

Travel:

A GREAT VACATION ALTERNATIVE... POLK COUNTY, FLORIDA

by Don Woodland

Beautiful Hollis Garden overlooks Lake Mirror in Lakeland, Florida.

The usual vacation in Central Florida means either staying in Orlando and doing Disney, or taking in the Tampa area and all that it holds. Well here's a third option that gets you outside of that box, and saves you vacation money.

Polk County is located east of Tampa and Southwest of Orlando. By staying in Polk County, you're only 30 minutes from Tampa and Disney. Doing this offers significant economies in food and lodging, and the county has some wonderful attractions to take advantage of as well—not the least of which is a county with 554 lakes. You'll also see a lot of the old Florida. Plus,

the centerpiece of one of Florida's cleanest, prettiest and safest cities --population 89,000. The hotel is also home to the best restaurant in Lakeland--the **Terrace Grill**. Everyone raves about the TG's crab cakes, but try the rack of lamb. It's sensational.

Adventures Theme Park in Georgia has revived the attraction and made it better than ever. All the locals are raving about the way the park looks, and congratulating Buescher for persevering through the damage of 3 hurricanes to get the place open. The attraction has retained

found nowhere else in Florida and dozens of fragrant magnolia blossoms. A 205-foot gothic and art deco bell tower is built of 2000 tons of pink Etowah and gray Creole marble cut from Georgia quarries. The structure houses one of the world's great carillons, which contains 60



The world's largest private aircraft collection, at Fantasy of Flight, in Polk City, FL.

At the Terrace, you're within walking distance to other restaurants in downtown Lakeland as well. And right across the street from the Hotel is the city's favorite bar and grill, **Harry's Seafood Bar and Grill**, which has a real New Orleans flair and casual atmosphere—serving three meals a day. (682-7974)

The Terrace overlooks Mirror Lake. And if you walk around this small lake from the hotel, you discover **Hollis Garden**. This extremely well-cared-for garden, which chronicles Florida's history, contains more than 10,000 flowers and ornamental shrubs. If you call ahead, you can get a guided tour, which is very informative. (603-6280).

Next to the Garden is a wonderful restaurant—the **Garden Bistro**—which is a convenient stop for breakfast or lunch, and overlooks Mirror Lake. (686-3332)

Polk County's favorite attraction has always been **Cypress Gardens**, Florida's first theme park. Just a few years ago, the attraction had fallen on hard times. However, the new owner Kent Buescher of Wild

the Ski Show, botanical gardens including an 80 year old banyan tree, and Southern Belles that made it

bells ranging in weight from 16 pounds to 12 tons. The total weight of the 60 bells is 61.5 tons. You can hear the carillon on the grounds every half hour. Also on the grounds is the beautiful **Pinewood Estate**, an example of Mediterranean Revival architecture. (www.boksancuary.org)

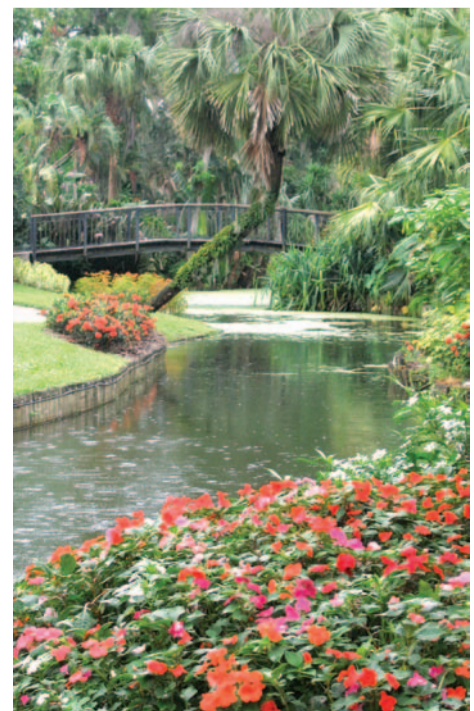
Those interested in aviation have two wonderful attractions they can visit right in Polk County. The **Sun n' Fun**--named Florida's "official aviation museum"--is best known for its April Fly-In. This annual event draws 160,000 pilots from all over. The **Florida Air Museum--part of Sun n' Fun**--displays numerous planes. Also interesting is the collection of Howard Hughes memorabilia at the museum. The exhibit has gained added popularity



Boys delight at ski clowns at the Cypress Gardens Ski Show

famous, while adding 39 very tasteful new rides, roller coasters, a new water park, and concerts. It is currently the least expensive by far of the Florida Attractions. And people love its undaunting size, which is somewhere between a small theme park and a state fair. (www.cypressgardens.com)

One of the County's most surprising things to see is Lake Wales' historic **Bok Sanctuary**, created by Dutch immigrant Edward Bok 75 years ago. It's located on the highest point on the Florida peninsula—what was an island in antediluvian antiquity, and contains 128 acres of gardens designed by Frederick Olmstead, Jr., plus 45 species of plants



The botanical garden at Cypress Gardens



The Bok Sanctuary in Lake Wales

you're in a county where those in the service trades still enjoy meeting tourists, because so many living in Polk County have never left there; they're real southerners. And for them, hospitality is still a tradition. The friendliness there is quite tangible.

