



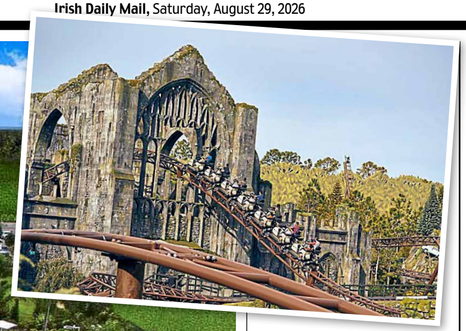

Snap up a trip to KISSIMMEE

BY **YVONNE REDDIN**

Making memories: Clockwise from main, Encore Resort, home to Jeeves by Casago; Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure; Yvonne and her twins with alligators at Gatorland; and Island H20 Waterpark

Getting up close with friendly(ish) alligators was just one of the highlights of a visit to this perfect base from which to explore Florida's many family adventures

THE last time I visited Florida was 18 years ago with my family and all the amazing things we did then have never left me. I even got to see the legend Tony Bennett sing live at the Hard Rock Café at Universal Orlando Resort.

Such is the magic of this US state, you can be guaranteed lifelong memories will be made.

I was recently back there with my 13-year-old twins and our base was Kissimmee, a city just 30 minutes from Orlando International Airport and one of the most popular places for families visiting theme parks.

We stayed in a holiday home with Jeeves by Casago, located within the secure gated Encore Resort complete with its own hotel, water park and restaurants.

Known as the vacation home capital of the world, Kissimmee offers everything from cosy two-bedroom apartments to luxury villas and mansions, making it an ideal choice for families of all sizes. As well as being within easy reach of Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando and SeaWorld, there are excellent shopping and dining options nearby, along with beautiful parks and outdoor adventures.

On pulling up outside our home for the next seven days, we noticed a pink light coming from the garage – to my twins' delight, it turned out to be a games room. This particular home has five good-sized bedrooms easily sleeping up to ten people, bathrooms in three of them and separate bathrooms too, a movie room, a huge dining and lounge area, a private pool and jacuzzi complete with sun loungers.

Our first meal was delivered from Palma Italian Kitchen, and we enjoyed a pizza under the palm trees.

A 30-MINUTE drive from Kissimmee and we were walking along the famous City Walk to the entrance of Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure Theme Parks. Universal has two other theme parks in Orlando, Epic Universe and a water park called Volcano Bay.

I would highly recommend a two-day pass for Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure, and it is well worth paying extra for a fast pass, as it means you won't be waiting up to two hours to go on a ride. Comfortable walking shoes are a must as we did over 18,000 steps that day, and bring a water bottle as there are refill stations.

Between Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure, there are 16 themed lands to explore, each feeling like you've stepped into a completely different world, from Harry Potter and Jurassic Park to Marvel superheroes, The Simpsons and Dr Seuss. There are simulator rides, rollercoasters, immersive shows and movie-style experiences. We also met 'Marilyn Monroe' on the street and saw characters from well-known movies.

You can bring a picnic but we had lunch at Moe's Tavern in Simpsons World, where the portions are big and perfect for sharing. Make sure and go on Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure ride, though my eyes were closed for most of it.

After nine hours, my feet made the decision for me that it was time to go home.

The following day, we visited another of Orlando's iconic attractions, SeaWorld, which has been welcoming visitors for more than 50 years. It's just 20 minutes' drive from Kissimmee and if you're hiring a car, there's parking on site.

We really enjoyed the relaxed layout of the park, which felt less hectic than some of Orlando's attractions. It's renowned for adrenaline-fuelled rollercoasters like Mako, Kraken, Pipeline, The Surf Coaster and Ice Breaker, and you'll also come across dolphins, sea lions, penguins, sharks, rays and flamingos, along with live shows and interactive animal presentations.

Like the other theme parks, you will do plenty of walking, so comfortable shoes are a must, along with sunscreen and water.

