

## Theme parks in 2021: What's open, what's not and how the experience has changed

(courtesy of Juliana Shallcross – The Point Guy)

Thinking about visiting a theme park this summer? The good news is, compared to last year, your choices for rides and amusements are plentiful. But not every park is operating exactly like it was before the pandemic. Masks, physical distancing and capacity limits have drastically altered the theme park experience.

**Here's what you need to know before purchasing your ticket.**

### Walt Disney World

[Walt Disney World](#) and its core theme parks — Magic Kingdom, Epcot, [Disney's Hollywood Studios](#) and Disney's Animal Kingdom — are fully open, as is the [Blizzard Beach Water Park](#). (Typhoon Lagoon, however, remains closed.)

The biggest change in the Disney experience actually happens when purchasing tickets. That's because not only do you need to buy a ticket, but you need to [book a reservation for a specific day through the Disney Park Pass system](#). And yes, a reservation is required for each day of a multiday ticket. This is all part of Disney's plan to keep tabs on capacity requirements.

Since last July, the parks have been operating under new health and safety protocols that include required temperature screenings at the park gates, masks on everyone over the age of 2 and physical distancing. Reservations for dining are encouraged, although not necessarily needed for some spots, and guests are advised to use a cashless/contactless form of payment.

A few attractions, such as the Magic Kingdom's Hall of Presidents, are closed for refurbishment. But other than that, almost all rides are up and running. Sadly, FastPass+, which allows you to schedule the time of your ride and therefore skip waiting in line, remains suspended.

Parades and larger live shows, however, are for the most part temporarily unavailable, although Disney has announced it will bring back the "Festival of the Lion King" show to Animal Kingdom next month.

Character greetings have changed, too. While guests previously could wait in line for photo ops with their favorite pal or princess, they now have to wave to them from a distance at certain parts of the parks. Having your photo taken by Disney's PhotoPass photographers is available, and in a new development, you can now [remove your mask to smile for the shot](#).

As Disney World prepares for its big [50th anniversary celebration](#) in October (and for the hotly anticipated opening of Remy's Ratatouille Adventure ride at Epcot), it's expected that more parts of the park experience will become available. Indeed, Disney is already touting the return

of the Extra Magic Hour for those who stay in its hotels. This feature has been suspended since reopening but should return in October, although instead of an hour it will be cut down to 30 minutes of early theme park access.

In the meantime, the best way to keep up with the changes is to follow [Disney's official Experience Updates site](#) and download the [My Disney Experience app](#).

## Disneyland

After a long 13 months of closure, Disneyland and Disney's California Adventure will finally reopen on April 30. As with Disney World, the ticket process for Disneyland now requires guests to buy a ticket, then book a reservation for the day they want to visit. (Here's [how to make a Disneyland reservation](#).) But unlike Disney World, this park is only open to California residents (for now, anyway). Disneyland also did away with its annual passholder program so former passholders will have to buy tickets like everyone else. No word yet on if annual passes will return at a future date.

Similar safety protocols to Disney World will be followed here, including temperature screenings at the gates, masks on everyone over the age of 2 and physical distancing. Capacity limits will be much stricter (at 25%) than Disney World given Disneyland's smaller space and California's cautiousness on resuming theme park operations.

Several of Disneyland's classic rides, including Snow White's Enchanted Wish, Haunted Mansion and the King Arthur Carousel, underwent refurbishments during the closure. Most rides will be up and running as normal, although the Matterhorn Bobsleds, the Jungle Cruise and Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters will be closed for updates.

Almost all of the rides at Disney's California Adventure will be open, except for Grizzly River Run, which is closed for refurbishment. The [Avengers Campus](#), devoted to Marvel superheroes like Spider-Man, Black Panther and Captain America, is set to open on June 4.

MaxPass and FastPass, along with Extra Magic Hour access for both parks, will be suspended.

Parades, live shows and nighttime fireworks will not be open and character meet and greets will be done from a distance. Photo ops will be available for guests but there's no word yet on whether you can remove your mask to do so.

Dining options will be limited at first but many table service restaurants will be open (reservations strongly recommended). For quick-service options, mobile ordering through the Disneyland app will be the primary way to get food. The app is also useful for tickets, reservations, maps, wait times and more.

Aside from the parks, [Downtown Disney](#), which had been open in limited capacity over the last year, will give guests more options for dining and shopping, and it doesn't require a theme park ticket or reservation.

Regarding hotels, only [Disney's Grand Californian Hotel & Spa](#) will be open to overnight guests when the parks reopen on April 30. The [Disneyland Hotel](#) and [Disney's Paradise Pier Hotel](#) will reopen at a later date, not yet determined.

## Universal Studios Florida

Having been reopened for almost a year, [Universal Studios Florida](#), Universal's Islands of Adventure, [The Wizarding World of Harry Potter](#) and [Universal's Volcano Bay](#) in Orlando are fully operational, just with limited capacity and health and safety protocols throughout. One note: The mask age limit is 3. Unlike the Disney parks, reservations are not needed, only a ticket. However, the park will close the entrances if capacity is reached.

Most rides are open, but a few interactive ones like Fear Factor Live, Poseidon's Fury, Storm Force Accelerator, Jurassic Park Discovery Center and Fievel's Playland are closed.

The Universal Express Pass, which allows you to skip the line at most rides, is available for purchase. Guests staying at the Hard Rock Hotel, Loews Portofino Bay Hotel and Loews Royal Pacific Resort will also have access to the Express Pass benefit. Early park admission is available too for Universal hotel guests and passholders.

