

DISNEY AFTER DARK

Walt Disney World, never one for subtle displays, turns up the “wow” even more when you have kids old enough to stay awake past dinner. There are parades, dance parties, and Fourth of July–worthy fireworks every night. Plus, big kids will get to experience some of their favorite rides in a whole new light.

“In some ways, the parks after dark are better than the parks during the day,” says Jason Cochran, author of *Frommer’s EasyGuide to Disney World, Universal and Orlando*. “It’s cooler, many of the longest lines have died down, and there’s tons of extra entertainment piled on.” Added bonus: With ticket prices hovering around \$100 a day, if you stick around for nighttime activities, you can stretch your budget. So choose a park from our list, and get ready to say so long to bedtime. (Hey, it’s a *vacation* after all.)

BY MELISSA KLURMAN

The nightly fireworks above Cinderella’s castle are the largest in Disney World.

MAGIC KINGDOM

After preschoolers get tucked in for the night, crowds tend to wind down at this classic park.

EAT

Start with dinner at the over-the-top **Be Our Guest** eatery. At night, it transforms from a counter-service to a sit-down restaurant, and it has dining rooms that look *just like* those in the Beast’s castle. (Make a reservation online up to six months in advance.) You’ll also want to save room for the park’s only-after-dark treat: Light Up Cotton Candy, available at stands throughout the Magic Kingdom. Sweet!

RIDE

Once everyone has digested the meal, don’t miss a ride through the Haunted Mansion: “Just standing in line for it after dusk makes it a whole new experience,” says Davina Chojnowski, a Massachusetts mom of two. “It’s extra creepy, especially as you walk through the cemetery and hear the ghoulish howls as you enter the ride.” Or catch the Seven Dwarfs Mine Train, where little princesses can get a jaw-dropping view of Cinderella’s castle all lit up!

WATCH

The new **Happily Ever After** show uses Technicolor animated images to transform Cinderella’s castle into a swirling journey through more than 25 classic Disney movies. Set to a soaring score, the 18-minute show pits classic villains against beloved heroes and princesses. Scenes out of everything from *Aladdin* to *Zootopia* melt, float, and twirl around the castle. At the climax, Maleficent engulfs the castle in green flames and *Toy Story* characters re-create it entirely out of toys. This leads into the park’s well-known but must-see **Once Upon a Time** extravaganza. The largest pyrotechnic show at a place that prides itself on over-the-top productions fills the sky with multicolored fireworks set to popular Disney songs. Then you can finish the night with the **Electrical Water Pageant**, a parade of light-festooned boats that float through the Seven Seas Lagoon and Bay Lake. (Check the park’s daily schedule online for exact times.)

ANIMAL KINGDOM

Until recently, Animal Kingdom shut its doors as soon as the dinner bell rang, making it a big payout for a single-day ticket that basically expired at 6 P.M. But with the spring 2017 unveiling of Pandora, the World of Avatar, and new extended safari hours, AK is now *the* place to be at night.

EAT

Pandora's counter-service **Satu'li Canteen** offers space-age food such as steamed "pods" (bao buns stuffed with cheeseburger meat or vegetable curry) and cool views of the glowing, floating mountains from the outdoor patio seating. Parents also won't want to miss the drinks that glow in the dark (from a magical Unadelta Seed) at the Pongu Pongu stand.

RIDE

With the sun down, the Pandora section of the park completely transforms; bioluminescence makes the ground glow with every footstep, trees light up as you touch their trunks, and the kids shine too, with the help of black lights if they're dressed in white or pale colors. Both of the area's new rides run at night: The **Na'vi River Journey** is a boat ride filled with six-footed animals, accompanied by melodious tunes from the Shaman of Songs; for bigger thrills, the **Avatar Flight of Passage** flies you over the moon on the back of a mythical Banshee.

All ages will also enjoy an evening **Kilimanjaro Safari**. Animal-spotting takes on added drama as you ride through the savanna at night, when you can witness the nocturnal habits of the reserve's many animals, including wild dogs, lions, and hyenas. And big kids will want to charge down the thrilling **Expedition Everest** coaster with a dark sky up above.

WATCH

Animal Kingdom starts rolling out special entertainment as soon as 5 P.M. hits, like the **Harambe Wildlife Parti**, a festival of street performers. Then head over toward the park entrance to see the **Tree of Life Awakenings**, where the 145-foot baobob-tree replica becomes a wildlife theater as projected animals seem to emerge from the twisted trunk and branches and leap out into the sky. In the **Rivers of Light** show, larger-than-life floating origami animals, elegant junk boats, and mist-spraying lotus flowers combine in a spectacle that feels like a Broadway show. Watch as images grow and glow from the mist (a trick of high-tech lasers you won't see anywhere else). Keep an eye on the Asian puppetry and costumed actors on the shores too.



Pandora's The Na'vi River Journey is dark but not too scary.

