



FLORIDA

Discovering the magic beyond the Magic Kingdom.

Words by Vanessa Gainford



COCO TRAVEL

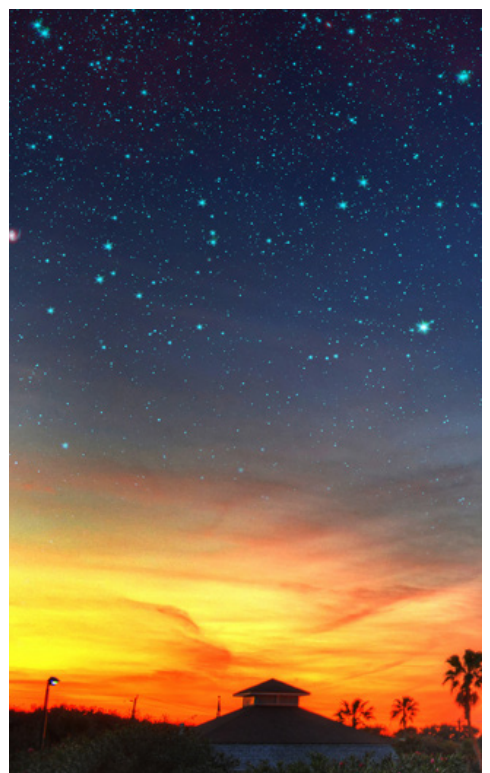
Orlando, Florida, the sunshine state; many experiences of this destination is Disney World, and it never goes much further than that. It's impossible to say no to returning to the Magic Kingdom, first stop, breakfast with Cinderella. However #TeamCoco were lucky enough to explore Florida, and in one week travelled across the state to experience what Kissimmee, Crystal River and Daytona Beach have to offer.

Florida now has over 90 million visitors a year and the state itself is the size of England; meaning each destination has its own unique appeal. From luxury hotels, nature adventures, delicious dining and beaches that rival the most idyllic destinations, this state has something for everyone. In each place we visited we had the best from hotels and dining to tours and activities so if you really want to #VisitFlorida, keep on reading.

Holding the title of theme park capital of the world, no trip to Florida would be complete without a visit Orlando, home to the worlds most renowned amusement parks and of course Walt Disney World. Kissimmee is an ideal place to stay due to the easy access to the parks,

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the local dining and the choice of hotels available. The Omni Orlando Resort at Championsgate boasts three swimming pools, a lazy river, a Mokara Spa, 36 holes of championship golf and seven restaurants. The resort has everything you need for the perfect escape. Whether you choose to stay at the Omni Resort or not, a visit to their Zen restaurant is recommended. If possible, book in advance to have the private dining room experience, the decor and atmosphere are second to none. Zen offers authentic Chinese cuisine prepared by the most passionate chef and staff who's know the dishes inside out, ensure you en-





joy your meal and every second from the moment you step in the door. Breakfast at Villa de Flora is a must. A grand dining room in a European villa located in the St. Augustine Atrium of the luxurious Gaylord Palms Resort. Villa de Flora offers a variety of fresh food and Southern American classics such as biscuits and gravy, which we definitely recommend trying.

On the topic of food, for the past few years SeaWorld has hosted the SevenSeas food festival and after its continued success it will be returning in the fall of 2017. The festival allows you to enjoy live performances from country to rock music, and market stalls that offer cuisines from Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The food festival allows you to eat and drink as you make your way around the park throughout the day. SeaWorld has a combination of rides, wildlife and education. After Blackfish the park has now opened its 'behind-the-scenes' rescue and rehabilitation to the public. For years, SeaWorld has been rescuing, healing and releasing injured animals. You can book tours which showcase the incredible work done to preserve and help wildlife, along with passionate staff that truly care for it. The tour provides you with information on how to prevent animal injuries how to report them and teaches you about each animal and conservation. It also allows you backstage access to see the animals currently in SeaWorld's care and follow the progress they are making; a worthwhile detour.

Tours are becoming more and more popular and the majority of parks in Orlando now





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offer them. Meaning you don't have to be a celebrity in order to go behind the scenes. Universal Studios offers a VIP tour which includes a guide for the day, backstage access, insider information, meet and greets and priority ride access. With extra benefits such as complimentary valet parking, breakfast before your tour and a lunch break at VIP Cafe Mamba, one of Universal's award-winning restaurants. You can visit Universal Studios or Island of Adventure or both, making the most of your time and ensuring you see and do everything you want in just one day.

