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4 reasons to visit Orlando that have nothing to do with theme parks



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Downtown Winter Park is filled with lovely boutique shops and lively restaurants with sidewalk patios. JIM BYERS PHOTO

ORLANDO – Stephanie Gray could've moved to any number of American cities that already register high on the hipster meter. Instead, after living in New Zealand and Australia for several years, the Gainesville, Florida native migrated south to make her mark in Orlando.

Today the Credo coffee shop barista is one of a surprising number of committed, community-minded folks selling everything from vegan gelato to fair trade coffee in a city that's finally escaping the shadow of The Mouse. Orlando may not be the first American city that pops to mind when visitors think of great ethnic food or hipster cocktail bars, but that's changing fast. Here's a look at four cool parts of town you should check out.

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DOWNTOWN I had one of the best coffee lattes ever at Credo Downtown, located on the ground floor of an historic building with wonderful light and solid, old-time architecture. Gray told me Credo works directly with coffee growers to avoid the middleman and provide a better living to farmers. They also help out with Boys and Girls Clubs in the area and other charities. "I love what's happening in the city," Gray says. "It's a lot different from the corporate culture of Disney and all that, and it's nice to be part of helping it grow instead of working somewhere that kind of ethic is already established." Dove Cote is a lovely French brasserie in the Bank of America Building. The roasted Brussels Sprouts come with honey and chili; a magical mix. They also do a fine steak frites, salmon, short ribs and other dishes. Lake Eola is a beautiful spot with electric swans you can rent and lovely walking paths. There's a Chinese



pagoda at one end, just a few steps from a monument honoring Confederate soldiers from the U.S. Civil War. There are several wonderful cocktail bars, including Herman's Loan Office, a Victorian-style spot with a fireplace and The Woods, a second-floor affair with powerful, authentic cocktails from \$10. Check out great entertainment at the stunning Dr. Phillips Center.

WINTER PARK The main street of this suburban city, Park Avenue, features dozens of cool boutiques and sidewalk patios. Boca makes a luscious gazpacho with smoked tomatoes, as well as a fantastic Caesar Salad with kale and butternut squash and killer mussels with Sambuca in a creamy sauce that makes you wish you could lick the bowl. A bit south of downtown, Foxtail Coffee would look right at home in Vancouver's Gastown or Toronto's Leslieville. For a change of pace, try the Winter Park Scenic Boat Tours, which take you on a series of pretty lakes past glorious homes and gardens. Best of all are the shady canals that link some of the lakes; shady, narrow affairs lined with towering trees drenched in Spanish Moss. The Morse Museum of American Art in Winter Park has the world's largest collection of Tiffany glass.

MILLS 50 There's a large Vietnamese/Asian community in this area north of downtown. Vietnam Cuisine is a casual restaurant with wonderful, inexpensive food, while Mamak features great curries and other Asian items. Communita is a community-minded coffee and food spot in an old house, with cool, local art and a piano in one of the back rooms. Local markets sell wonderful Vietnamese noodles, colourful dragon fruit, bubble tea and other Asian specialties. The District at Mills 50 is a "co-op marketplace and eatery" that features works by local artists and artisan food producers, including vegan sorbet with Meyer Lemons and a carrot cake made with Canadian flour (I was told it's considered more pure than American varieties). Black Rooster Taqueria makes wonderful tacos (try the achiote pork, which is slow-roasted in a banana leaf) and bowls filled with tender meat, veggies and plantains; a kind of Mexico meets Colombia approach.

EAST END MARKET This is a two-storey complex that houses boutique shops and small businesses. Florida & Co. features local produce, including brightly coloured rainbow chard and organic cilantro (they can grow almost anything in central Florida). Skyebird features fresh juices with lemongrass, beets, Florida oranges and other goodies, as well as kombucha and raw food items. La Femme Du Fromage sells everything from Welsh cheese with mustard seed to aged cheddar from COWS Dairy on Prince Edward Island. Gideon's Bakehouse makes chocolate chip and other cookies the size of a small ant hill, with what feels like hundreds of chips per cookie. At Freehand Goods, Seth Daniels makes wonderful wallets and other leather gear. "People around here really appreciate artisan goods," Daniels tells me. "Tourists who come in say this place feels like Portland, Oregon or Asheville, North Carolina. Orlando doesn't get a lot of attention so it's great to be seen in that kind of light."

ALSO WORTH EXPLORING The Milk District, just a few blocks east of downtown, has great food options. Market on South does fine vegan and vegetarian food. For nature lovers, Boggy Creek has informative and enjoyable

air boat rides through lovely lakes and marshes. It's a good spot to see alligators and learn about Florida's critically important wetlands. Leu Gardens has glorious rose gardens, tropical displays and an historic home on the shores of a pretty lake. They've also sprinkled large models of dinosaurs about the gardens through the end of April so kids can have fun tracking them down. If you're a theme park person after all, Disney Hollywood Studios has several great Star Wars attractions and frequent parades of scary-looking Stormtroopers. The Beauty and the Beast show is even more popular now that the live action movie is out with Emma Watson.

WHERE TO STAY: The Embassy Suites is a great spot in downtown Orland for families or folks who want a bit more space. They also have a very good happy hour with filling snacks and free drinks. At Walt Disney World, the Doubletree Suites is a perfect family hotel with easy access to Disney parks.

MORE INFORMATION: www.visitorlando.com

DEAL OF THE WEEK: Scottsdale, Arizona is offering relief for Canadians struggling with the exchange rate. Check out their Scottsdale Loves Your Loonies promotion for special deals.

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