

The Other Orlando

Theme parks aren't all this city has to offer

BY MATT ALDERTON



When you think of Orlando, Fla., elaborate theme parks, life-size cartoon characters and sprawling suburban areas are often the first images that come to mind.

It's a town where tourism caters to the young and young-at-heart who appreciate family-friendly entertainment and wholesome attractions, right?

That's what drew Marisa Flores Gladden, a Brook-

lyn, N.Y.-based event planner and self-described "Disney nut" to Orlando, where she visits every year with her husband, Kenneth. When they began their tradition eight years ago, she was psyched. He was skeptical.

"I was thinking of things to do for his birthday, so I suggested Disney. He was so against it. He thought it was too kiddie and had zero interest," Gladden recalls. "I convinced him it would be fun, and now he loves it."

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Lake Eola

Their annual trips to Orlando were enjoyed so much, in fact, that they got married there in 2018. However, during wedding planning, they realized that some wedding guests would shy away from theme parks, so they arranged for activities not only at Disney, but also in downtown Orlando. Their ceremony, for instance, took place at the Orlando Museum of Art.

“Guests ... weren’t expecting to see the other side of Orlando at all and were surprised and delighted



by the museum,” Gladden says. “They weren’t expecting it to be so modern and contemporary. They thought all Orlando had to offer was faux castles and princess-themed venues.”

Although there’s nothing wrong with faux castles — even guests who were dubious about Disney ended up loving it, Gladden says — the “other side of Orlando” is a gift few visitors unwrap. Inside: the best good time you never expected to have.

Orlando is considered very touristy and devoid of culture in the traditional sense, Gladden explains. “I’m not denying that it’s shaped by giant amusement corporations, but in its own way, it has its own culture.”

To experience Orlando the city instead of Orlando the tourist attraction, base your stay downtown — specifically, at the arts-themed **Grand Bohemian Hotel** (grandbohemianhotel.com). It boasts a private collection of 150 works of art; a rare Imperial Grand Bösendorfer piano that shines during the famous Sunday jazz brunch at **The Boheme** (theboheme.com), the hotel’s restaurant; a relaxing spa; and a rooftop pool with panoramic city views.

Per Gladden’s suggestion, art lovers should check out the nearby **Orlando Museum of Art** (omart.org), where a sizable collection features works by famed glass artist Dale Chihuly, post-impressionist >

Orlando Museum of Art has been a staple in the region since 1924.



Orlando offers myriad dining options, wineries and breweries.

painter Louis Dewis, American artist Georgia O'Keeffe and others. Downtown also is home to an impressive potpourri of public art, which you can sample on foot in parking garages, parks and public buildings, including City Hall. **The Mennello Museum of American Art** (mennellomuseum.org) and the **Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art** (morsemuseum.org) in nearby Winter Park can also scratch your art itch. Located in Orlando's Lake Formosa neighborhood, the former is known for its outdoor sculpture garden, which features walking paths that merge with the 3-mile **Orlando Urban Trail** (orlando.gov/parking-transportation/bike-trails-and-paths). The Morse museum features the world's largest collection of Tiffany glass.

Speaking of Winter Park, its quaint downtown — which feels more European than Floridian thanks to brick streets and charming storefronts — is an ideal destination for shopping, lunching and wine tasting. Check out **The Partridge Tree Gift Shop** (thepartridgetree.com) for special sundries and souvenirs, **Prato** (prato-wp.com) for an Italian lunch and **The Wine Room** (thewineroomonline.com) for a glass of your favorite vintage. Somewhere in between, make time for the **Winter Park Scenic Boat Tour** (scenicboattours.com), an hourlong guided cruise through the Winter Park Chain of Lakes, connected to one another by a system of Venetian-style canals.

Even though it's land-locked, water is kind of a big deal in Orlando. Downtown, **Lake Eola Park** (orlando.gov/parks-the-environment/directory/lake-eola-park) features a popular farmers market, a walking path and pedal-powered swan boats. Or head to **Wekiva Island** (wekivaisland.com) on the Wekiva River in suburban Seminole County,

suggests Caroline Eubanks, author of *This Is My South: The Essential Travel Guide to the Southern States*. "Wekiva Island is a special place outside of town where you can rent a cabana for drinking and lawn games or rent a paddleboard to explore the river," says Eubanks, who visits Orlando every year from Atlanta.

The island, which charges an entry fee of just \$1, also has a restaurant, a bar, canoeing, beach volleyball and a fire pit. "Want to just relax? Adirondack chairs are lined up right along the riverfront boardwalk," says Guilherme Cunha, tourism director at Orlando North, Seminole County Tourism. "Pull up a seat and watch the world go by, and if it's a warm day, take a dip in the refreshing river."

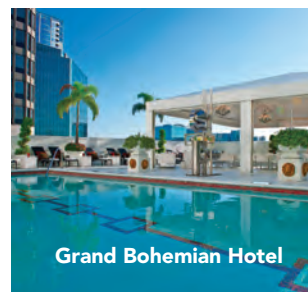
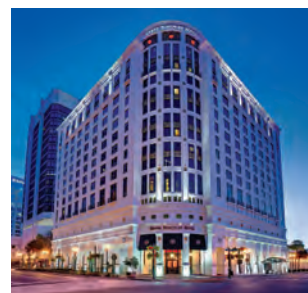
Don't leave Seminole County without beer in your belly. The county seat, Sanford, has a historic downtown with four stops on the **Central Florida Ale Trail**

(centralfloridaaletrail.com). Cunha recommends

Wop's Hops Brewing

(wopshopsbrewing.com), Sanford's first microbrewery, and Deviant Wolfe Brewing (deviantwolfebrewing.com), which is known for imaginative tastes like its Sourmanjaro, a sour ale with notes of coffee.

Because you'll need food to soak up the beer, head to Sand Lake Road — Orlando's "Restaurant Row" — on the other side of town, in Orlando's affluent Dr. Phillips suburb. Although chain offerings abound, homegrown spots include **Slate** (slateorlando.com) for wood-fired eats, **Chatham's Place** (chathamspplace.com) for farm-to-table fare and **Pharmacy** (thepharmacyorlando.com) for seasonal cuisine and handcrafted cocktails in chic speakeasy surroundings. Or if it's early enough (It closes at 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 3 p.m. on Saturdays.), eat instead at **Beefy King** (beefyking.com), a local institution that's been serving rad roast beef sandwiches in Orlando's trendy Milk District since 1968 — three years before Walt Disney World opened. It's a true taste of the "real" Orlando. ... and it's delicious. ■



Grand Bohemian Hotel