

# Travel

Epcot getting dramatic transformation. K4



A full-scale version of the Millennium Falcon is a centerpiece of Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disney's Hollywood Studios. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

## In a galaxy not too far away

Galaxy's Edge brings your Star Wars fantasy to life at Disney's Hollywood Studios

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ORLANDO — I stepped off the transport ship and came face to face with a room full of stormtroopers.

I didn't reach for my lightsaber, I reached for my iPhone, and started snapping photos nonstop. It was like I was in the middle of a movie, and I couldn't help myself.

All of Disney's new Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge is like that — an immersive, foreign land that's unlike any place you've ever been, but at the same time vaguely familiar. Listen closely, and you can almost hear the John Williams soundtrack.

I traveled to central Florida this month to check out the newest draw to Walt Disney World's vast entertainment empire. I went after the busy holiday season, hoping to avoid the crowds.

It was still crowded.

And yet despite the crowds, there were intimate moments — watching my daughter make her own lightsaber (for yes, a pricey \$200), seeing a cast member Rey trying to lure a young guest Kylo Ren away from the dark side, and being scolded by Kylo himself as I took his photo ("out of my way, traveler").

Disney World's new Star Wars land, housed at Disney's Hollywood Studios, opened in two phases last year. The first phase, open since August, includes the 14-acre space called Black Spire Outpost, a village on the planet Batuu, with numerous places to shop and eat, as well as one ride, Millennium Falcon: Smuggler's Run, in which riders get to pilot the ship made famous by Han Solo.

The land is inhabited by both the Resistance and First Order fighters, and is set roughly during the time between "Star Wars: The Last Jedi," released in 2017, and "Star Wars:

SEE GALAXY'S EDGE, K2



Patrolling the land: A stormtrooper stands guard inside Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disney's Hollywood Studios.

### If you go

**Disney's Hollywood Studios Admission:** A one-day ticket to any of the four Disney parks starts at about \$110, with discounts available for multiday passes. Information: [disneyworld.disney.go.com/admission/tickets](https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/admission/tickets)

**Hours:** To accommodate the crowds, Hollywood Studios has been opening early. The park will open at 7 a.m. at least through Sunday, Feb. 2. For up-to-date hours: [disneyworld.com/calendars/five-day](https://disneyworld.com/calendars/five-day)

### ALSO NEW AT DISNEY WORLD

## Ride the Skyliner while checking out this new resort

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ORLANDO — Disney World's new Riviera Resort is swanky and stylish, but its best feature is its location — on the new Skyliner transportation system, which operated flawlessly during my recent visit.

I expected the Skyliner to be a novelty, something to experience and enjoy once or twice. I didn't expect it to be such a terrific mode of transportation, far more enjoyable and efficient than Disney's bus system.

An aerial gondola system similar to those used at ski resorts, the Skyliner was the subject of international headlines in October, a week after it debuted, when a malfunction caused several cars to bump into each other in one

of the loading stations. No one was seriously injured, but numerous visitors were trapped in gondola cars, above ground, for hours.

The ride has had no significant problems since then.

We used the Skyliner multiple times every day, to and from the parks, and to dinner. It has four interconnecting lines, linking four Disney resorts and two parks, Epcot and Hollywood Studios. (Note: The Skyliner drops Epcot visitors off at the entrance to the World Showcase, near the France pavilion; so to take the Skyliner to the Magic Kingdom via the Monorail is tricky, because you'll have to walk all the way through Epcot.)

The gondolas seat up to 10, but most often, we had a car to ourselves, for our family of four. It doesn't operate in bad weather and the cars aren't air-conditioned, which was not a problem during our visit.

The only time we had to wait in line to ride was when we exited the parks at closing time. Even then, we waited perhaps 20 minutes — far less than we've waited for Disney buses at the end of the night.

And this is so much more fun to ride than a bus, cruising 60 feet above the ground, over busy streets, parking lots and waterways

SEE DISNEY WORLD RESORTS, K3



The new Skyliner carries guests above Walt Disney World Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. David Roark, Disney

## Galaxy's Edge

### FROM KI

The Rise of Skywalker," released last month. That explains why the Star Wars characters of my generation — Luke, Leia, Han and Darth Vader — don't get much action here.

The second phase, which opened last month, includes the land's centerpiece ride, Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance, which is among the best and most technologically advanced rides that Disney has ever created. This is where I came face to face with all those stormtroopers. The ride also includes a new, somewhat complicated queuing system to go with it.

