

travel

# The *Other* Florida vacation

Budget-friendly family fun awaits in (and near) Orlando

Photo courtesy of SeaWorld Orlando

Aquatica, a standalone waterpark that's part of SeaWorld, is a more affordable Orlando option than many of the big theme parks.

By Laurie Kaiser

**F**or many Western New York families, the much-needed respite following a brutal winter means a trip to central Florida. With direct flights from Buffalo to Orlando and days of fun to be had at major theme parks, what's not to love?

For many families, it's the cost: the average week with Mickey and the princesses will set you back \$5,000 for a family of four. But there is plenty of fun to be had in and near Orlando that won't break the bank, including free beaches, a reasonably priced waterpark and thrilling seaplane rides.

Last June we took our 10- and 12-year-old sons to central Florida, where we did all of the above (and more) and spent under \$1,100, including the drive down and back. Besides staying in moderately priced hotels and taking advantage of coupons, AAA discounts and packed lunches, we also stayed with a relative for part of our trip. You don't need a relative with a Florida address, however, to stick to a budget.

Central Florida offers a multitude of hotels at a wide range of prices, said Angela Wawrzynek, manager of AAA for Western and Central New York. For the budget-conscious, Wawrzynek suggests looking for chains with breakfast included, or booking a suite with a kitchenette to save on meals. She also advises travelling outside the popular school breaks in February and April to get the best deals. While most families who come to AAA planning a Florida trip want to visit Disney World and the other big Orlando attractions, she noted there are less costly choices at any time of the year. Here are a few of ours:



Photo courtesy of SeaWorld Orlando

### Splashing and dashing

In charming Tavares, around 40 miles north of Orlando, you'll find Jones Brothers & Co. Air and Seaplane Adventures in Wootton Park downtown. Jones Brothers offers short, four-seater rides over the lake. Although I'm not a fan of heights, I wanted a mini-adventure with the kids, who, thankfully, have not inherited my fear. It's also pretty awesome getting a bird's-eye view of houses, sailboats and farms filled with tiny palm trees.

Part of the tour included a "splash and dash" — the pilot swooped down and skimmed the water before arching back up. Yes, my stomach revolted, but the boys were thrilled. Because I wasn't sure how long I wanted to be splashing and dashing, we chose the "Tour Lake Dora" trip, around 15 minutes in length. It

costs \$44 for adults and \$39 for children 12 and younger.

Additional options range from 10 minute flights (\$29 for children 12 and under, who must be accompanied by an adult) to the deluxe "St. John's River and De Leon Springs," which runs between 60 and 70 minutes, travels farther and costs \$349 for one passenger, \$199 each for two passengers and \$179 each for three.

### The fountain of youth (and DIY pancakes)

In DeLeon Springs State Park, about 45 miles from Orlando, you'll find a natural spring long considered a "fountain of youth." Today the spring, which remains 72 degrees year-round, includes a swimming area and paddleboats, canoes and kayaks

*Continued on next page*

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Beautiful New Smyrna Beach is located about an hour north of Orlando.

*Florida Vacations, continued from page 55*

for rent (\$12 for an hour; \$24 for half the day). There also are acres of trails to hike. You get the feeling of being outdoors but in a contained kind of way, and it only costs \$6 per vehicle to enter.

One of the best parts of the park is the Old Spanish Sugar Mill Grill and Griddle House, where you make your own pancakes on a griddle set into the table. Waiters bring pitchers of white and wheat batter and you can add blueberries, bananas, peanut butter, chocolate chips (a hit with my kids) or applesauce to your pancakes. Prices start at about \$5. If you want a little protein on the side, they offer sausage, bacon, ham and eggs.

There's usually a wait. Put your name in for a table, then take a dip in the springs or a paddleboat ride. The park also offers an "eco/history" tour boat ride for \$14, a 10-mile trek through the canal which is a great way to see local birds and fish; you might even glimpse a gator or two.

**Sun and sand**

A trip to Florida is not complete without at least one beach excursion. New Smyrna Beach, located one hour north of Orlando, is a mini-piece of paradise with

13 miles of sand and surf, and it's free if you enter by foot.

If you enter with your vehicle, it costs \$5. For a more peaceful experience, we opted for the traffic-free zone, which can be found north of the jetty of the Smyrna Dunes Park. Get there early, however. The beach fills up quickly, and it can be hard to find parking later in the day.

**Shopping and high tea**

Twenty-five miles northwest of Orlando, Mount Dora is like a Florida-based East Aurora. Known for antiques, downtown boasts everything from upscale kitchenware shops and boutiques to a cute independent bookstore. One of our favorite stops, Barrel of Books and Games (128 W Fourth Ave.), includes a resident tortoiseshell cat and a healthy selection of new and used books for kids and adults, along with modern and retro toys and games.

