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Orlando- We're No More Weird Than Anywhere Else

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Orlando- We're No More Weird Than Anywhere Else

By Tom Cavanagh
UCF Forum columnist
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I saw the following tweet recently from a semi-famous college president: “On my way to Orlando, my version of hell.”

I have heard this sentiment expressed more than once by others in my higher education circles. At conferences during national committee meetings, it is usually a statement along the lines of, “Do we have to hold the meeting in Orlando? Anywhere but Orlando,” followed by a big, disgusted sigh. Sometimes I raise a hand and remind them, “Uh, I’m in the room...,” but it doesn’t seem to make much difference.

Look, I get that Central Florida has had its share of negative national exposure—from the Casey Anthony to the George Zimmerman trials, from pet pythons that kill children to a wild bear dragging a resident out of her suburban garage by her head, from giant sinkholes that swallow time-share condos to deadly hurricanes. Florida is a magnet for weirdness. It always has been. Some of that weirdness is wacky and funny but some of it isn’t very nice at all.

However, I don’t think the sentiments I cite above have anything to do with our Floridian weirdness. Perhaps these opinions are more the result of a type of higher ed snobbery from those with an idealized, ivy-covered college-town experience when they encounter the tourism machine that Orlando may appear to be to nonresidents. And there is no denying that Orlando can seem like a giant entertainment façade, all style with no substance.

But whether these Orlando haters believe it or not, real people with real families working at real jobs live here. And compared to a lot of other places, trust me, Central Florida has a lot going for it. For instance, we have a diverse culture, a growing arts scene, some great state parks, expanding job sectors in training/simulation, software development, biotechnology, and weather that permits year-round sports and recreation activity. And, oh yeah, the world's best theme parks.

These particular colleagues may not be theme-park attendees, but they are certainly the minority. According to Visit Orlando, more than 57 million people traveled to the region in 2012, the vast majority of whom were classified as leisure visitors. Ask the school-aged children of a typical Midwestern family if they would like to come to Orlando to visit Cinderella's and Hogwarts castles and see the reaction you get. How many more people, both the young and the young at heart, would also like to visit if they could?

So, to categorically dismiss Orlando for a conference meeting seems misguided to me. As a city, we are uniquely equipped to handle short-term visitors, whether they are visiting the theme parks or remaining within the general vicinity of the massive Orange County Convention Center. Perhaps only Las Vegas is similarly equipped for as many tourists but that city's general ethos is based on gambling while Orlando's is generally centered on a family-friendly vibe. You won't be forced to walk through a smoke-filled casino to get to your hotel room in Orlando.

Maybe you don't like the hot summer weather, but would you prefer this year's brutal, never-ending winter in the Northeast? Everywhere has its advantages and disadvantages. Everyone has his/her own preferences. Some like big cities. Some like small towns. Some like the east coast, some like the west coast.

For those of us who live in Orlando, especially in the parts of town far removed from the theme parks, it has an attractive balance of small town and big city. It's just like anywhere else in the country, except with generally better weather than anywhere except perhaps California. And the cost of living is a lot less than California.

Are we perfect? Far from it. Our Florida weirdness attests to that. But according to the most recent U.S. Census data, more than 2 million of us have chosen to live in metropolitan Orlando. And if this happens be one particular person's version of hell, well, 2 million permanent and 57 million temporary residents would disagree.

I'll take those odds.

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