

the Famlet monthly

January 29, 2012

Volume 15, Number 1

Dear Family,

You might think that someone with my frenetic and occasionally impatient disposition would be particularly ill-suited for a one-day, 880-mile drive from Washington, D.C. to Orlando, Fla. with five female bladders. And you'd be right about that. But when it comes to road trips, my preference has always been (and likely always will be) to compress the transit-related fun into the fewest possible segments.

In what has become a triennial tradition for us (if one can call something we've now done three times a tradition) we piled into our aging 2004 Toyota Sienna a little after 2:00 a.m. last Sunday morning and headed south. We ate breakfast just across the South Carolina border, narrowly missed sacrament meeting at the Waltersboro (S.C.) Branch, had lunch in northern Florida, and met Grandma and Grandpa Kent at their fancy-pants Orlando timeshare sometime between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. We ate dinner together and prepared for the forthcoming five-day marathon of theme park hopping.

As you probably know, the Walt Disney World Resort, near Orlando, features four main theme parks. There's a bunch of other stuff, too, but the other stuff never makes our itinerary.

Every day started essentially the same way: by walking out the door and into a protracted dispute over whose turn it was to press the elevator button. Grace was typically at the center of these, but fortunately, the tears had almost always dried by the time we'd handed over our 14 dollars at the entrance of that day's parking lot. The act of shelling out money just to enter a parking lot the size of Nebraska is merely a pump-priming exercise designed to get you into the mindset of unconsciously reaching into your wallet and, for no apparent reason, handing over a wad of cash to a smiling, cheerily attired stranger with a nametag every time you turn around inside the park itself. It's not that 14 bucks is all that much for a day of parking—you'd have a hard time finding a place in downtown DC where you could (safely) leave your car all day for less than that—it's just that for 14 bucks I don't expect to have to walk several hundred yards from my car just to board a separate conveyance to travel from my area of the parking lot to the entrance of the place where I'm trying to go.

This was true despite our days starting fairly early (not early for us, but still early). As we learned three years ago, arriving in time for the rope-drop (they don't actually do a rope-drop anymore, but you know what I mean) is less important in late January, when the children of responsible parents are in school and the crowds are down, than it is at busier times of year. But we're generally an early-rising bunch, and so by 8:00 a.m. or so each morning we were dragging grandma and grandpa's Pacific-Standard-Time-accustomed bodies out the door to the day's destination—sometimes without adequately communicating to them what the day's destination was, which led to occasional confusion between our two-car caravan. They were very good sports about all this, and for reasons I don't entirely understand, appeared to genuinely enjoy being with us.

It was a fun week. Since there are few things more tedious to read than a blow-by-blow account of somebody else's vacation (and I've already devoted an inordinate amount of space

to the parking lot) I'll provide a couple of representative nuggets for posterity's sake.

Nugget 1—Tuesday night at Epcot: Let's be honest, Epcot has its charm, but Disney could save a lot of pretense by just renaming it "Overpriced Gift Shops From Around The World." Our day of shopping culminated with a character dinner at the Akershus Royal Banquet Hall in "Norway" during which our table was visited by princesses Aurora, Cinderella, Snow White, and Ariel. I didn't recognize Ariel at first because she was wearing a ball gown, rather than her trademark seashell bikini top that is the reason Ariel has always been the preferred Disney princess of adolescent (and older) boys everywhere. I couldn't help noticing that Ariel, notwithstanding her modest attire, was the only roaming princess with whom boys (and young men) sought to have their pictures taken. As I've observed previously, I don't know what these princesses get paid, but they earn it. For all the people there, you'd have thought the princesses were there just for Sophie and Grace. I don't know how they do it. Dinner was good. Oh, and Grandpa (as usual) picked up the check. Ding.

Nugget 2—Wednesday at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter: Our one day off the Disney campus took us to Islands of Adventure at Universal Orlando Resort. The World, which opened in 2010, centers around a new ride—Harry Potter and The Forbidden Journey—that, despite its unquestionable awesomeness, has already garnered a reputation for prohibitively long lines and breaking down a lot. We were fortunate to go on a day when it had neither long lines nor breakdowns. The girls loved everything about Hogsmeade, from Honeydukes and Zonkos to Ollivander's and everything else. As for food and merchandise, the ride my credit card took at Disney (even with substantial reinforcement from Grandpa's credit card) was nothing compared to what it endured in Harry Potter World. Before even getting to lunch at Three Broomsticks (which was fine) we'd consumed enough Butterbeer and pumpkin juice to last a lifetime. In an apparent attempt to convey authentic British quaintness, all the gift shops are laid out in the most cramped and inconvenient manner possible. As a result, even with the park not at full capacity, the shops are like mosh pits. This also jacks up the spending: "Daddy, can we buy this, and this, and this...?" "Yes, yes, and yes, just get me the @#\$\$% out of here!" I can't imagine what it must be like when school's out.

