

Florida 2011 – Trip Diary – Part 3

Tuesday January 18 – We began the day at Sizzler's breakfast buffet, again. If you are noticing a pattern, you won't be surprised to see this in the diary for pretty much every day of the week. The prices there were great (\$3.99 per adult and kids were free!), the food wasn't bad, and it left our group full enough to sustain us until mid-afternoon, which saved us a lot of money. Today was Epcot day, and it was a great day – the sun finally came out, and the temp was in the low 70s. We rode the usual favorites, and we got to take our daughter Disney on my favorite Epcot ride Soarin' for the first time because she was finally tall enough – and she liked it! Epcot has a World Showcase which is an area set up like different countries, so we took the ferry to Germany and walked to Japan for their delicious snow cones. We walked around the lake through Morocco and Italy, and stopped in Norway and Mexico for their boat rides which are very cool. Someday I would like to visit the countries in Epcot, sampling the ethnic foods as I go – but that's more of a retirement plan since the kids would never go for that now! Oh, and we ran into Stitch in America!



After the day at Epcot, we sent the little ones home with Grandma, and Hubby, Jamy and I attempted to find a good place to eat dinner, but to our surprise, there

weren't many good dinner choices left at 10pm, even in Orlando. We ended up at Perkins – famished – and they were out of most everything I asked for. I stomached the sandwich I got, which wasn't very good, and Hubby was not too happy with his salad. We did end up with a box of Eclairs to go, and those were pretty good – well, what little of them we had anyway once the kids got a hold of them. Our friend Derek arrived that night while we were sleeping, so our next day would see one more joining our group...

Wednesday January 19 – Breakfast at Sizzler (did you think I was exaggerating about eating there every day?), then on to the Magic Kingdom where we spent a fun-filled day. We learned that there is an expansion planned and under construction to double the size of Fantasyland, so we are looking forward to seeing that on a future visit. Splashwater Falls was undergoing maintenance (usually does in January when we go, but this is a small price to pay for ideal weather and low crowds – BEST time to visit Orlando!!), but we enjoyed the classics like Big Thunder Mountain Railroad (and little Disney liked this one, even though it is a roller coaster!), Jungle Cruise, Haunted Mansion, Pirates of the Caribbean, and Hubby's and my personal favorite that many others find to be lame, The Carousel of Progress. We skipped out on Space Mountain this time, mainly because the kids wouldn't have liked it, and we don't find that its long wait is worth it for a herky-jerky outdated roller coaster. If you are into indoor roller coasters in the dark, I've always liked the Aerosmith one at Disney's MGM, er, Hollywood Studios, although we never find that park worth the time for a visit since there isn't much there. And [King's Island](#) in Mason Ohio outside of Cincinnati has a SUPER dark coaster called Flight of Fear. But back in Orlando, the People Mover ride in the Magic Kingdom, an elevated train-type ride that goes all around Tomorrowland, treated us to a one-of-a-kind glimpse inside Space Mountain – *with the lights on!!* The People Mover travels into the Space Mountain building, but usually you can only see the glowing

streaks of the ride trains as they zip past. Because of a ride malfunction, the lights in the building were on, so we got an insider's view of all the tracks and trains which was pretty cool!! After the Magic Kingdom, Derek, Chris and I took the two oldest kids to Fun Spot to try the extreme go-karts, but it didn't go over so well. The oldest hated them, and she made me go putt-putt-putt all the way up the spiral and around the track – that was not fun; I'm more pedal-to-the-metal! But we all took a spin on the bumper cars, and that was some great old-fashioned family fun that everyone was able to enjoy.

