

COVER STORY FLORIDA

Joyrides for adults

REAL ADVENTURE IN THE LAND
OF MICKEY MOUSE. RANJAN PAL
ENJOYS AN ADRENALINE
RUSH IN FLORIDA



Kayaking in the Everglades watershed



COURTESY BREVARD ZOO

WHISTLING THROUGH THE JUNGLE ON ZIP LINES, ONE FEELS AS FREE AS ONE'S PRIMATE RELATIVES

Zip-lining is to bungee jumping as snorkelling is to scuba-diving—not quite the real thing but with enough of an adrenaline charge and a solid sweaty workout. Ever since I chickened out of a tandem jump with my daughter off the highest bungee jump in the world at the Bloukrans Bridge in South Africa, I've had a lasting sense of regret. Now, some small measure of redemption is available as I clip onto

the zip line high above the tree canopy at the Brevard Zoo on Florida's Space Coast. The small wooden platform I am standing on is precarious and I can feel my heart pounding. I close my eyes and take a deep breath to calm myself down. Slowly I count to ten and firmly push off into space. Gravity takes over immediately and I accelerate effortlessly down the line, the tree platform in the distance rushing to meet me. It is exhilarating and

I use my gloved right hand to decelerate by pressing down on the cable. Eventually I come to rest with a satisfying thunk, both feet landing solidly on the platform. One zip down, eight more to go.

Earlier in the day we were briefed by a young trainer called Morgan, who showed us the proper way to clip-pulley-glove-clip onto a practice zip line and how to reverse yourself if you fell short of your platform and pull yourself up

From left to right: kayaking is one way to witness wild animals at the Brevard zoo; and (right) zip-lining is another

backwards hand-over-hand. There's actually not all that much to it if you stay calm and follow the procedure. They do tell you that if you get stuck halfway and are unable to rescue yourself, they will have to come up and get you and your

ride will be over. Enough incentive to pay close attention to Morgan as she goes through her moves. The basic course has nine zip lines and, whistling through the jungle, there is no better way for a human to go. One feels as free as one's primate relatives who swing so effortlessly from branch to branch. One particularly spectacular ride is across a pond infested with alligators and, as I zip across, legs at full extension with zoo visitors gawking

upwards, I feel like the heroic protagonist of an Indiana Jones movie.

Later that afternoon, we head for Wildlife Watersports located on a tranquil bay in Cocoa Beach's Thousand Islands. We are welcomed by a couple of shoeless surfer dudes who look like they spend their whole lives in the water. We are about to go kayaking and the rest of the group grip their paddles nervously during the safety briefing. Indians are



NO SOUND BREAKS THE SILENCE OF SHINGLE CREEK OTHER THAN OUR PADDLES SWISHING THROUGH THE CLEAR STREAM WATER

Cypress trees block out the sun and seem to press in on the creek

other than our paddles swishing through the water while the tall cypress trees block out the sun and seem to press in on us. One could almost imagine Ponce de Leon, Spanish conquistador and the man who 'discovered' Florida in March 1513, navigating his way along these shaded waterways in search of the Fountain of Youth. The water in the stream is clear and we can see right through to the bottom, where largemouth bass lurk, and pass a couple of Florida cooter turtles sunning themselves on submerged logs. I pull over for a closer look and the younger one slips off and into the water but the big fellow stays in place, still as a green-and-black striped rock, almost within touching distance.

As we push further along, the creek gets narrower and the waterway is crowded with tree trunks around which we have to navigate. It is a tricky business and our speed drops with all the awkward manoeuvring. Lori, our guide

generally not good swimmers and the prospect of being out on the big ocean must be intimidating. Happily for me, I am a veteran of several multi-day expeditions on big white-water in the Himalayas, and I spend my time taking photos of the group. I slip into the one-person kayak and love the familiar feel of the paddle as it slips cleanly and smoothly through the water.

The surface of the lagoon is quite flat and there is no discernible current. I paddle steadily and, as I round the first mangrove island, I leave behind the rest of the group. I revel in the feeling of being out on the water by myself with the sun shining brightly down on my orange

fibreglass vessel. I parallel the boat channel not too far from the shore and then cut across the bay to make for the other side. A group of teenage girls passes me in a small motorboat going the other way and I wave out a greeting. It takes quite a while to get to the far side where I can see traffic racing along the freeway and finally decide to turn the nose of the boat around and head home.

