19 Things to Do Around Orlando & Central Florida

With four theme parks, two water parks, two mini-golf courses, and a whole host of Disney resorts, there are enough ticketed and free(!) things to do at Disney World to keep you and your family busy for at least a couple of vacations. But every now and again, we love leaving the Disney dome to explore all the other amazing, fun things to do in Central Florida.
From taking in other touristy Orlando attractions to experiencing Florida’s natural beauty, there are a wealth of things to do around Disney World – no matter what you and your crew are into. So, whether you’ve got a night or whole day (or two) free, here’s our list of some of our favorite things to do in Orlando and beyond that don’t require Disney park tickets.

Things to Do Around Disney World in Orlando

Walt Disney World may be one of the first things that come to mind when most people think of Orlando, but there is so much more to do in this Central Florida city than visit The Most Magical Place on Earth. Give these Orlando attractions and activities a try if you’ve got some spare time during your next Disney World vacation.
Visit Another Theme Park

Let's start with the most obvious first: Go to another of the Orlando theme parks. Orlando is the Theme Park Capital of the World, so you might as well take advantage. Family-friendly thrills are just down Interstate 4 at Universal Orlando, as are SeaWorld and its exclusive sister park, Discovery Cove. More on the quaint amusement park side of things, Fun Spot in both Orlando and neighboring Kissimmee are perfect for wholesome fun like go-karts or adrenaline-filled rides like the SkyCoaster. Finally, although it'll take you a little over an hour to get there, LEGOLAND Florida in nearby Winter Haven is a colorful ode to those famous little interlocking blocks in theme park form, and a fun visit for families with younger children and LEGO fans alike.
Take a Dip at a Waterpark

Looking for some relief from the blazing hot Florida sunshine? Cool off at one of the Orlando water parks. With two different Disney World water parks, Blizzard Beach and Typhoon Lagoon, you don’t even need to leave Disney property. Volcano Bay is a lush hideaway at the Universal Orlando Resort. Meanwhile, SeaWorld’s Aquatica is a water park unlike any other in Central Florida, with its see-through tube slides through a tank that’s home to a pod of orca-like Commerson’s dolphins.

Watch the Gator Jumparoo at Gatorland

Technically, going to Gatorland should fall under our theme park suggestion, but this theme park-meets-wildlife preserve is an Orlando institution deserving of its own recognition. Gatorland was founded back in 1949, way before Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse came to town. Its title as Alligator Capital of the World is well-deserved, with hundreds of alligators and crocodiles calling the park home including babies, 14-foot-long monsters, rare white alligators, rescued gators, and more. There’s even a zipline over an alligator pit.
Get a Hole in One at Miniature Golf

For us, nothing says family fun quite like a lighthearted yet deeply competitive game of mini golf (other than Disney World, of course). Luckily, if there’s one thing the area has a lot of, aside from theme parks, it’s miniature golf: Orlando is filled with them! Indoors and outdoors, themed around everything from pirates to cheesy sci-fi films from the 1950s, there’s an Orlando mini-golf course for whatever weather is forecasted or mood you’re in.

For those looking to stay close to home (AKA your hotel room), the two Disney World miniature golf courses – Winter Summerland neighboring Blizzard Beach and Fantasia Gardens near Hollywood Studios – are both well worth a visit. However, the theming at Winter Summerland, especially the course where Santa goes on vacation in the tropics, makes it our favorite for mini golf at Disney World.

If you’d like a break from all the Disney magic, there’s a world of Orlando miniature golf courses to explore. For those visiting the Universal Orlando
Resort, go for the retro Hollywood Drive-In Golf at CityWalk Orlando – it’s even open late until midnight. Exploring the International Drive area? Try the popular Pirate’s Cove Adventure Golf. Or, if it’s looking like it might be a rainy day (or so hot that you’d rather not be inside), visit Putting Edge Orlando for 18 holes of air-conditioned, glow-in-the-dark good times.

