

[Travel](#)

Disney beyond the theme parks -- adventures, cruises and a Hawaiian resort

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Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa, overlooks the Pacific about 30 minutes from Honolulu, Hawaii. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

"Come on, Lou, you can do it," I shouted encouragement to my grandson on his fourth birthday. He was marking the occasion with a never-before feat: snorkeling. I felt confident he could do it because he was in an ideal place to try this new experience. He was in capable hands, Disney hands.

No, we weren't at Disney World or Disneyland or any of Disney's theme parks around the world. We were in Hawaii at Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa. There were no fireworks over Cinderella's castle, no parades, no roller coasters. An artificial lagoon for snorkeling and a lazy river pool with waterslide were as close as we came to thrill rides.

Vacationers may not realize Disney's brand of magic extends far beyond theme parks. Adventures by Disney has land tours on six continents and river cruises in Europe. Disney Cruise Line's four ships ply the waters of Europe as well as North America. And families find a four-star experience on Oahu at Aulani.



Rainbow Reef, a private snorkeling lagoon, is among the unusual features at Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa in Hawaii. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Authentic Hawaii

Disney concentrates its magic in one location on Oahu, a half-hour from Honolulu airport. Aulani, which roughly translates as "messenger in chief" from Hawaiian, is no kitschy cartoon take on our 50th state. Rather, it takes its mission of presenting Hawaiian culture seriously in a sophisticated, adult way with some all-ages fun thrown in Disney style. One example: Background music playing in public spaces is a Hawaiian remix of tunes from Disney films.

Before the resort opened in 2011, Walt Disney "Imagineers" worked closely with local artisans and cultural experts to create an authentic Hawaiian experience. Aulani boasts the world's largest collection of Hawaiian art, some of it seen on guided walking tours of the resort that also highlight elements of native architecture and decorative motifs.

Aulani continues to emphasize authenticity in resort activities such as storytelling of native legends around a fire pit, Hawaiian musical performances in the Olelo Room lounge, ukulele lessons and island crafts made by kids in the children's program. An evening luau begins with traditional activities such as lei-making followed by a buffet including a Polynesian favorite, suckling pig. An after-dinner show presents Hawaiian culture in song and dance.

While Aulani has plenty for adults to enjoy -- not the least of which is an outstanding spa -- the emphasis definitely falls on families. Aunty's Beach House has supervised activities for ages 3 to 12 from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. included in the room rate. And about those rooms: In addition to 351 hotel rooms and suites, the resort has 481 villas with family-friendly amenities such as separate bedrooms, full kitchens, washer/dryer, highchair, foldout beds, portable crib. There's even a step stool in the bathroom enabling little ones to reach the sink.

Mickey, Minnie and other Disney characters entertain during daily breakfasts and thrice weekly dinners in the buffet restaurant. A seven-acre water-play area replicating Hawaii's lava-studded landscape overlooks a sheltered beach with free use of sand toys. Perhaps the most unusual water-play area is Rainbow Reef, a private snorkeling lagoon that's more like an open-air aquarium stocked with tropical fish. Disney lifeguards stand watch and staff assist with rental gear in sizes suitable for toddlers to stocky grandpas.



Families climb to the top of a castle in Austria for a selfie during an Adventures by Disney tour through Central Europe. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Adventure tours Disney-style

Ballroom dancing has never been my forté, but in Vienna, the waltz is king. On an Adventures by Disney motor-coach tour through Central Europe our group had a private waltzing lesson at one of the city's oldest and most distinguished dance studios. Serious couples tried not to step on each other's toes while daddy/daughter and mother/son pairs just had fun.

It was just one of the exclusive, behind-the-scenes experiences Disney arranged for the adults and kids on our tour. In Vienna, we also had an after-hours tour of Europe's oldest zoo and a behind-the-scenes look at the Lipizzaner stallion stables at the Spanish Riding School.

Other Adventures by Disney experiences in Central Europe in 2019 will include a progressive dinner in Prague, a walk through an ice cave in the Austrian Alps and a private violin serenade of Mozart classics in a Salzburg restaurant that dates from A.D. 803 and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Unexpected experiences with multigenerational appeal also greet families on the South African plains, Costa Rica's rich rain forest, the ruins of Pompeii and Machu Picchu, Australia's Outback, the Great Wall of China and some of America's most iconic destinations. Each Adventures by Disney tour has a minimum age requirement. A few tours are for adults only. Hotels usually rank among the best at each destination. Meals are usually casual and kid-friendly.



On an Adventures by Disney private tour of the stables at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, families get a close look at the famous white stallions and their riders. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Two energetic and engaging Adventure Guides lead each tour and keep the entertainment rolling on the motor coach with games and movies between stops. Though they do not act as baby sitters, the guides lead a few separate Junior Adventurers activities while the adults take a tour more suited for grown-ups. One evening the guides might organize dinner and a movie with the kids leaving the older folks to enjoy some adult conversation over a meal. Free time is built into each tour so families can dine on their own, explore, swim in the hotel pool or just relax.

Adventure guides also are aboard Adventures by Disney river cruises in Europe offered through the cruise line AmaWaterways. Family-oriented activities are offered both in port and on board.

Cruising with Disney

An extensive program of children's activities makes it easy for adults and kids to enjoy separate adventures as well as quality family time on Disney Cruise Line. And its four ships, the 2,700-passenger Wonder and Magic and the 4,000-passenger Dream and the Fantasy, have plenty of room to accommodate big, multigenerational groups.

The ships have separate areas for ages 3-17 and even a nursery for babies as young as 6 months. So when grandma feels her energy flagging after too much toddler time, she can leave her little ones in the care of a trained crew member and retreat to a quiet area of the ship to recharge. Parents can play the day away with the kids in the pool and on the waterslide then go dancing in the evening. The Navigator App for smartphones keeps family members connected through an onboard chat feature.



The Disney Wonder docks at Castaway Cay, the cruise line's private island in the Bahamas, for a day of swimming and beach fun. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

All ages gather for deck parties, perhaps a daytime sail-away celebration or a nighttime pirate-themed experience. Broadway-caliber productions appeal across generations, while the latest films and Disney classics play on the big screen throughout the day. Families find plenty of opportunities to interact with Disney characters, including photo ops and autograph sessions, princess gatherings and royal teas, and character breakfasts on some weeklong itineraries.

Adults can seek out secluded spots such as the aptly named Quiet Cove Pool or the Senses Spa and Salon for ages 18 and up (the separate Chill Spa is for ages 13-17). Ships have coffee lounges just for grown-ups as well as nightclubs and restaurants. Adult beverage tastings might feature beer, bourbon, wine or a variety of cocktails.

Kids from 3 to 12 join in the fun in the Oceaneer Club and Oceaneer Lab where there might be storytelling, dress-up, games, science experiments and educational activities. The child to counselor ratio is 15-to-1. Tweens frequent Edge, their own hip hangout with flat-screen TVs, computers, video games and activities. Teens chill out in Vibe watching TV, listening and dancing to music and playing video games.

Each of the Disney Cruise Line ships features rotational dining with themed restaurants, and servers rotate with you throughout your cruise. One of the most popular restaurants, Animator's Palate, is a dinner show celebrating the art of storytelling where Disney characters come to life before your eyes. Even the costumes on the staff change colors as the show progresses throughout the meal.

- Information for this article was gathered on media trips sponsored by Disney.

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Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa: (866) 443-4763, disneyaulani.com

Adventures by Disney: (800) 543-0865, adventuresbydisney.com

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