



Orlando's

Green Side

*Think a lush theme-park zoo is as green as Orlando gets? Not a chance.
Eco-adventures abound just beyond the city's borders.*

BY RONA GINDIN PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN DEVRIES

This city's numerous theme parks capture the imaginations of millions of visitors every year. But as exciting as these parks can be, there are other, equally satisfying destinations that lie quietly outside town. These places resonate in a different way. They are an answer and an antidote to the sugar rush of amusement park rides.

Central Florida is a naturalist's haven. Woods, lakes, trails and animal encounters are just waiting to be explored. Venture to the vast untouched lands beyond the headline attractions for activities you'll rarely find in a guidebook.

Eco-Safaris

It may take a while to get to **Forever Florida's** parking lot, since a horseback rider or peacock may be blocking the road. But once inside you're in a complex that's a working ranch, an eco-park with guided tours and an adventure facility with ziplining.

Created by the Broussard family in memory of their naturalist son, Allen, who died young, Forever Florida aims to preserve Florida's fragile eco-systems and educate the public about conservation.

Guided eco-safaris run through parts of the 4,700-acre property in covered coaches. These vehicles, commonly known in Florida as swamp buggies

because of their oversized wheels, easily traverse the terrain. Your journey may reveal baby alligators or 11.5-footers, white-tailed deer or wild hogs, turtles or spiders the size of your palm. Each tour is different, but the banter is always educational. The guides are knowledgeable about the trees, the duckweed over the water and all the creatures that live among them.

And if you're interested in the ziplining but don't want to miss the nature tour? No worries—you can get a mini eco-tour en route to the zipline area. foreverflorida.com; tour packages from \$32

Deer on a trail at
Forever Florida.



IT'S EASY BEING GREEN (clockwise from above) Lake Meadow Naturals, a chicken- and duck-egg farm in Ocoee; a visitor gets a kiss from a camel at Giraffe Ranch, in Dade City; canoeing on the Wekiva River; along the Dora Canal with Premier Boat Tours; a sign welcomes diners to the Garden Gate Tea Room.



Canoeing on the Wekiva

Head north to **Wekiwa Springs State Park** for sublime canoeing and kayaking along the Wekiva River (both the park and the river, spelled differently, are pronounced *wuh-KIVE-uh*). That locals gather here en masse on weekends is testimony to its appeal as a respite from Orlando's bustling scene.

If the term *Old Florida* is appropriate anywhere, this is the spot. One can picture Timucuan or Creeks lounging by the water beneath the oak trees in what is now a wonderland of 7,800 acres, or traversing the 15-mile water trail by canoe.

After paying the six-dollar state-park entrance fee, drive to the very last parking lot. Past the playground and the shaded picnic tables with barbecue grills is a short trail that leads straight to the river. There you can rent a boat and lose sight of civilization for a couple of hours. 1800 Wekiwa Circle, Apopka; canoewekiva.com; 407-884-4311; rentals from \$18

Into the Wild at the Disney Wilderness Preserve

Disney generously donated land to the Nature Conservancy to create the **Disney Wilderness Preserve** and paid for the site's restoration. Far off a side road south of its namesake theme park, this 11,500-acre site is essentially a wilderness trail through former ranchland that has been returned to its natural state. It has two hiking options, of one and 2.5 miles, respectively. Both trails are wide, flat and well marked.

Birds abound here. You may hear them calling *Woo hoo! Woo hoo hoo hoo!* from high in the trees while you stroll past pines and saw palmetto. Experienced birders may spot red-cockaded woodpeckers, wood storks and sandhill cranes. On land, animals such as Sherman's fox squirrels and gopher tortoises make their homes amid the swampy confines.

Be sure to spend a few minutes at the

picnic tables overlooking Lake Russell, where cypress trees (and their "knees") form an otherworldly landscape.

2700 Scrub Jay Trail, Kissimmee; 407-935-0002; nature.org; free

Visit an Egg Farm

As you close in on the chicken and duck farm known as **Lake Meadow Naturals**, on busy Highway 429, you may doubt there could be an eco-spot within even 10 miles. Yet mere minutes from the exit you'll enter a serene complex containing a working farm, a country store, gardens and, on Fridays and Saturdays, a spot where visitors can pick their own eggs from chickens' nests.

