

ENDLESS RECREATION

And Charm

BY KEVIN FRITZ

Known for its endless outdoor recreation, the West Volusia County Region encompasses 14 distinct communities between Orlando and Daytona Beach, drawing families to its diversity of vacation experiences.

MUST SEE/MUST DO

TripAdvisor recently recognized the Stetson Mansion in DeLand as the “Most Popular Tourist Attraction in Florida.” As the Sunshine State’s first luxury home, it was built in 1886 by famed hat maker John B. Stetson. Now meticulously restored, tours are offered year-round on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

On the streets of Downtown DeLand, historic, architecturally rich buildings house boutiques, antique stores, galleries and gift shops, interspersed with sidewalk cafés and restaurants. Take a self-guided walking tour past sculptures, murals and historic plaques scattered throughout town. For a keener sense of West Volusia’s history, visit the Pioneer Settlement for the Creative Arts in nearby Barberville, established in 1763 as a trading post on the west side of the St. Johns River.

Springs and their crystal-clear temperate waters, wildlife and lush landscapes are major draws in West Volusia. Blue Spring State Park in Orange City is known as the official winter home to more than 250 manatees. Strategically placed observation decks offer excellent viewing vantages. Swim, snorkel or float on an inner tube down the natural lazy river.

At DeLeon Springs State Park, once home to Native American groups more than 6,000 years ago and plantations in the 1800s, you’ll find the Old Spanish Sugar Mill Restaurant where you can cook your own pancakes right at your table. After getting your fill, board the Fountain of Youth ECO/History Tour Boat.

Beyond the springs, the St. Johns River offers family adventure. Learn about its rich history on a scenic two-hour narrated river cruise. The river served as the first highway for tourists in the late 1800s; resorts and fish camps still line the riverbanks and offer laid-back accommodation oozing with southern charm.

LIVE IT UP

For gourmet food and exceptional wine selection, try the new Sinatra’s Downtown Ristorante at Artisan Downtown. Great-tasting craft beers and ciders and fresh homemade food are yours at the newly opened Persimmon Hollow Brewing Company.

There are so many reasons to dine indoors or out at the critically acclaimed and globally inspired Cress Restaurant in DeLand, featuring locally sourced menu items. Chef Hari Pulapaka is a three-time James Beard semi-finalist for Best Chef South and a two-time *Food & Wine Magazine* nominee for top 100 People’s Best New Chef. This dining establishment was also rated the top restaurant in Central Florida by the *Zagat Orlando Guide* and honored by the food editor of the *Orlando Sentinel* as the Best Overall Restaurant in Central Florida.

Blue Spring State Park is a great place to swim, snorkel or float on an inner tube.

SHOP

Feel the New England-southern vibe in the area’s boutiques, antique stores and galleries. Backhome Antiques has been selling the best antiques here for more than 20 years. For unique and unusual gifts by Florida artists, stop by Wolf’s Gallery.

INSIDER’S TIP

People from around the world gather for readings, healings and seances at the Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp, a mystical 119-year-old community in West Volusia. Browse the shops on the tree-lined cobblestone streets and consult with a medium along the way. **FL**

FEATURED LINKS

West Volusia Tourism Advertising Authority
visitwestvolusia.com
Blue Spring State Park
floridastateparks.org/bluespring
Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp
cassadaga.org
Cress Restaurant
cressrestaurant.com
De Leon Springs State Park
floridastateparks.org/deleonsprings
Persimmon Hollow Brewing
persimmonhollowbrewing.com
Pioneer Settlement for the Creative Arts
pioneersettlement.org
Sinatra’s Downtown Ristorante
sinatras.us
Stetson Mansion
stetsonmansion.com
The Old Spanish Sugar Mill Grill and Griddle House
oldspanishsugarmill.com