Travel: Orlando

The Kennedy Space Center, and bottom left, the swamp sightseeing airboat. Bottom, Hogwarts Castle

More to Florida than just the theme parks

Jenny Woolf and her son get slightly too close to nature in Orlando

We were tempted to return the following day – but we couldn’t just completely omit Disney from our trip to Orlando. So, we arrived bright and early at the Magic Kingdom, only to find it was unfortunately having a rather un-magical day. The entry gates had a technical problem, as we hastily paddled back to shore. Lovely to see wildlife in its natural setting, but sometimes it actually can be better to stick to the theme park animatronics...

Jenny Woolf is grateful to Holiday Extras for help with ground arrangements (holidayextras.co.uk), and to Universal Studios Florida (universalorlando.co.uk), Visit Orlando (visitorlando.com), and Experience Kissimmee (experiencekissimmee.com).

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More to Florida than just the theme parks

Jenny Woolf and her son get slightly too close to nature in Orlando

I’d warned young Arthur before we left London. “This trip won’t be just about theme-parks,” I said. A risky thing to say to an 11-year-old, but Arthur just wanted to see the alligators.

So our first day found us on a blazing, empty riverbank east of Orlando, boarding an airboat to sightsee in the swamp. We put on ear-protectors, the captain coaxed the engine into deafening life, and we shot off over the glittering John’s River. No other humans in sight, but out to the right, a flock of white ibises landed in the blue shallows; to the left, an eagle and sandhill crane fought over prey, while straight ahead rose an island where native American structures of shells and compacted earth could be seen. We headed into a groove of swamp-cypress, water lapping the tree-trunks, and when we emerged, our arrival caused a group of sunbathing alligators to slide one by one into the water.

Years ago, the Orlando area used to live off livestock trading, naval training, and rich people retiring to the area used to live off livestock trading, naval training, and rich people retiring to the warmth, or at least coming to pass the winter. With ground improvements, the place was unfortunately having a rather un-magical day. The entry gates had a technical problem, as we hastily paddled back to shore. Lovely to see wildlife in its natural setting, but sometimes it actually can be better to stick to the theme park animatronics...

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