If you wish to extend the fun into the evening then Universal's CityWalk is the perfect option; with an array of restaurants

lined along the river, good night life and an amazing atmosphere. Toothsome Chocolate Emporium and Savoury Feast Kitchen is where dining meets fun. Based on a woman who invented her own chocolate emporium along with a robot, who occasionally makes an appearance, the restaurant is anything but ordinary. With menus fashioned on old library books, the attention to detail is second to none and that's before we get to the food. With savoury dishes ranging from burgers to culinary dishes, the highlight of your visit will be dessert. From gourmet chocolates to their artisanal milkshakes, we recommend making sure you have room for these masterpieces.



If you really can't resist the urge for a little dose of Disney in your visit then head to Disney Springs one evening. The complex has a stretch of unique outdoor shops, dining venues like Planet Hollywood and plenty of entertainment on offer. If the springs don't quite fulfil your Disney needs but you can't quite face the Magic Kingdom, then there is a little town called Celebration that is more than sure to transport you into the world of Disney. The town was originally developed by the Walt Disney Company, the masters of happy places. A visit to Celebration is as though you have stepped right into a Disney film, the people are friendly, the architecture clean and bright and water that glitters and perfectly reflects the

blue skies. A fully functioning town, with rent that is actually cheaper than London, yes we enquired, Celebration is home to many who have a positive mind frame unlike any other. There is a little place called Sweet Escape, an old town Victorian environment in which you will find fresh baked breads, pastries, desserts, and cupcakes all made fresh daily. For meals, head to Columbia restaurant; family owned for over 112 years Columbia's charm and award-winning Spanish/Cuban cuisine allows you to dine in elegance either indoors or in the courtyard. If you want to explore then Celebration Bike Rentals is the perfect way to get you around the town. You can choose to have a tour guide who tells you everything you

Ticket info:

Universal Orlando 3 Park Explorer Ticket

Enjoy 14 days unlimited access to Universal Studios, Islands of Adventure and the brand new Volcano Bay for just £228 per adult and £219 per child. To book visit www.attraction-tickets-direct.co.uk

Universal Orlando 2 Park Explorer Ticket

Enjoy 14 days unlimited access to Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure for just £228 per adult and £219 per child. To book visit www.attraction-tickets-direct.co.uk



could possibly need to know about the town or you can go it alone, with map in hand and a picnic in your basket. Cycling through quiet streets, winding trails and lakeside paths, this is the best way to take in every part of this picturesque town.

After a few days of letting your inner child out with more confectionery, burgers and rides than you could think possible; it's time to change up your trip. So we're going from theme parks to wildlife parks. A stop at Debary in Florida to embark on a St Johns River Eco Tour Boat Cruise is the perfect way to step away from the crowds and into rural Florida. Up until the nineteenth century, the river was the only means of travel through the stated and little has changed from when explorers first visited and that's the way they intend it to stay. The cruise is eco-friend-

ly, meaning they don't disturb wildlife and allow you to see nature run its course without being a disturbance from manatees and alligators to owls, the river is overwhelmingly calming and enchanting.

A day at WildFlorida is essential. Just a 45 minute drive from Orlando, this wildlife park is home to over 200 different species of animals. You can catch a glimpse of alligators ranging from one named Bonecrusher to another named Fluffy, eagles and other native creatures. You can also book an encounter with the lemurs or the sloths. Perfect for learning more about each animal, being encouraged to get up close and personal and even taking a 'slothie' (sloth selfie). WildFlorida also offers airboat rides into the Florida Everglades which is incredibly fun and allows you to see wildlife in its undisturbed natural habitat. A visit here wouldn't be complete without a visit to The Chomp House Grill and taking away

their signature Swamp Slushy for the road.