One of the most surprising aspects of our trip was Gatorland, where I found myself ziplining over hundreds of alligators in a freshwater lake – the highest zip line was 75 feet – guided along each section by Jade and Albert.

Founded in 1949, director of media productions Brandon Fisher shared the history behind the oldest theme park in Central Florida. It is home to many rescue alligators, and they are expertly looked after and live in a natural habitat.

One of the most popular inhabitants is Mystic the Leucistic, the rarest alligator in the world because of its albino-type skin.

You can do a behind-the-scenes tour, have up-close encounters, feed the gators or take a monster truck adventure through the Florida wetlands. There is also a train ride, splash park, playground, snake area, cheeky parrot Harley, flamingos, a giant tortoise, a rock wall and a restaurant. This park is a unique full day out that children will love.



Back in Kissimmee, Island H20 Waterpark is an island-themed family-friendly water park, with rides like Hashtag Heights, Profile Plunge and Follow Me Falls. You can bounce on top of the waves at the lagoon wave pool or relax bobbing along Chat Creek Lazy River. The kids can have loads of fun in the splash areas Pelican's Paradise and Candy Stripe Cove.

There are plenty of seating areas and the water park also hosts events like Glow Foam parties. You can also dine outside the park and walk around the Margaritaville area, where there are lots of restaurants and bars.

Just a short 10-minute drive away is a charming town called Celebration. Built in 1994 by Walt Disney, the residents moved in in 1996, and it is like stepping on to a movie set – white picket fences, tree-lined streets, shaded quiet seating areas and spotless streets, all built around a lake.

The only way to see it is by bike, which we hired with Celebration Bike Company, right on the lake. We had great fun getting lost around the town, pretending we were residents and stopping for lunch at the Downtown Diner, much of which we took home in takeaway bags.

One evening, we swapped the theme parks for something completely different – a Medieval Dinner and Tournament. Just a 20-minute drive from Kissimmee, we arrived at a castle where the excitement had already begun, with families and groups eagerly waiting to step back in time.

Everything is themed around medieval life. Long wooden benches surround the central stage where the action unfolds and dinner is served the old-fashioned way – in bowls and on plates, with no cutlery in sight.

ONCE the show begins, the atmosphere is electric. Each section cheers on its own knight as they compete in thrilling jousting tournaments, sword fights and displays of horsemanship. You are served a medieval feast of roast chicken, sweetcorn, potato skins and cake. It's a fun, interactive evening and ideal for families.

Another 20-minute drive will take you to the Disney Springs area, part of the Walt Disney World Resort. We had a show booked – Cirque du Soleil and Disney's Drawn to Life – and like any Cirque show, it was truly unique.

We had dinner in a relatively new restaurant called Summerhouse By The Lake – I would recommend booking or you may have to wait a while for a sitting. If you do have to wait around, pop into the House of Blues, visit the World of Disney, the world's largest Disney store, or go into Raglan Road Irish Pub, which has authentic live music and dancing.

Sitting by the pool in our holiday home, all I could think was that a week wasn't enough, a true sign of a great trip. I hope it won't be another 18 years before I return to Kissimmee as there is so much more to explore here.

TRAVEL FACTS

Direct flights with Aer Lingus from Dublin to Orlando International from €650pp, *aerlingus.com*. The Elegant Villa at Jeeves by Casago from €200 per night, *jeevesfloridarentals.com*. For further information on Kissimmee, visit *experience kissimmee.com*.

A temple for body and soul



This luxury Austrian resort is a spectacular retreat that stays true to its ten-generation family values

BY **LISA BYRNE**

Spectacular setting: Stanglwirt is a sprawling resort in the Wilden Kaiser mountain range. Below, the view from the spa

WHAT do Jessica Alba, Pamela Anderson and Shania Twain have in common? Well, apart from being iconic and beautiful, they, along with a vast array of A-listers, have stayed at Austria's five-star Stanglwirt wellness resort and spa.

