

### Go directly to Florida this winter



By Katharine Fletcher

Surely 2.9 million Canadians can't be wrong? That's the number of us northerners who flock to Florida for fun and sun – a figure that rose a healthy 15.6 percent in 2008.

And as far as I'm concerned, it's not surprising. Even hardy types like me who adore Ottawa's cold and snow admit that Florida's dependable sunshine makes a fantastic break.

### Planning ahead

March break is months away, but there's no time like the present to lift doldrums, search the Internet with the kids, and plan a dream holiday. One of the best sites to browse which offers tips and deals is [www.visitflorida.com/](http://www.visitflorida.com/)

Want to waste vacation hours hanging about in airports waiting for connecting flights? No?

Instead, win kudos from your kids with direct flights. *Tip:* these are only *seasonally offered* by WestJet and Air Canada.

### WestJet:

WestJet offers three Florida destinations for seasonal non-stop flights: Fort Lauderdale (November-April), Orlando (November-April), Tampa (November – April).

### **Air Canada:**

Air Canada offers two Florida destinations for seasonal non-stop flights: Fort Lauderdale (December-March), Orlando (December-April).

*Tip:* Carefully examine fares on carriers' websites. While researching this article (in November), I entered travel co-ordinates of Ottawa to Orlando for both WestJet and Air Canada departing March 8. (I searched for one adult ticket, one way.)

WestJet flights started at \$198 and topped at \$498. Air Canada's varied from \$169 to \$1,038.

*Note:* in November, *neither carrier's seasonal direct flights appeared.*

*Tip:* Ensure you are selecting the least expensive, *direct* flights. (All those shown in November flew via Toronto, Montreal, or London connections.)

### **Environmentally friendly theme parks?**

Believe me, it's no contradiction although far too many people sniff, thinking Walt Disney World – arguably the world's best-known theme park – cannot possibly be “green”. I was skeptical too until I discovered environmental initiatives are alive and well, particularly at kid-friendly Rafiki's Planet Watch at Animal Kingdom.

It is an active research centre which, among other things, is conducting leading-edge research on how elephants communicate. As well, kids can interact with animals as well as ask questions of the handlers who bring different species out to meet visitors.

We can even ask questions of veterinarians who we can watch doing routine health checks on resident critters. An intercom allows us to ask the specialists questions.

Now, that's way cool!

### **Paddling natural Florida**

A favourite spot of mine is Weedon Island Reserve ([floridasbeach.com](http://floridasbeach.com)) found outside St. Pete/Clearwater. Twice I've paddled a kayak from Sweetwater Kayaks ([sweetwaterkayaks.com](http://sweetwaterkayaks.com)) through fascinating mangrove "tunnels". Talk about leisurely, safe paddling for beginners. While exploring, watch for tiny, feisty mangrove crabs, and birds we don't find here at home such as tricoloured herons, wood ibis, and many more.

### **State Parks and Sanctuaries**

Florida's park lands are safe, accessible – and oh-so beautiful. Between Naples and Fort Myers (southwest of Orlando) I explored Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary ([corkscrew.audubon.org](http://corkscrew.audubon.org)). It is on the Great Florida Birding Trail ([floridabirdingtrail.com](http://floridabirdingtrail.com)) – a connected network of 446 birding sites throughout Florida. Here, boardwalks course through 400-year-old Cyprus groves, wetlands, and grasslands where more than 200 species of animals live.

Another superb sanctuary is on Sanibel Island – one of the barrier islands in the Gulf of Mexico connected to mainland Fort Myers by a causeway. Here, J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge ([fws.gov/dingdarling/](http://fws.gov/dingdarling/)) welcomes more than 800,000 visitors annually.

I "opened the park" one day: I was the first person to stroll its paths one morning.

I spied exotic roseate spoonbills, large flocks of white pelicans, a river otter, alligators (calm ones basking in the mud...) and more. So if you rise early and go near opening time (7:30 a.m.) you too might be the only family walking along its winding, safe driveway. An excellent visitors' centre explains about the subtropical habitat and mangrove ecosystems.

Also on Sanibel is the Bailey Matthews Shell Museum ([shellmuseum.org](http://shellmuseum.org)) where, in air-conditioned comfort, you'll discover the habitat, life-cycles and more about shells. Afterwards, you can simply step outside to discover shells on Sanibel's glorious beaches.

Wherever you go in Florida, just around the corner you'll find a perhaps surprising but always fascinating natural world awaiting your discovery.

And of course, there are those fabulous beaches...

Now, doesn't that sound like a breakaway from winter you'd all enjoy?

*Katharine Fletcher is a journalist, columnist, and author. Find her guide books to the National Capital Region at bookshops and outdoor stores throughout the Ottawa Valley.*

*This article originally appeared in the December 2009 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.*