But the rides are only part of the attraction. There's enough eye candy in the land to satisfy even casual Star Wars fans: a life-size recreation of the Millennium Falcon, a DJ droid spinning tunes at Oga's Cantina, TIE fighters, Resistance vehicles, strolling stormtroopers, Chewbacca, Rey and Kylo Ren.

Disneyland in California, meanwhile, has a nearly identical Galaxy's Edge, where Rise of the Resistance opened just one week ago.

It's the largest single-themed expansion in Disney park history, and also the most anticipated.

Here's my report from Florida's Galaxy's Edge:

### FIRST, THE RIDES

It's inaccurate to call Rise of the Resistance a ride — it's an attraction in three parts, with the third part the only true ride. The premise of the attraction is this: We're Resistance fighters who are being pursued by the First Order (it's good guys versus bad guys, if you're unfamiliar with general Star Wars parlance).

The first part is the evacuation, the second part is the capture, and the third part is the escape.

The attraction features numerous appearances of modern-day Star Wars characters: Rey, Poe, Finn and Kylo Ren, among others, sometimes in holographic form and other times as truly lifelike animatronics.

The attraction starts in a briefing room with Rey and BB8, moves to a transport ship piloted by alien Lieutenant Bek, then to the Star Destroyer, and finally to the daring escape, on eight-person ride vehicles that careen across a trackless floor, with some unexpected drops and cool special effects.

All told, the experience takes a whopping 20-30 minutes, depending on how smoothly things are running. There have been numerous technical problems in the opening weeks, causing the ride to shut down unannounced. No doubt, those issues will become less frequent, as the kinks get worked out.

In the meantime, prepare for an early-morning wakeup if you want to ride Rise of the Resistance.

For the first time, Disney World is using a virtual queue system to allocate spots on the ride. The good news: If you secure a spot in a virtual line, you wait in an actual line which is minimal, perhaps 30 minutes. The bad news: It's not so easy securing that spot.

Here's what you have to do, at least for now: Wake up super early, get to the park before it opens at 7 a.m., be inside the park by 7, and then use the Disney phone app to reserve a spot on the ride later in the day.

I did all that — woke at 5, made it to the park by 6, through security and inside the park by 6:30, and then my phone app didn't work at 7. Fortunately, I was standing near a guest service member, who snagged me a spot in line for later in the day. I finally rode the ride at about 4 p.m.

On the first day of my visit, all the spots in line were gone in about an hour (by about 8 a.m.); on the second day, they were gone in less than 10 minutes. You're given a boarding group, not a time, and you're notified on your phone when your group is called; at that point, you have two hours to get in line. Eventually, the ride will use Disney's traditional FastPass/standby line system, although it's unclear when that will happen.

No one who rode with me — not even the guy who risked missing his flight home to Australia — regretted jumping through all



A First Order show of force at Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disney's Hollywood Studios in Orlando. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

those hoops to try Rise of the Resistance. It was that good.

Smugglers Run isn't quite as much fun — then again, the lines aren't as long — but the technology here is impressive as well. Riders are seated six to a car — two pilots, two gunners and two engineers. The premise is this: You're piloting the Millennium Falcon on a smuggling mission for pirate Hondo Ohnaka, who has cut a deal with Chewbacca to use the ship. It's a motion simulator on steroids, a kind of outsized video game with obstacles to maneuver around and enemies to shoot.

I rode this ride three times, in each position (try the single-rider line to cut some of the wait time). I wasn't great at piloting, but it was definitely the most fun, offering the most to do and closest to all the action on the screen.

### FOOD, BEVERAGE AND RETAIL

Galaxy's Edge is more than the sum of its rides. You could visit the land for hours, not get on either ride and still enjoy yourself. It may cost you, though.

**Building your own lightsaber:** I discovered just a few days before our trip how extremely popular Savi's Workshop has become. People are reserving half-hour spots to build their own \$200 lightsaber months in advance.

My younger daughter, always up for a pricey, unique retail experience, was determined — and scored a canceled slot for our last day in Orlando. Participants are allowed to bring only one guest, so my older daughter and husband found something else to do.

It's no easy feat finding the place — signage throughout Black Spire is kept to a minimum, so as not to alert the enemy to illicit behavior. Making lightsabers, of course, is a dangerous and secretive job.

Trying our best at role playing, I asked a cast member where we could find scrap metal. She looked at me for a moment and asked, "Do you want to build a droid or make a lightsaber?" So much for staying in character.

She directed us to the workshop, where I handed over my credit card and my daughter made the first of many selections, choosing a theme for her lightsaber (the options:

Elemental Nature, Peace and Justice, Power and Control, and Protection and Defense, each with a unique design).

