

See all Travel

◆ Premium

🏠 > Travel > Comment

## The secrets of the Happiest Place On Earth – 17 things I learnt working at Disney World



Want to play Mickey? You must be shorter than 5'2" CREDIT: GETTY

Follow

By **Beth Windsor**

18 JULY 2019 • 12:30PM

Working conditions at Disney theme parks are in the spotlight following criticism from Abigail Disney, an heiress to the company fortune. After meeting staff at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, she told Yahoo News she was “livid”, adding (<https://news.yahoo.com/i-was-so-livid-disney-heiress-visits-theme-park-undercover-to-see-worker-conditions-093000722.html?guccounter=1>): “Every single one of these people I talked to were saying, ‘I don’t know how I can maintain this face of joy and warmth when I have to go home and forage for food in other people’s garbage’”

The Walt Disney Company labelled the claims a “stunt” and “a gross and unfair exaggeration of the facts”, adding that employees at its parks in Orlando and Anaheim earn an average of \$19.50 an hour.

So what is working at a Disney theme park really like? And what secrets does the Magic Kingdom conceal? Beth Windsor, who worked as a “Cast Member” at Walt Disney World (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/north-america/united-states/florida/articles/Walt-Disney-World-Orlando-Florida-visitor-guide-advice-ticket-prices-and-packages/>), shares a few surprising things she learnt...

## 1. There’s a secret underground world

Ever wondered why you never see a Cast Member from Tomorrowland walking down Main Street or two Mickeys in the same place at the same time? It’s thanks to a large network of roads hidden beneath the Magic Kingdom known as ‘Utilidors’. They allow Cast Members to move around the park without being seen and also provide a place for costumed characters, such as Mickey, to take his head off in order to get a bite to eat at one of the many restaurants located down there.

## 2. Mickey is everywhere

Well, not Mickey per se, but you’ll find his silhouette (the iconic three circles) cleverly concealed around the whole resort. It’s all thanks to a group of Imagineers who were designing the second park to open at Walt Disney World, Epcot. Disney managers insisted that as Epcot was created with adults in mind it would be best if the characters weren’t a part of it. The Imagineers, however, had other ideas and started hiding Mickeys into the designs. Now they’re so popular that they have to be incorporated into every new build and project. Nobody knows exactly how many there, but more than 4,000 have been recorded by a man named Steven Barrett, known as the Hidden Mickey Guy (<http://www.hiddenmickeyguy.com/>), who’s dedicated his life to finding them.

## 3. Resorts and parks have special smells

Walt knew how important it was to create a full sensory experience when visiting Walt Disney World, so much so that he began piping scents into cinemas when Disney films were showing. This is why, for example, when you walk through Main Street in the Magic Kingdom, you’ll notice the aroma of freshly baked cookies.