Thursday January 20 – Breakfast at Sizzler (every day – told ya!), then on to our second day at Universal, this time with Derek, although we lost one because by now, Jamy's back pain was so bad that he had to stay in the rental house and relax all day. Thankfully it did not rain this time, and we had a wonderful day. It was a bit chilly, but we couldn't resist the urge to ride Bluto's Barges 3 (or was it 4? I can't remember) times in a row – we were drenched! Smarter ones in our group (Derek and Grandma) opted to stay out and stay dry, but those of us who got off soaked (and shivered) had a blast. It's a large round boat that's propelled down a raging river of rapids; every time it dips, the riders on that side get drenched by a wave that cascades over the wall of the boat. Then there are waterfalls and waterspouts – it's so much fun to bond with the strangers in your boat as you take turns laughing over who gets soaked and who dodges the torrents of water – whether everyone speaks English or not, there is bonding in the boat! Next it was on to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, and I think I talked about this earlier in this diary – it's amazing; that's all I need to repeat. We went on the Forbidden Journey ride again, this time with Derek, and he really liked it. Unfortunately, they decided that Sammie had shrunk an inch or two since Monday, and she no longer met the height requirement, so she had to wait in the child swap room – which is actually quite entertaining because

they have the old Harry Potter movies playing, and I had forgotten how young Harry Potter (actor Daniel Radcliffe) was when the movies began.

After Universal, we went to the McDonald's largest Playplace where the kids had a blast. Grandma stayed with them while Hubby, Derek and I went to the Titanic attraction I've always wanted to see. Unfortunately, our adventure was a bit marred when Hubby was pulled over and ticketed for U-turn in a No U-turn intersection. In our opinion, it should have been a warning – clearly we were tourists, it was an honest mistake, he didn't do it when there was oncoming traffic present so no one was in direct danger, and of the 3 people in the car, not one of us saw the (supposed) no U-turn sign. Personally, I think Orlando should treat their tourists a little more like the guests that they are, especially considering how much money the average tourist brings into their local economy. Also, they seemed to milk us for every penny – the ticket itself was very expensive, and because we were from out of town, we couldn't even show up to traffic court and contest the ticket, not to mention that when we returned home, we were bombarded with offers of traffic school via mail, which showed that they were looking for even more money by selling our info to these traffic schools so they could bombard us with ads. A frustrating episode in our otherwise super vacation, but that's enough – traffic ticket tangent over!

So back to the Titanic exhibit... I've always wanted to see it, but it's quite pricey, and we were always nervous about spending so much on trying something new that we didn't even know would be worth the cost or not. So enter Groupon – before we left, there was a Groupon for Titanic, and we got it. It kind of obligated us to fitting this in since we already had tickets, but with the money we saved on Groupon, it was worth it. And, we even made it on time, getting pulled over and all! Upon entry, each visitor gets a little card with the name and info of a Titanic passenger, and one of the rooms at the end of the tour has a wall with all the names of the passengers on it. The lights go down, and the names of

the passengers who survived stay bold while the names of those who perished are hollow, so you can see if “your” passenger made it. Mine survived, which I had guessed correctly because she had been a first class passenger. Our tour guide (portraying the famous Titanic personality “Unsinkable” Molly Brown) was very knowledgeable about all things Titanic, but our friend Derek’s passenger card stumped her – the name on his card was half-solid, half-hollowed, so we don’t know if he made it through the ill-fated voyage or not. But overall, it was a lot of fun, and a well spent hour or two. I’ve always been a Titanic buff (excluding the movie which I feel really commercialized, cheapened, and capitalized on the tragedy and the great loss of life involved – enough about that), so this museum was right up my alley. There were re-creations to see and explore (a first class cabin, the deck, which they had even chilled to provide an example of the actual temperature that night, and the grand staircase, see picture below), as well as actual artifacts recovered from the bottom of the ocean, like dishes. There was room after room of signs to read and pictures to look at, and as much as I don’t like the movie, they even had a few costumes and props from it which were interesting to see. Among my favorite parts of the exhibit: the hall of newspapers, which had newspaper editions reporting the disaster in 1912 from all over the country, complete with early 20th century advertisements and other news articles.

