



Florida Fun With the Kids

With so much to do, you can keep even teenagers entertained

By Wendy & Rob Lindsay

The mid-winter school break offers a golden opportunity to entertain family and friends in the Florida sunshine—so we did. While the ads seem aimed at little ones or college

kids, we were able to find plenty of new activities to intrigue two teenagers.

When the first morning dawned cool

and nippy, we knew just where to go. Grabbing sweaters and jackets, we drove north out of Fort Myers towards the Caloosahatchee River. This was ideal weather,

we told Jenny and Sarah, for manatee-watching.

Early in the morning in cool weather, these gentle giant mammals gather in the warm discharge waters from a power station. The popular gathering spot is now

preserved as Manatee Park, with walkways and railings so you can safely get close without falling in. Our girls were fascinated watch-

ing more than 50 cows and calves slowly drift to the surface for air then sink out of sight. They learned a lot that morning—manatee are strictly vegetarian, related to ele-





Below: The Olympian Museum; right: the Dali Museum.



phants, and too often suffer from careless boating, as the scarred backs on some of the adults confirmed.

Dali in St. Pete

The girls had already visited the Thomas Edison and Henry Ford Winter Estate in Fort Myers, but we headed for McGregor Boulevard anyway and pulled up at the new Art of the Olympians Museum and Gal-

lery, where the artwork of more than 30 Olympic athletes, including Peggy Fleming, is displayed.

On entering, the girls were impressed by its spectacular setting on the harbour, with the view of passing boats from the windows almost as enticing as the art within. They were amazed that so many Olympic athletes are also artistically talented. Oils, acrylics, photography, and sculpture...they couldn't make up their minds what they liked best—until they entered the women's room. The giant mural there makes you feel as if you've become part of the Olympic action. Had they been staying in Florida longer, we might have signed them up for one of the art classes offered for children of all ages.

Seeing their interest in art, we made our next outing a drive to the new Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, which holds the largest collection of Dali's works outside of Spain. The building itself is like one of his surreal projects and also afforded great views of the harbour from its central atrium. We spent most of the afternoon wandering through the galleries before discovering the ultimate souvenirs in the gift shop: Dali clip-on mustaches.

Back at our hotel, there was still plenty of warmth in the sun for some beach time, and the girls tried out every one of the many swimming pools and hot tubs, while we relaxed with books in the seaside hammocks. We had chosen the Trade Winds Island Resorts because of its family package with the Dali museum. On researching, we discovered many Florida attractions have a host hotel with family package specials.

As a treat, we had made a reservation at the Palm Court Italian Grill for some

Photos: Lindsay Editorial (Olympian Museum); Ilene MacDonald/Alamy (Dali Museum).

Photos: 2011 Universal Orlando Resort (butterbeer); Lindsay Editorial (castle, costume, and train).



Butterbeer and Honeydukes store at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter.



Hogwarts.



fine dining. It turned into a memorable evening. The attentive waiters treated the girls like adults, and we suspect added special flourishes with the food presentations. The teenagers faded away and the two young ladies that took their place carried on informed, worldly conversation free of texting and cell phones. We recommend the experience.

Mmm...Butterbeer!

Ever since reading the first Harry Potter novel, Jenny was hooked. Our Christmas gift had been a promise to take her to the Harry Potter theme park at Universal Studios in Orlando. So bright and early the next morning, we

found ourselves in line to enter. We hurried past everything else and went straight to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, only to

find it full and entry denied. Fortunately we located the staff giving out timed entry tickets and returned at one o'clock (which we learned later is often the time the crowd thins.) We found the area much smaller than we had pictured from the website, but we all enjoyed the novelty of seeing snow-laden village

roofs under the hot Florida sun. The girls were delighted when they found the "butterbeer" cart and proclaimed it the best drink they had ever tasted. They described the taste as something like a delicious mix of root beer, cream soda, butterscotch, and a little something else—obviously the secret in-

redient. Another highlight was photos with the strolling apprentice wizards.

Like so many others, we dutifully waited over an hour in line to enter Hogwarts's towering castle and take the Forbidden Journey ride. The girls proclaimed it great. The Dragon Challenge high speed double roller coaster was hugely popular and required three rides. The wait for Ollivanders wand shop was over an hour so regretfully we skipped it, only to find wands of all shapes, colours, and sizes—plus books, hats, and everything else you might want to buy—at the Universal Studio Store on the way out of the park.

What next? Well, the largest Legoland in the world opened at Winter Haven (45 minutes from Orlando) in October, and an Avatar attraction is coming to Disney World Florida in



Legoland.

2014, so we suspect we'll be heading back to Florida with young ones in tow once again. ■

Travel Info:
www.visitflorida.org