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SPECIAL EDITION

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- Walt Disney



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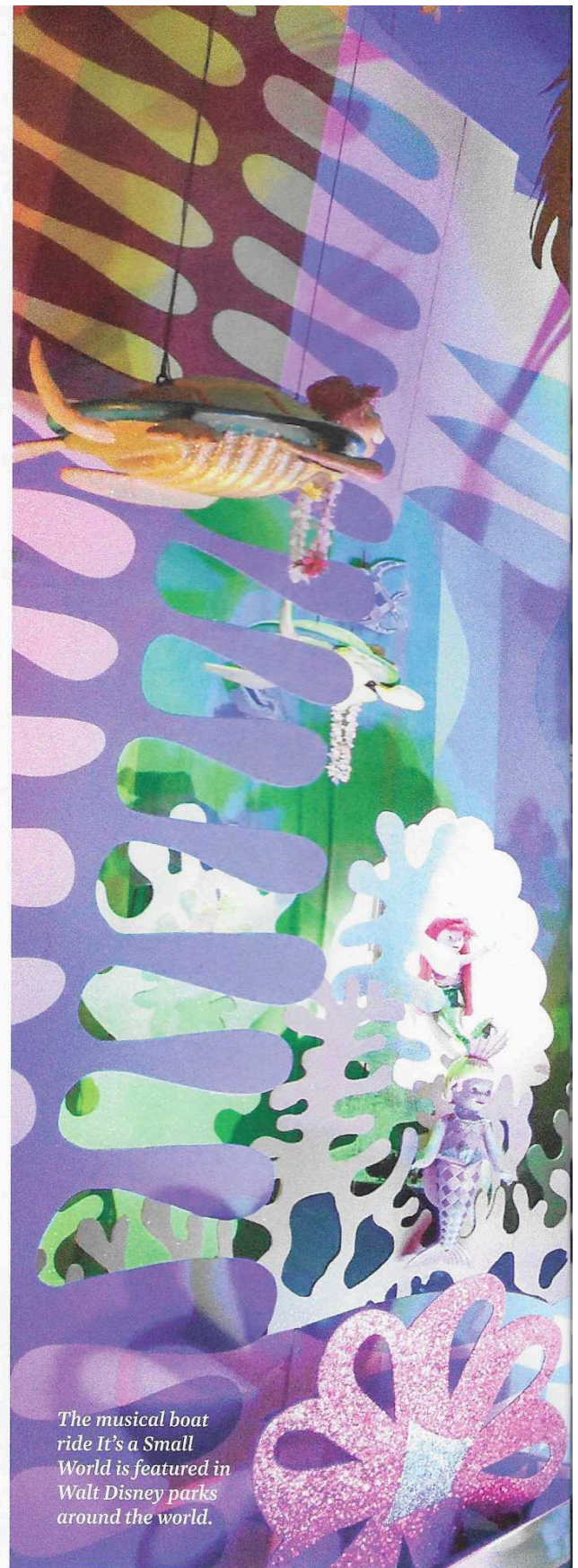
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The musical boat ride *It's a Small World* is featured in Walt Disney parks around the world.



# What I Learned Running 20 Disney Races

*Through 20 races, 10 weekends, 5 years, 3 Walt Disney World Resorts and 2 countries, one runner learned that the magic of running Disney races is all in the journey*

BY KARLA BRUNING

**Confession: My dog's name is** Cinderella. The love for all things Disney started young, as my parents brought my sister and me to Walt Disney World every year as children. My dad is from central Florida near the theme park, and my mom was Tinker Bell for Halloween when she was a little girl—three years in a row—so you could say that Disney is kind of in our blood.

My two favorite things—Disney and running—get a chance to perfectly collide at the brand's famous runDisney events. In the past five years, I've finished 20 Disney-sponsored races over the course of 10 weekends at three Walt Disney amusement parks and resorts in two countries. In 2016 alone, I ran at least one race at each of the three Disney resorts that host running events: Disneyland in California, Walt Disney World in Florida and Disneyland Paris in France.

I went into my first Disney-sponsored race as a competitive runner out to score my fastest half-marathon. But over my race career (one marathon, nine half-marathons, three 10Ks, four 5Ks and three kids' races alongside my niece and nephew), I've learned that when it comes to running Disney races, Ralph Waldo Emerson was right: "To finish

the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom."

Here's how I've learned to enjoy the "greatest number of good hours" during every step of a Disney-race road.

## Dress the Part

I showed up to the Disney Wine & Dine Half Marathon at Walt Disney World, my first Disney race, in my running team's singlet and black shorts. I instantly regretted it. The costumed runners looked like they were having so much more fun, and that's because they were.

I never made that mistake again. I've now run in sparkle skirts, tutus and harem pants, dressing up as an endless stream of Disney characters: Cinderella, Jasmine, Belle, Lady, Megara, Esmeralda and others. Cheers for your "character" from spectators, Disney cast members and other runners make the experience more magical. Just be sure to build your look from runner-friendly materials and gear.

