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Outdoor lovers can canoe on the little Wekiva River.

Fresh and almost free in Orlando North

Tourists can find affordable things to do in towns in Seminole County

BY ELEANOR HENDRICKS MCDANIEL
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Discover Orlando North, an area near Disney World that's off-the-beat-en track. It's a getaway packed with outdoor adventures, history, savory food and drink and an exuberant nightlife. The towns of Orlando North in Seminole County have all that at affordable prices.

Nature lovers can breathe fresh air in natural Florida. In 2009, Bill Weinage established a Green outdoor experience on Wekiva Island (www.wekivaisland.com), a small isle hidden amid upscale developments in Longwood.

The site has been awarded the prestigious LEEDS (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Certification. For 365 days a year, lovers of the Great Outdoors can kayak, canoe, waterboard, fish and swim on little Wekiva River which runs through the wooded area.

Entrance is free, but there's a fee for the use of equipment. An on-site food truck, called Lunch Without a Paddle, provides a unique culinary experience with a menu of lobster rolls, coconut shrimp baskets, Philly cheese steaks, quesadillas and more. And wet your whistle with soft and hard beverages at their open-air bar.

Gators, eagles and more

Imagine the excitement of the airboat ride at Black Hammock Adventures (www.TheBlackHammock.com) in Oviedo. Speeding over the waters of Lake Jessup that harbors the largest alligator population found in a Florida lake thrills adults and kids.

Gator spotting is almost guaranteed as the boat slows down next to patches of cottontail, eelgrass, laurels, hyacinths and other plants. Overhead, eagles, egrets and herons soar. Linger longer and enjoy all the venues on land.

A café serves traditional Fish Camp fare that includes the best fried gator tails around. (Yum!) Sit and sip in the Lazy Gator Bar with stunning views of the lake. And don't leave without an unforgettable photo-op holding a baby alligator.

Flora and fauna

In 1923, a traveling circus didn't know what they were starting when they gifted a rhesus monkey to the Elks Club in Sanford. Interest grew as the Sanford Fire Department got on board by acquiring a squirrel, a bulldog, a skunk, an opossum, a



At Tennessee Truffle Restaurant, traditional meets trendy.

raccoon and another monkey. Over the years more animals were added until the city had a zoo.

Today, the Central Florida Zoo and Botanical Gardens (www.CentralFloridaZoo.org) is still in Sanford, but now there are over 400 animals that include over 100 species, and it's a member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. It's also a non-profit wildlife, education and conservation resource for the entire family.

Entertaining, educational

Visitors can get close to many animals, such as feeding a giraffe or touching a one-horned rhino. There are entertaining and educational shows, and staff members stroll the grounds showing off non-threatening animals. All paths lead through lush foliage. Professional horticulturalists maintain the tropical gardens which feature specific categories: Health and Wellness, Butterfly, Wildflowers and Spiny Plants.

If walking, jogging, hiking, biking or horseback riding is more your speed, choose from one of three recreation trails that cut through Sanford, Oviedo, Longwood, Winter Springs and Lake Mary. It's an opportunity to enjoy some of the state's most beautiful scenery.

Hearty, authentic cuisine

The adventure continues when dining out around Orlando North. Diverse tastes are satisfied with menu offerings of ethnic, fusion cuisine, farm-to-table and Southern favorites.

People literally eat their way along Sanford's First Street. The Willow Tree Café (www.Hollerbachs.com) found a new life in 2009 when Theo and Linda Hollenbach opened their restaurant with their mission of introducing and sharing German Gemutlichkeit, which means happiness, friendliness and coziness. With unforgettable food and entertainment, they've succeeded.

The dishes are hearty and authentic. All kinds of wursts, beef, pork and seafood make up dishes, such as Sauerbraten, Eis-



Visitors bar-hop by catching a ride with Limo Cycle Tours.



Here is one of the displays at the Goldsboro Museum.

bein and Zigeuner Shrimp. But even carnivores enjoy the Vegetarian Spatzle Toss. Besides the usual libations, the bar pours German Beer, German wine and Schnapps. As a family food destination, prices fit the family budget.

Thursday through Sunday steps up the German experience when Jimmy Horzen and Eckhard Wachsmuth perform. The duo whips up the diners to laugh and dance as they sing, joke and play polka music on an accordion, Alpine Bells, spoons, the Alpine Horn and other instruments. It's a fun, spirited and enjoyable show.

Staples and sweets

At Tennessee Truffle, southern fare meets the creativity of Chef Nat Russell, a CIA graduate, as he updates breakfast and lunch staples. For instance, he cures the bacon for 15 days and imports Heirloom grits from Africa. And the biscuits smothered in gravy are to die for.

For a unique sweet treat, stop by Wondermade (www.Wondermade.com). Nathan Clark began making marshmallows as a special gift to his wife, Jenn. We're not talking the round balls found in every supermarket, but craft marshmallows, infused with a variety of flavors - some with a kick, like Marker's Mark bourbon.

But chocoholics have to veer

off to Lake Minnie Drive in Sanford to find Chocolate Compass (www.chocolatecompass.com). They'll end up drooling over a bevy of hand-dipped bonbons, chocolate cookies, truffles, ice cream and more. That shop has everything except Willy Wonka.

Booze news

Established and emerging breweries have set up in Orlando North. The beer boom began in 2012 when Hourglass Brewery in Longwood (www.hourglass-brewery.com) became its first microbrewery. Since then, five more have opened, and three craft breweries are scheduled to open soon.

For a night on the town, make that downtown Sanford. In just a few hours, you can hit an eclectic array of bars and taprooms. Much of that time can be spent in Celery City Craft taproom (www.celerycitycraft.com) that sports traditional pub fun of steel darts and weekly shuffleboard tournaments, all while guzzling 100 varieties of suds and 51 craft beers on tap.

Class it up at the Imperial (www.imperialwinebar.com) at Washburn Imports as you sample more than 40 beers, wine and small bites while sitting on imported antique furniture and listening to live music. Or bar hop on Limo Cycle Tours (www.LimoCycle.com), a pedal-powered open-air trolley that stops

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for a drink at all the hot spots on the crawl.

Town within a town

Take time to visit Goldsboro, an annex of Sanford. The former town was established to house the Blacks who worked in the farms, railroad yards and other regional industries.

It was incorporated by William Clarke and a small group of townspeople in 1891 and is the second oldest African-American municipality in the nation after Eatonville. Ironically, William Clarke was the brother of Joseph C. Clarke, the founding father of Eatonville.

Historic Goldsboro Boulevard is where you'll find a complex devoted to Goldsboro inhabitants, past and present. The Goldsboro Museum (GoldsboroMuseum.com) has archived the history and culture of the past, and also displays artifacts, photos and newspaper clippings.

Look for the salute to Zora Neale Hurston who resided there for a while. Across the street is the Art Gallery, Heritage and Art Garden. Inside the building are the works of local artists.

Outside you'll find a memorial to Trayvon Martin and other martyrs. Pasha Baker, director and CEO of the Goldsboro complex, says, "All the sites are necessary to tell our story." Check online for Goldsboro performances and events.

When you head back home from Orlando North, you'll have smiles on your faces and money in your pocketbooks.

Eleanor Hendricks McDaniel is a seasoned travel journalist who enjoys writing about girlfriend getaways, history, culture, food, wine, and some of the people she meets along the way. Her travels have taken her throughout the United States, Europe and other countries. Formerly of Philadelphia, she now resides in Ormond Beach. Follow her on Twitter: @ellethewriter, Instagram: @eleanor1004, Facebook: Eleanor.hendricks.mcdaniel and her website: flyby-nighttraveler.com.