Later that week, kayaking on Shingle Creek in Kissimmee is a very different experience. It is a small waterway that is generally considered to be the northernmost headwaters of the Everglades and drains into Lake Tohopekaliga. No sound breaks the silence in the thick forest



DRINKING CHAMPAGNE OUT OF PAPER CUPS IS ALMOST A POST-BALLOON RIDE RITUAL

A hot air balloon ride provides a fresh perspective to Florida

by the Seminole Indians who used to inhabit the area. It covers about 100 sq km and spans 70 km in circumference. Trudy turns the engine off and brings the airboat to an idling halt in a side channel of the swamp. Her keen eyes have spotted some bubbles rising to the surface in a deep ‘hole’ and she tells us it is a large female alligator buried in the mud at the bottom waiting for us to leave. And we do. Trudy eases up on the throttle and the airboat glides across the water in search of further prey, so to speak.

As we move along the water channel, a couple of white egrets watch us warily from a distance. All of a sudden, there is a great rush of wings as a great blue heron is startled from its lair and flaps slowly away from us. The boat comes to a silent halt, just feet from a large piece of rotting log. We look more closely and realise with a shock that it is the snout of a giant alligator, mere inches above the waterline. We linger for a while watching it

from Experience Kissimmee, decides that we should turn around and I readily agree. But before that I ask her to take a photo of me with my camera and remove my cap with a flourish but at the same time succeed in depositing my sunglasses in the stream. Not wanting to lose them I lean over to grab them as they begin to sink through the sun-dappled water and instantly the kayak capsizes! I struggle to my feet in waist-deep water, drenched to the bone, and grab the kayak in an attempt to right it. But the hull is filling rapidly and this is going to be no easy business. I drag the kayak to the riverbank and finally succeed in turning it right side up and draining it. Then I climb in again; Lori takes the camera

shots that started it all and we begin the journey home, enough adventure and heroics for the day!

Next day we approach Shingle Creek again, but from a different direction and in an entirely different way. Our airboat skims across the placid waters of Lake Tohopekaliga towards the point where the stream joins with it. There are six of us arranged in two rows under the command of a chatty captain called Trudy. Headphones on to cut out the propeller engine noise and shades firmly in place to cut out the sun’s glare, we can hear her in our heads as she explains the sights and sounds of this vast empty space.

The full form of Lake Toho translates as “we will gather together here”, named



ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

The cosy little town of Celebration is an extension of Disneyland

the woods and past several man-made lakes. Scott stops to point out several interesting things along the way including the ubiquitous though peace-loving alligators, some of which are out sunning themselves on the lakeshore.

The grand finale to our tour of Florida was supposed to be a hot air balloon ride but it started to pour the night before which resulted in the dawn flight being cancelled. Now we have only one more night to go and thus we wait in the pre-dawn darkness. Finally, we get the green light and race to the launching area in the company vans, the large balloon wicker baskets rattling along behind us on the trailers.

Mrityunjay and I, the only men in our group, are requisitioned to help with inflating the blue-and-yellow striped balloons. So we stand there, holding the ropes over our shoulders while the burners spit fire and the balloon swells behind us. Soon it has filled up enough to drag the wicker basket upright and we quickly clamber aboard on the captain's command, four to a compartment as the balloon strains at the leash.

And then we are off, rising majestically into the air with the ground dropping quickly away below us. We soar silently through the dawn sky while I stare wistfully down at many of Florida's lush golf fairways and greens spread out far below us. The white dune buggies scurry across the courses like busy ants and I imagine the golfers intently focusing on their shots and finding their balls, oblivious to the onlookers above. The pilot manoeuvres the balloon up and down giving us a closer look at the swamplands and the orange groves, the freeways and the townships, passing quickly below.

Soon, he puts the balloon down in a clearing and, once the envelope is deflated and packed away, we celebrate with cheap Cook's California champagne in paper cups, very much a post-balloon ride ritual!

CELEBRATION IS TOO PERFECT A TOWN WITH WELL-MAINTAINED BIKE TRACKS AND BOARDWALKS

in nervous fascination but the alligator remains motionless. Turning around for home, we cruise back up the St Cloud canal to our landing stage.