I also found this quite remarkable: it was an ordinary cooler, and the exploration staff autographed it and put it down at the bottom of the ocean where the Titanic now lies. I forgot how long it was there, but it’s not nearly as long as the remains of the ship have been there, and this is what the ocean pressure did to it:



Interesting as it may be, it is a sad representation of what will happen to the remains of the luxury liner itself. Scientists estimate that it won't last more than 50 additional years if people don't find a way to salvage it and bring it up for study.



Hubby and I in front of the actual sized re-creation of the Titanic's Grand Staircase

After Titanic, we stopped at Dippin' Dots, but it was our only taste of the delicious ice creamish treat for this trip, and I was SO disappointed to find out they discontinued my favorite flavor of Dippin' Dots: Root Beer Float. ☐

Zoo Traveler

I really like to travel (NO FLYING THOUGH!), and we were fortunate enough to do lots of it – before we had so many little kids, of course. We still try to make a yearly trip to Florida, especially while we can still fit the entire family in one car – something that soon won't be easily accomplished as the kids grow older. At each travel destination, I have to admit that my favorite tourist attraction is always the local zoo. I made a list of all the zoos and/or wildlife parks I have visited, and I hope to add to it soon! Here is the list by state, country, or territory, followed by the city in which it's located. An asterisk following the zoo means it no longer exists. I put notes about some of the places in *italics* as sort of a guide in case you're interested in visiting one of those particular attractions and want some info straight from a tourist's mouth.

California:

Sea World San Diego

San Diego Zoo

Canada:

Bird Kingdom Niagara Falls Aviary, Niagara Falls, Ontario

Marineland, Niagara Falls, Ontario – *this place is very cool.*

You can hand-feed deer, Beluga Whales or even Orcas (Killer Whales). You can throw food down to bears who beg and do tricks. There are also a variety of amusement park rides for the whole family. Look at me petting the Orca!



Washington, DC

National Zoo

Florida:

Wooten's Wildlife Park, Florida Everglades – *a cool, family owned place where you can see animals on display; including alligators, crocodiles, and Florida panthers. You can also hold and feed baby alligators! I wonder if they still exist; their website hasn't been updated since '06!*

Sea World, Orlando

Gatorland, Orlando

Animal Kingdom, Orlando

Idaho:

Zoo Boise, Boise

Illinois:

Brookfield Zoo, Brookfield – *this is the zoo I grew up going*

to. In the 80's when I was a frequent visitor, they had many 'celebrity' animals, with interesting stories to match.

Shedd Aquarium, Chicago

Peoria Wildlife Park, Peoria

Cosley Zoo, Wheaton

Glen Oak Zoo, Peoria

Henson Robinson Zoo, Springfield

Miller Park Zoo, Bloomington – *yuck, not one of my favorite places. Their tiger exhibits consisted of teeny tiny cages, and they had a really scrawny, terrible looking tiger, at least in the late '90's when we lived in the area. Hopefully they've cleaned the place up.*

Scovill Zoo, Decatur

Indiana:

Ft Wayne Children's Zoo – *a perfectly sized zoo to visit with kids. They have a wide variety of animals and some nice exhibits. They just recently built a chair-lift type ride that will take you over the lion exhibit once it's finished – cool and scary at the same time!*

Potawatomi Zoo, South Bend

Fun Spot, Angola

Michigan:

Binder Park, Battle Creek

Minnesota:

Minneapolis Zoo, Minneapolis

Missouri:

St Louis Zoo, St. Louis

Nebraska:

Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha – *I know they've since rebuilt it, but when I visited back in 2001-2002, they had a teeny-tiny exhibit for the gorillas, which made them none too happy. I actually witnessed a huge male gorilla charge a kid and beat on the glass from his small exhibit – scary!*

Henry Doorly safari park, Omaha

Folsom Children's Zoo, Lincoln – *a very nice little zoo located in the heart of Lincoln. It's so well-laid out that you can forget you're in the middle of a capital city, and they have lots of animals in a variety of nice exhibits.*

Ohio:

African Safari Wildlife Park, Port Clinton – *I love this place! You can feed deer, elands, huge buffalo and a variety of hoofed mammals from the comfort of your own vehicle. In season, they have pig races, animals shows, and camel and pony rides for the little ones.*

