

# FYi

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## The Wizarding World of Harry Potter

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HOGWARTS CASTLE AT NIGHT

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS PHOTO

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HAPPY  
Mother's  
DAY

FYi

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The **Suburban**

# The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios stands out as an Orlando holiday highlight



Butterbeer at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter.

## ALEXANDRA COHEN FYI

Orlando, Florida has long been known as the theme park capital of the world, making it an ideal location to visit for people of all ages, including both children and Disney Adults. While I had visited the city with great enthusiasm as a child, this was my first time returning in my adult years, and I am pleased to report that it has not at all lost its magic and wonder.

### Universal Studios and Harry Potter

When trying to select a theme park, the options are limitless. While I had visited several as a child, I had no doubt upon my return to Orlando that the Universal Parks were at the top of my list.

Outside of its separate water park, Uni-

versal features two distinct parks that one may wish to explore: Universal Studios, and Universal's Islands of Adventure. Visit one, visit both separately, or visit both in the same day by purchasing a park-to-park pass. Amongst other attractions, Universal Studios features areas tributing various cities, including Hollywood, New York, and San Francisco, as well as Minion Land and Springfield, USA: Home of the Simpsons. Universal's Islands of Adventure includes Marvel Superhero Island, Skull Island, Jurassic Park, Seuss Landing, and more.

That being said, the highlight for me was, without a doubt, *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter*. The Harry Potter universe is a must-visit for all fans of the books and movies, and sprawls over both Universal Parks. Visit the famed Diagon

Alley over at Universal Studios, where you can visit all of the shops so well-known from the series, including Gringotts Money Exchange, Ollivanders, and more. The main ride at this location is Harry Potter and the Escape from Gringotts. When you are done in Diagon Alley, make your way to Platform 9 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  and take the Hogwarts Express from King's Cross Station to Hogsmeade, which is found over at Universal's Islands of Adventure. To make this trip, you will need to have purchased a Park-to-Park admission ticket, however, or will need to be in possession of an Annual/Seasonal Pass.

Over at Hogsmeade, which is also superbly decorated to reflect scenes from the films, explore a few more shops, have a bite to eat at famous destinations such as Hog's Head or Three Broomsticks, and

try out a few more rides, including Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, which was my personal favourite of the day, as well as Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure and Flight of the Hippogriff. Stroll by the stage to watch performances by the frog choir or from the Triwizard Spirit Rally – the performance schedule can be viewed on the Universal phone app. Another highlight of Hogsmeade is the beautifully constructed replica of Hogwarts Castle, which is the perfect photo opportunity.

For an extra fee, guests can purchase the Express Pass, allowing them to skip the regular lines. Buy a regular Express Pass for as little as \$79.99 to skip the regular lines one time per participating ride,

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or buy an Express Unlimited Pass for as little as \$109.99 to skip the regular lines as often as desired. Note that most but not all rides at the park offer an express line. The list can be found on the Universal website.

### Other Attractions

While we did not have time to explore all that Orlando has to offer, here are a few other suggestions for your consideration.

Within a short distance of Epcot and Disney's Hollywood Studios, you can find Disney's Boardwalk. Inspired by Atlantic City, the boardwalk features free admission to stroll along a Coney Island-style boardwalk with complimentary evening entertainment including jugglers, comedians, and fire-eaters. It is connected to Disney's ferry system via the adjacent Disney's Boardwalk Villas.

Whether or not you plan on buying tickets to any of the Universal theme parks, check out the action-packed Universal CityWalk, which features several themed restaurants, nightclubs, a movie theatre, shopping, and access to all of the Universal-themed merchandise. Parking is free after 6 pm.

Love animals and nature? See more than 500 animals, including some rare and endangered species, and wander through 23 acres of lush, natural beauty at the Central Florida Zoo & Botanical Gardens. As well, Gatorland is one of Orlando's longest-running attractions, featuring 110 acres with thousands of alligators and crocodiles, plus a flight aviary, petting zoo, nature walk, splash pad play area, Bobcat Bayou, and more.

This spring, LEGOLAND Florida Re-

sort will debut the LEGO Ferrari Build & Race, which offers guests the experience of viewing a life-sized LEGO Ferrari Car and then building and testing it in one of three obstacle-laden test tracks. Young drivers can also enjoy the LEGO DUPLO Build Zone to design their own custom creations with larger bricks.

### Where to Stay

While Orlando has more than 490 unique properties to choose from, we chose to stay at the JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa, a beautiful hotel which first opened its doors in 2020. Looking for action and fun? The hotel includes not only a pool, but also an Activity Garden for families which features the Mount Chelonia rock-climbing wall, a nine-hole mini golf course, and an open lawn to play giant chess. There is also the sixth floor Kids Conservatory, which offers access to various games and arts and crafts. When you are ready to explore the city, the hotel offers a free shuttle service to take guests to the Disney World theme parks, as well as to Disney Springs, which is located less than 10 minutes from the hotel. The shuttle service can be booked in advance, and if desired, will also pick you up from any of these destinations.

