

TRAVEL

FLORIDA IS STILL FUN

Orlando has all the feels, including a surprising few days in a suburban bubble and a Pride Day to definitely add to your fall calendar

By Doug Wallace



Wave Hotel Pool. Photo by James Tattersall

“Or-lan-doooooo. I love you! Sea World and Dis-ney and putt-putt golf-ing...” All I can think of in the cab on my way to the hotel are those *Book of Mormon* lyrics.

Orlando has never been on my bucket list. Ditto Fort Lauderdale – or really anywhere in Florida except South Beach. And yet here I am, checking into the slick Wave Hotel in the Orlando suburb of Lake Nona. Suburbs were never on the list, either. But I quickly realize that trending Lake Nona is different.

This new, “planned” community growing up around the life sciences and aerospace industries is just 15 minutes from the airport, and about a half-hour drive from both downtown Orlando and Walt Disney World. A number of “what the hell is that?” moments lead to unexpected answers – an aviation simulation training centre, purple deer sculptures, a pasture full of real cows. Lake Nona is also the home of the United States Tennis Association’s national campus. The sexy Wave is really a hub for locals, too – the main lobby is actually called the Living Room. I watch so many hipster professionals ordering appetizers in Bacán restaurant or throwing them back in Haven Lounge, the latter a feast of fire-breathing bartenders and a saxophonist weaving his way around the tables, playing along with the DJ. “You could definitely find a husband here,” I tell my travel mates, who nod back knowingly.

We wander the 4,600-square-metre back sculpture garden – public art seems to be everywhere, all part of the bigger development plan. The metal sculptures by Jefrè Figueras Manuel gleam in the ubiquitous Orlando sunshine. We hop into a spin class first and then a rock-climbing session at the Lake Nona Performance Club – even the gym has a fancy name.

Later, we pull up a stool at Chroma Modern Bar + Kitchen and dig through a bowl of jambalaya, chicken satays, and an acre of charcuterie

and cheese. Even though it’s early, the place is packed with the after-work crowd. While I would normally play a game I call Spot the American, we instead play Guess the Profession, just by looking at everyone’s haircut and clothes, particularly the shoes. I swear nobody is over 40.

Lake Nona is a walkable neighbourhood, so we easily move the party across the street to Boxi Park, a shipping-container cluster of food kiosks and a large stage. A local band, complete with a full horn section, blares away as the crowd sips the venue’s own craft beer. People play beach volleyball in a very large sand box. We try not to get into trouble, but fail.

And yes! Before we depart for Orlando Pride downtown, there’s time to take a small bite out of the 100 square kilometres that is Walt Disney World. I neglect to mention that I am old enough to remember when it opened – nobody wants to do that math. At Epcot Center, we hop on a few rides, hopping off rather wobbly, dodging baby carriages. So much concrete! No wonder parents are worn out after a day of pushing the kids around. We take the Monorail to the Magic Kingdom and cool off with mouse-eared ice cream bars. When Mickey and Minnie bring up the rear of the daily three o’clock parade, I have a moment of realization – these people do this every, single, day. That’s entertainment, I guess.

PRIDE WAS ORIGINALLY A PROTEST. AFTER ALL

Florida’s appalling leaders and backward legislation targeting the transgender community and – of all things, drag performances – haven’t dampened the LGBTQ+ community spirit in Orlando. It may actually have amped it up: defiance in the face of indignity.

“We decided early on that no matter what, cancelling Pride 2023 was not an option,” says Tatiana Quiroga, executive director of the city’s Come Out With Pride organizers. “We had some productive conversations with the police department about the safety of the LGBTQ+ community,



Wave Hotel Living Room. Photo by James Tattersall



Lake Eola. Photo courtesy of Visit Orlando

what makes us more targeted. We wanted to make sure that we walked the line between feeling safe, but not feeling policed.”

Quiroga says the increased antagonism from legislators has definitely left the community feeling more vulnerable. “There’s been so much negativity...especially when you hear the names that some of our lawmakers are calling our trans siblings. It’s inhumane.”

Happily, Pride festivities lured 220,000 people to the Orlando streets this year – 20,000 more than last year – the “stronger together” attendees lining the parade route or marching in it, wandering the massive marketplace and taking in the shows. With all the legislation hoopla fresh in everyone’s minds, we are reminded that Pride is still essential, even in our enlightened-not-really age. It’s a miracle that we spend an entire very hot day outside but never seem to notice the heat. My disco nap afterwards is long and iron-clad, shoring me up for what turns out to be an excellent night out.

The next day, we head out for Broadway Brunch at Hamburger Mary’s, famous as the drag-themed burger restaurant that helped block Governor DeSantis’s bill. That activism sees the restaurant once again packing everyone – including families – in on a Sunday morning. In fact, a second seating has been added to the agenda. Host Angel Sheridan and the Brunch Bunch Dancers lay it on thick – as thick as the breakfast-skillet gravy – with gut-splitting gags and choreographed numbers from *Les Miserables*, *The Greatest Showman* and *Everyone’s Talking About Jamie*. In familiar drag-show candidness, the emcee reminds us that a second group of diners is outside waiting for the feast of fun. “Pay up and get out!”



Pride Parade. Photo by Doug Wallace



Lake Nona Boxi Park. Photo courtesy of Visit Orlando