After being escorted into the workshop, the builders choose from among several options for the parts of their metal hilt. And then comes the most important selection: Choosing the color of kyber crystal, which determines the color of the blade. (Or perhaps the color will choose you.)

At the end, after some sage words from Yoda, the sabers are illuminated all at once, in a dramatic show of solidarity. "You, too, have the power to change the galaxy," master gatherer Kembe told us as we departed. And I almost believed him.

**Another interactive retail option:** build your own droid, for \$99, at the Droid Depot. Stop in to take a look around, even if you're not building.

**And one more don't-miss shop:** Dok-Ondar's Den of Antiquities, with a variety of hard-to-find artifacts, including an Imperial Tie Fighter helmet (\$450), a Yoda cane (\$23) and Princess Leia dress (\$125).

If you're not building your own lightsaber, you can find some specialty, legacy versions here: Darth Vader's (\$129.99), Obi Wan Kenobi's (\$129.99) and Luke Skywalker's (\$139.99). The transactions are presided over by Dok-Ondar, an alien animatronic who is an attraction himself.

### BLUE MILK AND MORE

For refreshments, head to Oga's Cantina, another retail outpost that doubles as an attraction. The bar serves festive, pricey drinks in a dark but lively atmosphere. On the menu here: \$15 drinks with names like the Jedi Mind Trick, the Outer Rim and something called a Fuzzy Tauntaun that makes your lips tingle.

While you're here, enjoy the music of DJ R3X, the music-spinning droid; stick around long enough and you're bound to hear the Cantina Song.

Reservations for the cantina fill up days in advance, though we got in a stand-by line in the afternoon and were admitted within 20 minutes.

### OTHER OPTIONS FOR FOOD AND DRINK

► Docking Bay 7 Food and Cargo, the land's main restaurant, with several solid options for lunch or dinner, including Baruaan Beef Pot Roast and vegetarian Felucian Kefta and Hummus Garden Spread.

► Ronto Roasters, inside the marketplace area, with tasty pork and chicken wraps.

► The Milk Stand, serving blue and green milk, modeled after beverages consumed by Luke Skywalker, first in "Star Wars: A New Hope," and 40 years later, in "The Last Jedi."

Doubtful Luke had this choice, but Disney guests can choose their milk (which is actually a fruity, frozen, nondairy concoction) with alcohol or virgin. Both are priced — \$7.99 for the virgin, \$14 with booze — but you probably already knew that.

### ASSESSING THE LAND

Some early reviews of Galaxy's Edge were lukewarm, and perhaps it was a mistake for Disney to open the area in two phases. In an earnings call in November, Disney CEO Bob Iger reported that attendance at Disneyland, where phase one of Galaxy's Edge opened in May, was down slightly, prompting some to label the investment a flop.

Now that it's fully complete, I can't believe numbers won't pick up dramatically for this park. Combined with the new Toy Story Land that opened in 2018, Galaxy's Edge elevates Hollywood Studios to the second-best Disney park in Florida (behind Magic Kingdom, of course).

**And coming next year:** The Galactic Starcruiser, a Star Wars-themed, fully immersive hotel that is being built adjacent to Hollywood Studios. The hotel will offer a cruise-type experience, with three-day, two-night itineraries, complete with activities and themed areas, and guest rooms with space views. Included in the all-inclusive pricing — estimated to be an eye-popping \$500-\$1,000 per person per day — will be a visit to Galaxy's Edge. The cost may test the limits of even the most ardent fan's willingness to pay to play.

But you're starring in your own Star Wars story. It's crowded and it's costly and it's so cool.



Oga's Cantina, in Black Spire Outpost, serves up pricey drinks in an atmospheric venue. The watering hole is part of Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disney's Hollywood Studios.



A young Walt Disney World guest checks out a display of droids inside Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disney's Hollywood Studios.



Rey and BB8 give instructions to riders on Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance.

# Yes, you can take a lightsaber through TSA

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ORLANDO — Is a lightsaber a weapon? To Rey and Kylo Ren, of course it is. But I was more interested in the opinion of the Transportation Security Administration during my recent trip to Orlando.

Before I agreed to allow my daughter to build her own personalized, pricey lightsaber at Disney's new Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge, I wanted to make sure: Could we bring it home?

