

Park life

From Peppa Pig Theme Park to Disney World's big 5-0, **Sasha Wood** shares the scoop on what's new for families in Orlando this year

big-ticket family trips to Orlando are back on this year and better than ever, thanks to an evolving landscape of exciting new theme parks, hotels and facilities that are second to none. Families who've been holding off on a fun-filled Florida holiday during the pandemic will find 2022 is the perfect time to visit.

"With so many milestone celebrations put on hold during the pandemic, families are prioritising holiday plans to bond over new experiences, reconnect and create unforgettable memories in a destination that keeps safety top of mind," says Cassandra Matej, president and chief executive for Visit Orlando.

"Known around the world as a top destination for families, Orlando specialises in unique experiences for all ages. Families with younger children can join Peppa Pig and friends at the new Peppa Pig Theme Park – which opens this month – where they will experience interactive rides, meet-and-greets with Peppa and family, themed play areas and fun live shows."

The theme park mecca is set to shine in 2022 with an array of new attractions. Orlando's original theme park Walt Disney World Resort – which includes Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Animal Kingdom, Hollywood Studios, Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge, Blizzard Beach and Typhoon Lagoon – is celebrating its 50th anniversary, so visitors can expect an extravaganza unlike anything in its history.

As the most-visited destination in the US, Orlando is also upgrading its main airport. Phase one is due to be completed this spring, adding 15 gates along with shops, airport lounges and integrated transport links. The terminal will benefit from increased airlift, including Aer Lingus's new five-times-a-week flights between Manchester and Orlando.

These fresh sights and improved access will be joined by new immersive places to stay, including Disney's themed Star Wars hotel, which will transport guests to 'a galaxy far far away'. The property will join a new crop of family-orientated hotels, such as the recently opened Walt Disney World Swan Reserve tower.

THRILLS AND SPILLS

While it's blessed with year-round sunshine and plenty of scenic spots, Orlando is home to no less than seven of the world's top theme parks, and most families venturing this way will want to pack in as much top-notch entertainment as possible.

Sure to be a hit with UK families, popular kids TV character Peppa Pig brings a British flavour to the Sunshine State with the Peppa Pig Theme Park, which opens at Legoland Florida Resort on February 24. Joining classic cartoon favourites such as Sesame Street Land at SeaWorld Orlando and Seuss Landing at Universal Orlando Resort, the park will feature multiple rides and interactive attractions. ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Orlando airport; Universal's Islands of Adventure; SeaWorld Orlando; Peppa Pig Theme Park

PICTURES: Eric Cucciaioni; Ken Kinzie/Universal Orlando; Visit Orlando



Live shows will be scheduled throughout the day, as well as themed playscapes for little ones and aquatic playgrounds.

The park shares the same area as family favourite Legoland, which has added Pirate River Quest, a family-friendly treasure hunt adventure through the waterways of Cypress Gardens, for 2022.

But while both parks are well worth visiting – especially for families who love Lego bricks and Peppa Pig – the novelty and big-screen magic of Disney and Universal have long been Orlando's main attractions. These theme park giants are constantly reinventing themselves – and 2022 is a big year for Disney.

PARTY IN THE PARK

It's Walt Disney World Resort's big 5-0 and the iconic park is marking the milestone with an 18-month extravaganza unlike anything else in its history. The jewel in the crown of Orlando's theme parks – where it all started in 1971 – Disney World has always been a powerful

draw, but as it celebrates half a century, Disney is pulling out all the stops at its four theme parks and two water parks.

Throughout the celebrations, the four theme parks' iconic features and rides will be bathed in an iridescent glow at night. The original Magic Kingdom, in particular, will have added sparkle for the anniversary, with special touches including ornate embellishments on Cinderella's Castle and Disney Enchantment bringing super-charged fireworks, immersive projections and music to Main Street. New decorations across the park include 50 Disney characters cast in gold, and there'll also be an extra dose of fun and magic from Mickey and friends.

One of the most anticipated experiences across Magic Kingdom, Epcot and Disney's Animal Kingdom is the storytelling Guardians of the Galaxy: Cosmic Rewind rollercoaster, which launches at Epcot this summer. Disney's first reverse-launch ride rotates 360 degrees, so riders

don't miss out on any of the action. Epcot is also ramping things up with Harmonious, one of Disney's biggest-ever night-time spectacles, which features lasers and dancing fountains coordinated to classic Disney music.

The grand opening of Epcot's Remy's Ratatouille Adventure ride,

as part of the newly expanded France pavilion, was timed to coincide with the launch of Disney's celebrations last October, and families visiting this year can hop onboard to enter the animated world of Remy as a pint-sized rat scurrying through Gusteau's restaurant in Paris. ➤

BOOK IT

Kenwood Travel offers a week's room-only at Universal's Endless Summer Resort – Dockside Inn and Suites from £615, including flights with Virgin Atlantic. kenwoodtravel.co.uk

Ocean Florida offers seven nights' room-only at Rosen Pointe Orlando from £590, including flights. The operator is also offering four free experiences with bookings, such as tickets for The Wheel at ICON Park and the Outta Control Magic Show in downtown Orlando. ocean-florida.co.uk

American Sky has seven nights' room-only at the five-star Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge from £1,199, including flights. americansky.co.uk

Purely American offers seven nights' room-only at Universal's Aventura Hotel from £1,099, including flights. purelytravel.co.uk

DESTINATIONS

FAMILY HOLIDAYS | ORLANDO

Disney's Animal Kingdom will also feature a special anniversary show, Disney KiteTails at the Discovery River Amphitheatre, with incredible kites and colourful windcatchers dancing across the sky to the tune of songs from films such as *The Lion King*. Another stellar show, Finding Nemo: The Big Blue... and Beyond, has been reimagined to be set in the timeline of the *Finding Dory* film.

Over at Disney Springs, a new family-friendly Cirque du Soleil show premiered in November. Drawn to Life combines Disney animation and awe-inspiring performances, including 10 unique acrobatic acts.

ICONIC ATTRACTIONS

Meanwhile, big kids can be among the first onboard the dual-tower white-knuckle ride Orlando Slingshot, which debuted along with sister attraction Orlando Free Fall at ICON Park on International Drive in December. At 90m high, it's the world's tallest slingshot attraction, launching a pair of riders out of an "exploding volcano" straight into the sky at speeds of up to 100mph. Similarly, daredevils

can tackle Orlando Free Fall, which breaks records as the world's tallest free-standing drop tower at 130m.

Ocean theme park SeaWorld Orlando is also looking to the future, as it opens its first launch coaster Ice Breaker this month. The ride features four backwards and forwards launches, and a 93-foot-tall spike with a 100-degree angle, making it the steepest beyond-vertical drop in Florida and a must-do for thrill-seekers.

The Aquatica Orlando water park will launch the Reef Plunge slide this spring, which will take riders down an aquarium chute past a variety of marine life including Commerson's dolphins and leopard sharks.

Elsewhere, families fascinated with space and the universe shouldn't miss a trip to the Kennedy Space Centre, with Gateway: The Deep Space Launch Complex, making its debut next month. The multi-level attraction will showcase Nasa and commercial spacecraft hardware via immersive displays, as well as a virtual journey through space and the chance to witness a live launch. **TW**

top tip

Visit Orlando has relaunched the Orlando Travel Academy e-learning platform, which offers agents easy access to sales planning resources, including digital brochures, maps, itineraries and an app. The platform includes a training curriculum featuring webinars and videos on how to sell Orlando, plus destination news, in multiple languages. Agents that complete the course become certified Orlando experts and qualify for a range of perks including discounts on hotels and attractions.

orlandotravelacademy.com

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