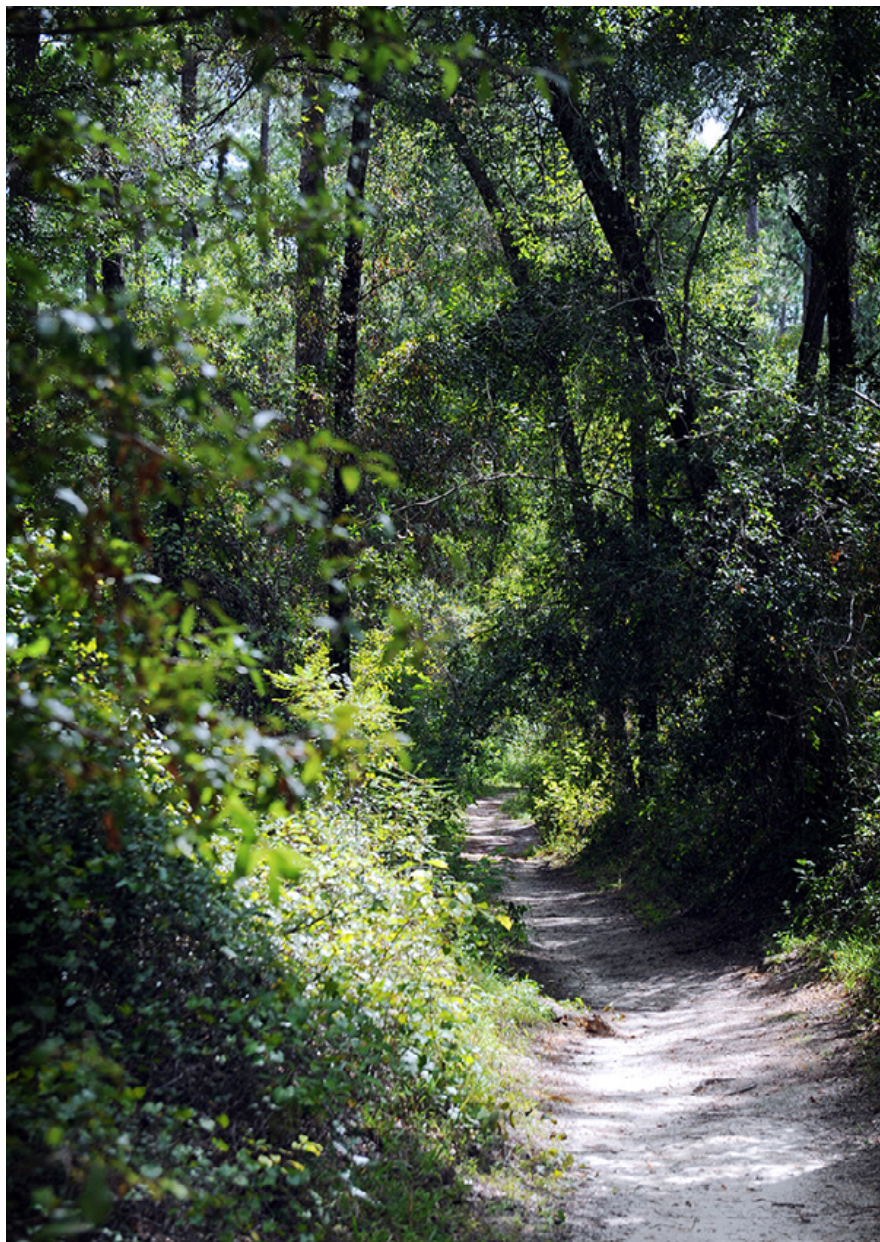
For the explorers there is a place to the west of Kissimmee, in Citrus County called Crystal River. It boasts the most incredible rivers, crystal-clear springs, the Gulf of Mexico and is the manatee capital of the world. If you want a true authentic Floridian feel to your stay, then Plantation on Crystal River immerses you in the outdoors. The resort is 232 acres, has four on site restaurants, hosts scuba diving, snorkelling and golf lessons, has canoes and kayaks for hire and has an onsite spa and salon. If you want to venture further afield for your evening meal then there is no better place to go than Katch Twenty-Two. Located on a roadside, this restaurant is the definition of modest, that is until you enter. This small restaurant makes you welcome, feel like a local and ensures you enjoy both your meal and every moment of your time there.

There is only one place in the

world where it is legal to swim with manatees and Citrus County is it.. Plantation on Crystal River has the facilities for you to do so. Once equipped with your wet suit, snorkel, and a vital safety video on how to act around manatees, you clamber onto your boat and go in search of these incredible mammals. The key is to not splash, not make noise, not let your feet touch the floor. If you can do these three things, a manatee is sure to approach you; as they are both equally friendly as they are nosey. You can actually come nose to nose with one depending on how lucky you are. After your manatee encounter, and a swim in the internationally famous Three Sister Springs, which are so beautiful it feels like you've stepped right into a holiday brochure, you hop back on board and are greeted with a warm cup of coco, tea or coffee, we of course went for the hot cocoa.

