



BY THE WAY

# A hater's guide to Orlando

How to make a Disney-free itinerary for Central Florida



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If you hear “Orlando” and picture a landscape strewn with castles, roller coasters and costumed mascots, you could be forgiven. And if that’s the last place you ever want to go, that’s understandable, too.

As a Miami native who has visited the destination since I was a toddler, I unabashedly love the scene: the Disney bubble, the array of hotels, the highway-side rides, the smorgasbord of chain restaurants. I’m far from alone.

According to the destination’s tourism association, in 2019, nearly 76 million people visited the Orlando area, which includes Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties. They had plenty to see: some 480 hotels with 130,000 rooms, more than 6,000 restaurants, multiple theme parks, several malls and endless tourist traps. Hotel or vacation rental deals are often easy to score, but just walking into a Disney or Universal park can set you back more than \$150 a person.

Granted, this is not everyone’s bag. It might even sound like your version of hell on earth — and such a price tag! But Orlando has so much to offer beyond rides, discount souvenir shops and an extremely large McDonald’s.

“Orlando is very youthful. It is very new and it’s growing, and there’s so much to do outside of theme parks,” said [David Plowden](#), an Orlando-based influencer (and theme park fan) who moved to the area 10 years ago. “It kind of makes me, I don’t want to say sad, but it’s unfortunate that the theme parks kind of take over the reputation.”

There are lively art and music spaces, a robust coffee shop culture, thriving local food scenes, bungalow-dotted neighborhoods, lakes galore and nearby getaways to springs and beaches. Oh, and extremely enthusiastic residents.

“Orlando, I see it as an underdog town, because it’s one that folks underestimate as a theme park town and don’t really take the time to know her spirit,” said [Ida Eskamani](#), a lifelong resident. “It’s a home of quirky, cool people who are always used to being underestimated and always rise to the occasion.”

For most of my life, my trips to Orlando were limited to Disney World and Universal: Drop in for a day or two, exhaust myself on rides and butterbeer, and head back south. Guided by locals’ recommendations, I returned recently for another whirlwind trip, this time without spending a dime at a theme park.

My stay was short, my agenda long — and the list of suggestions even lengthier.

For the reluctant convention-goers, the family-vacation tagalongs or tourists eager for a glimpse of the lesser-known Orlando, these were my highlights.

## Choose from indie hotel gems

Over the years, I’ve stayed in all levels of theme park properties; name-your-price Priceline finds; giant conference hotels; and Mickey-accented Airbnbs. But for this visit, I looked for something unique and independent among the carnival of chains. The options were not plentiful.

Just about everyone I talked to recommended [the Alford Inn](#) in neighboring Winter Park, an art-filled boutique hotel owned by the liberal arts school Rollins College. But the room rates were a little steep for my purposes, and I wanted to stay within the city of Orlando.

I chose [the Wellborn](#), an Instagram paradise clustered with historic buildings, a “Floribbean” restaurant and bar, thrift store-chic outdoor furniture and spacious, affordable rooms. I paid about \$172 total, including a \$25 early check-in fee, for a suite that immediately won me over with its built-in bookshelves.

Ana Carolina Salazar, the CEO and founder of [Bold Digital Marketing Studio](#), called the Wellborn “really magical” and said the outdoor area is her “favorite place in Orlando.” The campus is a popular hangout for locals to grab weekend brunch, happy-hour bites or late-night cocktails.

## Try a new wave of Asian American restaurants

After food blogger [Ricky Ly](#), an Orlando resident for 20 years, texted me nearly a dozen restaurant recommendations in a row, I replied: “I need to stay a week clearly.”

Sometime between eating at the Michelin-recognized ramen spot, the Filipino-inspired ice cream shop and the Korean-style coffeehouse, I realized how rich the Asian food scene is here. You can add the quick-service bao place and vegan Vietnamese kitchen to that list, too.

“Really a new wave going on of third-gen Asian American-owned businesses,” Ly wrote to me after also recommending a Japanese gastropub, noodle house and Taiwanese dessert shop.

A significant number of these restaurants are gathered in the Mills 50 neighborhood, where refugees from Vietnam settled in the 1970s. The area has expanded to include a broader representation of Asian American offerings.

My first stop for a bite in Orlando was in Mills 50 at King Bao — both a vegan option with crispy tofu in a traditional soft bun and the decidedly not-vegan “Hogzilla.” (I noticed this trend throughout my visit: lots of vegan options, and also lots of pork.) A few hours later, at the East End Market food hall in the Audubon Park neighborhood, I savored spicy tonkotsu ramen at Domu, which last year earned a Michelin Bib Gourmand denoting good value and quality. East End is also home to the original location of Gideon’s Bakehouse, a gothic-themed bakery that generates Instagram clout with its giant cookies (and big lines at the newer location on the Disney campus).

Back in Mills 50 later that night, I stopped by the just-opened and super-packed Sampaguita Ice Cream for Filipino flavors, such as a bright purple ube latte, pineapple cake and the titular sampaguita, an almond vanilla base with jasmine and litchi jellies.

The next day, I found myself in the same strip, this time meeting Ly at Haan Coffee — originally a roastery but now serving items such as a “strong, creamy and sweet” Seoul iced coffee made popular in early Korean coffeehouses and espresso with elderflower tonic at a newly opened storefront — then grabbing lunch at Vietnamese Veggie Garden.

I filled out my visit with a breakfast stop at Black Bean Deli, a Cuban cafe with locations in Mills 50 and Winter Park that offered some of my Miami favorites, namely toasted Cuban bread to dip in cafe con leche.

Before a road trip down to South Florida, I wanted to experience more of the coffee shop culture that so many people boasted about. I popped into the Robinson Coffee Room downtown, which balances the caffeine with a cocktail joint upstairs, and got a cereal milk latte to go with a guava pop tart and chai banana bread.

## See Black art, Tiffany glass and a shrine to Mister Rogers

I knew that the groundbreaking author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston lived in Florida, but didn’t realize she grew up just north of Orlando, in Eatonville, the country’s first Black-incorporated municipality. Eskamani, 32, included the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts in a long list of must-sees, and it became my first stop on a mini arts and culture tour.

The museum is dedicated to showcasing works by artists of African ancestry, and the [Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community](#) offers tours of the museum and area. I browsed the just-opened exhibition featuring Arizona artist [Granville Carroll](#), whose work focuses on Afrofuturism, and picked up a Hurston paperback for my home collection.

Next, I headed to the Enzian Theater, a single-screen art-house cinema with an outdoor cafe and bar that sits under giant oak trees in Maitland, another city on the outskirts of Orlando. Gabrielle Russon, a [freelance writer](#) who covers news, politics and theme parks, talked up the relaxed vibe at a bar “that feels romantic and fairy-gardenish.” Couches inside provide cozy seating to watch independent or retro films.

Eskamani also writes about local music and shows for [Orlando Weekly](#) and loves venues such as [Will’s Pub](#), the [Henao Contemporary Center](#) and [Renaissance Theatre Company](#), which opened in 2021 and hosts music and performances. One perk of the proximity to theme parks, residents told me, was that the creative energy of its employees often flows into the local community’s art and culinary scene.

I had hoped to make it to the Renaissance Theatre the night I was in town, but the doors didn’t open until 10:30 p.m., and I had an appointment with [Mister Rogers](#) — or at least his cardigan — the next morning.

Before Russon mentioned the connection, I had no idea the icon of children’s television had Orlando-area ties. But he’s [immortalized](#) on the campus of Rollins College, his alma mater.

Rollins celebrates Fred Rogers, its most famous alumnus, with a stone marker near his residence hall, a plaque, a portrait, a 3,000-plus-pound sculpture, and clothing and papers that have been donated to the archives.

Anyone can explore the campus and request to see the archived materials, and until March 20, the college will display an exhibit featuring a sky blue cardigan knit by Rogers’s mother, a pair of his sneakers, handwritten letters and other items in the library’s lobby. The college provides a [downloadable map](#) for the Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood Walking Tour.

In Winter Park, just up the road from Rollins, is the [Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art](#), which showcases what it describes as “the world’s most comprehensive collection of works” by the artist [Louis Comfort Tiffany](#). There are plenty of leaded-glass lamps and windows, jewelry, paintings and a stunning chapel interior dating back to the [World’s Columbian Exposition](#) in Chicago in 1893.

For people who appreciate — or create — art, there’s a lot going on. Jordan Jones, 32, who is known as [JJ the Artist](#), named local artist events at the [Orlando Museum of Art](#), the [CityArts](#) gallery downtown, monthly [wine and art walks](#), and paint nights at his local coffee shop, [Bynx](#).

“Whether it’s at the club, at the bar, at a lake, at a little coffee shop, there’s a lot of art opportunities,” he said.

## Explore the ‘Venice of Orlando’

As I crisscrossed the area in my rental car, I wished I had time to stop at the lakes that serve as the center of so many neighborhoods. Several people spoke lovingly of downtown's Lake Eola, which Russon described as "our little Central Park" where swan boats float and locals gather for a Sunday farmers market.

"Lake Eola really feels like the heart of Orlando," Russon said in an email.

Another top recommendation: the [Winter Park Scenic Boat Tour](#), a one-hour pontoon boat cruise along canals and lakes, featuring private estates, Florida flora and the possibility of an alligator sighting.

"It's so cute," said Ly, a civil engineer who founded the [TastyChomps](#) blog. "It's like the Venice of Orlando."

So many lakes, so little time.

I did make it to [Harry P. Leu Gardens](#), a some 50-acre getaway just down the street from East End Market. On a sunny January afternoon, I finally got to indulge my impulse to wander through palms and live oaks, and it could not have been more perfect.

Just about 16 miles outside of Downtown Orlando, [Wekiwa Springs State Park](#) is a popular close-to-home getaway for canoeing, kayaking and swimming in 72-degree waters.

If the beach is more your thing, Orlando may be landlocked, but you can get to East Coast beaches such as Cocoa Beach, New Smyrna Beach and Daytona Beach in a little over an hour.

## Get a (free) theme park experience

Curious about the tourism magnet that draws [Disney](#) adults and Hogwarts-ready wizard wannabes? There's a way to dip a toe in those waters without dropping \$100-plus a person.

At Disney's Polynesian hotel, about 40 minutes from downtown, you can park free and wander back to a beach area to watch the distant Magic Kingdom fireworks. Judging by the cups and aromas around me, plenty of adults pre-gamed for the some 18-minute pyrotechnics show. Kids warbled along to songs from "Frozen 2" and shrieked in delight: "Mama, it's Moana!"

Another free option, Russon said in an email, is parks-adjacent. Both Disney and Universal have their own versions of outdoor malls, with shops, restaurants, bars and entertainment; parking is free at Disney Springs, and free after 6 p.m. at Universal CityWalk. How much you want to spend from there is up to you.

"You can go out for dinner or buy a souvenir from Disney or Universal there too," she wrote. "Or hell, don't go at all. There's plenty of else to do in Orlando."

