

Disney's Fort Wilderness Resort & Campground

Enticing guests with backwoods charm for over 30 years.

By Deborah Brauser

Located just down Bay Lake from Disney's Magic Kingdom, the Fort Wilderness Resort and Campground is unlike other properties in the area. This comfortably rustic resort is tucked into the woods, nestled among tall pines, bay trees and palmettos. Here, there's plenty to entertain both the back-to-nature lover, as well as those who want more conveniences.

With vehicles restricted, the grounds are full of bicycles, golf carts, walkers and horseback riders. From the Reception Outpost's check-in lobby with an oversized fireplace and game tables, to its lively town center area surrounding Pioneer Hall, there's a distinct feeling of being in a small community, complete with friendly neighbors and fun amenities meant for sharing with new friends. It's a combination that's been successful for more than three decades.

Since 1971, Fort Wilderness has been welcoming guests to its tree-lined campground. And though a few things have changed – the steam engine train is long gone, as is the Melvin the Moose Breakfast Show – the resort still attracts families for numerous repeat visits.

Lisa Egan of Powder Springs, Ga. grew up in Florida and stayed with her parents in campers and cabins at the campground several times as a kid. She's now vacationed here twice with her husband and 7- and 4-year-old sons. "There's a lot to do here such as horseback riding and the



singalong with Chip 'N Dale. You can even watch the Magic Kingdom fireworks right from the beach by the marina with no crowds. I just like the convenience of its location, while still feeling like I'm away from it all."

When the property first opened, it had six accommodation "loops" and 232 campsites. Today, it stretches out over 700 acres with 28 loops, 784 campsites for tents and recreational vehicles, and 409 Wilderness cabins.

Accommodations

With street names such as Dogwood Drive and Possum Path, the Wilderness cabins are located in the quieter areas near the main entrance. Each of these enchanting "cabins in the woods" has more than 500 square feet of living space, including a full-sized bed and a set of bunk beds; a separate living room with a full-sized pull-down bed, cable TV with a DVD player and a kitchen stocked with a full-sized refrigerator, microwave and stove. Outside features include

a private patio deck, a charcoal grill and a picnic table. (Not exactly roughing it, is it?)

Dan Thomas of Tyrone, Penn., has stayed at the Campground seven times over the past 10 years with his wife, two sons (who are now grown) and daughter (who is now 14). And they plan on returning again in February. "The cabins are the best by far for atmosphere and theme. You get so much for your money versus a room with two beds at other places. It gives the kids the privacy they seek from the parents with separate TVs, yet you can be a family and have a sit-down meal together."

Egan said that traveling with her two young sons makes staying in the cabins especially appealing. "They're clean and nice, and having a full kitchen is very helpful. We also like the peace and quiet of the campground. You don't hear the people next to you like you do in a hotel type room."

The campsites are available for travel trailers, motorhomes and tents and feature paved pads, a charcoal grill and picnic table, and hookups for water, electric, sewer, TV and internet.

Many campsite residents contribute to the neighborhood feeling by decorating their temporary homes, especially during the holidays. Around Halloween, black and orange abounds. And once December hits, the areas become small Christmas villages full of twinkling lights, colorful inflatable lawn decorations, and Santas and Mickeys of all sizes and shapes. "We like that people decorate their campers and cabins for the holidays," said Egan, who was inspired to join in the fun. "We even brought a Mickey Mouse inflatable to put outside our cabin this year."

Air-conditioned comfort stations are scattered throughout the campsites with restrooms, private showers, laundry facilities and ice dispensers. Basic groceries, camping supplies, movie rentals and even Disney merchandise



Fort Wilderness features 409 cabins within its 700 acres. One of the most popular and fun ways to get around the property is via golf cart.



An almost endless supply of activities captivates guests throughout the Fort Wilderness Resort & Campground, from land to the water.

can be found at the Meadow Trading Post and at the Settlement Trading Post, just across from the marina.

Recreation

No matter where you stay, everyone is welcome to use all onsite amenities, including its two heated pools. The larger one is located in the Meadow Recreation Area in the center of Fort Wilderness, along with a kiddie pool, snack bar, Daniel Boone's Wilderness

Arcade and two lighted tennis courts. The smaller pool can be found near the cabins on the southwest end of the property.

The Settlement Recreation Area is on the far north end, next to Bay Lake and its bustling marina. Lawn chairs, tetherball matches and a steady stream of touch football games can be found along the white sand beach at almost any time. (Depending on when the boats come in from their jaunts back and forth to



the Magic Kingdom, it can also become one of the most crowded areas of the campground.)

Watercraft rentals at the marina includes canoes, kayaks, and pontoon boats, along with water skiing and fishing excursions. In addition to seeing the Magic Kingdom's nightly fireworks display, guests can also get a great view of the nightly Electrical Water Pageant boat parade from the beach area.

Horses, Of Course

According to one of the ranch hands taking care of the pony rides, the resort houses about 90 horses of different types, including the draught horses used to pull the trolleys down Main Street U.S.A. in the Magic Kingdom. The pony rides, which are located in the corral at the Tri-Circle-D Ranch, cost only a couple dollars for a short, very calm stroll around the stables. (By the way, the petting zoo used to be located at the Ranch, but signs are now up asking guests to just walk around the corral and enjoy the ponies there without petting or feeding them.)