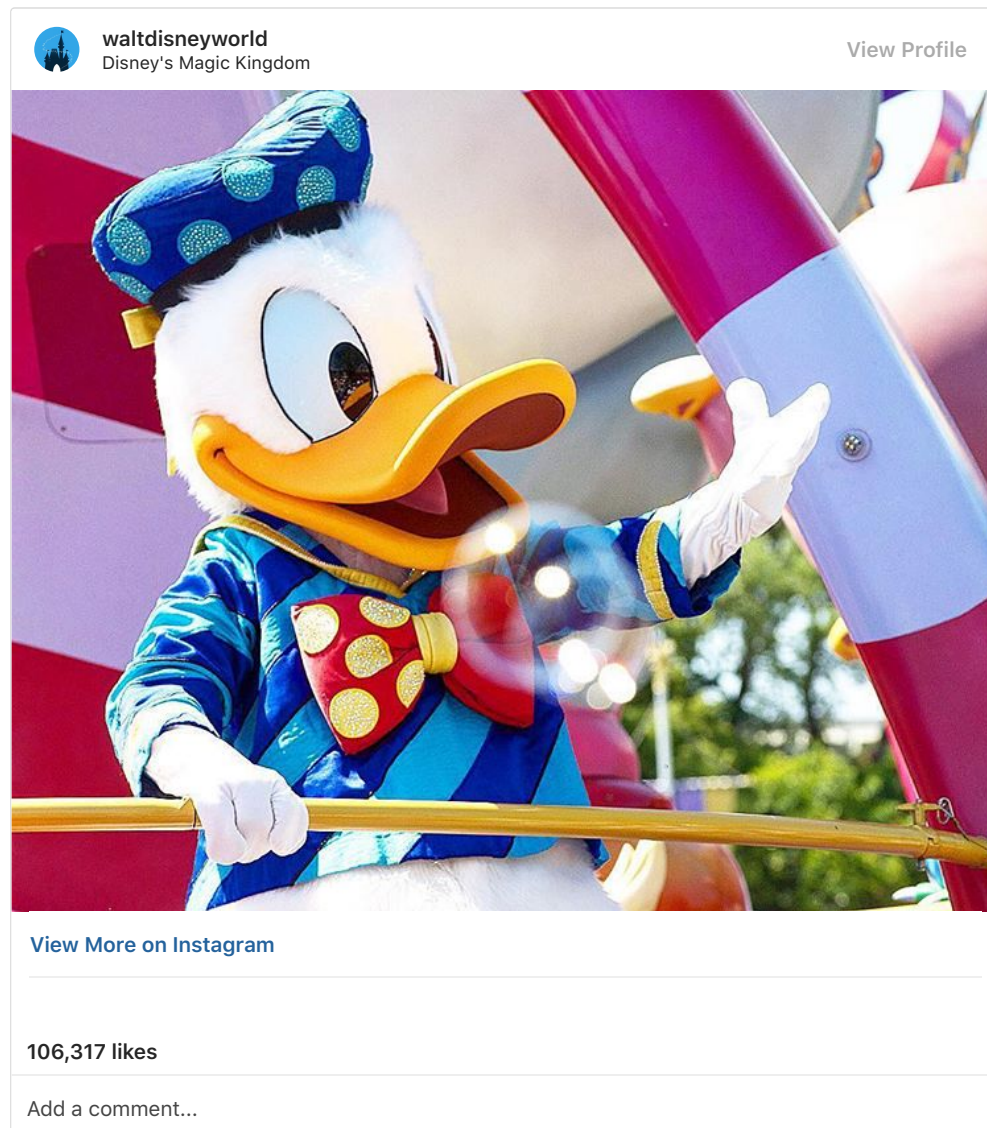
## 4. There’s a suite in Cinderella’s castle

The most coveted room in the whole of Walt Disney World has to be Cinderella’s very own boudoir. The suite is covered in gold tiles and comes complete a lavish bed, hot tub, fireplace, and even your very own magic mirror that turns into TV. Don’t try to book a stay though – it’s nearly impossible to get into as people are chosen at random or selected as part of a promotional prize. One can only dream.

## 5. There’s a secret lingo – and even a ‘Disney Point’

Cast Members are there to create magic and be part of a show, which is why they’re not referred to as ‘employees’, and visitors are always known as ‘guests’. You wear a ‘costume’, not a ‘uniform’; have a ‘role’, not a ‘job title’; and you’re never ‘at work’ but ‘onstage’ or ‘offstage’. When your role is to be a character you can never say you ‘play Donald Duck’, you have to say that you’re ‘pals with Donald Duck’ so that you don’t ruin the magic in case little ears hear you. Even when you spot

something on the floor you can't just walk over and pick it up as it has to look seamless or unnoticeable – this is known as doing 'the Disney Scoop'. Then there's the 'Disney Point' which is usually two fingers or an open palm. This is adopted by Cast Members when giving out directions so not to offend anyone who may find a one fingered point rude [some claim it is also a nod to Walt Disney's own habit of pointing with two fingers because he was usually holding a cigarette].