Children delight in the enclosed area where during hatching season they can pet the chicks. Visitors can stroll around the shaded grounds while the chickens and ducks meander through their pens and barn, clucking (or quacking) happily. All are heritage breeds—including hens that lay eggs with a greenish hue. 10000 Mark Adam Rd., Ocoee; 407-399-7670; lakemeadownaturals.com

Florida by Boat

"This is the real Florida, folks," says the **Premier Boat Tours** captain as he guides a pontoon boat across Lake Dora, part of the Harris Chain of Lakes, on the way to the Dora Canal. After crossing the lake, he steers the vessel along the narrow waterway, which is shaded by cypress trees. One of them is estimated to be 2,250 years old—dead for more than 300 yet still standing.

The Dora Canal is protected by local, state and federal agencies. Consequently, the verdant foliage is the backdrop for fauna of all kinds. You may see a great blue heron, a tricolored heron and an anhinga lounging near a baby turtle shaded by Spanish moss. On this ride you'll even glide past an alligator breeding ground. *Departure points vary*; 352-434-8040; doracanaltour.com; tours from \$17 per adult



EAT

The Tasting Room

End your West Orange Trail adventure with dinner at this dimly lit tapas restaurant that also offers Cajun and Creole dishes. *The Edgewater Hotel*, 99 W. Plant St., Winter Garden; 407-230-4837; chefstableattheedgewater.com; dinner for two, \$65*

Pearl in the Grove

This homey farm-to-table restaurant near Giraffe Ranch serves creative cuisine with global flavors, plus a family-style Sunday supper. 31936 St. Joe Rd., Dade City; 352-588-0008; pearlinthegrove.com; dinner for two, \$75

The Garden Gate Tea Room

Lace and floral fabrics abound at this sweet Mount Dora spot, which serves light lunches and afternoon tea with snacks. 142 E. Fourth Ave., Mount Dora; 352-735-2158; thegardengatetearoom.com; lunch for two, \$35

**Estimated meal prices do not include drinks, tax or tip.*



HORSING AROUND (clockwise from left) A member of the team at Rock Springs Run Trail Rides; Winter Garden's West Orange Trail; on a tour at the Giraffe Ranch, in Dade City; a two-seater for rent at West Orange Trail.



A Slice of Africa

After visiting Africa 30 times to lead safaris and participate in international zoo conferences, Lex Salisbury created the **Giraffe Ranch**—a 47-acre swath of land adjoining an 875-acre wilderness area. Hundreds of live oak trees shade the zebras and giraffes, which guests are invited to feed from the coach that takes them around the savannah.

Animals live well here, each breed penned in an expansive area with species friendly to it. Over the course of a 60- to 90-minute exploration, you'll probably encounter ostriches, Sicilian donkeys, blackbuck antelopes, llamas, axis deer, warthogs and pygmy hippos. For an extra fee you can feed two Indian rhinos, which gobble up whole apples and wedges of cabbage and pumpkin. *38650 Mickler Rd., Dade City; 813-482-3400; girafferanch.com; adults \$70*

Finding Your Path

If time is limited or you'd be satisfied with a sliver of eco, plan an outing to the **West Orange Trail**, a growing 22-mile stretch adjacent to the neighboring county's nine-mile South Lake Trail. Hop on at any point, such as the Oakland Nature Preserve or the Killarney Station, a remote outpost that has a bike and skate rental shop (bonus: bikes built for two). Then walk, jog, ride, glide or skate-board your way past pretty town centers, playgrounds, residential neighborhoods and undeveloped areas.

You'll find locals along the path whenever the weather is nice, walking their dogs or heading to Winter Garden's quaint historic district. About 55,000 people a month find their way to this scenic stretch of Florida along the West Orange Trail. *Winter Garden; orangecountyfl.net; free*

Get on Your High Horse

Located within a 14,000-acre reserve, **Rock Springs Run Trail Rides** is an operator that takes guests 6 and older through hammocks, pine forests and open meadows to spot wild turkeys, deer and bald eagles.

