


## After the Fantasy of Disney, the REAL Florida Begg to be Discovered

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Tags: cedar key, florida, unique destinations, unusual travel

Welcome guest blogger, Barbara Weibel at [Hole In The Donut Travels](#)

Let's play a travel game. I'm going to name a place and I want you to respond with the first thing that comes to mind.

Ready?

OK, here goes.

FLORIDA!

Quick! What pops into your head?

You probably answered "Disney World." And that is so sad. Because, though Walt Disney World is a worthwhile attraction (undoubtedly a mandatory one if you have kids), the "real" wonderland of Florida is just begging to be discovered. It's not as difficult as you might think - once you've spent the requisite two or three days at Disney, rent a car, leave the world of fantasy behind, and head for the Nature Coast of Florida, where the panhandle curves around to meet the peninsula.

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On day one, drive three hours northwest of Orlando to the tiny Gulf-front community of Cedar Key. Life here is slow and uncomplicated and everyone knows their neighbors by name. Set back from the water, a handful of historic, ramshackle buildings make up the two block business district, while newer hotels, restaurants, and quaint shops built on wooden pilings hang out over the Gulf. There is even a small sand beach next to the harbor, but the main attraction of Cedar Key is its pristine natural environment.

This part of the Gulf of Mexico has a shallow offshore shelf, with the average depth increasing roughly one foot per mile. Because the area is dominated by a network of inland creeks that give out onto salt marshes and seagrass meadows covering 1,800 square miles of the Gulf, one of the best ways to enjoy Cedar Key is to rent a kayak for the day and paddle around the marshes. Keep your eyes peeled for giant drum, blue crabs, and spotted sea trout under the water, and an amazing variety of sea birds above. Closer to shore, watch fishermen dig in the muddy flats for clams and crab from their small, flat-top boats. Anglers hoping to catch their dinner can either drop a line from the new municipal pier or head offshore on a day charter. At the end of the day, retire to one of the historic inns and enjoy some home cookin' and great conversation at one of the local cafes.

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Next morning, drive 50 miles inland to the small town of Dunnellon. In 1888, rock phosphate – a commodity in high demand – was discovered near Dunnellon. Soon, investors, prospectors, and developers were pouring into town. Development happened in a helter-skelter manner, with elaborate Victorian mansions being constructed alongside “shotgun shacks” and foreman’s cottages. Unfortunately Dunnellon’s “Boomtown” was short lived. World War I shut down the shipment of phosphate to Europe and the town faded into obscurity, just another sleepy, small town in north central Florida.

Then, in the late 1960’s, newcomers arrived and began restoring and converting many of the historic structures to antique shops, gift stores, florists, real estate offices, and and restaurants. Today, a walking tour of the town provides a glimpse into the mansions, saloons, bordellos, rooming houses, churches, and mercantiles that served the needs of the once rough-and-ready mining town.

Although Dunnellon’s historic architecture is reason enough to make the trip, the town’s most treasured resource is nearby Rainbow Springs State Park, home to the second largest natural spring in the state of Florida. Miles of nature trails wind through the park, up sand hills, past waterfalls, and through native gardens that attract butterflies and hummingbirds. In the springtime, pink, purple, and white Azaleas burst into bloom, perfectly framing the crystal clear turquoise waters of the headspring. Visitors can swim year-round in the constant 72 degree waters of the spring or tube the length of the 5.6 mile river during the summer months. Best of all,

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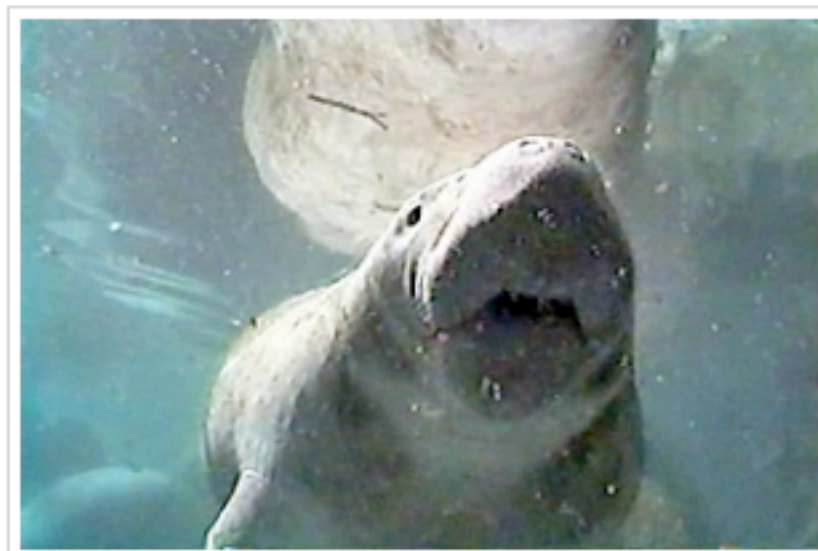
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On the final day of your Nature Coast exploration, drive 15 miles to the town of Crystal River, one of only two places in Florida where it is legal to swim with the manatees. Local tour operators can take you to Three Sisters Springs, a magical blue wonderland where dozens of these 3,000 pound creatures swim back and forth, mingling with snorkelers and divers. Price for a half day tour averages \$50 per person and includes all the necessary equipment – snorkel, mask and fins.

With Orlando just an hour and a half away, you can spend one last evening at the Magic Kingdom, safe in the knowledge that, unlike most Florida tourists, you've seen the "real" Florida.

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