

Coast to country

Pretty parks, pristine sands and Peppa Pig show a new side of Florida for both families and couples, finds **Cathy Toogood**

It's more than 30C and the shade from oak, palm and pine trees is much appreciated. Zebra longwing and monarch butterflies flutter among purple agapanthus and I smile as I spot a rabbit darting into some foliage. I'm only an hour's drive away from Florida's Walt Disney World Resort, but my serene surroundings feel a world away.

The inscription above the entrance to Bok Tower Gardens tells visitors to make the world "a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it". These 250 acres of landscaped gardens, woodland, the art deco Singing Tower (pictured) and 1930s-built El Retiro mansion are testament to the fact that Dutch writer Edward Bok did exactly this. And a fam trip to

explore some lesser-visited areas of central and southwest Florida reveals plenty of surprising beauty spots dotted around the Sunshine State.

GREEN SCENE

The gardens are in Polk County, a laid-back slice of central Florida between Orlando and Tampa, which is an excellent recommendation for clients who'd like the option to dip into the nearby Orlando action but with a calmer base to retreat to.

Villas are a popular accommodation choice here with large complexes in cities such as Davenport and Haines City, along with hotels in lakeside spots such as Lakeland and Winter Haven, which come with ➤

Bok Tower Gardens
PICTURE: Shutterstock/Charlotte Shutter

DESTINATIONS

THE US | FLORIDA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Peppa Pig World; downtown Lakeland; Frank Lloyd Wright architecture at Florida Southern College Campus PICTURES: 2021 Snap Out Loud Photography, LLC/Chris Stephenson; Polk County Tourism and Sports Marketing

vibrant places to eat and drink on their doorsteps.

There's plenty in Polk County to attract adults travelling without children, from Bok Tower Gardens to the largest single collection of architect Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings at Florida Southern College Campus. Advise clients to book a tour here to understand the genius behind the architect's methods, such as how the layout of the buildings were designed to direct which rooms you spend your time in.

Couples will also enjoy its sophisticated dining scene. Latin American restaurant *Nineteen61* in Lakeland is buzzing even on a Monday evening, serving up dishes such as traditional Peruvian paella with scallops, shrimp, clams and lobster.

MUDDY PUDDLES

But in recent years, Polk County has worked to appeal more to families. Joni Allen, tourism industry sales manager at Visit Central Florida, says: "We've completely flipped the market. We used to be an older market but we're more of a family destination now and we're really pleased. Peppa nailed that."

The Peppa Pig Theme Park opened in 2022 next to Legoland Florida Resort, on the site of the former Cypress Gardens, and a new Sea

“Peppa Pig Theme Park is a Certified Autism Center, with sensory guides for all rides and quieter spots

Life Florida Aquarium that opened in June 2025. Smaller and less crowded than some other Florida playgrounds, the Peppa Pig Theme Park is perfect for children under the age of six. After queuing for mere minutes, I test out Daddy Pig's Roller Coaster before posing with Peppa herself at a meet-and-greet. As a Certified Autism Center, there are sensory guides for all rides and plenty of quiet spots to take a breather, including an air-conditioned cinema room.

Legoland itself has more than 50 attractions and a water park. Pre-teens will love its rides and Miniland USA, with recreations of everything from Bok Tower to the Daytona race track made out of colourful blocks.

Away from the theme parks, Bok Tower Gardens also has a dedicated children's garden, while Bonnet Springs Park – Polk County's largest ➤



POLK COUNTY Solterra Resort

The villas in Davenport, just south of Orlando, feel like a relaxed home-away-from-home with each property individually decorated by its owner. With the largest villa sleeping up to 28, Solterra Resort is perfect for big groups or those who want the flexibility of self-catering. The resort's amenities include a heated pool, lazy river, fitness centre and sports courts.

solterresort.com

The Terrace Hotel Lakeland

First opened in 1924, this 88-room art deco hotel in Lakeland has hosted famous guests including Frank Sinatra and Henry Ford. Due to its age and history, all rooms are unique in shape and size and some have lake views. The shops and restaurants of Lakeland are a walk away. From £121 per night for a King Room.

hilton.com

PARADISE COAST

Naples Bay Resort & Marina

The Naples Bay Resort & Marina maximises its surroundings – all 87 rooms and suites have balconies and a waterfront view. Guests have access to the Naples Bay Club next door where there are five pools, a spa, sauna, steam rooms, a gym and tennis courts, while Naples' 5th Avenue is close by. From £140 per night for a King Superior Waterway Room.

naplesbayresort.com

Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort and Spa

Set on a beautiful stretch of powdery sand on the Gulf of Mexico, this laid-back resort has 310 rooms and suites, a pool, gym and spa. Sit looking out over the ocean at its restaurant The Deck at 560 or snack on lighter bites from its 560 MKT grab-and-go market.

