

# 1 America's Playground

Approaching Orlando—and this guide

IN 1886, A YOUNG UNMARRIED MAILMAN, FRUSTRATED WITH HIS FRUITLESS endeavors in the Midwest, moved to the woolly wilderness of Central Florida to make a better go of life. The land was no one's friend. Summers were oppressively hot, the lightning relentless, and the tough land, by turns sodden and scrubby, seemed to defy clearing. The only domestic creatures that thrived in Central Florida, it seemed, were the cattle, and even they turned out stringy and chewy. Undaunted—and in love with a girl from a neighboring farm—the young man planted a grove of citrus trees and waited for things to get better. They didn't. His trees died in a freeze and the young man was forced to return to delivering the mail to support himself. By 1890, the young man gave up. He moved, defeated, to Chicago to seek work. He was joined by his new bride, whose father had been injured clearing Florida pine and died. Back in the smoke of the Midwest, they had children and settled for what was to be an anonymous existence.

One day, 8 decades later, long after the young man and woman had lived full lives and passed away, two of their sons would return to Central Florida, that land that broke their father, and together, they would transform the recalcitrant swamp into the most famous fantasyland in the world.

The American Dream appeared to fail for Elias Disney. Little did he know it was only skipping a generation, and that his sons Walt and Roy would become synonymous with the very land that rejected him. Had he known that the Disney name would in due time define Central Florida, would he have been so despondent? Even if he could have had a fleeting vision of what was to be, and what his family would mean to this place and indeed to the United States, could he even have believed it?

The Disney brothers turned a place of toil into a realm of pleasure, a place where hard-working people can put their entertainment in reliable hands. The English have their Blackpool; Canadians have their Niagara Falls. Orlando rose to become the pre-eminent resort for the working and middle classes of America, and the breathtaking ingenuity of its inventions now inspires visitors from everywhere on Earth. While other countries segregate their holiday destinations by income or some other petty quality, Orlando, in the classic American egalitarian style, is all things to all people, from all countries and backgrounds.

This guide is written with a keen awareness that Orlando represents something even more powerful to American culture and history than merely being the fruit of a dream. It's something we all share. No matter who you are, no matter where you grew up, no matter what your politics, you probably went at least once to Walt Disney World and Orlando, and if you didn't, you desperately wanted to. What other thing in our culture can we all claim to share? What else has given children for the past two generations such sweet dreams? I've always said that if

somehow Walt Disney World went out of business tomorrow, the National Park Service would have to take it over. It means that much to us.

So don't think of the amusements of Orlando as mere moneymaking enterprises. Of course they are, and it's easy to name legitimate issues with how they're run. But Walt Disney World, and by extension Orlando, is also Americana incarnate. The taste for showmanship and fantasy that Walt Disney World crystallizes, now known as *Disneyfication*, has become the defining mind-set of modern culture, in which even local grocery stores and shopping malls are dressed up like film sets and the "story" of your local burger joint is retold on the side of its soda cups.

Orlando tells us about our own culture, and it defines who we are and who we dream of being. Virtually nothing about today's Orlando is natural or authentic, and yet there may be no more perfect embodiment of our national culture. To understand this invented landscape is to understand our civilization and our generation. And if you observe Orlando with a long view—starting with young Elias Disney cutting his hands trying to budge a tough Florida pine—you will be a part of the explosive, unexpected powers of the American Dream.

And one more thing: As you'll soon see, it's a hell of a lot of fun.

## THE SIGHTS YOU MUST SEE

Walt Disney World operates four top-drawer theme parks every day of the year: **Magic Kingdom**, the most popular theme park on Earth, is an improved iteration of the original Disneyland and the park that started it all; **Epcot** is a new-brew version of an old-style world's fair; **Disney's Animal Kingdom** blends animal habitats with theme park panache; and **Disney-MGM Studios** presents a show-heavy salute to the movies. Every bit as elaborate and cunning, Universal Orlando's two parks, **Universal Studios Florida** and **Islands of Adventure**, command great respect and get the adrenaline pumping a bit stronger. The gardens and marine mammals at **SeaWorld Orlando** serve to soothe. Those seven parks, all of which are in the top 10 most visited in the world, would take over a week to see fully, but there are still a few more. Busch Gardens Africa provides animal sightings with coaster after celebrated coaster, and three water parks combine cooling water with kinesthetic energy: **Typhoon Lagoon** for family-friendly slides, **Blizzard Beach** for more aggressive ones, and **Wet 'n Wild** for no-holds-barred thrills.