The resort has 516 rooms, as well as 18 event/meeting rooms. It is only a 30-minute drive from the Orlando International Airport, and a 10- to 15-minute drive to the main Disney Parks. We stayed in a very comfortable room which overlooked the pools and featured two queen-sized beds, a fridge, both a shower and a bathtub, and an in-room safe. For those traveling in larger groups, consider booking a suite, including one of the Family Suites which has two bedrooms and sleeps up to nine people.

While Orlando is best known for its amusement parks, the primary purpose of our trip was relaxation, hence our selection of this fantastic hotel. This property features two pools – a larger and more shallow family pool with sparkling fountains and zero-entry, as well as a neighboring, slightly smaller adult pool for those looking for peace, quiet, and a splash-free zone. The adult pool area is completed by a soothing hot tub.

For those looking to further elevate their comfort at the pool, one option is to reserve a personal cabana. During my time in the cabana, I was treated to a sectional couch with a fan, a 43-inch Satellite TV, a personal safe, a mini fridge, scented towels, a fruit platter, as well as a platter of sweet and salty snacks. Poolside cabanas must be booked for an entire day.

Looking to step up the relaxation yet again? Look no further than Spa by JW, which is 10,000 square feet of luxury. I had the opportunity to try out the 50-minute Magnesium Oil Infused Massage, which was incredibly well-done and also included the use of some sound bowls.

Hungry? The hotel offers plenty of din-



PHOTO: VISIT ORLANDO

Legoland is a big hit with the kids.

ing options for any mood and any budget. On the hotel's main floor, consider starting with their signature Sear + Sea steakhouse, which offers both a nice interior and a small patio overlooking the pool. For another dining option, consider the ninth floor rooftop lounge, Illume, which features a menu of creative and hand-crafted cocktails, sushi, and Asian tapas.

### Dining Out

While its world-famous theme parks are certainly the headlines, Orlando has increasingly been recognized in recent years for its culinary scene. In fact, the website WalletHub recently named Orlando the 2023 Best Foodie City in America.

During my recent trip, I discovered the wonders of Disney Springs, which is an incredibly popular entertainment, dining, and retail district formerly known as Downtown Disney. Disney Springs is a completely outdoor district featuring 120 acres of boutiques, restaurants, and entertainment. Watch the Magic Kingdom or Epcot nightly fireworks from a patio, or take to the sky in the Disney Springs hot air balloon. Furthermore, every Saturday, families can enjoy the Disney Springs Kids Club, a free experience featuring interactive entertainment for all ages located at The Landing.

Let me recommend three dining establishments in particular: *Wine Bar George* and *Morimoto Asia* in Disney Springs and *Sophia's Trattoria* at the brand new Conrad Hilton.

With Wine Bar George being a predominantly tapas-style restaurant, I decided to embrace the experience and sampled some of their small plates, including an out-of-this-world artisanal cheese plate which featured four different types of cheese paired with almonds, honey, fig jam, and olives. Other delicious treats included their New Zealand Lamp Chops, which are served with black garlic purée, salted onions, and an herb vinaigrette,

as well as the crispy mac & cheese bites with tomato nage and pecorino. The true highlight of the restaurant, however, is, as its name implies, the wine.

Morimoto Asia is a two-storey Pan-Asian destination not to be missed. It is helmed by famous Japanese Master Chef Masaharu Morimoto. The menu truly includes something for everyone, with a series of small plates, dim sum, vegetable dishes, ramen, rice and noodles, and seafood. Another signature dish that I did not have the chance to taste is the Morimoto Peking Duck, which is a carved house-roasted whole duck meant to be shared amongst two. Sushi-lovers are in for quite the experience at Morimoto Asia! While sushi and sashimi can be ordered a la carte, another option would be to order one of the several available combos, platters, and towers/pagodas, which allow for the chef's selections to be brought to the table for a tasting experience. All fish is fresh and flown in daily from Japan sauce. My meal was coupled with one of their highball cocktails – the restaurant's Suntory custom highball machine dispenses super chilled, highly carbonated soda water, which is described in the menu to be 5x the carbonation of regular soda water and 1.5x that of champagne.

Sophia's Trattoria is found on the hotel's first floor, with its patio directly facing the hotel's picturesque lagoon and man-made beach. Both the restaurant's aesthetic and menu are meant to celebrate the coastal-inspired Southern Italian cuisine, with dishes including wood-fired pizzas, handmade pasta, fish, and meat. For our meal, we started with the tasty baked fontina, dressed with garlic and thyme, and Bellini cocktails. We shared the whole branzino for our main course, which was served with sauce verge, lemon confit, and fine herbs. For dessert, we enjoyed a truly decadent tiramisu.

Considering a trip to Orlando? You won't be disappointed. ■

JW MARRIOTT PHOTO



Two pristine pools at the JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa.