

Travel: Orlando

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 over 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 grove of swamp-cypresses, 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 warmth, or at least coming down to pass the winter.

An important legacy of that period can still be found in the smart little city of Winter Park, 20 minutes from downtown Orlando. Here, in the 1950s, interior designer Jeannette Genius McKean began amassing the world's most comprehensive collection of Tiffany glass. We visited the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum to see McKean's shimmering legacy, which is

displayed in the context of Tiffany's life and times.

Jewellery, mosaics, and stained-glass windows attested to Tiffany's tireless efforts to combine his two loves of flowers and glass.

We next took a trip to Medieval Times, a mock castle in the Kissimmee area.

It resembles a movie version of the Middle Ages rather than the real thing, with a dramatic soundtrack, spectacular costumes and exciting riding.

The biggest draw for film fans in Orlando right now, though, is Universal Florida's The Wizarding World of Harry Potter. Theme park it may be, but Harry's world really is worth seeing, from the cobwebs of creepy Knockturn Alley to the minutely detailed magical shops of Diagon Alley.

A life-sized Hogwarts Castle is well-themed inside and out and its dark ride, Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, combines film and 3D. The Potter attractions are distributed over two adjoining parks in Universal, and are linked by the Hogwarts Express, my favourite thing of all.

From a vintage King's Cross station, we boarded a life-like old British Railways train. Shut inside the compartment, a nearly-real London slides past, before you're pulled into snow-covered Hogsmeade Village.

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 did the monorail taking guests to the park. Attraction queues were enormous, crowds were far too thick,

and several rides were closed. Just as well Arthur hadn't been expecting theme park heaven, but I expect it would have been better another day.

For the rest of the trip, we focused on Orlando's outlying attractions. The Kennedy Space Center, less than an hour from downtown Orlando, is a splendid museum of the race to space, with real astronaut visits, IMAX movies, genuine rockets to clamber around, a site tour, a gallery of interactive science, and (in a nod to Orlando's theme parks) a very exciting Shuttle Launch Experience, which is not for the motion-sick.

For our last day, I thought we'd get back close to nature again. We went to Blue Spring, a laid-back state park, where we admired tilapia fish building their underwater nests in the sand, saw large, slow manatees lazily congregating in the shallow waters. We decided to take a canoe ride – we were rank amateurs, but the lake was shallow enough. What could go wrong?

After a short canoeing practice, we set off unsteadily into an idyllic scene. Rippling water, green trees, blue scrub-jays, four turtles sunbathing on a log. Perfect. But what was that poking out of the water? Could it be a gator snout?

It certainly looked like it. The canoe felt very flimsy 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...

■ The Kennedy Space Center, and bottom left, the swamp sight-seeing airboat. Bottom, Hogwarts Castle



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