## 6. Being a character isn't easy

Being paid to dress up and put smiles on children's faces can be hard work. Not only do you have to wear a giant fuzzy costume in sweltering heat, but you need to go through intensive training too. This involves hours of practicing the moves and mannerisms of a character, learning how that particular character expresses certain emotions and being able to perfectly copy their autograph. This has to be uniform across all Cast Members as there's 'only one Mickey' so there can't be any noticeable differences when performing – each character even has its own way of holding a pen that Cast Members must adopt.

## 7. Mickey can't be more than 5'2"

People from all over the world apply to work for Walt Disney World and competition is tough. Disney have an extremely high standards. As well as being well presented, having an engaging personality and a desire to make people happy, there's a strict height restriction for characters. Mickey Mouse is often played by girls due to his height range lying between 4'8" and 5'2".



## 8. There's no rubbish

Well, none you can see. Walt was believed to have visited other parks during the planning stages of the Magic Kingdom in order to see how long people held onto rubbish until they dropped it. Therefore, visitors to his parks will never be more than 30 steps away from a bin. You'll also notice that there's rarely any chewing gum stuck to the sidewalks as you can't buy it on Disney property.

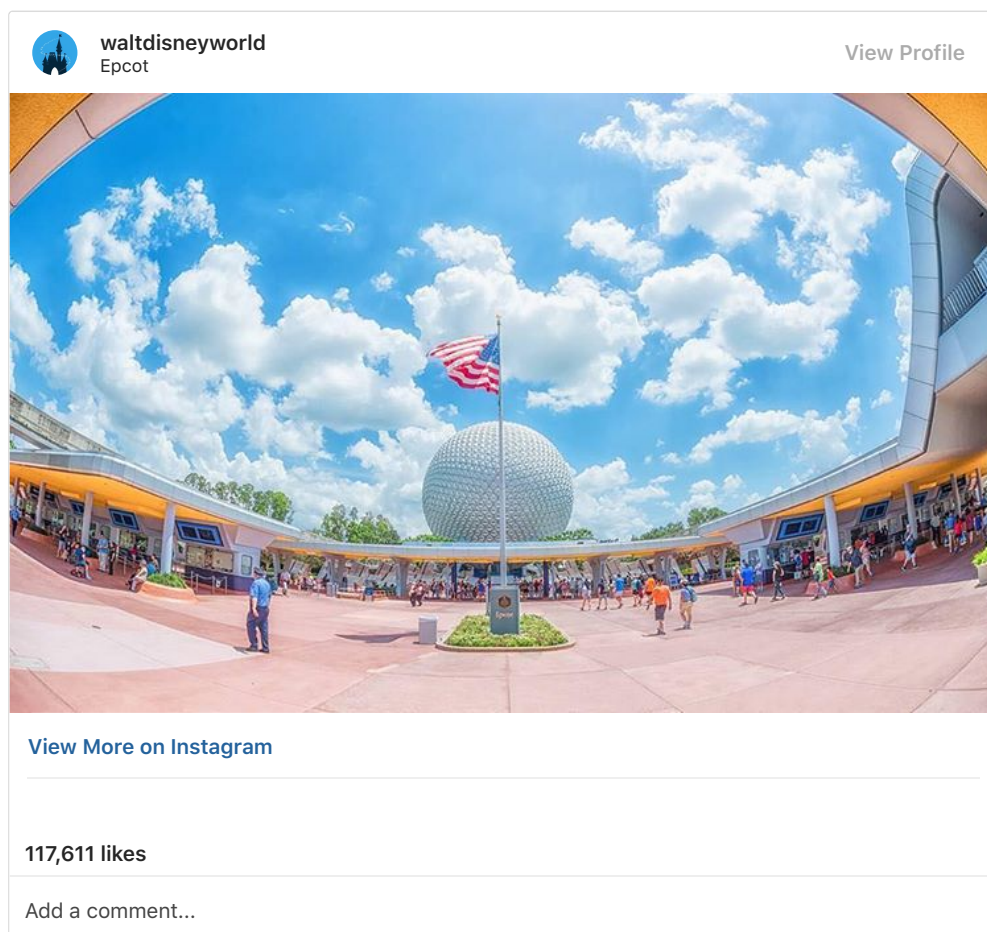
## 9. Disney is the world's largest single-site employer

Walt famously said that "you can design and create, and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a reality". Which is why there are around 70,000 Cast Members at Walt Disney World in Florida. Many are housed in Disney accommodation, just outside the parks. It has its own set of buses, recreational areas and regular house inspections.



