

ORLANDO FOR AMRO

By Neville Walker

NOT even cloudy skies and steamy humidity could dampen my holiday spirit for long as I landed at Sanford, the charter airport for Orlando. Like most people, I associated Orlando with theme parks, and I wondered if it would be a bit full-on and commercial. But the drive south from the airport dissolved any doubts. For a city whose fame is built on fantasy, Orlando looked reassuringly real - lots of greenery, wide lakes, and a proper downtown with skyscrapers. And as my mood brightened, so did the hot, muggy weather.

My hotel, the Hilton Garden Inn, was on International Drive, the commercial strip that runs south from Universal Studios. That first night I pulled onto I-Drive and let the neon backdrop roll by until something took my fancy: a Tex Mex place. Close by was the **Karma Bar** (8723 International Dr, Orlando FL 32819 Tel. 407-903-9052) - big and buzzing, but with a real neighbourhood feel. Among the crowd there were many women.

The next day I met with Diane Berube of GayDays Inc, organisers of the annual Gay Days at Disney World, now in its 16th year. Something that started small - organised by the local LGBT Community Centre - has blossomed into a major event attracting 140,000 visitors annually. Centrepiece of the event is the **Gay Day** at Disney itself. It's on Saturday 3rd June in the Magic Kingdom: gather at the castle for the 3 o'clock parade and wear red to be seen. Visiting Disney World is a pretty gay-friendly experience at the best of times, from the sweetly camp It's A Small World at the Magic Kingdom to the hi-tech fun of Honey I Shrank The Audience or the unintentional hilarity of the World Showcase Lagoon at Epcot, where Britain - fish and chips, Boddington's Beer, Mary Poppins -

comes off better than some other countries. Many visitors find Universal Studios more adult-friendly with attractions like Terminator 2:3D and Shrek 4-D, exhilarating rides like Back To The Future and Men In Black and live street music from the Blues Brothers. There are dozens of smaller attractions around Orlando, from the Titanic exhibit on I-Drive to the lovely Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art in classy Winter Park. Many can be visited with a 2, 3, 5 or 7 day Go Orlando Card, which cuts down the cost. Shopping is an Orlando must: the **Florida Mall** (8001 South Orange Blossom Trail, Orlando FL 32809 Tel. 407-851-6255) is packed with big names, including Macy's, Saks Fifth Avenue, Banana Republic and retail gay mecca Abercrombie & Fitch.

There's a full gay scene with bars, clubs and a men's health club and sauna spread throughout the city - for a pub crawl you'll need your car. The most famous gay landmark in Orlando is west of downtown along Orange Blossom

Trail. **The Parliament House** (410 N. Orange Blossom Trail Orlando, FL 32805-1789 Tel. 407 425-7571) is a former motel converted into a gay resort. It's unbelievably cruisy and its Sunday tea dance is the social centre of Central Florida. It might not be the most restful place to stay, but this raunchy, unpretentious place is the perfect antidote to the smart, preppy **Lava Lounge & Cafe** (1235 N Orange Ave, Orlando FL 32804-6411 Tel. 407-895-9790) and the chic dance club, **Pulse** (1912 South Orange Avenue, Orlando FL 32806 Tel. 407-649-3888) I had a blast. Next day I headed for **St Petersburg** on the Gulf Coast where there's a gay strip west of downtown, including the city's largest gay bar, **Georgie's Alibi** (2266 Wilton Dr, Fort Lauderdale FL 33305 Tel. 954-565-2526). It's a big, slick video bar with a mixed but mostly male crowd, cute and well worth checking out. My home in St Pete's was the **SunCoast Resort** (3000 34th St S. St Petersburg, FL 33711 Tel. 727-867-1111), another former motel but without The Parliament House's frantic edge. It's like a miniature Yumbo Centre, the twist being that here you never have to leave the hotel because it has all the shopping and entertainment you'll need. SunCoast has a laid back, hospitable vibe and it's popular with older men, though it attracts all ages. The poolside tiki bar is the place to make friends.

St Pete's is famous for the astonishing white coral beaches that fringe the Gulf coast for mile after mile, too vast ever to be crowded. The most stunning is **Fort deSoto beach** (3500 Pinellas Bayway S.,Tierra Verde, FL 33715), a national park that's protected from development. On my last night in Florida it seemed a good a place to watch the sun sink over the Gulf of Mexico before heading back to SunCoast for another dose of that good old southern hospitality.

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