A great jumping off point for your Central Florida vacation is the **Terrace Hotel** (www.terracehotel.com), in downtown Lakeland. This fully-restored 1924 jewel is located in the heart of Lakeland, and is



A scale replica of the Spruce Goose at the Florida Air Museum



One of many floral statues on the grounds of Cypress Gardens

since the release of the movie, “The Aviator,” which depicts Hughe’s life. (www.sun-n-fun.org)

Fantasy of Flight, in Polk City, opened in 1995, and is home to the world’s largest private collection of planes and other aircraft, including a Curtiss Jenny, a Ford Tri-Motor that appeared in the movie Indiana Jones, a B-17 Flying Fortress,



The Terrace Hotel in Lakeland

and the last airworthy Martin B-26 in existence. There are also WWII Flight Simulators you can try your hand at. These offer a variety of Pacific theater missions. Weather permitting, there’s also a daily aerial demonstration. The attraction’s Compass Rose Diner is a wonderful lunch stop. It is stylishly designed in art deco, and the food is surprisingly good. A guided tour of Fantasy of Flight’s air museum is available for those who call ahead. (www.fantasyofflight.com)

Architecture buffs visiting Polk County have an opportunity to visit some of Frank Lloyd Wright’s architectural work at the **Florida Southern College’s “Child of the**



Returning airboaters at Westgate River Ranch

Sun” campus. The building was started in 1938 and concluded in 1958. Guided tours are available if you call ahead. (863-680-4110, www.flsouthern.edu)

Polk County’s big surprise is **Westgate River Ranch**, a sprawling 1700-acre resort ranch—the only Dude Ranch on the eastern seaboard—one that offers just about anything you can imagine for amenities. Plus, you get to see the “old Florida,” with sweeping oaks and landscapes that look much like they did 500 years ago. There’s golf, miniature golf, tennis, horseshoes, shuttle-board, swimming, biking, trap and skeet shooting, horseback riding, boating (John boats), canoeing, fishing (also guided fishing trips), swamp buggy rides, airboat riding on Lake Kissimmee, and if you have a group, cattle driving. You can see Lamas, Buffalo, sheep, goats, etc. And every Saturday night, they hold their own officially-sanctioned Rodeo. And there’s a barbeque and hayride as

well. Accommodations include either hotel-style rooms (starting at \$79), courtyard suites, efficiencies, one- and two-bedroom cottages, or if you’re traveling by RV, they have one of the best-looking RV parks you’ll ever see. Special packages on all accommodations are available. (www.wgriverranch.com)

If this still makes you want to visit Tampa or Disney, here’s the best news of all. In northern Polk County you’re just 30 minutes from Disney and Tampa, and you can



Rodeo! At Westgate River Ranch

Golfers will find Polk County an exceptional golfing value. And there’s no shortage of courses; the County offers over 500 holes of golf. Golfers can receive a free golf vacation planner by calling 800-828-7655, or go to www.centralfloridasports.com.

Vacationing sports buffs who make their way to Polk County in late February or March can enjoy big league professional baseball at the training camps for the Detroit Tigers and the Cleveland Indians—both located in Polk County.

Those flying into Central Florida who plan on making Polk county home base for their Florida vacation, can shop the airlines to see whether it’s more economical flying into Orlando, or flying into Tampa, since the two are about the same driving time from Polk County.

For more information about Central Florida and Polk County, please go to www.sunsplash.com or call 800-828-7655.)

And thanks for traveling.

stay in a 3-bedroom luxury home that has its own pool, for only \$115 night (plus a modest cleaning fee for stays less than a week). These homes are available from **Sunsplash Vacation Homes**, in Davenport, Florida. The company has over 80 of these homes and they are all impeccable, and located in nice neighborhoods. Also 4 to 7 bedroom luxury homes are available at additional expense—the largest sleeping up to 12 guests.) Renting a home like this means that when it’s raining, or when your spouse wants to do something else, you aren’t stuck in a hotel room. You can further economize by eating some meals at home. And you can pack light, because you’ll have laundry facilities.

When booking a home rental with Sunsplash, you can refer to www.sunsplash.com, but it’s best to book by phone at 863-424-6193. You can request the size house you need. Also ask about golf packages or a rental car package.