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Horsing Around at Walt Disney World

by Barbara Nefer Lesniak

If you're one of the millions of people heading to Walt Disney World in Florida this year, you probably don't equate "Disney" with "horses." Sure, there are prancing, painted steeds on Cinderella's Golden Carousel, and you may even notice a flesh-and-blood equine pulling a trolley on Main Street in the Magic Kingdom. What most visitors don't realize is that the laid-back draft horse doing his job in the midst of the chaos is just one of nearly 100 horses that live and work on Disney property.

Most people think of "Disney World" as the four theme parks (Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney-MGM Studios, and Animal Kingdom), but the Walt Disney World Resort actually encompasses 40 square miles. There are hotels, water parks, shopping areas, nightclubs, golf courses, a campground, and wetlands. While the most visible equines are the implacable draft horses pulling the trolleys on

to take a break from endless lines and commando-style theme park touring.

Fort Wilderness is home to the Tri-Circle-D Ranch, where most of the horses are housed. The main barn, located near Pioneer Hall in the Settlement area, is open to visitors until 9 p.m. every evening. You can walk through the front part of the stable and meet many of the hooved Cast Members. If you see their human counterparts, be sure to say hello and introduce yourself as a fellow equine enthusiast. Beatty says that the Cast Members at the ranch are always happy to engage in "horse talk" with like-minded guests.

If your timing is right, you might even see one of the horses getting a new set of shoes. There are two farriers on staff, plus one who comes in from the outside, and a veterinarian who visits weekly. If necessary, the horses are also treated by the vets who work at the Animal Kingdom theme park.

Near the barn, you can find Cinderella's white ponies greeting delighted young visitors. Children can pet them and can even go for a ride on the magical miniature steeds.

The ponies are also used for weddings where they pull Cinderella's royal coach, and the draft horses travel to the Port Orleans Riverside hotel to provide carriage rides. Carriage and hayrides also take place daily on the grounds of Fort Wilderness.

photos courtesy of Walt Disney World

have reached their new home.

They are quarantined for 30 days after their arrival and are also evaluated during that period. They are slowly but surely exposed to guests, traffic, and other elements of daily life by being pastured next to a road and stabled in a barn with frequent visitors.

For the trail horses, which typically come from other ranches, there is no big transition period because the work is not much different than what they have done before. Once they are used to the new, and potentially busier, environment, they can begin their career at the riding stable.

For the draft horses, they will steadily work their way up by pulling carriages and hay wagons in the less-intense atmosphere of the campground and at the Port Orleans Riverside hotel. Beatty says that once they are "solid" in those environments, they can be integrated into the ultimate job: pulling a trolley on Main Street in the Magic Kingdom.

Beatty explains that the ideal is a place where the horse is a beloved pet, ridden once in a while but mainly kept as a pampered pasture ornament. He added that the adoption program is so popular and successful that there is no problem finding suitable homes for the equine retirees.





Main Street or the steady steeds making guest appearances in various parades, you can also find horses in many of the lesser-traveled areas.

According to Mark Beatty, Curator at Tri-Circle-D Ranch, there are horses at many areas beyond the Magic Kingdom. They also perform duties in the Fort Wilderness campground, at the Port Orleans Riverside hotel, and even at the wedding pavilion.

"We usually have between 90 and 100 horses here at any given time," Beatty says. The horses range from draft breeds such as Percherons, Belgians, Clydesdales, and even Gypsy Vanners, to the tiny white ponies that pull Cinderella's coach. There is also a trail riding operation where you can find virtually any popular breed, from Quarter Horse to Arab.

The highest concentration of equines can be found at the Fort Wilderness Campground. There, you can escape the crowds and chaos by taking a trail ride through shady, tranquil forests. As you saunter through the woods, you'll easily forget that the Magic Kingdom is just down the road and across the lake. It's the perfect getaway for a horse lover who needs

Some of the horses even travel on tour, pulling an antique calliope originally purchased by Walt Disney himself. They have appeared in parades and at marketing events throughout the United States, including New York and Chicago. They are always accompanied by a VIP (Very Important Passenger) who sits near the driver: Mickey Mouse himself! The team typically makes 12 to 15 appearances a year. Their busiest times are in November and December because they are a popular attraction in holiday parades.

A model of the calliope, photographs, awards, and other information about the parade horses can be found in the museum at the Tri-Circle-D Ranch barn.

According to Beatty, the horses at Disney World are full-fledged Cast Members, working alongside their human counterparts four days a week, eight hours a day. Understandably, a very close bond develops between the two-legged and four-legged partners. "The Cast Members get very attached to the horses they work with regularly," Beatty notes. "Because the horses work four days and the humans work five days, they have to work with a different horse one day a week. On those days, they miss their favorites!"

Beatty says that many of the horses are purchased in Amish country, traveling nearly 1400 miles from Iowa to Florida. Because horses at Disney World are exposed to everything from motorized vehicles to excited children to balloons, banners, and marching bands, they go through a rigorous desensitization process once they

"We start them out in a stall in the Car Barn (at the Magic Kingdom)," he explained. "It's a test of patience for them, and it also exposes them to the crowds and music." Once a horse has adjusted to the bustling atmosphere, it learns to pull the trolley before the theme park opens and after it closes for the night. The horses practice during parade rehearsals, with all the attendant noise and activity, to prepare them for eventually being "on stage."

Beatty said that about 80 percent of the horses purchased by Disney World make it through the process to become full-fledged, reliable equine Cast Members.

A typical workday for the draft horses begins at 7 a.m., when they are prepared and transported from the barn at Fort Wilderness to the Magic Kingdom. They are thoroughly bathed and groomed, and then they are harnessed to the trolley to begin the core part of their job: transporting delighted guests down Main Street in old-fashioned style. They will work until 3:30 p.m., with four days on and three days of rest each week.

According to Beatty, a horse's career at the Disney World Resort typically spans from five to seven years. Their retirement plan is a good one: an adoption program that places them in carefully screened private homes where they will be pampered for the rest of their lives.

"There are businesses such as carriage companies that would love to get our horses because they are used to everything," he says. "But we want them to go to places where they won't have continuous work."

The main draw to Disney World will always be the thrilling rides and dazzling shows at the theme parks. But horse lovers who need a little downtime can discover a hidden, peaceful world far from crush of the crowds. If you need a horse "fix," head over to Fort Wilderness and meet the equine Cast Members. Sign up for a hayride or take a horseback jaunt through the serene forest. Not only will you enjoy yourself, but you'll also experience a side of the Walt Disney World resort that most guests don't even realize is there.

Note: If you are interested in booking a trail ride, carriage ride, or hay ride, call 407-WDW-PLAY before your vacation. For same-day reservations, call 407-824-2832. Weddings at the Disney World Resort, which can include Cinderella's coach, can be booked through Fairy Tale Weddings. Call 407-828-340 for details.

