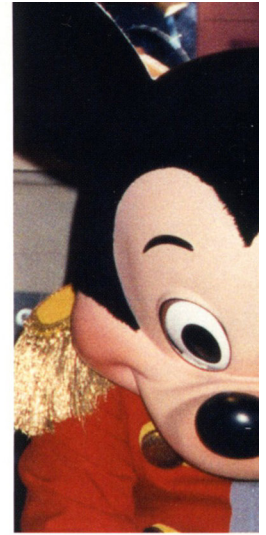


Long Live

A sophisticated
traveler's love letter to
the Magic Kingdom

BY MARIA ARENA BELL



I have had my share of magical moments around the world. I have slept on a futon in a Tatami room on a rainy night in Kyoto. In Greece, I discovered that I could get better cell reception on an island inhabited only by goats than I do on San Vicente Boulevard in Santa Monica. I have obsessed over my favorite lobster pasta in Paris (Le Duc's) and where to find the world's most perfect pizza (Positano). But the most magical moments I've ever had were at, of all places, the Magic Kingdom.

Last year, as I pulled into the hotel where I would spend spring break with my two kids, I had a sudden flash of clarity. In that moment, I accepted that I was incredibly uncool. My friends and relatives were off in glamorous locales—Aspen, St. Barts, Maui. My own husband was bidding me adieu for business in Paris. And there I was in Anaheim, headed to a land where the best dessert is a churro and wine is simply nonexistent. Was it my hundredth, possibly thousandth visit? Who can say? It was a journey through time, 10,000 Leagues into the center of my childhood universe. The mother ship. Disneyland.

I'm from Orange County, and I'm not afraid to admit it. Los Angeles is home now, but I wear my O.C. heritage like a badge of honor. And Disneyland is the Orange Countiest of all. It's not just the happiest place on earth but the shiniest and newest. Growing up in the shadow of the Matterhorn, every time I glimpsed it as a kid, the white peak was proof that I lived somewhere special. Like me in my ever-present pigtails and plaid Catholic school jumper, Disneyland was squeaky clean.

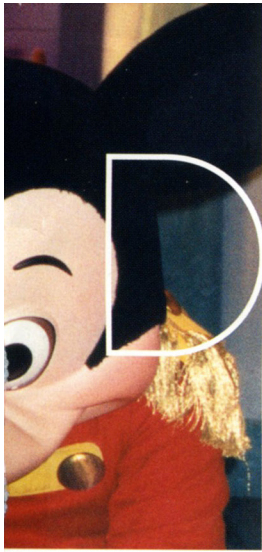
My story is not uncommon among Orange Countians. There were kids who rode the parking lot shuttle for hours on end because they wanted to feel like they were at

Disneyland but couldn't afford the admission. And there were kids like me who were lucky enough to be let loose on the place. On rainy winter Holy Days of Obligation, I'd be dropped off at the monorail station with my friends and set free. No supervision, no parents.

As the station wagons squealed away, my friends and I would burst through the front gate, past the topiary flowers and the smell of the world's best popcorn. It was all about the rides. I would be prepared, having delved into the kitchen drawer that held the leftover tickets. My family stockpiled A and B tickets, and an occasional C, but all the E tickets—the ones that let you on the best rides—were gone. And if you happened to have a precious E, there was the momentous decision of where to "spend" it. Space Mountain? The Matterhorn? General admission and fast passes have long since obliterated these dilemmas, but there was something quaint about the penance of only having A tickets and being eternally stuck on the carousel.

Of course, unleashing unsupervised kids on Disneyland would be unthinkable now—they'd call child services in an instant. But left to our own devices in those carefree days, my friends and I got to know the park better than our own neighborhood, from shortcuts and back ways to secrets of the rides that no one else noticed. As 11-year-olds, we ran amok, jumping out of the cars in Snow White; swinging the Skyway to Tomorrowland cups; trying to grab treasure in Pirates of the Caribbean. Many a time, Mr. Toad's Wild Ride would screech to a halt and the lights would come on because we'd grabbed the teapot and wouldn't let go.