From £190 per night for a King Room.

hilton.com



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Naples pier; the fam trip group enjoys a sunset cruise; writer Cathy Toogood learns about the area with Naples Bicycle Tours PICTURES: Shutterstock/Delpixel

city park, close to downtown Lakeland – attracts families with its giant treehouse, playgrounds, nature trails and the Florida Children’s Museum, which is inside the park.

WILD PARADISE

Another Florida destination working hard to attract families is its Paradise Coast – consisting of Naples, Marco Island and the Everglades. A three-hour drive south from Lakeland, I meet Laura Radler, manager of the Edgewater Beach Hotel and member of the Tourism Development Council in Naples, who explains the area was once seen as a mainstay of older travellers but now, the visitor demographic is shifting. “Our guests are changing to more families and multigenerational groups as more places to stay are being offered, bringing extra variety,” she says.

The Edgewater Beach Hotel is a prime example of a property to recommend to families wanting to relax on the Paradise Coast’s pristine beaches. Set on the Gulf, the all-suite hotel has rooms sleeping up to 10, and all come with kitchens.

As well as its powdery sands, Paradise Coast’s exciting wildlife is a big selling point for both families and animal-obsessed adults too. Sightings in the Everglades may include alligators and manatees, while an Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary a half-hour drive north of Naples means the chance to scour the bald cypress forest for black bears from a buggy-friendly boardwalk. For child-free travellers, there are also beaches, a high-end dining scene and designer shops to browse.

“On a bike tour, I learn Naples has been attracting tourists seeking sunny climes since its first hotel opened in 1889

This diverse appeal is nothing new here. While exploring with Naples Bicycle Tours, I learn Naples has been attracting tourists seeking sunny climes since its first hotel opened in 1889. Its well-heeled residents keep the city’s food, retail and cultural offerings top notch – the exclusive Port Royal neighbourhood was home to the most expensive property ever sold in Florida last year, at a massive \$225 million.

CANDYFLOSS SKIES

I admire Port Royal from the water during a sunset cruise aboard catamaran Miss Naples, spotting the silhouettes of the tiny Key deer against a golden sky. Inspired to see the sun put on one more show, I set my alarm early when I reach Marco Island, south of Naples, to gaze at the candyfloss clouds of dawn reflected in the waves.

I enjoy the tranquillity of being here solo but as the water splashes my ankles and the sun rises in the sky, I think how much my two children would enjoy the sugar-soft sand in a place where everything feels “a bit better or more beautiful”. **TW**

TRADE VIEWS



“I was impressed with the diversity of what these lesser-known Florida locations had to offer. Away

from the hustle and bustle of the theme parks, the slower pace lets you take in the beauty of Bok Tower Gardens or Bonnet Springs Park in Central Florida. Travelling down the Gulf of Mexico through Florida’s Paradise Coast, I now appreciate the calm sophistication of Naples and Marco Island, which were great for foodies.”

Miné Yusuf, senior product & marketing coordinator, USAirtours



“Something not to miss in Polk County is the swans by Lake Morton in downtown

Lakeland. They were gifted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1957. As you wander around downtown, there are also restaurants, bars and shops, plus some colourful murals.”

Sarah Edwards, sales consultant, Gold Medal

BOOK IT

Gold Medal offers a 14-night Central Florida and Florida’s Paradise Coast break from £2,059 per person, based on four adults sharing. The price includes seven nights in a five-bedroom Solterra Vacation Home on a self-catering basis, three nights’ room-only in a Two-Bedroom Waterway View Suite at the Naples Bay Resort and four nights’ room-only in a Deluxe Two Queen Beds Ocean View room at Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort and Spa. The price includes indirect United Airlines flights from Manchester, flying into Orlando on November 7 and out of Southwest Florida, plus one-way car hire. An additional £344 is payable in local fees.

goldmedal.co.uk