

*Angelina Villa-Clarke looks beyond Orlando's theme parks, from historic towns to untouched nature, to discover a different kind of thrill*



In bloom: pretty Winter Park is a far cry from the crowded theme parks

Travel *with* Cathy Winston

**L**ITTLE BIG Mountain has a string of alligator teeth around his neck, a shaved bone through his septum and limbs decorated with ornate tribal tattoos. Sat on the banks of Lake Tohopeckalliga, in Osceola County, Florida, he easily falls into conversation about how his ancestors, members of the Jororo Native American tribe, survived in the alligator-infested Everglades for hundreds of years.

"Back then it was not unusual for alligators to grow to over 20 feet," Little says, explaining how the Jororos would have hunted the dangerous animals with arrows and spears. "Even now, only 10 per cent of people survive alligator attacks," he adds ominously.

Looking at the teeth around his neck, it's clear his relatives must have been pretty good at the task in hand.

One of six siblings, Little is a fourth-generation Native American and as a child, travelled with his family across the US performing and

educating others about his culture. These days, he has taken on the role of a living-history museum close to the lake, just outside of Orlando. The replica Native American village is made up of traditional chickee huts, filled with artefacts, some dating back thousands of years, open fires for cooking and thatched "rooms" where weapons and everyday objects would have been crafted.

Found just a 40 minute drive south of Disneyworld, Lake Tohopeckalliga - or Toho, as it is locally known - is a world apart from the Florida that most tourists experience. Here, there are no Mickey ears to be seen, no screaming heard from high-adrenaline rollercoasters and (most importantly, perhaps) no queuing to see its sights.

Instead, this is a slowed-down Florida, where time seems to have stood still and where visitors can

immerse themselves in the area's natural beauty. Surrounded by towering cypress trees and draped in Spanish moss, the serene Lake Toho stretches over 22,000 acres and, due to its largemouth bass that grow to huge sizes, is most famous for its fishing competitions.

For visitors, the best way to explore it is on an airboat tour, such as those offered by Boggy Creek Airboat Adventures. Reaching high speeds, you glide across the surface of the water, the wind whipping your hair as you sit on the elevated seats on the boat's hull. As you zoom around, the eagle-eyed captain suddenly slows the boat down when he spots anything of interest, his fingers on his lips for silence - snail kites glide over the marshes, bald eagles appear as if from nowhere to dive into the bulrushes and camouflaged alligators are found hiding amid waving



Foodie's delight: Plant Street Market in Winter Park is a far cry from the crowded theme parks. Inset, left: the Charles Mosner Morse Museum of American Art

maiden-cane and hydrilla grasses.

While Orlando may be dubbed the theme park capital of the world, with 74 million visitors recorded in 2022, there is a surprisingly large number of little-known natural and cultural activities, all in reach of the city. A home rental is one of the most practical ways to enjoy all the region has to offer. Seeking more flexibility

than that afforded by hotel stays, I checked in to a modern townhouse, by Homes & Villas by Marriott Bonvoy, in the ChampionsGate residential area, south of downtown Orlando. Close to supermarkets, restaurants (and the parks if you did want to spend some time there), the rentals have open-plan living, en suite bedrooms, high-tech kitchens, a laundry