Akron Zoo, Akron – *I was really impressed with the layout, exhibits, and the happiness of the animals – a very impressive little zoo!*

Cincinnati Zoo, Cincinnati

Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Cleveland

Columbus Zoo, Columbus – *a zoo no one had heard about until my favorite celebrity, Jack Hanna got ahold of it and made it a world-reknown facility. Huge zoo, and the only place to see my favorite animals, manatees in my home state of Ohio!*

**Sea World Ohio, Aurora – we actually lived in Illinois at the time we visited here, but I'm glad we got to see it before they sold it to Six Flags, who sold it to Cedar Fair. Any of the other Sea Worlds are quite a hike from IL or OH for that matter, especially for a non-flyer such as myself.*

Toledo Zoo, Toledo

Pennsylvania:

Pittsburgh Zoo – *very impressive zoo! Lots of kid-friendly playgrounds and interactive areas. The polar bear habitat looked really cool – people go through a tunnel that the bears can swim over – but we didn't see it since the bears weren't in the pool. I NEED a second look at this zoo and will definitely allow more time when I get back there!*

ZOOAMERICA North American Wildlife Park, Hershey – *We did not care for this zoo at all. We visited in the late '90's, so*

maybe they've added more to it by now. But at that time, they only had animals indigenous to North America, and let's face it, those are easy to spot in most areas of the U.S. And let's face it, the real star tourist destination in Hershey is the chocolate factory!

South Dakota:

Great Plains Zoo and Museum, Sioux Falls – I visited here with my family when I was 15. This place was amusing to us because attached to the zoo is the museum, which has many taxidermied specimens. We joked that this zoo had more dead animals than live ones!

**Marineland, Rapid City – note the asterisk, this place doesn't exist anymore, thank goodness. When we visited in the summer of '93, they had dolphins and sea lions held in such tiny cages and pools, it was sickening. I haven't been able to find much info on this place, but I'm sure they were shut down because of poor treatment of their animals. I can only hope the animals found a better home.*

Bear Country USA, Rapid City – a cool drive-thru bear habitat experience – keep those windows rolled up!!! And check out the baby bear nursery – so adorable!

Wisconsin:

Henry Vilas Zoo, Madison

**Serpent Safari, Wisconsin Dells*

GRAND TOTAL AS OF 2009:

41 animal-themed places in 2 countries, 13 states, 1 district... and counting!

Vacation Diary – Chapter Four

Wednesday, October 22 – Breakfast at Golden Corral – best omlette I've had in a long time. Then it was off to the Magic Kingdom where our group got separated. It was ironic because they make an announcement on the monorail on the way over to the Magic Kingdom about picking a meeting place in case your party gets separated, and during that announcement, I had a feeling we should probably do that. We ended up finding everyone but not at the meeting place we had designated. The Monsters Inc. show is funny as always, and my husband was chosen *again* to participate, this time playing "Sully". We skipped Space Mountain this time around because the line was long and by the time we remembered to get fast passes, we were ready to leave Tomorrowland. I also skipped one of my favorites, Peter Pan's Flight, but it was well worth it to get my husband a wheelchair so he could get off his extremely painful infected toe. Besides, the girls still got to ride it with our friend, Jamiahsh. Splash Mountain was fun, although the recent updates the ride incurred saw the song on it changed from the extremely catchy "Zippidy Doo-Dah" to something else I don't even remember. That's 0/2 for me liking the rides they've updated this trip, if you're keeping track.

