](#), families sauntering between attractions rather than racing, rides with five-minute wait times. There was barely a stroller to be seen near Disney’s singsong It’s a Small World boat ride, much less the usual gridlock.

“It was almost more enjoyable than usual because we got to ride everything with no wait times,” said Samantha Harris, who drove to Orlando from Myrtle Beach, S.C., with her family, including her 5-year-old niece, Addilyn. Ms. Harris said she was so eager to score tickets that she logged onto Disney’s booking website at 5 a.m. on the day it opened. To

limit capacity, Disney no longer allows visitors to walk up and buy tickets, instead making blocks of “reservations” available online. Some blocks for July were gone in minutes when Disney opened the site on June 24.

Image



A visitor outside the Magic Kingdom on Saturday. After months of quarantine, a chance to have some wholesome fun seemed to outweigh the risk of catching the virus for many visitors. Credit...Eve Edelheit for The New York Times

After months of home quarantining, the chance to have some wholesome fun and perhaps touch a childhood memory seemed to outweigh the risk of catching the virus for visitors. “[A Welcome Respite](#)” read a headline in The Orlando Sentinel about Disney’s reopening.

“We will take any amount of normalcy and any amount of joy that we can get,” Jose Villanueva said as he rested in the shade in Tomorrowland with his wife, Kacie. “I know that some people are upset about having to wear a mask or there being no fireworks. For us, we feel lucky to be here. This was the first thing that made us feel like we could leave our house and still feel safe.”

Why?

“It’s Disney,” Ms. Villanueva said. The couple made the trek to Florida from their home in Laurinburg, N.C.

That kind of optimism is the foundation of the Disney experience. In case the wafting smell of fresh fudge and pipe-organ soundtrack don't immediately jolt you into another dimension, there are signs at the entrances reminding visitors, "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy." No matter how terrible things seem outside the gates, here is a place where everything is OK: people are nice, the windows all sparkle, there are stuffed animals to cuddle, the speedway cars never run out of gas.

To safely reopen, however, the Magic Kingdom had to allow some of the grimness of pandemic life to puncture the utopian fantasy. To ward off germs, Disney now leaves rows of seats empty on rides like Pirates of the Caribbean. Employees constantly disinfect ride vehicles and lap bars. Face masks are mandatory, and, for some visitors, the coverings quickly grew wet with sweat.

"It would be a lot more fun without having to wear one," Ivan Chanchavac, 14, said as he hopped off the Jungle Cruise.

His friend, Victoria Perez, 15, shot him a stern look. "But it is best for our safety and others that we wear them," she said.

Her mother, Dolly Perez, drove the group to Orlando from Atlanta. "We were desperate for some fun," she said. "*Desperate.*"

Disney declined to say how much it spent to retrofit the resort for the coronavirus age. The cost must have been considerable. In addition to providing employees with protective gear, the company added 4,000 hand-sanitizing stations, set up restaurants for mobile ordering and installed plexiglass partitions everywhere, including inside the queuing areas of rides.

"People trust Disney, and we have a big responsibility to deliver on that trust," Josh D'Amato, Disney's theme park chairman, said as he stood near Main Street watching the company's most avid fans pour into the park. "As hard as the world is right now, this feels like a turning point — it's a signal that people have hope."

Underscoring the risk that Disney is taking with its brand, Twitter was flooded with negative commentary from users who judged the reopening from afar. People used words like "irresponsible," "disappointed" and "greedy" to describe Disney's decision to stick to its reopening plans, announced in May, even as coronavirus cases surged. Disney on Saturday posted a marketing video on one of its own Twitter accounts showing upbeat employees wearing masks and saying "welcome home" into the camera. But the company [deleted the video after it was mercilessly mocked](#), with users turning it into a parody trailer for a horror film and redubbing the greeting as "stay home."

From inside the parks, however, people posted images of rapture. "Some things in life are worth melting in the Florida sun with a face mask for," one woman wrote on Instagram, where she posted a photo of herself standing in front of the freshly painted Cinderella's Castle. A visitor from Chicago posted a photo of himself receiving [a surprise visit from](#)

[Goofy](#) while dining at the resort. “This was the happiest moment I have had in so long,” he wrote.

Media coverage of opening day was tightly managed, even by Disney’s stringent standards. The company initially said it would give a credential to a New York Times photographer for Magic Kingdom access but reversed itself late Friday.

The reality of whether Disney succeeds in keeping its guests and employees safe will become clear in the weeks to come. Demand is also a question, especially since Disney World draws much of its attendance from the Northeast. Getting on a plane right now can be more harrowing than any theme park ride.

Disney has been [devastated by the coronavirus pandemic](#). Its [14 theme parks](#) delivered record profits in 2019. Several are still closed, including Disneyland in California. Disney’s movie studios controlled 40 percent of the domestic box office last year. Now, they’re sitting at a near standstill. ESPN has been left without live sports to broadcast. Analysts estimate that Disney will lose more than \$1 billion for the quarter that ended in June.

To shore up its balance sheet, Disney lined up more than \$13 billion in fresh credit, slashed executive salaries, suspended its dividend and furloughed an estimated 100,000 workers.

About 43,000 union employees were furloughed by Walt Disney World in April. Diego Henry, 34, who works at [Dinosaur](#), an Animal Kingdom thrill ride, was one of them. On Saturday he was back at work, one of roughly 20,000 union workers Disney has recalled for its reopening. Although he has pre-existing health conditions like asthma and diabetes that make him particularly wary of the coronavirus, Mr. Henry, a member of the Unite Here union, said he felt “confident” about his safety given Disney’s protocols.

Under Disney’s new procedures, Mr. Henry begins his work days by taking his temperature at home and running through a list of possible symptoms that include coughing and muscle pain. Disney checks his temperature again when he arrives at the park.

So far, Mr. Henry said, most visitors have been careful about wearing masks and physically distancing. “I have had to tell a few people, ‘Hey, your mask needs to be covering your mouth *and* your nose,’” he said. “But I give Disney a round of applause. I feel safer at work than I do at the grocery store, where people don’t wear masks.”

It gives new meaning to one of the corny jokes that Jungle Cruise skippers deliver at the end of each excursion: “We’re about to enter the most dangerous part of our journey — the return to civilization.”