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THE OTHER ORLANDO- Offering More Than Theme Parks

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Published 02/03/2008 - 3:28 p.m. CDT

Orlando is a city that attracts visitors to Florida again and again. First-timers might come for the theme parks, since Orlando is home to Disney World, SeaWorld, Universal Studios and others. But repeaters likely return for the climate and the desire to find what lies beneath the tourist trappings. Those with an interest in the arts won't be disappointed.

The Orlando area has a population of more than 1.8 million people, many of whom are occupied in tourism related businesses. Like residents in other cities of a similar size, they have a need to take a break from their work and relax with traditional forms of entertainment. As a result, Orlando has developed a thriving cultural base that visitors also may enjoy.

I had the privilege of being introduced to the artistic side of Orlando during a recent stay at the Orlando Peabody Hotel, where I met Maureen Brigid Gonzalez, currently the hotel's director of corporate communications but formerly a dancer with the Irish National Ballet.

"When I came here in 1996, I had no idea that the Orlando area had such wonderful, though often overlooked, cultural resources," she told me. "As I began to discover them, I approached my boss at the hotel about supporting them and promoting them to our guests."

With her boss's blessing, she enlisted the participation of several dozen cultural organizations and formed the Orlando/Peabody Alliance for the Arts and Culture. The alliance has become a sort of cultural chamber of commerce, promoting the Orlando area arts scene not only to hotel guests but also on a regional, national and even international level.

Inside Orlando

Strangely, Gonzalez began my introduction to the artistic side of Orlando by taking me to a converted power house on the north side of downtown. It seems the spacious building now contains offices and rehearsal space for both the Orlando Opera and the Orlando Ballet.

The opera had no performances scheduled during my visit, but we were allowed to sit in on a rehearsal for "Luisa Fernanda," which would travel to communities throughout Florida as part of the company's Education on Tour program. In its regular season, the opera generally stages three productions a year at the Bob Carr Performing Arts Center, in collaboration with the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra and the Orlando Ballet.

After the rehearsal, we walked along a corridor and entered the ballet's domain, where we met several of the dancers who we would see perform that evening in "La Fille Mal Gardée." They were very enthusiastic about being able to pursue their careers with a well respected ballet company in a warm climate. Like the Orlando Opera, the ballet's season comprises three productions at the Bob Carr Center, plus its annual rendition of "The Nutcracker" accompanied by the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra.

During my stay in Orlando, we attended several plays as well. One was the musical "Urinetown," presented by Mad Cow Theater at its intimate venue in the heart of downtown. The company produces 10 classic and contemporary plays each season, with some running simultaneously in its side-by-side shoebox

sized theaters (50 seats and 100 seats).

We also went to a performance of "Twelfth Night" by the Orlando Shakespeare Theater. Its season includes a half-dozen plays by the Bard and others in four theaters, ranging from 70 to 324 seats, at the Lowndes Shakespeare Center in Loch Haven Park just outside the downtown core.

Also located in Loch Haven Park is the Orlando Museum of Art, established in 1924. It showcases permanent collections of American, Pre-Columbian and African art but also hosts special exhibitions such as "American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell," organized by the Norman Rockwell Museum of Massachusetts and featuring the artist's popular covers for The Saturday Evening Post.

Surrounding Scene

Before we had a chance to exhaust the cultural potential of Orlando proper, Gonzalez whisked me away to nearby Winter Park, a lush lake-side community northeast of the city. There, she surprised me with a visit to the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art. Not just any art, though. The Morse holds the world's most comprehensive collection of the works of Louis Comfort Tiffany. For a glass art lover like me, it was heaven. It houses not only many stained glass windows and lamps, but also the entire chapel that Tiffany designed for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

We continued on to the Albin Polasek Museum and Sculpture Gardens. The charming retirement villa of Czech-born artist Albin Polasek (1879-1965) has been converted to a gallery for his drawings, paintings and sculptures as well as for exhibitions of other artists' works. Its secluded tropical grounds display some of Polasek's larger sculptures.

Before leaving Winter Park, we stopped at the Crealde School of Art, a maze of bungalows and breezeways containing classrooms, studios, workshops, galleries and a sculpture garden. As long as we did not disrupt classes, we were welcome to wander around, admire finished pieces and those in progress, and chat with working artists such as Calvert LaFollette, who explained the inspirations for his drawings and sculptures being shown in one of the galleries.

I was grateful to Gonzalez for giving me a taste of the cultural attractions the Orlando area has to offer outside its well publicized theme parks. Now I know there are plenty of reasons to keep me coming back for more.

INFO TO GO:

Cornell Fine Arts Museum (407-646-2526, www.rollins.edu/cfam) has been called one of America's finest art museums, with a permanent collection that ranges from antiquities to 21st century creations.

Maitland Art Center (407-539-2181, www.maitartctr.org) is worth visiting just for its architecture and gardens, but it also has a gallery, classrooms, studios and accommodations for working artists.

Orange County Regional History Center (407-836-8500 or 800-965-2030, www.thehistorycenter.org) explores the rich history of Central Florida through interactive exhibits featuring the people and events that helped make the region what it is today.

Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra (407-896-6700, www.orlandophil.org) is Central Florida's resident professional orchestra, participating in more than 100 performances each season.

Peabody Hotel (407-352-4000 or 800-732-2639, www.peabodyorlando.com), conveniently located in the midst of Orlando's convention center complex, includes comfortable guest rooms and a variety of restaurants.

Winter Park Playhouse (407-645-0145, www.winterparkplayhouse.org) is a professional theater specializing in Broadway, off-Broadway and original musicals.