**IF YOU HAVE ONLY 1 DAY IN ORLANDO** Well, I'm sorry for you. Just as it's impossible to eat an entire box of Velveeta in one sitting, you can't get the full breadth of Orlando in a day. But there is a must-see attraction: Walt Disney World's **Magic Kingdom** (p. 102). There is enough diversion at every Orlando theme park to keep you busy from morning to midnight—it's all a matter of willpower, and at what point you can tear yourself away. Ride the great Disney Audio-Animatronic odysseys, **Pirates of the Caribbean** and **Haunted Mansion**, and "it's a small world"; and brave the drops of **Splash Mountain** and **Space Mountain**. While you're there, take a free spin on the **monorail** through the iconic **Contemporary Resort**, and then connect for the free round-trip ride to **Epcot** (p. 129) and back, where you'll see the other top Disney park from above. Stay until closing, through the **fireworks** and the **parade**, or, if you've had

enough, head to a quintessentially kitschy dinner banquet spectacle such as **Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede** (p. 87). Hope you're not hungry for subtlety!

**IF YOU HAVE ONLY 2 DAYS IN ORLANDO** Do the **Magic Kingdom** for sure, but for your second day, drop into **Epcot** and pass the morning hours seeing **Future World**, and then have lunch at one of the ethnic eateries of **World Showcase**, such as in **Morocco** or **Japan**. Hopefully, you bought an admission ticket that allows for park hopping, so you can duck into **Disney-MGM Studios** (p. 147) to try the superlative **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror**, or as long as it's before 5pm, into **Disney's Animal Kingdom** (p. 158) to sample the newly built **Expedition Everest** roller coaster.

**IF YOU HAVE 3 OR 4 DAYS IN ORLANDO** Now it's time to consider branching out beyond the Mouse. If you're here for theme parks, you should go directly to **Universal Orlando's Islands of Adventure** (p. 189), one of the most elaborate amusement parks in the world, and don't neglect some of its most celebrated rides, **The Adventures of Spider-Man**, **Incredible Hulk Coaster**, and **Popeye & Bluto's Bilge-Rat Barges**. If you have small kids or you don't like thrills, then **SeaWorld Orlando** (p. 201), with its **Shamu** show and multiple marine animal habitats, makes for a soothing change of pace. Fill in spare time by visiting the secondary Disney theme parks (Animal Kingdom and Disney-MGM) or by spending a few hours at **Universal Studios Florida** (p. 176). During the evening, spend 1 night at the shopping-and-clubs zone of **Downtown Disney** (p. 169) and another among the nightlife of Universal's **CityWalk** (p. 282), or for an experience that's a little less canned, hit a pedestrian zone such as **Old Town** (p. 225) in Kissimmee, **International Drive** north of Sand Lake Road (p. 221), or the beer halls of **Wall Street** (p. 290) downtown. You might need a fine art fix, too: The **Morse Museum's** (p. 234) dazzling collection of Tiffany glass, followed by a boat cruise past the mansions of **Winter Park** (p. 268), might be just the ticket. At the moment you get sick of roller coasters—or when the temperature cracks the boiling point, whichever comes first—head for a water park: **Blizzard Beach** (p. 166) for a heavily themed experience, or **Wet 'n Wild** (p. 221) for unvarnished thrills.

**IF YOU HAVE 5 OR MORE DAYS IN ORLANDO** Finally—you're approaching a vacation long enough to enable you to actually relax, and to take time to sit by the pool. Of course, if you stuck to a schedule as rigid as one major theme park per day, it would still take you 8 days to knock down the biggies, and that's before setting your belly on a single water slide. Take a day to drive out to **Kennedy Space Center** (p. 237), or if you need some peace, take a dip in a natural spring, such as **DeLeon Springs** (p. 265).

**IF IT'S RAINING** Universal Studios Florida, with its many air-conditioned shows, waiting areas, and its covered parking, is the best choice. SeaWorld Orlando, where you'll spend lots of time walking outside, is the worst in rain. If it's a **scorcher**, both Universal Studios and Disney-MGM Studios have lots of sheltered activities, but you'll be best served by one of the three water parks (**Wet 'n Wild**, **Blizzard Beach**, or **Typhoon Lagoon** [p. 167]) which get crowded, but are

fine choices—though, of course, your hotel pool holds water as a heat reliever, too. The worst park on hot or wet days is the exposed **Disney's Animal Kingdom**.

## THE TRUE CHARACTER OF THE PLACE

Of course, Orlando's identity as a theme park mecca only began in 1971. The city has a deep culture of its own. Sample the high art collected by its high-society settlers at Winter Park's **Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art** (Tiffany glass by the shelf; p. 234), the **Cornell Fine Arts Museum** (lush decorative arts of every description; p. 235), or the **Orlando Museum of Art** (fine works from every era; p. 229). The reason all those blue-bloods migrated here? The fine weather and the beautiful water. While some people rave about the horticultural achievements at botanical gardens such as the **Harry P. Leu Gardens** (p. 263) or **Historic Bok Sanctuary** (p. 264), I personally crave swimming in the 72-degree natural springs at **DeLeon Springs State Recreation Area** (where you can make your own pancakes and then have a swim in pure water; p. 265); a canoe paddle at **Wekiwa Springs State Park** (just north of downtown; p. 265); or, in winter, watching some of the area's original residents, wild manatees, swim at **Blue Spring State Park** (p. 265). Even Orlando tourism has its antecedents: **Gatorland** (p. 231) and **Cypress Gardens** (p. 232) are pleasing, corn-fed throwbacks from another era. And modern history has fewer finer monuments than the still-active launch pads at the **Kennedy Space Center** (p. 237), where America accomplished the impossible, over and over again.

