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Spirit of the Swamp

# AIR-VENTURES IN KISSIMMEE

BY VAWN HIMMELSBACH

**I'M IN AN AIRBOAT**, on the edge of the Everglades. Spanish moss drips from cypress trees, reflected in water as clear as glass under a cloudless Florida sky. Watching great egrets and roseate spoonbills, I'm almost lulled into a Zen-like state. Almost.

After all, we're here to spot alligators. And despite the serene surroundings, there are more than 4,200 gators in these waters. Oh, and it's nesting season, which means there's a good chance we'll spot some females protecting their eggs.

Chris Miller, my guide with Spirit of the Swamp, seems unfazed by this fact. We're gliding effortlessly over the water when he suddenly slows down, coming to a stop. "Over there," he points toward a patch of sawgrass. I'm straining to see something in this river of grass, something that might view me as a tasty afternoon snack.

I make out the nest, but it takes a few minutes to spot the gator, still as a statue. She's so well camouflaged by her surroundings, I'm both impressed and terrified.

This is part of the largest subtropical wilderness in the U.S., supporting flora and fauna not found anywhere else on earth; it's why the Everglades has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. The king of this wilderness, of course, is the American alligator, and seeing them up close gives me a whole new respect for the Everglades ecosystem.

Spirit of the Swamp is an easy drive from my base at Magic Village Resort, a vacation home rental in Kissimmee, Florida – known as the vacation home capital of the world (yes, it's even trademarked) with 50,000

accommodation options, including 22,000 vacation homes.

From here, it's only a 10-minute drive to Disney's Animal Kingdom and a 10-minute drive to Orlando's city limits, providing easy access to the area's popular theme parks. But it's also my base for accessing Central's Florida's well-preserved natural assets.

While I did take advantage of my proximity to Animal Kingdom to ride a virtual banshee on the Avatar Flight of Passage, I also soared through the air in real life. This required getting up well before the crack of dawn and driving in the dark to a secluded spot in the woods. Not to search for banshees, but to prepare for a sunrise flight with Orlando Balloon Rides.

As the sun poked over the horizon, I stepped into what looked an awful lot ▶

Experience Kissimmee



Hot air balloon over Kissimmee

like an oversized wicker basket, with a roaring flame in the centre. As a first timer, my nerves started kicking in. Whoever came up with the idea to soar into the sky in a wicker basket?

But, like airboating, my fears dissipated as I felt myself effortlessly gliding – this time on air instead of water. We floated above misty swamps, subtropical forest and orange groves, all tinted pink from the sunrise. After the initial thrill of ascent, I was once again lulled into a Zen-like state. Until we had to land.

Hot air balloon operators never know exactly where they're going to land; it depends on where the winds take you. So a team in a vehicle on the ground chases the balloon to help coordinate a landing (in this case, in a small park behind a row of houses, causing curious residents to wander outside in their bathrobes, coffee in hand).

The excitement of descent – and a surprisingly smooth landing – was followed by a traditional celebratory Champagne toast, which felt well deserved, even if it happened to be before breakfast.

Another morning, I found myself in the air once again, but this time strapped to a zipline at Forever Florida, also an easy drive from my vacation home. At this nature conservancy, you might spot alligators, armadillos and white-tailed deer, but the real adventure is soaring through the treetops on a two-and-a-half-hour aerial adventure spanning seven ziplines and three sky-bridges.

Admittedly, I did wimp out on the Panther Pounce, which requires stepping off a seven-storey platform into a free fall to the ground below.

After action-packed days exploring Central Florida's natural assets (and overcoming a few fears along the way), I found plenty of ways to unwind: like a bone-in ribeye at the rooftop steakhouse Eleven at Reunion Resort – the area's premiere star-gazing destination – and table-side sangria at the historic Columbia Restaurant in nearby Celebration.

Best of all, I could skip the crowds and watch Animal Kingdom's nightly fireworks from the privacy of my vacation home's pool – an added bonus to a perfect outdoor adventure getaway. ☺

## When You Go

**WHAT TO DO:** First, go wild. Venture out with **Spirit of the Swamp** for an airboat tour into Central Florida's 100,000 acres of pristine wetlands. At **Wild Florida's Gator Park**, come face-to-face with a sloth and the other 200 critters and creatures that call it home. Next, take an urban adventure. Visit **Celebration**, a master-planned community founded by the Walt Disney Company in the mid-1990s. Modeled after historical American small towns, Celebration was named one of America's 10 prettiest towns. Explore it by foot, bicycle, carriage or Segway.

**WHERE TO EAT:** Founded in 1905, **Columbia Restaurant** is located in Celebration and serves up a century's worth of Latin-style family recipes. Popular menu items include the Original Cuban Sandwich, paella Espanola and the 1905 Salad, tossed tableside for your entertainment. Hungry travellers have a buffet of options at **Disney Springs**, located on the Walt Disney World Resort property but open to non-park guests too. Peek into the exhibition kitchen at **Morimoto Asia** before tucking into celebrity Chef Masaharu Morimoto's mouth-watering pan-Asian menu. Located on the waterfront, **The Boathouse** sets the table for upscale surf n'turf. Dry-aged steaks appeal to hungry carnivores while a raw bar and Gulf-caught seafood mean you might still have room to tackle The Boathouse's famously delicious, yet utterly gluttonous, desert: S'mores Baked Alaska.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Our writer stayed at **Magic Village Resort**, a concierge-style, gated community with 3- and 4-bedroom furnished townhomes that accommodate up to eight guests. Music-lovers take note: **Margaritaville Resort** is now open and features 1,000 cottage-style vacation homes, a hotel, expansive lagoon pools and a dine-in movie theatre. Travelling with your extended family? **Reunion Resort** offers luxuriously appointed villas and vacation homes and activities to suit everyone: a five-acre water park, spa, tennis courts and three private championship golf courses.