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FLORA, FAUNA REIGN SUPREME IN NORTH ORLANDO AREA

A Central Florida vacation experience is typically distinguished by experiences with some of the world's most famous man-made adventures. There are, however, some even more spectacular diversions to be found in the area.

In contrast to its sister county, Orange County, which is home to world-famous Walt Disney World, Seminole County, located just minutes to the south, is notable for its tremendous natural resources. Slow, lazy rivers, cool forests and spectacular spring-fed lakes combine with lush wooded areas to create a unique environment that offer visitors a genuine getaway experience.

Key to Seminole County's natural appeal is the lush tropical vegetation, cypress swamps and marshlands that comprise the fragile eco-system of the area. Seminole County's primary ecosystems are centered on its two main waterways: the St. Johns and Wekiva Rivers. Both boast an abundance of diverse plant and animal life that are vital in maintaining Seminole County's pristine ecological condition.

ST. JOHNS RIVER AND BASIN

Comprising the northern and eastern boundaries of Seminole County, St. Johns River is the longest navigable freshwater waterway in Florida at a total length of 342 miles. A distinct feature of the St. Johns is its lazy five to six mile-an-hour northward flow caused by the inversion of sea level. During dry periods, the river has been known to reverse itself and flow south.

With an average water temperature of 80 degrees during the summer and 60 degrees during the winter, the St. Johns River is a pleasing destination for sightseeing or year-round fishing. Lake Monroe, a wide point of the river, forms the northern border of the county and is a favorite of boaters and fisherman.

Just east of Lake Monroe is the St. Johns River Basin. Characterized by wide expanses of grassy marshlands and home to a huge and diverse plant and animal population, the area is also called the Central Florida Everglades. Many species of fish abound in the Basin, including largemouth bass, striped bass, sunshine bass, speckled perch, bluegill, shellcracker and catfish. A complex network of cypress trees, cattails, bulrushes, hyacinth and water lilies act as a natural filtration system for the river, cleaning it of organic waste and other pollutants and encouraging fish and wildlife to thrive. These plants provide shelter and nesting areas for many small animals and the more than 200 species of exotic and native birds that inhabit the St. Johns River Basin.

Wood stork, osprey, limpkin, rosette spoonbill, and stilts can be seen wading in the shallow water at the river's edge or perched high on a limb of an ancient cypress or slash pine. The endangered bald eagle and American White Pelican are often seen soaring overhead. The St. Johns River Basin is also home to a variety of other Florida faunas including alligators, white tailed deer, wild hogs, raccoons, bobcats and the Florida black bear, which is currently listed on the threatened species list. In the winter months, endangered Florida manatees can be seen feeding on aquatic vegetation in the St. Johns River.

WEKIVA RIVER

Located on the western border of Seminole County, the Wekiva River is fed by several underground springs that pump approximately 48 million gallons of crystal-clear, fresh water through the river every day. The river

flows from south to north, joining the St. Johns River 16 miles downstream. With miles of pristine waters flowing through the shade of an ancient and delicate semi-tropical forest, the Wekiva is a stunning illustration of primitive Florida, prior to civilization.

Several distinct biological communities can be found in and surrounding the river ranging from wet, marshy swamplands to dry, sandy, elevated plateaus. With the exception of Texas and California, Florida has a larger variety of native plants than any other state. Many of these native plants, such as the star anise, Spanish moss, and sabal and saw palmettos, can be found growing along the Wekiva River. The dense cypress marshlands bordering the river are thick with a variety of tropical ferns, palmettos and hardwoods like oak, sweet gum, red maple, bay, ash, Southern magnolia, pine and palm. The spider lily grows along the banks as well as saw grass and cattails, while wild grapevines twine around the trees and hang over the water.

In the river itself, native aquatic plants, such as arrowhead, bald cypress, eelgrass, pickerelweed and spatterdock, help keep the water healthy and clean. The exotic hyacinth -- introduced into the area in the late 1800s -- and hydrilla filter the water. The fresh waters of the Wekiva are home to several small fish including the Florida gar, speckled perch, pickerel, channel catfish, bluegill and the largemouth bass.

Like the St. Johns, the Wekiva River also is a natural habitat for many mammals including the opossum, raccoon, gray fox, white-tailed deer, river otter, bobcat and the Florida black bear. Amphibians and reptiles also abound throughout the river and along its banks. The American alligator, Florida cottonmouth, slimy salamander, southern toad and the endangered gopher tortoise are a few that can be observed basking in the sun.

Both the land and aquatic plants provide protection for Seminole County's wide array of birds. A few that call the Wekiva River home include the Southern bald eagle, American swallow-tailed kite, great blue heron, osprey, little blue heron, scrub jay, green-backed heron, white ibis, limpkin, pileated woodpecker and the red-shouldered hawk.

The best way to experience the river and its inhabitants is by canoe. Three canoe liveries service the Wekiva River and offer a variety of canoe trips, as well as other amenities such as nature trail boardwalks, picnic areas and horseback riding trails. The Wekiva River has been designated "scenic and wild" by the United States and Florida Departments of Natural Resources and, as such, has been protected from over-development and unregulated building. The state also protects the river with its designation as the Wekiva River Aquatic Preserve and as "Outstanding Florida Water."

Seminole County, with its central location and many natural diversions, is an ideal vacation destination for visitors who want to experience the best of Florida naturally.

Located in the heart of Central Florida, and within a 15-minute drive from its tourist-magnet neighbor, Orlando, Seminole County offers immediate access to theme parks, exciting entertainment and thrilling nightlife. Surrounded by the beauty of natural Florida, Seminole County also offers the classic Florida experience of peaceful rivers, fishing, boating, hiking and more. And it's all within an easy drive of Florida's fabulous Treasure Coast beaches and Kennedy Space Center.

For destination information call 1-800-800-7832 (USA and Canada) or 407-665-2900 (outside the USA) or visit www.BookSeminole.com.

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