Outdoor activities are hard to pass up in Crystal River and the opportunities are endless. There is one place in particular that is part of a 30,843 acres United States National Wildlife Refuge System; Chassahowitzka River. With wildlife so close and being so secluded, kayaking down the river is one of the freest we have ever felt. The scenery is something that cannot be described only experienced. The wide rivers lead to streams barely the width of your kayak, where you have to limbo under trees and eventually take you to a cove with a conveniently placed rope swing; that of course no-one can resist. This is Florida at it's finest.

Citrus County is not only home to Crystal River, but to



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some small but very charming towns; Floral City, Homosassa and Inverness. All have amazing dining, boundless activities, a friendly atmosphere, and not to mention a lot of breweries as well as the Withlacoochee State Trail. The trail is a 46 mile path situated between Orlando and Tampa, which it's possible to cycle, no we're not suggesting all 46 miles but it's possible to hire a bike and get from Floral City to Inverness in an hour. To recover from the cycle there is the Pine Street Pub, a tick off the brewery list and to refuel there is the Motor City Pasta Company. A small local restaurant which owner Joe Romano states; "if you don't have passion, stay out of the kitchen," which says it all really.

After each destination you begin to wonder how Florida can possibly get better, well it can and Daytona Beach is how. When you hear Daytona Beach, you immediately think 'Spring Break Baby' yet this is far from what this destination is about. Ocean views and beach access are necessary in order to make the most of the town and The Hampton Inn, is in the ideal location. The hotel has its own convenience store, jacuzzi, swimming pool and fire pit for chilled evening drinks in order to watch

the most magnificent sunsets. Whats more is that the hotel backs onto the beach, giving you the time for that early morning run or to simply soak up the sun.

From visiting Ponce Inlet, Florida's tallest lighthouse, sampling beer at the Beach Brewing Company and enjoying street food from little places like Soul Surf or dining in unforgettable places like River Grille on the Tomoka; Daytona Beach has incredible food, lovely people, and an atmosphere that is hard to beat. If you want to explore Daytona further, then Three Brothers Boards is your key. With knowledgeable and patient guides, all you need is some suncream, a bit of balance, your paddle board and you're good to go. Paddling down the marinas and canals allows you to see this town from another perspective. Once out of the route of boats you can simply stop paddling, lay back and relax on your board and if you're lucky at some points you will be paddle boarding with dolphins in tow.

Daytona is of course also known for it's International Speedway, which hosts the iconic Daytona 500 NASCAR race. The speedway offers tours which take you through VIP area's boxes and gives you the history of the races. The final stop is the museum and hall of fame in which the current champion, Denny Hamlin's car sits, exactly how it was when he won; covered in smudged paint from Champagne and accessorised with confetti and a lump of grass from his 360 winning spin.

If the tour doesn't put into perspective the scale of the race course or the speed of the cars then the Richard Petty driving experience definitely will.





You can choose to have a driver or get behind the wheel yourself, either way you'll have 600 horsepower behind you and hit speeds of 170mph, on corners which are the height of a four storey building. You don't feel unsafe in the slightest, as your adrenaline kicks in and you're kitted out in trainers, a jumpsuit, a helmet and a neck-brace. The car is also full of metal bars, the only entrance through the side window and you are strapped in as though you're going to space, not three laps of the speedway. Believe us whether or not you like cars or not, the atmosphere and the sheer noise of the car engines is enough to make you beyond excited. There is also the Racing's North Turn which is a nascar themed bar and grill, actually situated on the races North Turn, the exact spot where racing history began in Daytona Beach. Since 1936 races took

place on the beach until 1958 when NASCAR relocated to the Speedway. The restaurant has good food, good cocktails and of course a good view to soak up the culture and the pride from it's locals.

It's clear that Florida's attractions have not always been a secret, with stunning beaches, world renowned theme parks, incredible shopping destinations and an atmosphere that keeps dragging you back, its no wonder that a trip here for most is essential. However, it's worthwhile letting the traveller in you come out in order to fully experience what this beautiful state has to offer and once you do, you start ticking things off that bucket list that you never knew existed.