

# THE DAY THE WORLD OPENED

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Oct. 1, 1971 — 55 years ago — Walt Disney World near Orlando, Florida, opened its doors to the public for the first time. About 10,000 guests showed up that first day — and many of what would become the park’s most popular attractions weren’t open yet.

Walt Disney World would formally open three weeks later with a star-studded gala celebration.

## A ‘SOFT OPENING’

Oct. 1, 1971, was what they now call “a soft opening” — a “grand opening” that’s not quite so grand and not particularly widely publicized: The folks at Disney wanted to avoid the bad publicity that comes with being swamped on opening day, which had happened when Disneyland opened in California in July 1955. Promised attractions weren’t yet operating, asphalt sidewalks melted in the hot sun and drinking fountains weren’t hooked up. Disney had expected 15,000 people that first day in Disneyland. Almost double that showed up.

So the plan for Disney’s second venture into the world of amusement parks was to be low key — at least, at first. Two hotels were ready by Oct. 1. A number of what would become key attractions were not.

On Oct. 23, Disney would haul in celebrities like Bob Hope, Julie Andrews, Rock Hudson, Annette Funicello and Fred MacMurray to formally inaugurate the park.



While about 10,000 people attended Walt Disney World’s “soft opening” on Oct. 1, 1971, considerably more attended the official grand opening ceremony on Oct. 23.

## BUILDING ‘THE MOST MAGICAL PLACE ON EARTH’

In those days, guests bought ticket books containing tickets labeled A through E, with E tickets required to get into the most attractive attractions. At Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom, this meant 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, the Haunted Mansion, the Jungle Cruise, It’s a Small World and the Hall of Presidents.

Hardly anything other than the automobile ride and the skyway were open yet in the Tomorrowland section.

A ticket book with seven tickets cost \$4.75 for adults and \$3.75 for children. A book of 11 tickets cost a dollar more. General admission — meaning no tickets to ride but admission into all shows and exhibits — was \$3.50 and \$1.00 for children.

Disney World charged 50 cents to park an automobile.



Nearly 280 tons of steel and other materials were used to build the Magic Kingdom’s 189-foot-tall Cinderella’s Castle.

Walt Disney’s original hope for his Florida facility was to build a “planned community” — what he called a prototype “city of tomorrow.” This would be an artful mix of what we today refer to as mixed use commercial and residential areas, designed for easy access to work, schools, municipal utilities and recreation.

Walt had anonymous brokers buy up thousands of acres, in order to not push up land prices. Only 14 months after he began buying land did Walt reveal his plans for the elaborate project. A year after that announcement, Walt died of lung cancer.

Construction began on Walt Disney World in 1967. His wish for a residential “city of tomorrow” was abandoned and replaced with a larger, bolder, brighter copy of his Disneyland amusement park. Rather than push guests out the door at night to nearby hotels, Disney wisely built its own resort lodgings on site.

Some of Walt’s utopian dreams would be enshrined in Walt Disney World’s second amusement park, EPCOT, in 1982.

## IT’S NOT A SMALL WORLD, AFTER ALL

While Walt’s dream of an experimental city of tomorrow never got built, a whole bunch of other stuff did, leading Walt Disney World to become the world’s most-visited vacation resort. More than 58 million people flock there each year.

Today, Walt Disney World consists of 39 square miles — about half of which has been filled with four theme parks, two water parks, 27 themed resort hotels and a handful of golf courses and shopping areas and an awful lot of parking lots.

Here’s how the Walt Disney World resort area filled out over the past half century:

**Magic Kingdom park**  
Oct. 1, 1971

**Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort and Spa**  
June 28, 1988

**Disney’s Magnolia, Palm and Oak Trail golf courses**  
1971, Oak Trail in 1980

**Disney’s Polynesian Village Resort**  
Oct. 1, 1971

**EPCOT**  
Oct. 1, 1982

**Disney’s Animal Kingdom theme park**  
April 22, 1998

**Disney’s Animal Kingdom Lodge**  
April 16, 2001

**Disney’s Blizzard Beach water park**  
April 1, 1995

**Disney’s Contemporary Resort**  
Oct. 1, 1971

**Four Seasons Resort Orlando and golf club**  
Aug. 3, 2014

**Golden Oak residential area**  
2011

**Disney’s Lake Buena Vista Golf Course**  
1972

**Disney’s Saratoga Springs Resort & Spa**  
May 17, 2004

**Disney Springs shopping area**  
March 22, 1975

**Disney’s Hollywood Studios**  
May 1, 1989

**Disney’s Typhoon Lagoon water park**  
June 1, 1989

**ESPN Wide World of Sports complex**  
March 28, 1997