And this is the second Florida trip where both my husband and I saw a strange and unidentified creature. We're not crazy, but both times we both saw the same things. This time, it was a black figure running across the road which was actually a bridge over another road. When it got to the edge of the bridge, the black shape just kept going – which means it was airborne. I didn't see it "running" really; to me it was a black oval traveling across the road – I couldn't make out any legs. My husband, who has better eyesight than I, saw something running and then flying. Either way, none of this describes any animal I'm familiar with, especially one who is

native to the United States. And since I'm on the subject, I will describe our first unidentified creature encounter. It was a few years ago on our way down to Florida, somewhere in the wilderness of Georgia in the middle of the night. I saw something sitting by the side of the road, and then it opened and flapped a LARGE pair of wings and flew a short distance upwards onto a low branch in a tree. It's wingspan was huge – a diameter of a full grown man at least, 6 feet or more. This sighting was witnessed by my husband also, and we call it "Batman". I've looked up various birds and the largest I've found is a condor, but this creature seemed even larger and its body was bigger and shaped less like a bird's body. Mysteries as yet unsolved...

Well, anyway, talking about the strange creature on Wednesday night disoriented us, and after we got out of Disney World's huge tangle of roads, we went to the Boston Lobster Feast where at least one kid stayed passed out. Because we had 3 of the 4 kids asleep by the time we got back to the condo, Chris and I decided to take our night out that had been scheduled (and cancelled due to kid neediness) for the previous two nights. We went over to the Fun Spot, a newer amusement park next to Old Town. We went on an extreme ride – check this out:



It actually was much more mild than it looks – and no, that's not us in the picture. The ride was kind of lame, really... Conversely, two of the 4 go-cart tracks at Fun Spot are wicked, simply put. And I'm not exaggerating when I say that someone might be killed on those tracks. Unfortunately, I had to witness a little girl speed out of control and hit the wall at a high rate of speed. I think she was alright; she was conscious at least, but she was very scared, and it was terrifying to witness. The one track starts by winding up a ramp, and then when you're at the top, the track drops off so

suddenly that I'm sure a cart could get some air if one was on a suicide mission and wanted to try it. So your cart picks up speed down this steep hill, and before the track even levels out, there's a hairpin turn – looks like you're driving in a bowl – followed by another downward slope. I can't believe they let kids drive the course, and I shudder to think what careless, invincible (so they think) teenage boys would do with a go-cart on that track – especially a whole pack of them driving it together. But for us adults, it was lots of fun, although I prefer something much more mild in a go-cart – the things have no padding! Another course they had there was very small but it had a lot of sharp turns, and it reminded me of a live version of Mario Kart – without the fake gift boxes and shell weapons, of course ☐

Here is a picture of crazy go-cart course – it doesn't even show the “32 degree banked bowl”, just the “shear drop”:



Crazy Busy

In the past few days, I've been able to catch up a little, but I haven't written much before today and yesterday because we have been too busy having fun!

It started last Friday when we took the kids out to the [Fun Spot](#) in Angola Indiana. We had a great time, but I think I learned a lesson about taking 3 kids out for a full day of fun in the sun while I'm trying to nurse a full-term pregnancy. It was over 80°, and we ran out of water and I got sick. I think what pushed me over the edge was trying to watch my 20-month-old as she sat at the edge of a pool while my other

children and husband went on the water slide. It's hard to explain to someone who doesn't know, but being this hugely pregnant is basically like being incapacitated – if my toddler had fallen into the water, it would have taken me way too long to get over to her. There was a lifeguard present, but still I was a nervous wreck and the stress of the situation was too much, so I picked her up and took her away from the pool. This of course made her cry, and so the exhaustion came from trying to redirect her and do something else in the heat... it was all just too much for me when all I wanted was a seat in the air conditioned arcade. And for his part, my husband only got to go down the waterslide once which also made me feel badly because he had so much fun, but I just couldn't handle our toddler any longer in the heat alone.

After the water slide fiasco, we made our way to the animal area – they have a macaw parrot and a few baby deer and some big cats. They are rescue cats; lions and tigers and a cougar, and I'm not sure where they were rescued from. I was a little disenchanted with how small the animals' enclosures were, but since they are large cats and spend roughly 20 hours a day sleeping, I think it's a good thing that they've been rescued at all and get food and shelter every day.