## LODGING TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE

Although pretty much everyone comes here to see Disney, not everyone can afford its prices, which start at \$82, in the best of times, for a mediocre room in its **Pop Century** or **All-Star** resorts (p. 37). So rent an entire house instead. **All Star Vacation Homes** (p. 23) decorates its properties, all within 4 miles of Disney, to the highest design standards from as little as \$109 for two bedrooms, plus a living-room pull-out—and companies such as **Alexander Holiday Homes** (p. 23) and **Oak Plantation** (p. 25) do it for as little as \$65 a night. Other affordable hotels such as **La Quinta Calypso Cay** (p. 46) and **Rodeway Inn at International Drive** (p. 54) get you a straight-ahead standard room for nostalgic prices. Of course, many people have saved up all year for the chance to splash out on their Orlando hotel experience, and for them, there are places where you can get a better-than-average experience for market value. The **Courtyard at Lake Lucerne** (p. 32), set in the city's oldest documented home, is impossibly romantic; the **Nickelodeon Family Suites** (p. 51) entertains kids with the flamboyance of a theme park; and the downtown hideaway **Grand Bohemian Hotel-Orlando** (p. 59) is decorated by original fine art, including drawings by Klimt. Let no one say Orlando lacks sophistication.

## FOOD, BEYOND THE CHAINS

Orlando is one of those places where even blasé restaurants are priced like splurges, but I sort the wheat from the chaff and tell you which special-occasion tables get you the most for your buck, including **California Grill** (overlooks the Magic Kingdom fireworks from atop the Contemporary Resort; p. 64), **bluezoo**

(impeccable fish by chef Todd English; p. 65), and **Primo** (modern Italian by whiz chef/author Melissa Kelly; p. 78). More importantly, I point out fabulous restaurants, many family-run, that have been elbowed into the background by the proliferation of also-ran chains. These guys could put Epcot's World Showcase to shame, and at a fraction of the price: **Bruno's Italian Restaurant** (*abbondanza!* Right in the franchise zone of Disney, too! p. 70); **Rice Paper** (Thai fusion, rich and addictive; p. 76); **Asia Bagus** (Indonesian, smartly done, also near Disney; p. 72); **Memories of India** (Indian, done lightly and with nuance; p. 76); and **Seasons 52** (no dish will hit you for more than 475 calories and desserts are served by the shot glass; p. 77). And a selection of little places will put you in touch with the locals: The hummus at the friendly **Dandelion Communittea Cafe** (p. 79) comes in a teacup, while **Little Saigon** (p. 83) feeds the resident Vietnamese community. Bet you didn't know there was one!

## THE BEST "OTHER" EXPERIENCES

There's no better way to get under the skin of Orlando than to sneak backstage. Far from spoiling the show, behind-the-scenes tours only enrich your understanding and appreciation for the feats of urban planning that have been achieved here, and what's being accomplished every single day in the name of your entertainment. Walt Disney World's **Backstage Magic** (p. 245) is a 7-hour primer on the resort's operational secrets, from the secret utilidors underfoot at the Magic Kingdom to the warehouse where the Audio-Animatronic figures are repaired. You fulfill the childhood fantasy of having an empty theme park all to yourself, paired with the pleasure of learning to ride a Segway scooter, on **Around the World at Epcot** (p. 247). SeaWorld's **Dolphin Nursery Close-Up** (p. 250) is a rare chance to feed a dolphin family by hand, and at Busch Gardens Africa, you can do the same thing with nosy giraffes from a flatbed truck on the **Serengeti Safari** (p. 252). For even deeper learning, Kennedy Space Center's **Astronaut Encounter** (p. 251) affords the opportunity to meet and talk with a real NASA astronaut who has been to space, while Disney's **Dine with an Imagineer** (p. 245) program puts you in touch with the engineers who make fantasies into reality. Outside the theme parks, Orlando is rich with more opportunities to see how people live, from unusual planned communities (the picture-perfect Stepford town of **Celebration** [p. 257] and the psychics of the haunted 19th-century hamlet **Cassadaga** [p. 258]) to some of the most vital Christian evangelical projects in America (such as the **WordSpring Discovery** Bible translation center; p. 260). When you're worn out from thinking, take a night off to kick back at a **spring training** (p. 254) baseball game or a **drive-in movie** (p. 253)—Orlando is one of the only places in America that can boast both options.