After a hectic day of exhilarating but exhausting rides at Universal Studios, it is a good idea to unwind with a relaxing ride using one's own feet. So after a sumptuous breakfast of eggs benedict, blueberry pancakes and maple butter

French toast at the Market Street Cafe in the town of Celebration, we waddle over to a bike rental place run by an enterprising young man named Scott and his parents. Celebration itself is an extension of Disneyworld, an oddly too-perfect town. But it is certainly fun riding around the neighbourhood on the well-maintained bike tracks and boardwalks. We cover some eight miles, weaving in and out of

Gliding on an airboat through Shingle Creek requires headphones to block out the roar of the propellers



THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Air India flies New Delhi-Orlando via New York return for approx. ₹60,000. Several other airlines also do the run, with stops either in Europe or the Middle East, depending on the airline.

WHERE TO STAY

The Orlando area has a range of accommodation options. We first stayed at the **Ramada Plaza Resort & Suites** (from ₹4,500; ramada.com). The hotel offers suite-style accommodation which is good for families and can make special arrangements for Indian food at their Chutney's restaurant. On the Space Coast, we stayed at the newly-opened and very comfortable **Homewood Suites by Hilton Cape Canaveral-Cocoa Beach** (from \$130; homewoodsuites3.hilton.com), which are a stone's throw from the bars and restaurants of the cruise port. But the undoubted high point of the trip was our stay in a luxury 10-bedroom **vacation rental home** in Kissimmee (jeevesfloridarentals.com), which came with every facility including a swimming pool. Ideal for families travelling in large groups

and looking to economise on the high cost of a Disney hotel stay.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

> **Brevard Zoo** offers various levels of treetop aerial adventures. Zip lining is the most popular and you can go from the basic nine zip lines to 'Challenge Reloaded' and the ultimate 'Black Diamond' which throws in additional obstacles like a high-wire bicycle and a rock wall. For the less adventurous, there is the treetop canopy walk 20 feet up in the trees and two zip lines. For those with families, the zoo also has wonderful opportunities for feeding, petting and interacting with giraffes, lorikeets, rhinos and other animals. Guided kayaking trips and a train ride are also available as parts of a zoo admission package but the adventure activities have to be bought separately. Adults \$17.95, children \$13.95; brevardzoo.org

> **Sea kayaking** can be done on a tranquil bay in Cocoa Beach's Thousand Islands through Wildlife Watersports. They have a wide selection of one- and two-man kayaks and paddleboards to choose from. Private changing

stations, lockers and a basic level of instruction for beginners are provided. See wildlifewatersports.com.

> For a different river kayaking experience, go to Shingle Creek in Kissimmee and rent your equipment at The Paddling Center—kayaks, paddleboards, canoes. It also offers guided tours of the creek and nearby Makinson Island on West Lake Toho. For landlubbers, there are adjacent biking and hiking trails and outdoor picnic tables. Guided canoe tours from \$45, canoe rentals from \$13/hour; paddlingcenter.com.

> **Airboat rides** are offered by Spirit of the Swamp. You can take rides lasting an hour, 90 minutes and two hours—that way you can have enough time to find the elusive creatures of the swamp, particularly the alligators. Be sure to call and reserve beforehand—no walk-ins are allowed. From \$49.95 adults, \$44.95 children; spiritoftheswamp.com.

> **Cycling** is a good way to explore the picturesque model town of Celebration with its 1940s architecture. Rentals are available from Celebration Bike Rentals (tourcelebration.com). Scott

will take you on a guided tour of the neighbourhood along scenic winding trails and waterfront pathways—it is quite an easy and relaxed ride with no ups and downs and lasts about two hours. Scott is an entertaining guide and the bike trip can be an enjoyable antidote to the non-stop action at Disney and Universal.

> A **hot air balloon ride** is a fun and unique way to experience Orlando and Orlando Balloon Rides (from \$195 adults, \$99 child; orlandoballoonrides.com) offers safe and enjoyable rides lasting about an hour. Reservations are required two days in advance and due to the tropical thunderstorms that sometimes occur in the Florida area, one needs to confirm the flight at 8pm the previous night. If the flight is cancelled due to weather, you will be rescheduled to the next day so it is good to plan ahead and keep a day in reserve. Another tip is to wear the same casual and comfortable clothes and shoes as you would when walking around as it is no colder in the air than it is on the ground.

■ RANJAN PAL