Then it was time for more rides, and this place is built for kids my daughters' ages! They have about 10 kiddie rides which all 3 of them could ride, and my 8-year-old still really enjoys these since she's not ready for big rides yet. Her little sister, on the other hand, cannot wait until she is a little taller and gets to ride the 4 roller coasters the Fun Spot also has. Then they have several middle-of-the-road rides for everyone, like flying boats, a scrambler, a tilt-a-whirl, and even more I'm not mentioning. Compared to the carnival that just left our town, admission into the Fun Spot is a steal – it was \$4 for me, a non-rider who just wanted to visit the zoo. Our little toddler cost only \$4, and she was able to ride about 10 rides. Our 4-year-old was \$8, and my

husband and our oldest were \$16 each. So for a grand total of \$48, it was a full day of family fun and much cheaper than the traveling carnival or even the county fair, based on what you get for your money. And I have to add that in June – too bad it's over now – but in June they had a special promotion where if you bring in a report card with A's and B's on it, the kid that earned them gets in free! So subtract \$16 from our \$48, and our day of fun was only \$32 – we were really pleased. The only problem with the place is that they are at the mercy of the weather always, and with all the rain and storms we've been getting, our day of fun was no exception and was cut short when a sudden storm moved in. But it was only an hour and a half away from closing anyway. Also, we had been about to leave as it was, and the staff handed out half-price admission coupons, so we will definitely be back when I can enjoy some of the rides myself after the baby is born. And I will be able to give hubby another few rounds on the water slide! We were so pleased with the place that we tried to go back Sunday since we wanted to take advantage of the report card promotion one more time before June was over, but alas, the weather foiled our plans and we ended up at [Crazy Pinz](#) in Fort Wayne, Indiana instead. Still a fun day, but no where near the value of Fun Spot. Crazy Pinz is an indoor entertainment place, and they have an arcade, mini-golf, bowling, and a 3-story play area for the kids. We've been there before and really liked it, but this time, everything had changed and was MUCH more expensive. But, we had 4 little kids (brought a friend along) who really thought we were doing something really fun that day, so what could we do but spend the day at Crazy Pinz regardless. I have to mention that somehow, on the way to Fun Spot on Sunday, my husband and I got to talking I guess and somehow missed the exit and overshot the place by about 20 miles. (Sorry for not using you, Mr. GPS, I thought I knew where we were going!) Then Fun Spot was closed for rain, so we had to head down to Fort Wayne, and overall we ended up spending an extra \$20-30 on gas... Kind of a big oopsie with gas prices being so high in

this day and age. It was a bad luck kind of day, but we did end up salvaging it, and overall, it was an AWESOME weekend.

Saturday we went with friends to see the movie [Wall-E](#) and then visited a friend who is recovering from heart surgery. He is doing well thankfully, and we all enjoyed our visit together – even the kids, who played with cats and bugs and other creatures found around their house in the country. We ran up to their church which was having an ice cream social and enjoyed delicious food and homeade ice cream – a dream for a pregnant lady – YUM! Wall-E was pretty good and as it turns out, the Pixar people had a brainstorming meeting years ago, and this is the last film to be made from ideas presented at that meeting. Others are [A Bug's Life](#), [Monster's Inc.](#), and [Finding Nemo](#), so needless to say, that brainstorming lunch should go down in history! I have to say I was a little taken aback by the lack of human dialogue in Wall-E. Even after seeing the previews, I wasn't prepared for it. I think this is what may have finished off my 4-year-old since she had to leave the movie theater with dad before the movie was even half over. She's been able to make it through the last 5-10 movies we've been to in a theater, so that's why I think it was the lack of dialogue in this one that did her in. It was a cute movie though, but not on par with Pixar's latest features like Monsters Inc. or especially Finding Nemo, at least in my opinion. Then again, it was SO different, mostly because it was so futuristic that I suppose it's hard to compare to the others.

So yeah, fun extended weekend, even though piles of laundry await my folding. If you're anywhere nearby, head out to Angola, Indiana and visit the Fun Spot, it's well worth it especially if you have really little ones – it totally trumps a place like Six Flags with their high admission prices and long lines.