Go to an Escape Room

Looking for some next-level family bonding time? Consider going to an escape room. If you’ve never tried one of these frustrating yet very fun activities, basically, you and your group get locked in a highly themed room and need to work together to solve the clues within in order to earn your freedom. While this may sound like a strange form of torture for some, if your family likes putting together puzzles or playing whodunit games, these kinds of Orlando attractions are right up your alley.

If you’re looking for escape rooms close to Disney World, your best bets are Breakout Escape Rooms or Escapology, both roughly a 15-minute drive from Disney Springs. Or, for the best escape room in Orlando, head on over to I-Drive and visit The Escape Game for six different rooms themed around a prison break, art heist, school playground, and more. International Drive is
actually home to several Orlando escape rooms, so check around to see suits your budget, schedule, and interests.

**Eat Like a Local**

Believe it or not, once you get past all the overpriced theme park fare, there are some mighty tasty eats to be had in Orlando, so feel free to indulge your inner foodie to your heart’s content. Of course, if you’re looking for a memorable meal with just a tad of pixie dust and little-to-no drive, Disney Springs has some top-notch restaurants. The I-Drive area is popular with tourists and Orlando foodies alike, particularly near Pointe Orlando and ICON Park.

For a truly local experience, try exploring areas like Mills 50 (or Orlando’s “Little Vietnam”) for some killer Asian food, visit popular Disney Springs bakery Gideon’s Bakehouse at its original location in Audubon Park’s East End Market, and more. Use apps or websites like Yelp or OpenTable to look at reviews or make reservations. Visit one of the city’s several farmers’ markets. The sky’s the limit – and your stomach, of course.
Explore I-Drive

Las Vegas has the Strip, and Orlando has I-Drive. International Drive is a tourist's dream, with shops, restaurants, hotels, and attractions on every block. Though long, this winding thoroughfare was made for walking. Seriously, finding parking here can be quite the task. So, once you've found a spot, keep it, and hoof it from there.

There are tons of I-Drive attractions to enjoy. ICON Park is home to the 400-foot-tall Ferris wheel called The Wheel, as well as Madame Tussaud's wax museum and the SEA Life Aquarium – with the kitschy Ripley's Believe It or Not just down the block. Or try the mind-bending WonderWorks over at Pointe Orlando. Plus, adults won't want to miss I-Drive's abundant nightlife, like the rowdy Howl at the Moon piano bar, lively Mango's Tropical Café, and more.
Enjoy a Dinner Show

We love food. We also love being entertained. Put them both together and you get what might just be the most enjoyable meal out there: the dinner show. And just like theme parks, restaurants, miniature golf courses, and escape rooms, there are a bunch of Orlando dinner shows. Disney touts two of them: The Hoop-De-Doo Musical Revue and the Spirit of Aloha Dinner Show. However, you don’t need to stay on Disney property to get your fill of food and fun.

Like much of the other tourist-centric entertainment in Orlando, I-Drive is crawling with dinner shows. In this one area, you can dine with pirates, solve a mystery, go to a luau, go to the circus, and jam out at a rock concert. Plus, if you make your way over to neighboring Kissimmee, you can even travel back to Medieval Times or pal around with Al Capone.

Discover Orlando’s Coolest Neighborhoods

If the only places you ever go on your Disney vacation are the theme parks or I-Drive, then you’ve never really seen the real Orlando. Orlando isn’t known as The City Beautiful for nothing – here you’ll find charming neighborhoods of
bungalow-lined, red-bricked streets speckled with oaks dripping in Spanish moss, and quaint downtowns dotted by hip hangouts.

While College Park and Winter Garden maintain their small-town feel, Winter Park is a vision of manicured perfection, its pristine Park Avenue area home to over 140 boutiques and cafes including The Ravenous Pig, a James Beard Award nominee. Thornton Park, Audubon Park, and the Milk District, meanwhile, are where Orlando’s foodies and young and hip go to play. Or, for a taste of Mayberry with a hint of Old Florida charm, check out Celebration, the town that Disney built.

