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STORY IDEA:

IF YOU THINK YOU'VE SEEN CENTRAL FLORIDA . . . THINK AGAIN

America's vacation capital is known for its natural beauty and tranquil atmosphere. It's this alluring environment that offers a welcome alternative to Orlando's man-made attractions and is one of Central Florida's best kept secrets: Seminole County, just North of Orlando. Although the border of the community is only five miles from downtown Orlando, it is a different world altogether from the theme parks and attractions for which Central Florida is renowned.

Those who have a "been there, done that" attitude about a visit to Central Florida will find Seminole County a delightful experience. This area is replete with genuine history, genuine natural wonders, genuine animals, genuine thrills and genuine vacation values.

Key to the appeal of Seminole County is a charming "old Florida" atmosphere, which is personified by Sanford's enchanting Main Street Historic District. Visitors can take a self-guided tour of the area that will take them past 22 buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places or stroll along the shady streets of the Historic Sanford Residential district to view outstanding examples of Victorian, Queen Anne and "Cracker"-style architecture. Antique shops, cafes, bookstores and art galleries also abound, adding to the turn-of-the-century ambiance of the community.

Also located in Sanford is Central Florida's version of the Love Boat: the Rivership Romance. The 1940's style Great Lakes Steamer offers daily luncheon and moonlight dinner-dance cruises featuring appetizers, fullcourse meals, table service and live entertainment. In addition to the Romance's spacious dining salons, guests can enjoy the cozy ambiance of the cocktail lounge or the outer decks as the ship winds its way along the tranquil St. Johns River.

The serene areas of Seminole County are complemented by its natural resources. Lush vegetation, wildlife in its natural habitat and a variety of waterways — including more than 2,000 freshwater lakes and clear-running rivers — offer visitors varied recreational opportunities and natural thrills.

For the ecotourist, St. Johns River Cruises offers leisurely nature tours along the St. Johns River Basin. River cruise captain, Ron Woxberg, guides visitors along the backwaters of the St. Johns offering colorful narration and insight into the abundant animal species surrounding the river, including more than 200 species of exotic and native birds, manatees, alligators, owls, wild hogs, deer and more.

Another wonderland of nature can be experienced on a canoe trip down the springfed waters of the Wekiva River, one of the area's most popular attractions. The Wekiva Marina is an ideal departure point for exploring the Wekiva, whose abundant wildlife and lush, semi-tropical vegetation have earned it a "scenic and wild" designation from the state of Florida. Visitors can travel the unspoiled waterway on canoe runs that range from 6 miles to 19 miles or enjoy the ultimate freshwater fisherman's paradise by casting for the catfish, bass and bream that abound in the area.

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Wildlife of another sort can be found at the Central Florida Zoological Park. The 116-acre compound — the only zoo in the area — emphasizes animal species education, conservation and preservation in a natural setting. Among its residents is an international ensemble of more than 300 animals including llamas, elephants, hippos, lemur, ostriches, leopards, cougars, monkeys and a variety of birds and reptiles. An estimated 250,000 guests visit the zoo annually.

Visitors with a taste for adventure will relish a fascinating look into the area's sights during an airboat tour of the 10,000-acre Lake Jesup with Bill's Airboat Adventures or Gator Ventures of Seminole located at Black Hammock Fish Camp. A flat-bottom airboat propels riders on an exhilarating trip over logs, sandbars and grassy marshes deep into the wild side of the 100,000-year-old lake, which has one of the largest concentrations of alligators per acre of any lake in the U.S.

For the shoppers in the family, Flea World is a definite must. One of the nation's top 10 flea markets, Flea World features merchandise ranging from garage sale rejects to rare antiques at the market's more than 1,700 dealer booths. The county also boasts three regional malls featuring major national department stores and specialty shops.

But perhaps the best bargains to be found in Seminole County are accommodations. While hotel and motel rooms in the area are similar in selection to those close to the theme parks, rates are — on average — one-third less than comparable ones found elsewhere in Orlando.

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