Afterward, treat yourself to high tea in British style at the Windsor Rose Tea Room and Restaurant (142 W. Fourth Ave.). It's just as fancy as its name and features tea for one or two. The Queen Victoria Tea for One includes traditional cucumber sandwiches with a slice of sponge cake and home-

made pastries. For kids, there is the Mad Hatter Tea, which consists of cheese and butter, peanut butter and jelly finger sandwiches, a slice of sponge cake and cookies with hot chocolate or milk. Both run about \$12.

### Water fun

If you want a splurge day in Orlando while still steering clear of big theme parks, Aquatica is a good choice. The standalone waterpark that is part of SeaWorld has an impressive range of attractions, from splashing fountains and a rain forest for little kids to major thrill slides and winding chutes for older ones. It also features a lazy river where you can just float and soak up the sun — the epitome of vacation in my book. What pleased the mom in me was the park's cleanli-

ness, bevy of lifeguards, and sea creature demonstrations during the day. It's also affordable.

If you have your heart set on swimming with dolphins, Aquatica offers the next best thing. One of our favorite rides was the Dolphin Plunge — two see-through enclosed slides that plunge past a pool filled with black and white dolphins. It's a fast swoosh down, so if you blink, you'll miss them.

Hours and admission prices vary by time of year. If you purchase tickets online you can save up to \$20 per ticket. The boys and I (husband opted not to go), paid about \$180 for a day pass; this included parking and an all-you-can-eat buffet. If you have children who eat and drink as much as mine do, the buffet choice is worth it. Besides the regular hamburgers and

hotdogs, the buffet includes a decent salad bar, and you can visit as many times as you like.

Ideas for off-the-beaten path fun in central Florida are more extensive than I have room to expand upon here. If you do a little research, keep your mind open and your ears closed to, "But Mom, everyone else goes to (name your theme park/resort)..."

You can carve out a beautiful vacation, one that will fill you with enough warm memories to last you through the next long winter (without simultaneously emptying your wallet). ■

*Laurie Kaiser is a local freelance writer.*

### For more information:

#### **Aquatica**

[Aquaticabyseaworld.com](http://Aquaticabyseaworld.com)

#### **DeLeon Springs State Park**

(386) 985-5644

[Floridasprings.org/visit/map/deleonsprings](http://Floridasprings.org/visit/map/deleonsprings)

#### **Jones Brothers & Co. Air and Seaplane Adventures:**

(352) 508-1800

[Jonesairandsea.com](http://Jonesairandsea.com)

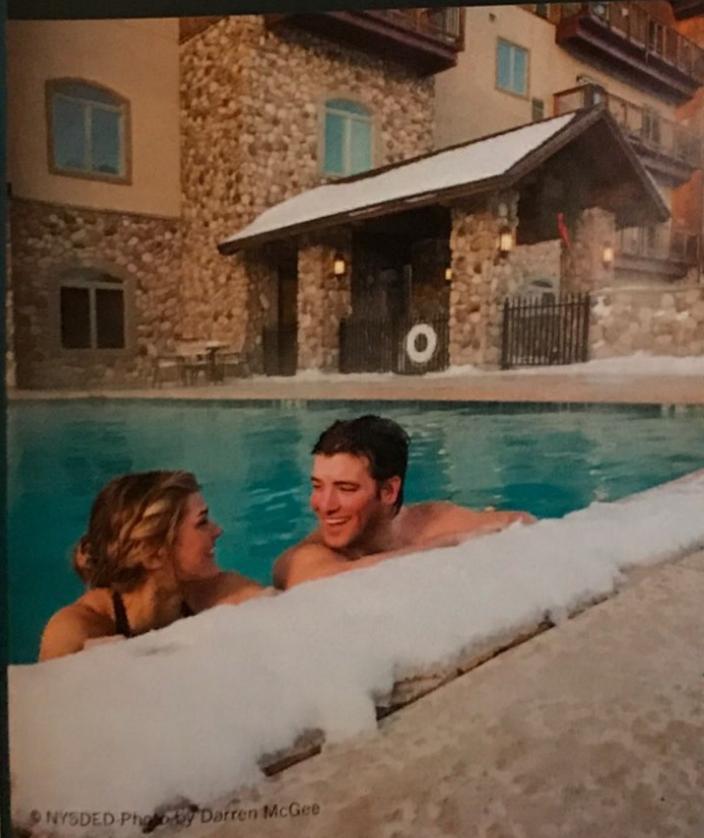
#### **Mount Dora**

[Mountdora.com](http://Mountdora.com)

#### **New Smyrna Beach**

[Nsbfla.com](http://Nsbfla.com)

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