## Plan for All Weather

As with any race, weather—and particularly being caught in bad weather without the proper gear—can make or break your

performance. So when picking that perfect costume, don't just go for a furry, full-body Chewbacca onesie and matching hat in the Florida humidity. That was my husband's mistake at the Star Wars Half Marathon at Walt Disney World. Yep, he looked great as my co-pilot—I was Rey from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*—and he got lots of cheers: "That's commitment!" and "You must be hot!" But I'm pretty sure we need to burn that suit, it was so sweaty.

The opposite kind of running weather can be a nightmare too. My sister and I faced 32-degree temps at the 2015 Disney Princess 5K while dressed as the wicked stepsisters from *Cinderella*... in tank tops and skirts.

## Run for Fun

Plenty of people will tell you that Disney isn't the place to really "race." You'll want to stop for photos with characters lining the course. You'll want to pause for pics in front of Cinderella's or Sleeping Beauty's castle. In short, you'll want to slow down and enjoy the experience.

Disney-held races are the perfect environment for a change of pace to forget about personal records or the competition. Think of Disney races as the running equivalent of Neverland: be a kid and have fun. Give yourself over to the experience.

## Or You Can Go for Glory

I've also completely ignored the previous lesson and gave it my all in Disney-sponsored races and still had a great time. At the 2012 Disney Princess Half Marathon, I ran a new half-marathon personal best while dressed as Cinderella. At the 2016 Tinker Bell Half Marathon, I ran my second-fastest half-marathon ever while dressed as Meg from *Hercules*. Every Disney half-marathon course is relatively flat, so if you're lucky with cool, clear weather, you can certainly kick up your speed.

The best part? I thoroughly





enjoyed each race. The characters, entertainment, spectators and spirit of the other runners around you help carry you through to the finish line.

### Run First, Then Tour

I've learned this one the hard way. In fact, it's a mistake I made at all three of my Disney half-marathons in 2016. Hoofing 30 miles on foot in the four days before a half-marathon? Yep, that's exactly what I did before the inaugural Disneyland Paris Half Marathon that year. The Eiffel Tower! Sacré-Cœur! Running along the Seine! I was a tourist fool. Come race day, my legs were toast.

And at one Tinker Bell Half Marathon, I clocked 18 miles roaming around the theme park—12 of them the day before the race. Oof, bad idea, especially considering I

came "this" close to that personal record, only to end up dry heaving eight times in the last three miles.

Moral of the story: if you can, build your trip so that you race first and play in the parks later. It's really easy to rack up unforeseen mileage.

### Keep Pace with Friends

I run plenty of races by myself, but Disney parks help foster a "more the merrier" vibe, which is the perfect chance to get your family and friends to toe the line. I accompanied my mom through her very first race at the 2014 Walt Disney World 5K. Two years later, I paced her through her first 6.2-miler (at 70 years old!) at the Tinker Bell 10K over Mother's Day weekend. I've also

been on the other side of that duo with my speedy husband leading the charge or merely keeping me company.

And a fleet of fairies—friends I met a few years before at, you guessed it, a different runDisney race—helped me through the Tinker Bell Half Marathon. Strike up a convo, continue it over social media, and you'll see friendly faces the next time you arrive at a Disney-sponsored race.

### Bring (or Borrow) Kids

Watching kids race gives me all the feels. In 2012, I signed up my niece and nephew (then 3 and 5 years old) for a Disney kids race for the first time. They talked about it for the rest of the year and hung their medals in their bedrooms. It's been a family tradition ever since.

They've each asked me to run

with them at a few of the events, so I've had the joy of personally running the 200 meters, 400 meters and mile run by their sides. I don't usually like being left in the dust at the finish line. But when my 9-year-old nephew takes off because he can see the finish line, it puts a huge smile on my face.

### Go the Distance

There are more than 35 running events and 10 racing challenges over the course of nine weekends in runDisney's annual calendar. But there's only one 26.2-miler: the Walt Disney World Marathon. It's a truly magical way to challenge yourself, as I learned in 2013 when I ran the 20th-anniversary race. It's still one of my favorite races, and I've completed eight marathons.

The course takes runners through all four theme parks at Walt Disney World Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Animal Kingdom, and Hollywood Studios—plus the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex and other resort areas. Simply put, the race is a must for any marathoner. It's a great course and race for running your first marathon too. More than 50% of the runners are first-timers. It was also the first marathon in the world where women outnumbered men. Women make up 44% of marathon runners nationally, but at the Walt Disney World Marathon, females reign, with 52% of all finishers.

### Make It Magical

My husband proposed during the after-party for the Disney Wine & Dine Half Marathon. Five years later, we ran the Disneyland Paris Half Marathon together as a burgeoning family—I was pregnant with our daughter. My extended family—mom, sister, aunt, uncle and more, living in four different states—have turned runDisney events into family reunions. For us, Disney has been the place to get together, have fun, celebrate each other and, oh yeah, run. □