

H2O Adventures

By Amy Nance, Visit Florida

From a turret in Cinderella's castle, there's a good view of the Magic Kingdom, and it extends farther than you think. If Orlando boasts the princess' quarters, Seminole County is her backyard paradise.

Just 15 minutes north of Orlando's major theme parks, 2,000 waterways promise adventure, from the majestic St. Johns River to the sprightliest of springs; from lakes teeming with creatures big to creeks laced with creatures small. Zip around by airboat or glide like royalty on a river tour. On the other side of Orlando, you'll find nature's calling the whole family to dive right in.

Steady your sea legs and climb on to the Rivership Romance for a family lunch cruise. The Romance leaves from Lake Monroe in historic Sanford. From your booth's huge window, watch 25 miles of the St. Johns River slip past. You won't miss a single egret or alligator while you enjoy the Romance's fresh fare. On deck, spot herons and ospreys amid the cypress and sweeping oaks. Moonlight cruises encourage dancing and strolls around the deck at sunset. Whatever the time, you'll forget it as you chart a course down some of St. Johns' 342 freshwater miles. Temperate and slow moving, you'll be lulled by the river's mysterious charms, including its northward flow and ancient flora.

Say "Hi" to Hammy Nale! This 12 foot, 600-pound gator greets you from her pen at Black Hammock Adventures in Oviedo. Barrel down Lake Jesup, home to more alligators than any other lake in Florida. On the banks at Black Hammock they number in the tens, and from your open vantage on the seven-seater airboat you'll lose count altogether. More than 100,000 years old and 16,000 acres, the lake hosts birds, bobcats and wild boars. On your 30-minute trip you'll see it all and at thrilling speeds. Take a night ride, if you dare, and claim an 'I Survived Alligator Sea' T-Shirt. Scared up an appetite? Stop for a gator bite at the Black Hammock Restaurant, right on the lake. Snack on ice cream from the gift shop and banter with Mike the parrot. Feeding is at 4 p.m. every Sunday, if the family wants more face time with the gators.

H2O Adventure - Airboat Hooked on the chase? Head to Lake Harney and the Jolly Gator Fish Camp and Restaurant, where Central Florida Airboat Tours steers the family around the backlands of the St. Johns River. Bill's Airboat Adventures offers yet more trips on the St. Johns (by appointment) with airboat tours that even include a shore stop.

Ready to get wet? Wekiwa Springs State Park is a dense semi tropical forest. All 7,800 acres of designated "scenic and wild" land cast you back to the rugged days of the Timucuan Indians. First, sink into the lagoon-like spring. This shallow, jewel-toned water is mild and clear, shaded by the rich, atmospheric foliage of oaks, sweet gum and pine trees. Sunbathe on the grassy bank, or try the quarter-mile walk from the lowlands to the sandy ridges, exploring eight plant communities as you go. Scan the treetops for bald eagles and the brush for black bears, or go horseback riding. Next, grab your paddles and slide along the Wekiwa River. Canoe rentals are available at three liveries. Look for Indian middens and the curious, funnel-shaped sinkholes that surround the Wekiwa. Get close to native aquatic plants like pickerelweed and eelgrass, and watch the speckled perch and largemouth bass go by. Discover Wekiwa's delicate ecosystem and tool around in the primitive playground as long as you like.

No kingdom is complete without an enchanted forest. Check out Big Tree Park and meet The Senator, a towering 138-foot, 3,500-year-old bald cypress, the largest in the country. Once used as a landmark for the Indians, this behemoth will delight all ages. The Senator's companion tree, Lady Liberty, was just inducted into the Tree Hall of Fame, weighing in at a staggering 61 feet. Want to monkey around on land some more? Head to the Central Florida Zoological Park, where you'll find rare and endangered animals and the Butterfly Sensory Garden.

Still thirsting for thrills? Seminole County is just a hop and a skip from the theme parks and the welcoming shore of Daytona Beach. The area's central location and low hotel room rates make it a great place to use as a base for these types of day trips. After getting your feet wet in the other magic kingdom, you'll have a hard time topping this aquatic adventure.

For more information on the above family-friendly adventures on the water in Seminole County, check out www.VisitSeminole.com or call the Seminole County Convention and Visitor's Bureau at 800-800-7832.