As years went by, we learned that Monsanto was the legendary makeout ride for pre-teens. At 13, my friends and I would go dancing in Tomorrowland (it was the



Disneyland!

1970s, and that was the only disco we could get into!), hoping to meet guys to hold hands with on Monsanto. It was the perfect Disney fantasy for an eighth grader. Then one night, a cute boy noticed me noticing him. My first kiss was in the Haunted Mansion. I never saw him again, but a ghost followed me home.

As a too-cool teenager, Disneyland became a massive party. My prom was held at the Disneyland Hotel. Kool & The Gang played Newport Harbor High School's Grad Night in '81, and we stayed at Disneyland all night while my friends drank smuggled-in vodka. In college, I brought home a gaggle of sorority sisters from Chicago and took everyone on a whirlwind tour of the Magic Kingdom. They wanted to go see stars in Beverly Hills, but I won them over as we basked in the sun on Tom Sawyer Island.

My aunt worked at Disneyland one summer selling tuna fish sandwiches out of a boat in the lagoon, but I never wanted a job at the park; that would kill the fantasy. Later, when I wrote for television and hung out with friends in the entertainment business, everyone who worked for Disney lamented the long hours, low pay and boring corporate

retreats. "Oh yeah, that would suck," I'd think with a twinge of envy. "An all-expenses-paid week at Disney World?!"

Now, at 42, I love to introduce the uninitiated to

Disneyland. My husband and I went there on one of our first dates for a Snow White Sundae at Carnation Company on Main Street, which has since closed. He wondered why I didn't want to go to Spago like the other girls. (The knowing expert, I was happier on my turf.) My husband always says I lag behind him on the streets of New York

or London, but I run like a five-year-old from ride to ride in New Orleans Square. Ultimately, he asked me to marry him on my first ever trip to Walt Disney World. He knew that beyond all the romantic spots around the world we had already visited, Cinderella's Castle would be the perfect spot to pop the question.

My bachelorette party was at Club 33, Disneyland's private club hidden on Rue Royale. A plastic Aladdin jumped out of the cake. Now we have a family membership at the club—the only place in the park that serves alcohol—and I love going for a glass of wine. One of Disneyland's virtues is the complete absence of drunken people; it doesn't

have the honky-tonk quality of other amusement parks.

My husband has reluctantly embraced my Disney obsessions. Our first dance at our

CONTINUED ON PAGE 123



FROM TOP The author, circa 1967, in front of her favorite restaurant in all of Disneyland, Carnation Company; at far left, Bell with sorority sisters at the park in 1983; Maria with her husband on one of their first dates at Disneyland.

LONG LIVE DISNEYLAND!

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 79

wedding was to “When You Wish Upon A Star,” and a castle topped our cake. I decorated our first baby’s room in vintage Disney fabric collected at Disneyana Conventions. Yes, I’m a Disney geek. And I’m not alone in coming back to Anaheim, even after traveling the world. Last year on spring break at Disneyland, I called Maria Shriver to tell her about an arts initiative. “Where are you?” she asked as jangly music played in the

background. “Disneyland,” I sheepishly admitted. California’s First Lady laughed and said, “I was there yesterday.”

I am of the first generation that can’t remember a world without Disneyland. And despite the passage of time, Disneyland never gets old. While I’m there, neither do I. It’s like my personal *Picture of Dorian Gray*. One evening last spring, as my kids and I were watching *Fantasmic* for the 40th time, they were exhausted and dozing and whining. We should have gone back to the hotel room, but I couldn’t stop myself from getting

caught up in the scene and watching the expressions of everyone around me in one collective “Aaah!” At the end of the show, Mickey exclaims: “That’s some imagination, huh!” and I have to agree. On every visit, I make a salutary stop at the statue of Walt and Mickey in front of Sleeping Beauty’s Castle. After all, it’s Walt’s place. One man influenced so many more of us than even he could have imagined. I, and others like me, see the world through bright Disney-colored glasses, and there is nothing wrong with that. That’s some imagination, huh? ●