The facility's 21 horses are all on their second careers. Owner Debra Jamie Zito buys them once they're done with their more demanding jobs and trains them to take riders of all levels around the property. One is an American Thoroughbred that worked as a polo horse in Argentina. Another is a great-grandson of Secretariat, the legendary Triple Crown winner.

You can even camp in the reserve, by booking a spot near the stables or reserving the Indian Mound or Buffalo Tram site, both reachable only by canoe or kayak. *31700 County Rd. 433, Sorrento; 352-266-9326; rockspringsruntrailrides.com; one-hour rides, \$45 per person* 🐾



STAY

RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS
IN AND NEAR ORLANDO INCLUDE:



Sheraton Vistana Resort 0450
Orlando's theme parks and golf courses are within easy driving distance. *8800 Vistana Centre Dr., Orlando*

MEMBER REVIEWS: "We felt like we were on an island resort in the Caribbean." "Everything was at our fingertips." "The staff addressed us by name anytime we called."



Holiday Inn Club Vacations at Orange Lake Resort—West Village 0670

1,450 acres of family fun next to Walt Disney World® Resort and Disney's Animal Kingdom® Theme Park. *Rte. 192W, 8505 W. Irlo Bronson Memorial Hwy., Kissimmee*
MEMBER REVIEWS: "Beautiful, well-maintained, and easy access to the Orlando attractions!" "Lots of amenities on-site."



The Fountains 7605

This 54-acre retreat is home to a large waterpark and an on-site lake. *12400 S. International Dr., Orlando*
MEMBER REVIEWS: "It's a great resort for families!" "Close to everything, but an oasis away from the crowds." "The staff responded quickly to questions and requests."



Summer Bay Resort 3175

A spacious sanctuary with complimentary shuttle service to a range of theme parks. *17805 U.S. Hwy. 192, Clermont*
MEMBER REVIEWS: "Accommodations are excellent; pools are clean; loads of amenities for kids and adults." "Everything worked as it should, nothing was a hassle."



Wyndham Cypress Palms 3995

A conveniently located complex with two heated swimming pools, arcade games and a children's playground. *5324 Fairfield Lake Dr., Kissimmee*
MEMBER REVIEWS: "This made my list of Orlando resorts to go back to." "This resort met our needs and had all the comforts of home."



Vacation Village at Parkway 4940

2,168 guest rooms surrounded by six pools, hot tubs, barbecue grills and a fully staffed activities center. *2949 Arabian Nights Blvd., Kissimmee*
MEMBER REVIEWS: "The resort was clean, the rooms well-appointed and quiet." "The staff was excellent and very helpful with our questions concerning nearby attractions, purchasing tickets and offering specials for restaurants."



Legacy Vacation Club Orlando—Spas 8615

Suites at this centrally situated resort can sleep 10 guests. *2800 N. Poinciana Blvd., Kissimmee*
MEMBER REVIEWS: "Loved the cleanliness of rooms and activities they have going on at night and during the day." "There was more than enough space."

For complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed) and additional resort listings, visit RCI.com or call 800-338-7777 (Weeks) or 877-968-7476 (Points). Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.

NON-RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS

Lakeside Inn

A historic hotel—dating from 1883—filled with antiques. *700 Bloom St., Celebration; 888-249-4007; celebrationhotel.com; doubles from \$179 a night*

Bohemian Hotel Celebration

An upscale lakefront hotel filled with art. *700 Bloom St., Celebration; 888-249-4007; celebrationhotel.com; doubles from \$179 a night*

Hyatt Regency Orlando

A massive convention hotel with a spa and a large pool. *9801 International Dr., Orlando; 407-284-1234; orlando.regency.hyatt.com; doubles from \$289 a night*

Aloft Orlando Downtown

New urban-chic hotel. *500 S. Orange Ave., Orlando; 866-716-8143; aloftorlandodowntown.com; doubles from \$159 a night*