RESORT FUN

Plan to get an evening bite at one of Disney's deluxe resorts and you'll have access to after-dark entertainment—no park tickets or additional fees required. A few of our favorites:

ANIMAL KINGDOM LODGE

Visit the African-themed resort for stories around the fire, live drumming performances, and viewing wild animals on the savanna.

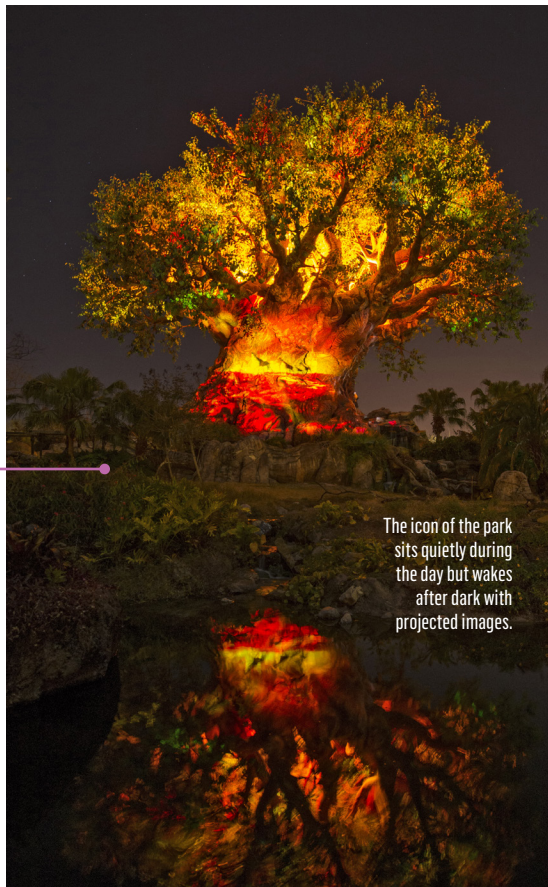
FORT WILDERNESS RESORT & CAMPGROUND

A night of fun in the cool woods includes a campfire sing-along with Chip 'n' Dale, make-your-own s'mores (bring your own ingredients or buy a kit there), and a Disney movie under the stars.



POLYNESIAN VILLAGE RESORT

The sandy beach is the perfect setting for watching the Electrical Water Pageant and the Magic Kingdom fireworks. Plus, for a special sipping treat, you can buy a cult favorite, the pineapple Dole Whip, from a take-out window.



The icon of the park sits quietly during the day but wakes after dark with projected images.

HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS

This movie-themed park is currently a bit sleepy during the day as it gets ready to unveil two new areas in the next two years: Toy Story Land with kids’ rides later this year, and galactic-themed Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge in 2019. But there’s been a surge in nighttime experiences with lasers and fireworks—and without the spillover daytime crowds, you can usually score a good viewing point.

EAT

Sci-Fi Dine-In Theater Restaurant, which has booths shaped like classic cars, really gives you a '50s drive-in-movie feel when you go at night. And don't miss its glowing drinks, such as the Buzz Lightyear Punch for kids.

RIDE

For kids who love a good scare, we dare them to take the plunge into the darkness on an evening trip to The Twilight Zone **Tower of Terror**. “Winding your way through the grounds of the Hollywood Tower Hotel at night is enough to make your hair stand on end! The ride is always terrifying but takes on another dimension—pun intended—at night,” says *Undercover Tourist*’s Ian Ford.

WATCH

From a galaxy far, far away comes **Star Wars: A Galactic Spectacular**. The show, which is projected onto the outside of Grauman's Chinese Theatre and other buildings, combines special effects, lasers, and video to take you to the twin suns of Tatooine, a field of battle droids, the trench of the Death Star, and more. Or head to the Hollywood Hills Amphitheater to see **Fantasmic!**—the live-action show combines water, lights, and lasers as Sorcerer's Apprentice Mickey Mouse tries to control his magic, all while battling evil villains. (Spoiler alert: He wins. The reward? More fireworks!)



Above: Elsa and Anna take center stage at Fantasmic!
Below: Grauman's Chinese Theatre is taken over by Star Wars: A Galactic Spectacular.



DISNEY SPRINGS

At Disney Springs (formerly Downtown Disney), the nighttime scene offers a plethora of food and entertainment fun for families, not to mention free admission. There's a ton of live music, such as at the Raglan Road Irish Pub and Restaurant, where kids can take to the stage to learn Irish step dancing with a live band. At Exposition Park, families can chow down on affordable bites from colorful food trucks, watch street performers, and listen to DJs spin familiar tunes. And upscale bowling fun at Splitsville attracts active families who fill up on sliders, pizza, and nachos while trying to throw a strike.

EPCOT

We'll admit it, a lot of Epcot at night is really for parents: The glittering Eiffel Tower in the France Pavilion and cocktails under the stars as you walk around the World Showcase add some grown-up romance to a family vacation. But kids will also love nibbling their way around 11 countries, stopping for gelato in Italy, watching performers in China, and following the twinkling pathways in Future World to reach the illuminated dancing fountain.

