

# Thrill to chill

Hays Travel agent **Julia Painter** visited SeaWorld's parks in Orlando with her autistic son to experience their new autism-friendly facilities. Here she gives her verdict

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here's a lot to think about when it comes to travelling with a child who has autism. The flight, the hotel, the activities – you have to make sure they're not going to be overly stimulated and that you know exactly what to expect.

When I went to SeaWorld Parks with my husband and 21-year-old son Jamie this year, I was really impressed with how all of that was handled.

We're not new to Orlando – it was actually our 25th time travelling there as a family! – but I can honestly say it was one of the best trips we've had, with so many initiatives in place to help us get the most out of our time there.

## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

It was a huge help that we were able to prepare before we left. The three Certified Autism Centers – SeaWorld, Discovery Park and Aquatica – have sensory guides on their websites that rate how

different senses will be affected on each ride, from touch and taste to sound and smell. They go into a lot of detail – if you're going to get wet, how wet and so on. That's important for us; most people like the element of surprise on a ride, but for a family with a child who has autism, you need to understand exactly what's going to happen.

At the park itself, there were lots of provisions to make things easier. One of the key things was the quiet rooms, which provided indoor seating with air conditioning, sensory toys and bean bags, and a lock so you could have the room to yourself. We went a few times to relax and get away from the heat, and get Jamie back to a level where he felt he could cope with the rest of the day. You can't hear anything from outside so it's calm and peaceful – it was amazing.

You can also get a Ride Accessibility Pass from Guest Services which allowed us to skip the queues, and there are noise-reducing headphones ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## FAMILY HOLIDAYS | ORLANDO



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jamie meets a dolphin at Discovery Cove, rides Manta with his family at SeaWorld Orlando and poses with Cookie Monster



available to limit outside stimulation.

But it was the staff that really made it. Autism is a hidden disability, so generally people can't see it until they start interacting with you. All staff at the certified parks are trained to help visitors with autism, and they just seemed to know what to do. We went into a shop and Jamie was getting a bit flustered, but they were so patient and understanding.

We stayed at Doubletree by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld, which is within walking distance of SeaWorld. There were shuttle buses to Discovery Cove and Aquatica, but as Jamie doesn't like having other people too close to him, we hired a car and drove to make things a bit easier.

It was a lovely hotel and I'd definitely recommend it to any families heading here. The rooms had everything you needed and were a good size, and we got warm cookies every day, which was a nice touch!

### THE HIGHLIGHTS

Discovery Cove was amazing. They cap the entrance at 1,300 people so it's not crowded – Jamie was so chilled there. There's a Quiet Space for guests wanting some downtime, but we were lucky enough to have a private cabana, which I'd recommend as it was somewhere private to go when Jamie needed a bit of peace.

He absolutely loved the dolphin swim, but the highlight for all of us was SeaVenture, where you're given a helmet and dive under the water surrounded by

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schools of colourful fish – it was phenomenal.

Another standout was the Sesame Street parade at SeaWorld, and Storytime, where Big Bird and other Sesame Street characters told their stories on stage. It featured Julia, the autistic character introduced to the show in 2017, and that was quite moving. Jamie met her afterwards and you could just see that he felt understood.

Our favourite ride was Manta, a rollercoaster that has you facing the ground as you spin and fly around. It was terrifying and I still can't believe I actually did it! Jamie also loved Mako, which whizzes you round at speeds of over 70mph, and Kraken. He didn't seem to get scared – his face just lit up.

Aquatica was lots of fun too. The water attractions might not suit everyone, but Jamie really enjoyed them, and the sensory guides helped us know what to expect. We also went to Busch Gardens, which was very peaceful. It's not autism-certified yet, so it doesn't have quiet rooms, but being around the animals was calming anyway.

Jamie was more relaxed on this trip than any before and I think that was just because he felt accepted and understood. That was truly special for us. **TW**

### TRAVEL TIPS

- ✿ Research the airport. Gatwick has a special-assistance programme with a sensory room, separate security queue and lanyard system recognised by the staff.
- ✿ Arrange pre-boarding so families can avoid the rush and get settled in, and bring snacks and entertainment to keep kids occupied on the flight.
- ✿ Send clients a link to the sensory guides for the parks and talk them through it. Preparation is everything.
- ✿ Choose the right time of year. Avoid the height of summer, when the parks can get busy and hot.
- ✿ Avoid hotels that are overly stimulating – go for something calmer, or choose a self-catered villa or apartment.

### THE FACTS

**Certification:** SeaWorld, Aquatica and Discovery Cove were all designated Certified Autism Centers by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards this year. Busch Gardens is aiming to follow suit soon.  
[seaworldparks.co.uk](http://seaworldparks.co.uk)

**Book it:** Do Something Different offers a Discovery Cove Ultimate Package from £216, including a one-day reservation at Discovery Cove (with 30-minute dolphin swim experience, meals, snacks and beverages) plus 14 days' unlimited entry to SeaWorld, Aquatica and Busch Gardens, and free parking.  
[dosomethingdifferent.com](http://dosomethingdifferent.com)