I think we all had a good time, though it's hard to say what everyone'll remember from it. When Crystal asked Grace what her favorite thing about the Magic Kingdom was, she replied, "It was when Grandpa gave me cotton candy." I have to give Grace credit, though. She trusted us enough to go on the scariest rides at each park (Tower of Terror at Hollywood Studios, Space Mountain at the Magic Kingdom, Forbidden Journey at Harry Potter World, and Expedition Everest at Animal Kingdom) exactly one time. After that, it became a running joke to ask Grace whether she'd like to ride [insert name of scary ride here] again just to watch her overwrought reaction: "Noooooooooo!" (That didn't keep the rest of us from going multiple times, though. Did I mention how short the lines were?)

Love,
Tim et al



In "France"

At Hogsmeade



Garrick Ollivander, Lucy, and the wand that chose her.

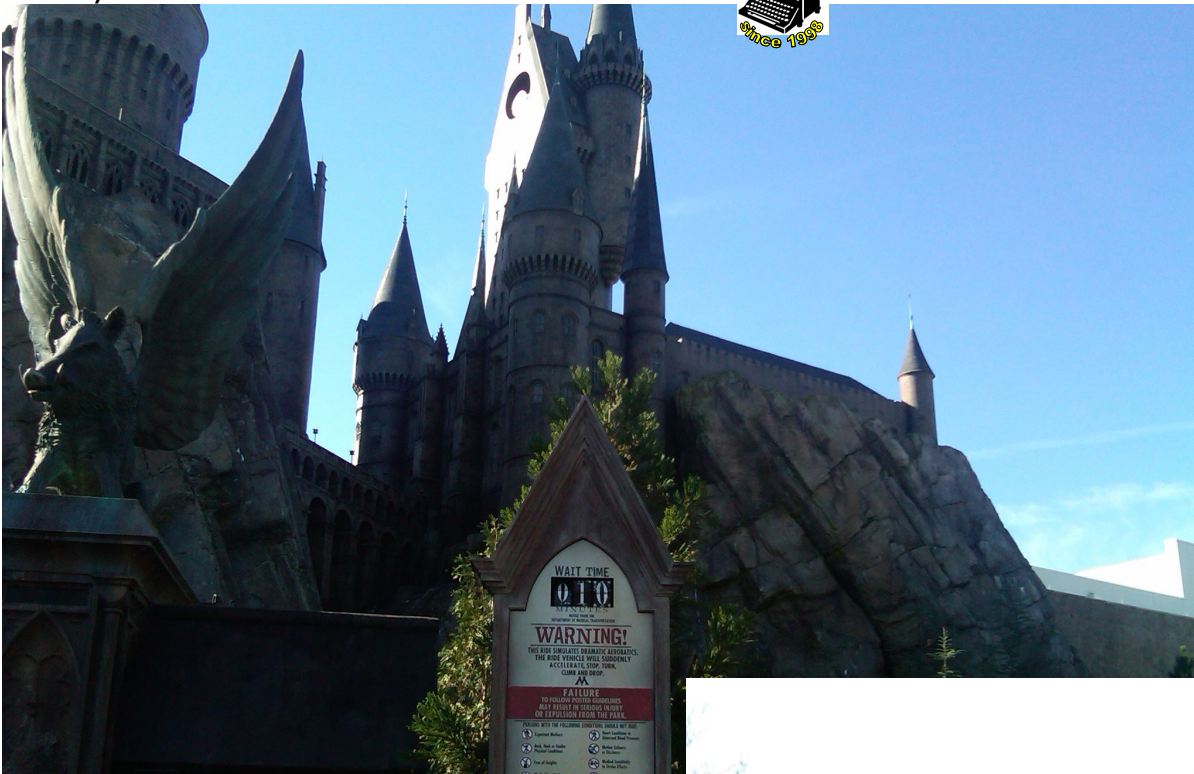
We now have pictures of Grace with about 80 million different characters. Here one with Rapunzel (from Tangled)...



...one with Winnie the Pooh...



...and one with Mary Poppins.



Photographic evidence of the virtually non-existent wait at Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey. The photo (which I took with my phone) isn't time-stamped, so you'll have to believe me when I tell you it was a little after 10 a.m. (We'd already ridden once—and nearly killed Grandma Kent in the process.)

If you like short lines and perfect weather, we recommend the last week of January.



Last photo of the week—All of us in front of the Tree of Life at Disney's Animal Kingdom. (Lucy and I in our matching Expedition Everest fleeces.)