Other Fun Things to Do in Central Florida

To enjoy the wilder side of Florida – we’re talking, kayaking down spring-fed streams alongside a lazy manatee and feeling the force of a rocket ship as it blasts off for space – you’ll need to look outside the theme park gates. So, take off your Mickey ears and drop your Ollivander’s wand, and let’s get to
learning about all the fun things to do in Central Florida if you’ve got a day or two free away from Disney World.

**Go Kayaking or Canoeing**

Row, row, row your boat gently down the spring-fed rivers of Central Florida. From the beaches to the freshwater springs, Central Florida is a canoers and kayakers paradise. In the picturesque Orlando neighborhood of Winter Park, a chain of lakes connected by canals lets boaters float peacefully through the backyards of some of the city’s most historic mansions. For a nearby paddle outside Orlando, make the roughly 30-minute drive to the aquamarine waters of Rock Springs. If you’re willing to drive a little bit farther, a whole world of possibilities opens up, from kayaking with manatees in Blue Spring State Park (1 hour) or Crystal River (1.5 hours) to floating through bioluminescent dinoflagellates in the moonlight near Titusville (1.25 hours).

**Stop and Smell the Roses in a Botanical Garden**
Though brutal in the summer, what makes people drip with both sweat and unexpected thunderstorms also makes Central Florida the perfect climate for growing all manner of beautiful things. And while walking down some of Orlando’s bougainvillea-strewn streets is pleasant enough, we recommend you pay a visit to one of the area’s formal gardens.

While you could certainly stick around Disney World and visit Leu Gardens (a sprawling, 50-acre paradise near downtown Orlando), if you’ve got the time, suggest you make the roughly 1-hour trek over to Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales. Surrounded by orange groves, the gardens play host to acres of meandering paths through towering trees, lush foliage, and a riot of azaleas, camellias, and magnolias in bloom. The star of Bok Tower Gardens is, of course, the carillon Singing Tower, which plays concerts twice daily each afternoon.

*Dive Into the Greek-Led Sponge Diving Industry of Tarpon Springs*

Hunt for a new loofah – and eat your weight in Greek food – in Tarpon Springs, the Sponge Capital of the World. Just 20 miles northwest of Tampa (1.75 hours), this coastal town is home to the largest Greek American population in the country, as well as a roaring sponge diving trade that dates back to 1890. While the tradition almost died out due to disease and red tide
algae between the 1940s and 1980s, it has since been reinvigorated and the Tarpon Springs Sponge Docks are thriving. Come here to pick through the harvest in one of the many waterfront shops, then stuff yourself with fresh spanakopita and baklava.

**Zip Around on an Airboat Tour**

There’s no outdoor activity in Florida quite as quintessential as jetting across the Everglades past alligators on a speedy airboat. But there’s no need to go all the way south to see gators – just hop on a local airboat tour through some of the most densely populated (alligator-wise anyway) bodies of water in the area. Consider this the ultimate Central Florida roller coaster. Airboat rides are thrilling and, sometimes, even a little educational. Plus, the best airboat rides will also offer a restaurant on-site that dishes up tasty gator specialties. For a short drive, we recommend Lake Jesup in nearby Oviedo (approx. 40 minutes) which plays host to more than 10,000 gators as well as the excellent [Black Hammock Orlando Airboat Rides](#).

**Have a Beach Day**
Florida is home to some of the best beaches in the country, with some beaches near Disney World that are just a short 1 or 2-hour drive away. For a shorter drive and rougher waves, Atlantic beaches like Cocoa Beach, Daytona Beach, New Smyrna Beach, and Vero Beach are the way to go. Or, for white, powder-soft sand and gentles waters, along with a 2-hour drive (or more), head to the Gulf Coast beaches like Clearwater Beach, St. Pete Beach, and Treasure Island Beach.

The one exception to the white-sand-beaches rule along the gulf is the seashell-covered beaches of the Sanibel and Captiva Islands. Because of how the islands angle into the gulf, seashells are constantly washing up on the shores of Sanibel and Captiva, making for the best shelling in all of Florida. Unlike Florida’s other beaches, you won’t want to walk around barefoot here, but you will get a lot of practice doing the Sanibel Stoop and Captiva Crouch as you hunt for treasures to take home. The farthest away suggestion on our list, it will take you around 3.5 hours to drive to Sanibel and Captiva.