EAT

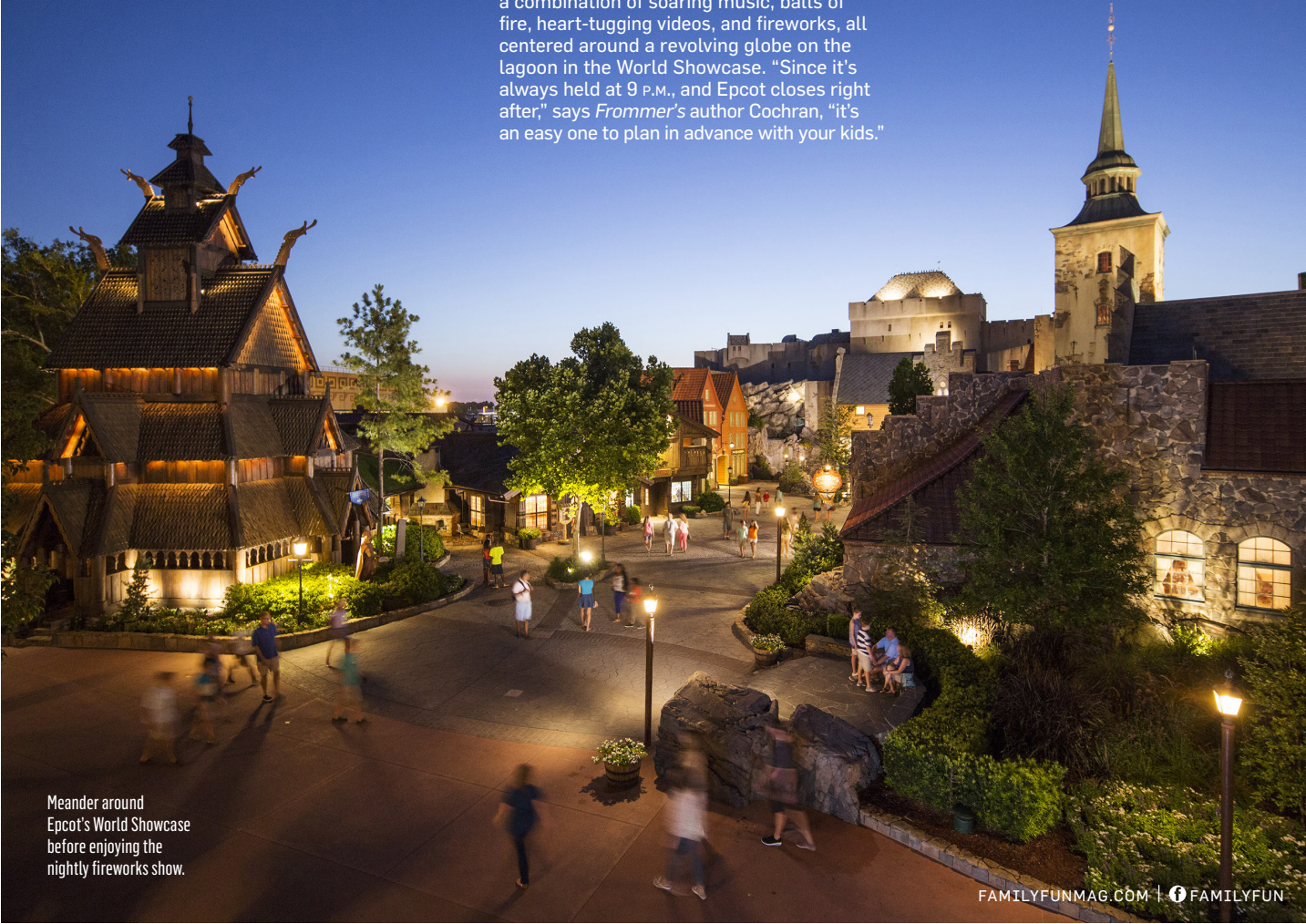
The glass-enclosed **Chefs de France** brasserie has Eiffel Tower views and is great for evening people-watching while you slurp up gooey French onion soup.

RIDE

Shooting across **Test Track** in the dark makes it feel even faster, and entering the shimmering **Spaceship Earth** at night to ride into the interior stars is an added thrill.

WATCH

In the courtyard at the China Pavilion, the circus-like troupe of **Jeweled Dragon Acrobats** tumble and fly through the air in hourly performances from 4:30 to 8:30. But the real highlight of an evening at Epcot is **ILLUMINATIONS: Reflections of Earth**, a combination of soaring music, balls of fire, heart-tugging videos, and fireworks, all centered around a revolving globe on the lagoon in the World Showcase. “Since it's always held at 9 P.M., and Epcot closes right after,” says *Frommer's* author Cochran, “it's an easy one to plan in advance with your kids.”



Meander around Epcot's World Showcase before enjoying the nightly fireworks show.