

by **Michelle Casas Groogan**, staff writer

Here We Go

Doing Disney with a disability

Vacation planning can be a stressful process for any family. But include a child with a disability, and envisioning the potential pitfalls and worst-case scenarios can abort the vacation before it has a chance to begin.

That anxiety had long kept me from taking my kids to Walt Disney World in Florida. My 11-year-old son, Garrett, has autism.

Those who know him well might defensibly compare me to a Disney villain for waiting so long. You see, Garrett loves the world of Disney so much that he's thoroughly acquainted with every Disney character, intimately versed on every Disney film and staggeringly familiar with the lyrics of most every Disney song. But taking him to the "Happiest Place on Earth" was not the kind of happy I could wrap my arms around; it was simply terrifying. Not roller coaster terrifying (and why didn't anybody tell me that Space Mountain is completely in the dark) but worrisome in the worst way.

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder that impairs a child's ability to communicate and interact. The term spectrum refers to a wide range of symptoms and severity, so every child is different. My son's autism generates impulsivity, which means he can scamper away in the blink of an eye. For years, we avoided crowded public places for fear he would get lost.

He also has sensory-integration issues and is affected by loud noises and anything that bothers his skin. Years of therapy left me convinced that wearing some kind of park-admission band simply wasn't going to happen. My husband, Greg, and I also worried if he was capable of asking for help if he needed it. And forget about waiting patiently in lines ... can you say tantrum?

A relaxing vacation for all of us, including our 10-year-old daughter Hannah, seemed at best a long shot. But Garrett had been requesting to go to Disney World for so long. We knew that denying him the experience was no longer justifiable.

A trip to Disney World can be magical, says Houston travel blogger Haley Shivers. She and her 7-year-old son, Jackson, just returned from their seventh trip to Disney World and Disneyland. Jackson has severe autism and apraxia, which means he is nonverbal. Haley has the



INCREDIBLE TRIP Greg, Hannah, Garrett and Michelle Groogan (from left) met Mr. Incredible at Hollywood Studios, one of the Disney World theme parks in Orlando. The family made their first visit this year.

system so perfected that she has daily rides and restaurants booked weeks before she arrives. Her blog encourages folks to travel with their special-needs kids, and she touts Disney as the No. 1 destination for a special-needs first-timer. "The very first time that we went, Jackson had a balloon on Main Street and the wind was blowing, and it blew into a tree and popped. He burst into tears and was sobbing and frantic. A cast member saw this and immediately brought us over another balloon without question. The service alone removes a level of stress for me," said Haley.

To help ensure success, I traveled during the off-season – most websites agree that is January-February – and not on a weekend. My son's school, The Monarch School, was instrumental in preparing Garrett and discussed potential stressors like airport waits and security checkpoints.

Once at Disney, the meal plan saved money and, more important, time from long lines to see Disney characters, since it includes table service at restaurants where the characters come to you.

The park also offers a disability pass to families. It works much like a Fastpass, which gives access to shorter lines at rides. At Magic Kingdom, there is a Care Center near the entrance; inside is a quiet room with tables, chairs, books and a movie playing, so you can

just stop and rest a while.

Serious enthusiasts like Haley check websites that predict park attendance. She also explains on her blog how to request a "Stroller or Wheelchair" pass, which is not just for the physically disabled.

For us, little things made a big difference. Turns out, if you book at a Disney resort, the whole family gets customized "Magic Bands" and a video via email from Edna Mode, the superhero costume designer from *The Incredibles*, who simply explains the importance of wearing the band. That did the trick for my son.

There were a couple of times where we left the park to rest before returning later. There were a few uncomfortable moments when we got disapproving looks from folks waiting in line when Garrett darted to an escorted character to give a hug.

But in every picture my son's face shines with joy and pride. And I know we'll be back, as evidenced by our Disney-decorated coffee can that he continues to plop in his chore-earned quarters, one by one.

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See this story at thebuzzmagazines.com for a link to Haley Shivers' travel blog.