**Plunge Into the Deep at Devil’s Den**
You could go snorkeling or scuba diving in the ocean or the gulf, but you really should be looking more in-land – roughly 1.75 hours away from Disney World at Devil’s Den Spring in Williston, Florida. Given its name by the early settlers because of the steam that would rise from the depths like smoke from the fires of hell on cold winter mornings, Devil’s Den is an atmospheric underground spring tucked inside a dry cave. With its crystal-clear water that’s perpetually 72 degrees, this 50-foot-deep sinkhole is a scuba or snorkeling experience like none other in Central Florida.

**Soar Through the Trees While Ziplining**

There’s no better way to experience Mother Nature than by flying above and through it just like a bird on a zip line. Of course, as the flattest state in the entire country, Florida probably isn’t the first place that comes to mind when you think of ziplining, but visiting the Canyons Zip Line & Canopy Tours in Ocala (1.25 hours) is sure to change that. With full, express, and even nighttime tours past limestone quarries and craggy cliffs and over turquoise-hued lakes, you get a breathtaking glimpse of natural Florida in all its glory.

**See a Rocket Launch at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex**
At the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, roughly 1 hour away from Disney World in Merritt Island, you can go behind the gates of the Kennedy Space Center, be dwarfed by the Space Shuttle Atlantis, and yes, if you’re lucky enough, even see a rocket launch. While the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Center is open year-round for guests, rocket launches only happen occasionally, so be sure to look at the launch calendar if you’d like to plan your trip around one.

**Go Manatee Watching**

Most states have state birds, state flowers, state animals, and even state trees. Florida also a state marine mammal: The manatee, or sea cow. And yes, that is a thing – we checked. So, when visiting Disney in Florida, you owe it to yourself and the Sunshine State to try and see these gentle (and adorable) giants.

Without a doubt, the number one place to go manatee watching in Florida is Crystal River. Roughly a 1.5-hour drive from Disney World, Three Sisters Springs in Crystal River can be home to hundreds of manatees at a time. Kayaking here is quite popular, and it’s also the only place in Florida where you can legally swim with manatees. For those who prefer a closer drive and
to keep their feet on the ground, Blue Spring in Orange City is only 1 hour away from Disney and has numerous boardwalks for viewing.

If you’d like to see manatees while visiting Florida, your best bet is to schedule your trip between November and April, with local populations tending to balloon from December through February. This is due to the water cooling in the Gulf of Mexico and forcing the manatees to retreat to the warmer waters of Florida’s bays and springs.

Track Down Some Sea Turtles

Each year, loggerhead sea turtles make their way onto Florida beaches to lay their eggs under the cover of nightfall. Sea turtle walks are held during the summer months, with some lasting until midnight or later. These romps through the sand bring visitors up close and personal to mama sea turtles making and filling their nests, and often include an educational portion before going out on the hike.

Keep in mind that space is limited and reservations are usually required for sea turtle walks, plus there is no guarantee that you will see a turtle anyway. However, if you are lucky enough to snag a spot and witness a nesting, it’s
sure to be an experience you won’t soon forget. Sea turtle walks are held throughout Florida, but the closest to Orlando is with the Sea Turtle Preservation Society in Brevard County.

Well, that wraps up our list of the best things to do around Disney World, in Orlando, and beyond. The City Beautiful and the rest of Central Florida are rich in natural beauty, fascinating culture, tasty food, and a whole lot of fun. What are your favorite things to do in Orlando? What are your top Central Florida attractions? Let us know in the comments. Then, be sure to pop over to our website to learn about how you can save money on discount Disney World tickets and get even more mileage out of your Central Florida vacation.
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Dean has been writing and blogging for over 10 years. He specializes in Disney theme park news including updates, openings, special events and general advice for travelers. He doesn't shy away from the good, the bad and the ugly. His previous work includes being a Cast Member at Disneyland and working as a travel agent.

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