I had two primary concerns: Would TSA have any issue with these sabers, which are made of brushed metal and an LED light enclosed in plastic? You may recall that the TSA issued a warning last summer that another Galaxy's Edge souvenir, a Coke bottle designed to look like a Star Wars thermal detonator, couldn't be packed in a carry-on or a checked bag because it was a replica explosive. You may also recall that a few years ago, I was flagged by TSA for trying to take a lacrosse stick through security. So I take nothing for granted.

Even if TSA didn't have a problem with

the sabers, what about Spirit Airlines? The carrier has strict guidelines on the sizes of its carry-on and personal items. A 36-inch long lightsaber certainly didn't meet those requirements.

A quick internet search revealed that lightsaber-toting air travelers weren't having any trouble with security at Orlando International Airport or other U.S. airports, although some reported problems at facilities outside the U.S.

Indeed, when we got to the airport, I asked the agent who handled my family how many lightsabers pass through security daily, and she said too many to count. She also reported that the ban on the souvenir Coke bottles was lifted months ago (but cautioned that they must be packed in a checked bag if they're still full of liquid).

So far, so good.

At Spirit, I was worried about two things: First, the lightsaber didn't meet the size requirements of the airline's personal item. Second, each of the four of us already had

a personal item, including backpacks and purses, so this would be a second item for one of us — and only one item is allowed.

I've found that the airlines' enforcement of personal item rules is completely inconsistent — not just Spirit, but all carriers. Most of the time, they don't measure your personal item, or care if you're carrying two items. (I often travel with both a computer backpack and a purse, which I can insert into my backpack if requested.)

So we devised a plan — if the gate agent objected to my husband carrying a satchel and a lightsaber, we'd stuff the satchel into my backpack.

Even so, the lightsaber wouldn't meet the size requirements, which for Spirit measures 18 inches by 14 inches by 8 inches.

But no one said anything.

My husband boarded with two items, and we carefully placed the lightsaber under the seats in front of us for safekeeping. It made it back to Cleveland intact.

Perhaps the Force was with us?



A young Kylo Ren practices his moves at Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge in Orlando. Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer



Disney World's new Riviera Resort, as seen from the restaurant Topolino's Terrace. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

Below, the new Skyliner travels above the Caribbean Beach Resort, one of four Disney World hotels connected via the gondola system.

## Disney World resorts

FROM K1

(including the headwaters of the Everglades, according to the narration, which looked like a drainage ditch outside Hollywood Studios to me).

The resorts connected via Skyliner are the Art of Animation and Pop Century, both value (least expensive) hotels; Caribbean Beach, a moderate-priced resort; and the new Riviera Resort, which opened in December.

The Riviera is part of the Disney Vacation Club, Disney's version of a timeshare program. But you don't have to be a member of the vacation club to stay here.

The resort, with 300 rooms, is small by Disney standards. Its theming is understated by Disney standards, too.

The resort is themed after the Riviera in France and Italy, and celebrates Walt and Lillian Disney's love of travel, as well as their art collection. Disney-themed art decorates the hotel, in rooms and hallways and public spaces (the hotel has organized an art scavenger hunt, fun for kids and adults).

Among its features:

- The upscale restaurant, Topolino's Terrace, on the 10th floor, with an outdoor patio offering views of Epcot's nighttime fireworks show. Topolino's (Italian for Mickey Mouse) serves French and Italian-inspired cuisine for dinner, and offers

a character breakfast in the morning, featuring painter Mickey, writer Minnie, dancer Daisy and sculptor Donald. Other restaurants here include Primo Piatto, for quick-service fare; Le Petit Café, with coffee and dessert, plus wine and cocktails; and Bar Kiva, by the pool.

- Two swimming pools, a bocce court, nightly marshmallow roasting, outdoor movies, painting classes and more.

► A variety of room configurations, from studios to three-bedroom villas, many with full kitchens and washer/dryer units. Nightly rates range from \$350 for the studio to \$2,400 for the three-bedroom villa. (To save money on this and other vacation club properties, consider renting DVC points from an owner; here's a primer on the process: [theopintsguy.com/guide/renting-disney-vacation-club-points](http://theopintsguy.com/guide/renting-disney-vacation-club-points))

But its best feature, in my view, is its location on the Skyliner, a 10-minute ride to and from Epcot and Hollywood Studios. My next Disney vacation will absolutely include a hotel with easy access to the Skyliner.

*Note: You don't need to stay at a Disney resort property, or even pay for park admission, to use the Skyliner. You can use it to get from Epcot to Hollywood Studios, and vice versa, or to check out dining options at any of the resorts along the way. For information: [tinyurl.com/disneyskyliner](http://tinyurl.com/disneyskyliner)*



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