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Orlando's Bay Hill Golf Club is home to the Arnold Palmer Invitational.

Making the most of a kid-free trip to Orlando

MORE THAN JUST AMUSEMENT PARKS

RON PRADINUK

I HAVE spent many memorable times over the years visiting the Orlando, Fla., theme parks with my children. We went there from when they were too short to go on some of the rides to when I thought I was risking life and limb joining them on death-defying thrill rides.

On this most recent trip, however, there would be no thrill rides, no lining up at Disney or Universal, and no "must-have" souvenirs that the kids absolutely needed — in fact, no children at all.

Instead, it was my brother-in-law, John Thomson, and I travelling together to Orlando to escape the last vestiges of winter. We got to Orlando on the early Sunday morning Flair Airlines flight, arriving in time to get to the Bay Hill Golf Club and catch the leaders battling through the final holes of the Arnold Palmer Invitational.

After that, we were on our own private food and beverage tour, finding interesting things to do during the day, and searching for shows and other entertainment options to pass the evenings.

We didn't have to go far. Only a three minute walk from the Wyndham Resort property where we stayed, was the

burgeoning new tourism destination area along International Drive.

It's anchored in no small part by the recently rebranded ICON Park, a 20-acre walkable entertainment and restaurant district, featuring a couple of major rides that could rival some of those in the theme parks.

Unless my grandchildren somehow convince me, I am no longer interested in swinging around in high-altitude circles at breakneck speeds. Instead, we watched those who chose the Starflyer ride as they silently made their 135-metre ascent to the top — then listened to their screams as they twirled around the main pole at 70 kilometres an hour until they touched ground again.

We did enjoy the decidedly tamer ICON Wheel, which rises to about the same height — but takes 23 minutes to complete the circle back to the starting point. The large cabins are comfortable and the views afforded of the entire Orlando region can be spectacular, especially at night. After dark, the park is fully lit and extremely impressive from ground level — or from up in the air.

While there are more than 40 restaurant and bar options within ICON Park, there are dozens more nearby.

Orlando is also the home of many of the best performers in the U.S. Denise Spiegel, director of public relations for Visit Orlando, said "Orlando attracts such great talent. Theme park entertainment leads the rest of the destination in motivating others to get very high quality performers for the dinner shows and downtown clubs".

Those who choose to spend most of their time at the theme parks are missing out on what the city has to offer as a culinary centre, as well.

A number of celebrity chefs have opened restaurants and "there is a diversity of food offerings many will be surprised at. There are over 40 international cuisines represented

in Orlando," Spiegel said.

John and I would discover that ourselves when we took in the Rock Dinner Show at the Orlando Forum. With a menu created by award-winning executive chef Russell Booth, the meal was much better than what you might expect from a dinner theatre — where entertainment is what usually counts most to patrons.

And deliver entertainment value this show did. The Rock Forum is a Vegas-style presentation, with all the usual lighting and effects. The quality of the celebrity tribute impersonators led to plenty of spontaneous applause from the audience. An array of impressions — from Tina Turner to Adele — were capped off with a stunning portrayal of Prince from a talent whose voice and athleticism were the highlights for both John and me.

We are both avid boat people, so we jumped at the idea of trying the highly advertised Boggy Creek Airboat ride in the Kissimmee area, only a few kilometres from Orlando.

We saw more alligators than we are likely to ever meet close up in the wild again. Nature was at its best in presenting us with a number of bird species and beautiful water lilies. We used a few speed bursts to find more gators and waterfowl near the shoreline.

The Boggy Creek facility is also a historical learning centre, whose restaurant serves some of the best traditional dishes of the region. Catfish and swamp cabbage stew are two of the more popular menu items.

In front of traditional Chickee Huts, Native American heritage is brought to life daily by an elder who shares stories of the past and Indigenous culture.

Back on International Drive, we decided to take in more of the attractions at ICON Park. If I were to come back with family I would definitely do repeat visits to at least two of the attractions. Everyone should visit the



Skeletons: Museum of Osteology, is an educational display of over 500 skeletons.

Sea Life Orlando Aquarium.

John Goodman, director of sales at the neighbouring Wyndham Resort summed its defining difference best. "It is very entertaining. But it is an even more exceptional place to go learn," he said. "The species have not been put there just to entertain, but are presented as a genuine informative experience on marine biology."

The most unique attraction of them all, Skeletons: Museum of Osteology, is an educational display of more than 500 skeletons, none of them taken because animals or birds were killed — but rather gathered by Jay Villemarete, who started collecting them when he was a child over 40 years ago.

While golf was not a prime objective on this trip, we did play a couple of rounds, one of them on the Celebration Golf Course in the community of the same name.

Designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr.

and his son, it is an undulating course with lush playable fairways, which made for an excellent way to cap off the trip.

If you go:

This was my first trip on a Flair Airlines flight and I was impressed by the aircraft, the flight crew, and especially the on-time performance, which allowed us to get to the Arnold Palmer on time.

While we dined close to International Drive most of the days, we did spend a fun evening at the Sea Dog Brewing Company. Its origins are in Maine so fish and chips were the natural choice. Many of the brews were from that state as well.

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