## 10. The architecture – and the graves – tell a story

Look closely at the windows along Main Street. You may think the names you see up there are just referring to the stores. On the contrary, these serve as credits to the people who helped to bring Disney alive. Similarly, in the graveyard of the Haunted Mansion, you'll find the names of those who helped to create the well known spooky attraction.



## 11. It's as large as San Francisco

That's more than 43 square miles to be precise.

## 12. Epcot was Walt's vision of a model community

Rather than the world showcase park it is today, Epcot was originally designed to be a model community which would have homed 20,000 people. The name itself stands for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow and was to take inspiration from new ideas and new technologies that were emerging at the time. Walt intended it to showcase to the world the ever progressing ingenuity and imagination of the American enterprise. Walt's death, however, meant that his dream was never fully realised, but instead Disney created a park incorporating his idea of showcasing new technology along with that of international culture. The Moroccan pavilion is the most authentic of all the countries located in Epcot as the Moroccan monarchy insisted on sending their own people to build it.

## 13. It's the world's largest working wardrobe

With more than 1.5 million costumes, Walt Disney World is one of the largest working wardrobes in the world. Mickey alone has over 130 outfits to choose from.

## 14. It has the Presidential Seal

One would expect to see the Presidential Seal displayed in the White House, but did you know that you can also find it in



Disney's Hall of Presidents in the Magic Kingdom? It's worth paying a visit as it actually took an act of Congress to get it there.



## 15. Lost property could open a store

Every year Lost Property receive around 6,000 mobile phones and 18,000 hats. On a day-to-day basis they get handed 200 pairs of sunglasses. People have also lost engagement rings, bundles of cash, a prosthetic leg and even a glass eye.

## 16. It's all about the magic

Disney is all about creating magic and putting on a show so that everyone visiting Walt Disney World has a memorable experience. Cast Members are encouraged to go out of their way to create 'magical moments' for guests at any given opportunity, even if that involves abandoning work duties.

## 17. We get magical moments too

For your induction you're taken to 'Disney University'. There, Cast Members learn about the history of Disney, along with the 4 'keys' to guest service (safety, courtesy, show and efficiency) and are welcomed to the company by the Mickey himself.

Disney looks after its Cast Members by providing unlimited free access to the parks, discounts, team days out and pizza nights. Cast Members at Animal Kingdom get to ride around backstage on bikes, while in the parks you're required to test out the rides before opening to the public. Occasionally, when the park closes to guests, Disney will throw parties in them exclusively for Cast Members to say thank you for all their hard work.

When your employment ends, all Cast Members on a college programme are given a graduation ceremony where they're presented with a certificate and their very own mortar board, complete with ears.

---

Contact us

[About us](https://corporate.telegraph.co.uk/) (<https://corporate.telegraph.co.uk/>)

Rewards

[Archive](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/archive/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/archive/>)

[Reader Prints](http://telegraph.newsprints.co.uk/) (<http://telegraph.newsprints.co.uk/>)

Branded Content

Syndication and Commissioning

Guidelines

Privacy

Terms and Conditions

Advertising terms

[Fantasy Sport](https://fantasyfootball.telegraph.co.uk) (<https://fantasyfootball.telegraph.co.uk>)

[UK Voucher Codes](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/vouchercodes) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/vouchercodes>)

Betting Offers

Modern Slavery

© Telegraph Media Group Limited 2020