

ESCAPE TRAVEL // CULTURE // ADVENTURE

MOST people who come to this part of the world, smack-bang in central Florida, are here to see a mouse: Mickey Mouse, to be exact. Walt Disney World draws millions every year and Orlando, just under 20 minutes' drive away, is the city most visitors flock to as a result.

But if you want to steer clear of the throngs of mouse-ear-hat-wearing tourists, Kissimmee is the place for you. And for me, I discover, not being a big Mouse superfan myself. However, there is enough around this Disney-adjacent locale to add just a touch of stardust and I begin, appropriately enough, at the restaurant of a local Florida celebrity: singer Gloria Estefan.

The buzzing Estefan Kitchen on lively Margaritaville Street features live Cuban music and footage from some of Gloria's concerts. As her 1980s hits - Dr Beat, Rhythm Is Going To Get You - reverberate around the vast venue, plenty of people are getting out of their seats and, well, letting the rhythm get them before turning back to tasty Cuban plates like empanadas, lechon asado (slow-roasted pork) and ropa vieja (shredded beef, mains from £18, estefankitchenorlando.com).

The next day I take a stroll around Old Town Kissimmee, designed to look like an old-timey frontier town,



The pleasure dome: Epcot became part of Walt Disney World in 1994

stuffed with souvenir shops, bars and cafés, arcades and amusements (myoldtownusa.com). Then it's time for something even more exciting: a trip to Celebration, USA.

Walt Disney had a vision for an experimental, futuristic community back in the 1960s, which would sit under a glass dome, have a monorail and be kept free from litter (he hated litter, I learn from my tour guide Scott; tourcelebration.com). Walt wanted to call it Epcot but his idea met with criticism as it sounded like a weird human zoo (apparently it inspired the film The Truman Show). In the end, Epcot became part of Walt Disney World and later, in 1994, the Walt Disney Company established Celebration nearby as its perfect



Dr meat: The Estefan Kitchen on Margaritaville Street



HEADING TO ORLANDO THIS SUMMER? STAY FAR FROM THE CROWDS AT THIS QUIRKY NEARBY TOWN, SAYS LAURA MILLAR

Delightful: Kissimmee's historical downtown area resembles an 'old-timey frontier town'

example of small-town America.

Today its population is around 11,000. The mix of residential houses and public buildings, designed by a handful of renowned US architects, makes it an endlessly desirable place to live, with its own hospital, school, golf course, cinema and church. The spacious homes, all with colourful, neat gardens arranged around a series of pristinely kept squares, are classic white-picket-fence style and can go for anything up to \$10million. The very first show home to be constructed

here was aimed at appealing to future buyers, with subtle Disney touches: elaborate porch columns are based on Cinderella's castle, with wooden cutouts, lamps and miniature hedges all shaped like Mickey's head.

It's utterly delightful but residents have to obey fairly strict rules. You can't repaint the front of your house a different colour; the plants in your garden have to be approved by landscapers; and no new home can be over three storeys high. It's suburban perfection, like Desperate Housewives (a scene from which was actually shot here, although it never actually made it to the screen). Scott grew up here, however, and says it was a great, safe community in which to live.

On its outskirts are swampy forests that ultimately lead to the Florida Everglades. I get a taste of the area with an airboat ride at Wild Florida Safari Park (from £27, wildfloridairboats.com), zipping through marshland and past alligators. Then I spend my final evening at Disney Springs, a huge entertainment and dining district that sits just outside the theme park itself (disneysprings.com). At the Disney Style store, I'm tempted by a Minnie headband. Maybe I'm more of a Mouse fan than I thought.

For info, see experiencekissimmee.com and visitflorida.com



Pristine living: Houses on Celebration Avenue and a fountain in the Old Town



Flights to Orlando from £447, tui.co.uk; stay at a four-bed villa at Magic Village Views (sleeps up to 8) from £288pn; magicvillagevacationhomes.com



Dip in: The pool at Magic Village Views in Kissimmee

TRAVEL // CULTURE // ADVENTURE **ESCAPE**



DETOX THEN RETOX

Just because you're on a hedonistic holiday to Ibiza doesn't mean you have to give up on your fitness regime. Hardcore boot camp Barry's is launching a pop-up residency at the Destino Pacha Resort this summer, where you can book classes and workouts as payback for larging it the night before. Four outdoor classes will run daily, including Barry's signature HIIT workout, taught by the brand's UK trainers.

From about £30 a class, barrys.com/barrysxpacha

The HOT List
ISLAND WORKOUTS TO BIG-CAT TRIPS
compiled by **LAURA MILLAR**

GET IN GEAR FOR THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

Stunning scenery plus ultimate freedom: that's the dream road trip. And now you can get inspired to plan your next one with Lonely Planet's new guide, Epic Road Trips Of Europe. From the windswept wild Atlantic Way in Ireland to cruising the coasts of Italy (below), it's full of fact boxes for each route, vehicle hire information, practical tips and illustrated maps.

Out August 16



TIGER, TIGER...

If you've got jungle fever, head to West Midland Safari Park, where its new luxury lodges overlooking the tiger enclosure will open in the autumn. You could be sleeping just a whisker away from the park's magnificent Sumatran tigers, immersed within the brand-new tiger habitat. Two of the lodges sleep five, with private terraces featuring sunken hot tubs, while the other two sleep seven. All of them have open-plan living spaces, stylish interiors and floor-to-ceiling windows so you won't miss any tiger action.

Stays include dinner, breakfast and two-day admission to the park. From £790pn, safari-lodges.co.uk

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