But guests can minimize their wait times through Universal's Virtual Line feature on the theme park's official mobile app. That will allow them to select a time to go on a specific ride. Availability and selection will change daily so you'll need to constantly check the app to see what's offered. The app is also where you can do mobile ordering for to-go food and drinks at several spots within the parks.

Parades still aren't running and character encounters continue to be done at a distance. However, Universal has allowed some indoor theater shows to resume. And this summer, Universal plans to open a new roller coaster, the Jurassic World VelociCoaster, on June 10 at the park's Islands of Adventure.

## Universal Studios Hollywood

Universal Studios Hollywood recently reopened on April 16 and due to California health regulations, the capacity limit is set at 25%. Temperature screenings and mask mandates for visitors over the age of 2 are in place. Guests will need to buy their ticket online before entering the park and a reservation is also required. Passholders are able to use their passes; however, the park is only open to California residents at this time.

The rides are more limited here compared to Orlando, with a few major ones like the Simpsons Ride, DreamWorks Theatre Featuring Kung Fu Panda and Despicable Me Minion Mayhem closed. That should change as the park approaches summer and eases into reopening.

One new ride that is open is The Secret Life of Pets: Off the Leash, which actually employs a virtual queue instead of a physical line. The Jurassic World ride, which was updated in 2019, also received a new dinosaur fight addition. Also worth a peek? Spying on the construction for the upcoming Super Nintendo World at the park.

Wait times for rides have been long in the first week of opening but Universal is offering an Express ticket which allows one-time express access to each ride, attraction or show. The WaterWorld show is open, as is the World-Famous Studio Tour, but the popular Special Effects Show is closed. Parades have been discontinued and character encounters are done from a distance.

Many of the restaurants both inside the park and outside at Universal CityWalk are open. While the app does provide digital menus to look at, guests still have to order in person as mobile ordering is not available.

## SeaWorld

SeaWorld Orlando reopened last summer and now requires both a ticket and a reservation to enter its parks. Masks for everyone over the age of 2, social distancing, limited capacity and strict cleaning protocols are in place.

Most rides, shows and animal experiences are open (except the Dolphin Days show.) The same goes for the dining options and stores, although a few stores have weekends-only hours.

SeaWorld San Antonio is open in pretty much the same fashion, although the park is closed on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

SeaWorld San Diego recently reopened to California residents with a 25% capacity limit. Some of its rides are still offline but check before you go to see what's open. SeaWorld does post

what rides and experiences are open and which aren't on their website, so if you've ever in doubt, head there.

## Legoland

Since reopening last June, Legoland Florida incorporates the ticket and reservations process into one step, allowing guests to purchase date-specific tickets. Once inside the park, health and safety protocols abound (I love the cutesy but informative graphics about these on the Legoland site.) Kids under 8 are not required to wear masks, although it is encouraged.

Most rides and the waterpark are open as are the dining outlets and stores. Shows are also open and a few characters meet and greets as well. It's best to check the daily schedule to see when those happen.

In California, Legoland reopened on April 15, although priority is being given to Legoland Hotel guests, active passholders and existing day ticket holders. All visitors will need a ticket and an advance reservation to enter the park. Everyone over the age of 2 will need to wear a mask. In addition to the usual health protocols, the rides, Lego Chima waterpark, Sea Life aquarium and the Legoland hotels are all operating at limited capacity.

One important thing to note about both Legolands is that they are completely cashless, so have your credit cards ready.

Legoland New York is still set to open in 2021, although a specific opening date has not been announced.

## Knott's Berry Farm

One of the last theme parks to open in California will be Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park on May 21. **Actually, the park will be open for its season passholders starting on May 6 before opening to the general public. Tickets for opening will be available on April 26.**

The theme park will be celebrating its 100th anniversary all summer long with new park decor, themed food items and new attractions. The park will also host nightly celebrations centered around the park's iconic illuminated K-tower (atop the Sky Cabin ride.)

Full health and safety protocols haven't been released but they will follow the ones found at Disneyland and Universal Studios Hollywood, meaning at least temperature screening, masks and social distancing.

## **Busch Gardens**

The Busch Gardens theme parks in Tampa and Williamsburg, Virginia, are both open. Most tickets are date-specific, meaning you don't need to make a reservation after purchasing. Since the parks are a part of the SeaWorld company, the same commitment to health and safety of visitors, and animals, is in place.

A few rides and attractions are closed, particularly the ones where it was too difficult to implement physical distancing. However, in Tampa, live indoor theater shows will return on May 28, including the ice skating show, "Turn It Up!" Capacity limits and masks will still be required, although there is no eating or drinking allowed inside. In Williamsburg, shows are limited to outdoor performances.

## **What to expect when visiting a theme park in 2021**

There are two important tips to remember when visiting a theme park these days.

The first is to do as much planning as you possibly can before your visit. This means downloading the park's app, buying your tickets, making your reservations, double-checking which rides are open and mapping out what you must absolutely hit up and what you could skip.

The other tip is to be flexible. That sort of contradicts the first tip, but the reality of theme parks these days is that things can close unexpectedly because of capacity limits or because more time is needed to complete cleanings. So understand that not everything will be open during your visit. But hopefully, with all your preplanning, you'll have a perfect backup plan.

### **Some other things to keep in mind:**

Check to see what masks are acceptable and what masks are not. For example, gaiters are not allowed at Disney parks and face shields are not allowed on rides at Universal.

Bring backup masks in case yours gets wet or sweaty.

Don't bring a lot of stuff with you as locker space at the parks is also limited because of capacity.

Go cashless as many parks are encouraging contactless payments. That means downloading the required apps before entering the park.

And, since you'll be relying on in-park apps, be sure your phone is totally charged and carry the charger with you for a midday refill.