Horseback riding enthusiasts can take part in a wrangler-guided trail

ride, which is offered several times daily. For around \$35 per group, horse-drawn carriages carry guests on relaxing half-hour excursions. Reservations are highly recommended.

A cheaper alternative is an old-fashioned 45-minute wagon ride on a first-come, first-served basis for only \$8 for everyone over 10-years-old, \$5 for children aged 3 to 9, and free for children under three.

Thomas remembers a wagon ride around Halloween five years ago that made a lasting impression. As the driver told the story of the headless horseman, he actually made an appearance near the end of the ride. "We were seated in the back of the wagon and the horseman began to chase after us," recalls Thomas. "It was a real man on a real horse, holding a pumpkin head under his arm.

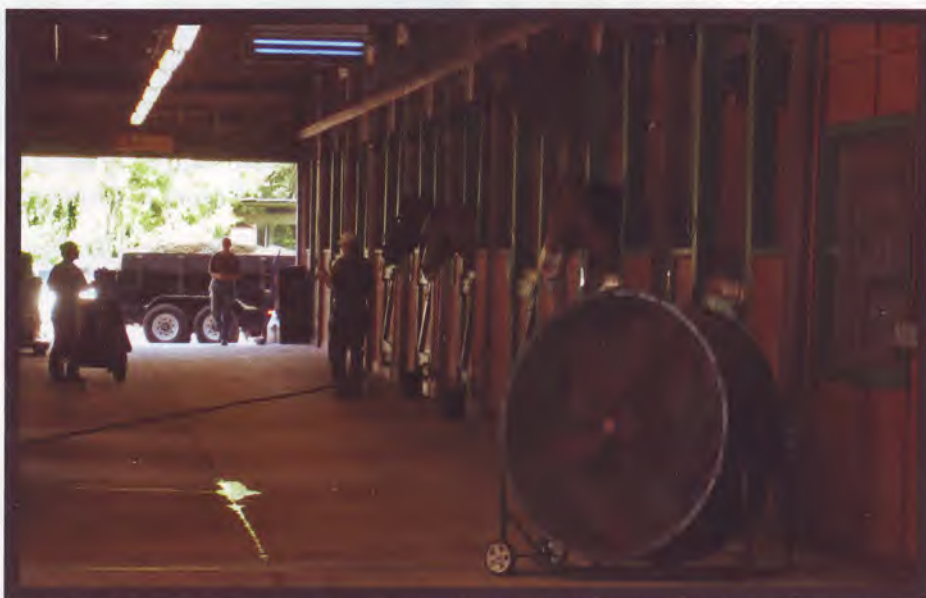
He got so close to the wagon, you could actually see the breath of the horse near your face. It was really cool and my daughter was scared and amazed by the whole event." The headless horseman character still appears at the Campground each Halloween season. He's just now part of the Haunted Carriage Ride.

Transportation

With vehicles restricted just past check-in, the resort's buses are vital. They pick up and drop off guests at external destinations such as the Disney theme parks and waterparks, as well as all internal locations.

But what if you'd like to explore the property without having to wait for a bus? Walking along one of the many winding trails is one option, as is bicycling. Guests often bring their own or rent them at the Bike Barn. The most popular mode of transportation on site, however, is the electric cart – also rented out at the Bike Barn. "I always rent a golf cart for the entire trip," said Thomas. "You don't have to get one. The bus service will get you anywhere you need to be. But cart rentals are dad's fun toy."

Lisa Egan believes the carts are essential for her stays. "We have young kids, so we always rent a golf cart. There can be a lot of walking to and from the bus stops, or you can drive your cart right to the marina or to the bus depot. They're expensive, but they do come in handy. And after a long day at the parks, that cart is a welcomed sight."



The Tri-Circle-D Ranch is home to the horses found up and down Main Street U.S.A. in the Magic Kingdom. There, visitors can see how these horses are cared for when they're not entertaining theme park guests.



The Hoop-Dee-Do Musical Revue

For pure country fun, catch one of these nightly dinner hoe-downs at the Pioneer Hall. The program provides Wild West music and laughs, along with an all-you-can-eat menu of country comfort food such as fried chicken and smoked BBQ ribs. The original version of this show opened in 1974. After all these years, it's still going strong and can fill up fast. So make your reservations in advance.

For a true splurge, there's also a new two-hour Segway tour called "The Wilderness Back Trail Adventure" for guest over 16 years old. (See the full story about this experience on page 39).

Chow Time

The area surrounding Pioneer Hall has become a natural gathering spot for guests. There, you can join a group playing horseshoes, mingle, or take it easy in one of the oversized wooden rockers on the building's porches. In addition,

the area boasts a small gift shop, Davy Crockett's Wilderness Arcade, and most of the resort's dining options.

Located inside Pioneer Hall, the casual, full-service Trail's End Restaurant offers an all you-can-eat buffet for all three meals, plus snacks and beverages into the late evening. Crockett's Tavern offers appetizers, pizza, and a full service bar. The very popular Hoop-Dee-Do Musical Revue is also located here.

When asked to name his favorite part of Fort Wilderness, Thomas replied,

"It's not just one thing, but a combination of the music from the Hoop-Dee-Do, the food at Trail's End, and the old time movies with Chip 'N Dale at the campfire. I look at Disney as a really great place - and my children grew up going here."

Egan agreed, "I think this is a great option for families with kids. "It's not like staying in a five-star hotel. It's more laid back, which after a day at the parks is appreciated. We love staying here and will definitely do it again."



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