However, even these gorgeous women pale in comparison to the hotel's pure-bred 'horses of royalty', the utterly beautiful, white Lipizzaner horses, who are an emblematic feature of Stanglwirt.

If you're a fan of the BBC's Amazing Hotels: Life Beyond The Lobby, you may have spotted these extraordinary creatures trotting around the indoor arena adjacent to the hotel's bar area.

On arrival, I was delighted to be taken on a tour of the stables by Elisabeth Hauser-Benz, a horse-mad member of the family that owns Stanglwirt, and I admit to having pangs of jealousy when hearing of her daily jaunts with these magnificent beasts.

Unfortunately, I had recently tripped and sprained my ankle, so I was unable to go on a ride. But what a pleasurable experience it was to sip a spicy margarita in the lobby bar while studying these magical beings trotting around the indoor arena.

STANGLWIRT is a vast, sprawling resort which boasts a colourful history tracing back to 1529 when silver and copper fever took over the region and an inn was set up to help keep the workers refreshed. Today, it is managed by Balthasar Hauser, the tenth generation of his family.

His dynasty has dedicated itself to providing a luxurious escape which is as eco-friendly as possible. The resort boasts an organic farm containing an integrated luxury hotel set against the stunning backdrop of the Wilden Kaiser mountain range.

I am taken to my spacious suite where untreated Swiss pine, fine linen and pure wool have been utilised to make the surroundings exceptionally organic and a respectful reflection of local culture. Apart from a huge bed, the suite includes a bathroom with sauna and an enormous balcony overlooking scenery which is so spectacular, it looks like bright, rich technicolour come to life.

Dinner is served in the traditional inn Gasthof Stangl, where we feast while being scrutinised by cattle in the legendary cowshed room adjacent to the restaurant. Mouthwatering plates brimming with rustic Tyrolean fare are delivered, including veal schnitzel, goulash and roast chicken.

But it was the awe-inspiring spa which provided the ultimate escape from the troubles of the modern world. At the Green Spa Resort I smothered myself in a fleecy 'comfort robe', switched off all technology, picked up my much-neglected book – the incredible Yesteryear by Caro Claire Burke – and while sprawled on an enormous day bed, enjoyed utter peace and calm.

Eventually I hobbled over to the treatment area where I was indulged in Japanese SIJ (sacroiliac joint therapy). This relieves back pain and sciatica by micro-mobilising the joint between the sacrum and hip bones. Having rather fragile bones due to aggressive cancer treatment, I found this treatment to be truly miraculous.

Later, we were treated to a wonderful masterclass in wellness by beauty guru Dr Barbara Sturm, famed for the platelet-rich plasma facial. As an anti-inflammation pioneer, the medic has devoted her life to developing cutting-edge treatments which use the body's own proteins and healing factors to curb illness.

Dr Sturm emphasised the importance of vitamin D and the sun as a life source. 'Beautiful skin has less to do with quick-fix products and everything to do with living a conscious, anti-inflammatory lifestyle,' he told me.

Sadly, our last night came all too soon, but we decided to make the most of it with a visit to Leni's Restaurant, where we devoured divine risotto, truffle pasta and mouthwatering meat, washed down with crisp Austrian wine.

I am not exaggerating when I say I was devastated to leave Stanglwirt. I felt like I had visited a spiritual temple where both my body and soul were cleansed. It is a spectacular place, and despite being a sprawling resort, everything feels within a comfortable walking distance.

Strolling from the luscious pools to the spa or to visit the vast array of farm animals is the height of luxury. My only complaint is aimed towards my bothersome ankle. But as it's now recovered, I must book a return so I can finally ride those beautiful horses.



TRAVEL FACTS

Ryanair flies from Dublin to Salzburg from €50 return, *ryanair.com*. A four-night stay for two people starts from €4,500, see *stanglwirt.com*.