

Theme Parks a Walk in the Park for Guide Dogs

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By Guiding Eyes

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by Guiding Eyes graduate Deni Elliott

Theme parks and guide dogs might not seem like a compatible match. But, if you are a guide dog user within a few hours of Orlando, as I am, or within a half-day's drive of any amusement park, some visitor is sure to make such a place an essential destination.

I have been happily surprised by the guide-dog-friendliness of two Orlando-based theme parks: *Walt Disney World's Epcot Center* and *Universal Studio's Island of Adventure*. My guide dogs made the visits more fun and certainly less stressful for me than if I had opted for my cane. Visiting a well-managed, ADA-aware amusement park with a guide dog can be, literally, a walk in the park.



Epcot Center provides 300 acres of eye candy for a socialized and intelligent guide. Spinning rides, topiary, fountains and crowds of excited children to work by. Bigger-than-life Disney characters roam the park. The loose-limbed Goofy stopping by to say hi made all of my guides wag and smile at the goofy human dressed up as a dog.

Even better are the dog-accessible rides. *Ellen's Energy Adventure* is a 45-minute multi-media production with a detailed audio description for people to hear and dinosaurs for dogs to see. Whole sections of seating turn during this slow-moving ride so no one is startled by sudden movement.

Spaceship Earth is the iconic 180-foot tall globe that dominates the Epcot vista. And, it is a 15-minute slow, well-described, ride. A roller-coaster-style train winds its way up the inside of the globe and then back down on a historical tour of communication. Guests-with-dog seating is in the front, which provides a canine-clear view of life-like robotics, including some robotic dogs and provides the best sensory experience – smells and sounds – for the visually-limited guest.

What dog doesn't love a boat ride? *Living with the Land* is a 15-minute ride through a series of canals with an in-depth audio description of the plants that one flows by, along with an introduction to hydroponic food production. The boat's front platform is large enough to accommodate wheelchairs and dogs in harness. Once again, our guide dogs guarantee the best seats in the house.

If Epcot is my favorite park because of the rides that my guide dogs have enjoyed, Universal's *Island of Adventure* is my favorite for how the park accommodated Guiding Eyes Alberta when she could not ride along. Guide dog users know what it is like to wait out in the sun with the dog while others enjoy amusement park rides. Not at Universal.



I was asked to check in with guest services when we arrived at the park, and then asked if my party had planned out our day. We had. *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter*, moving on to *Jurassic Park*, and then to *Looney Tunes*. While not committed to that schedule, I was told that the pre-planning helped Attraction Attendants prepare for our arrival.

Curious, we started our tour. Alberta was fascinated by robotics and other magical effects at the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, wagging her tail at passing ghosts and cocking her head in wonder as she observed the talking portrait gallery. Alas, no talking dogs.

As we wound our way through the castle past crowds in the normal cue, seemingly alone in the disability/VIP lane, and heard the roller coaster sounds that meant that we were near the start of the high-speed no-dogs-allowed *Forbidden Journey* ride, I became concerned. What was I supposed to do with Alberta? Where could I wait so that I didn't lose my friends?

Just as I looked around for help, an Attraction Attendant led me to the large dog crate that had been constructed moments before and set up in an alcove to keep Alberta safe while humans enjoyed the ride. “I don’t want other people bothering her,” I said, a little dubious of the arrangement. “No problem,” said the perky young woman, “I’ll be standing guard in front of the crate for the full 7 minutes of your ride.”

And so it was throughout our exploration of the exhibits on the *Island of Adventure*. Any ride not suitable for a service dog had helpful attendants setting up a collapsed crate upon our arrival and standing guard with Alberta in a protected area while I went on the rides. And *Universal* had clearly marked Service Dog Relief areas where I could give Alberta some time off harness and away from the crowds.

Theme parks will never match the real world adventures that I have with Guiding Eyes Alberta, but it is comforting to know that service dogs are truly welcomed in these ultimate environments of imagination.

