

FAMILY TRAVEL

# Rediscovering the magic of Disneyland, Huntington Beach

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

Mickey, Minnie, Goofy and the gang enthusiastically welcomed us back to the most magical place on earth last month. There were a few more hoops to jump through for this trip, but once we arrived on those hallowed grounds, Disneyland and California Adventure sparked a little brighter than before. Perhaps it's because we haven't seen palm trees in person and felt that warm southern SoCal sunshine in close to two years, but when it comes to travel, absence does make the heart grow fonder.

We also hit a sweet spot, visiting the parks in early November, a lovely lull between the Halloween and Christmas festivities. While certain rides — like Radiator Springs Racers and Indiana Jones — had wait times of up to 45 minutes, we breezed onto almost everything else. We were so spoiled with nearly non-existent lineups that my daughter Brooklyn turned her nose up at any attraction requiring more than 15 minutes of her time. Over our eight-hour Park Hopper day, we tore through about 30 rides, including new and beloved family favourites like Pirates of the Caribbean, Star Wars Galaxy's Edge and Rise of the Resistance. It was, in Brooklyn's words, "totally epic."

One day at Disney was more than enough for us and our bank account. Ticket prices have increased for the fifth straight year, with one-day Park Hopper passes starting at US\$164 for ages 10 and up and US\$158 for children ages three to nine. This price is for Tier 1 tickets — visiting Disneyland mid-week, as we did, during the least busy season. If you're travelling during school breaks or for special events, including Halloween and Christmas, tickets can cost as much as US\$224 for a Tier 6 adult one-day Park Hopper (US\$215 per child). First, determine what tier you



Brooklyn soaks in the magical views from The FIFTH Rooftop Restaurant & Bar patio overlooking Disneyland. CURT WOODHALL

need by checking park availability on [disneyland.disney.go.com](http://disneyland.disney.go.com) before buying your tickets and booking flights and accommodation. After purchasing your park passes, you'll then need to secure a date-specific park reservation online based on your ticket tier. Also, remember to bring masks to wear at all indoor attractions (including lineups), in stores, restaurants and restrooms.

We typically stay at Disneyland properties to take advantage of the Extra Magic Hour, early park admission. However, that benefit is on pause due to the reduced capacities, so staying off-park is a great way to save on accommodation. Element by Westin Anaheim Resort Convention Center was

our home base this trip, and it was excellent, especially for the price point. Highlights were the complimentary buffet breakfast, which included many healthy choices, the spacious park-view rooms, modern decor, and the exceptional customer service. The property is also within walking distance to Disneyland (15 minutes) and the many shops and restaurants at AMC Garden Walk. We ate most meals on the go in Anaheim, except one sunset supper at The FIFTH Rooftop Restaurant & Bar. The food there is standard California pub fare, but the view of Disneyland is magical.

After clocking 25,000-plus steps at Disneyland, we escaped

to Huntington Beach for a laid-back break in Surf City, USA; and relaxing is easy at the Waterfront Beach Resort. This Hilton property is brilliant for families, with an elegant beach vibe, two oceanview pools, a waterslide, hot tubs and firepits you can book for marshmallow roasts — one of our favourite Huntington Beach activities. I further enhanced the serenity with a Swedish massage at the resort's Drift waterfront spa; while my husband and daughter tested the waterslides and hot tub. My treatment was the perfect counterbalance to travelling and navigating the parks. Although I could have happily hidden in the spa for the duration of our stay, we managed to take in a few of the coastal community's top sights.

First up was an electric Duffy Boat ride with Huntington Harbor Boat Rentals. Gliding through the picturesque Huntington Harbor is a longtime local tradition, and we took to it like experts. My husband, Curt, was in his element as captain while Brooklyn and I basked in the SoCal sunshine, munching on guacamole and chips. The rental came with a wireless Bluetooth speaker and a harbour map, which kept us on track throughout our adventure. Not much to report in terms of wildlife, but the harbourfront houses were fun to check out, and the warm ocean air was welcome.

We explored the quaint downtown and wandered along the pier the following day, checking out the Pier Plaza Art Faire and watching the local surfers. Feeling inspired by the experts in the water, we visited the Huntington Beach International Surfing Museum. While the space was small, the exhibits contained an excellent overview of surfing culture, and history, in California. My daughter loved reading about Hawaii's famous lifeguard Eddie Aikau, as well as seeing the original long wooden Alai surfboards. Admission is by donation.

Pacific City, an open-air shop-

ping and dining centre, is another worthwhile local attraction, just a short walk from the Waterfront Beach Resort. We enjoyed most of our meals here, as well as an extraordinary tasting at Bella Sophia Chocolates. The boutique confectionary, owned by Steph and JD Shafer, is a marriage of artistic and culinary talent, showcasing dreamy, hand-painted artisanal chocolates and sweets. Every truffle, caramel and marshmallow was divine. Although hard to pick a favourite, mine was either the salted caramel, dark chocolate dipped candied orange slices or the caramel white chocolate surfboards, or ... never mind, they're all great. My main recommendation is to arrive early, as the handmade creations sell out quickly. Two other standout dining experiences were Dukes Huntington Beach, for its Aloha-atmosphere, water views and Mai Tais; and Bluegold in Pacific City, which was phenomenal — from the milk buns and oysters to the wild salmon and rib-eye.

According to Brooklyn, our much-needed SoCal escape was well worth the two weeks of home-school awaiting us upon returning to Canada. Given she's unvaccinated due to her age, we had to keep Brooklyn home from school and group activities for 14 days as per Health Canada regulations.

We were also required to take an antigen COVID test before entering the United States and a molecular test to return home. The COVID Clinic ([covidclinic.org](http://covidclinic.org)) has 75 drive-thru testing locations across California and was easy to book online. Each expedited PCR test costs US\$150, and we received our results within 24 hours. Rapid-molecular tests are also available for US\$199, providing results within one to two hours.

I then completed the health questionnaire on the ArriveCAN travel App for our family. My husband, unfortunately, was randomly selected for a COVID screening test at Canada Customs, which only took about 15 minutes but could cause a slight delay if connecting between flights.

For more destination information, visit [www.arrivalstravel.com](http://www.arrivalstravel.com).



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