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Why I am still travelling to Orlando

The resilient LGBTQ community makes this city far more fun to explore than just stopping at its famous theme parks

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This was supposed to be a place where you “don’t say gay.” But the 220,000 people who showed up for Orlando Pride this past October had plenty to say and more.

Despite Florida state legislation restricting gender transition care, eliminating instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools, and targeting drag performances, I find that Orlando is just as its Pride slogan describes – Stronger Together.

Organizers knew the 2023 Pride Celebrations were going to be different, executive director Tatiana Quiroga says. “But we wanted to make sure we created an opportunity for folks to celebrate as their authentic selves, especially our trans-siblings, who are going through such direct attacks. We wanted to make sure that people knew that they’re part of the bigger community.”

As a gay man, I will admit that I was reluctant to set foot in Florida. I know so many people, from the LGBTQ community and otherwise, who have stopped going to the United States altogether over the past few years. But in addition to the Pride excitement, what I discovered was a pleasant little city, dotted with lakes and scenic waterways, ample manicured parkland, world-class golf, a diverse culinary scene and a dozen cool neighbourhoods to gravitate to come sundown. Orlando is clearly not just for families heading to Walt Disney World anymore.

Mostly orange groves and farmland in the late 1800s, Orlando first became a centre for military bases and then for the aerospace industry – Kennedy Space Center, NASA’s primary launch centre since 1968 – is a one-hour drive straight east. The opening



Orlando’s Pride slogan of Stronger Together is a perfect example of resilience to the state’s many restrictive legislations on gender-transition care and education as well as targeting drag performances. VISIT ORLANDO



Orlando’s Pride parade features no end to over-the-top floats, drag queens, stilt-walkers and marching groups and even some politicians. COME OUT WITH PRIDE

of Disney World in 1971 coincided with the expansion of Orlando’s highway system, triggering an influx of tourists and amping up the entertainment industry. Nowadays, the theme parks are still pulling in tourists, of course, but the city has also become a hub for technology and health care, and for the people and cultures that come with that.

The region was once a destination resort community for wealthy Americans from New York and Boston, who built their summer homes in what is now Winter Park, a small city a few miles north of Orlando in Orange County. The draw here is the old-world charm, rose gardens, state-ly homes and seven main lakes – a tranquil break from big-city

bustle. We start our sweep of the area with a pontoon-boat ride, beginning on Lake Osceola and toodling around, ogling the mansions tucked beneath the cypress trees, the odd crane swooping by. A lone water skier attempts a jump platform but is too far away to hear our disappointment. Narrow canals connecting the lakes reveal sprawling back yards and boat houses. The tour guide points out architectural history and local folklore but tactfully falls short of naming those who live here.

I also enjoyed exploring the neighbourhood of Mills 50 in Orlando’s northeast. Closer to the city centre, it presents an eclectic and rather unpolished façade, supported by a culturally diverse mix of artist studios, coffee houses, shops, markets and businesses that focus on wellness. The area is also home to a large Vietnamese-American community (and Asian restaurants) and to murals that augment the bohemian character. In nearby Ivanhoe Village, we find more indie ambience, in the form of independent retailers, antique stores, gift shops and

wine gardens, woven around the latest new restaurants and off-beat bars.

A more sombre stop awaits us in Orlando’s south end where the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub occurred. We walk among the portraits and read the messages of remembrance posted on the makeshift signboards that encircle the building, which is still standing with bullet holes clearly visible. In October, the city announced that it had bought the property with plans to create a permanent memorial on the site.

On the day of the Pride parade, we get an early start, wandering around Lake Eola Park, checking out the marketplace stalls and food trucks. There is live entertainment on two stages. Dozens of women’s-rights activists gather petition signatures and a religious enthusiast with a loudspeaker preaches across the street from the park entry, two reminders that the current political and social climates continue to be a challenge for many Floridians.

When the parade starts, there is no end to the cheering of the over-the-top floats, drag queens, stilt-walkers and marching groups, even a few politicians.

“Being the largest single-day event in Orlando, Pride has a very large economic impact,” Quiroga says, “so it’s in everybody’s interest that Pride is a success.”

The next day, we shake off our hangovers at Hamburger Mary’s, famous for its drag brunch, a sharp-witted comedy act and lip-synched musical revue. The restaurant is renowned for temporarily blocking Governor Ron DeSantis’s drag-show bill as unconstitutional last June, thanks to a patron who offered free legal services. We settle in with Bloody Marys and enjoy the Broadway tunes, singing right along. Unsurprisingly, it’s a ton of drag fun – I’ll take these queens over the Disney princesses any day.

Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer was a guest of Visit Orlando. It did not review or approve the story before publication.