

Welaka: A Town in Tune with the River

By: VISIT FLORIDA staff
OFF THE BEATEN PATH



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Less than two hours from Jacksonville and Orlando, the river town of Welaka recalls the simpler Florida of your grandfather's era. Traffic gives way to fields and forests. Hand-lettered signs advertise Fish Fry and Frog Legs. And on the rivers, the sense of drifting back in time is especially strong.

The Ocklawaha River looks the same as it did 100 years ago, Kevin Finch said as he navigated his deck boat into the calm currents that were bordered on both sides by forest. Finch owns Welaka Lodge and Resort with his wife, Jessica. His sunset river tours launch from the lodge's dock on the St. Johns. Depending on the season, his passengers may spot alligators, manatees, fish and water fowl. In Welaka, time moves at the river's pace and has since the Timucuan Indians lived here in 1200 AD. Welaka is Timucuan for the St. Johns and means river of lakes.

On Welaka time, you notice subtleties: mullet jumping, osprey soaring, the wind shifting river currents. Life revolves around fishing, boating and hunting. Anxious moments occur only when fishermen struggle to land a lunker – the town touts itself as the “Bass Capital of the World.”

To understand Welaka, you have to get out on the river, said Skip Joest, a master shipwright whose remarkable riverfront workplace, Joest Boats, attracts people fascinated by his ability to transform wood into sleek, seaworthy vessels. It's another of those Welaka surprises you discover by slowing down. It's easy to blow through town and miss everything, said Skip's wife, Kathleen.

Welaka Lodge and Resort is a good base camp for exploration. At the entrance, a Speed Limit 5 sign sets the pace for a weekend of unwinding. The resort's small RV park and five cottages rest on a river bluff under oaks that predate the Civil War. Relaxing as it is to cocoon in the stylish cottages, the call of Welaka's wild places is hard to ignore.

Captain and professional guide Adam Delaney leads excursions on the St. Johns and Ocklawaha, Lake George and the Rodman Reservoir. Gator hunts in the “deepest, darkest swamps” and eco-tours are also part of his repertoire. The region's rivers and woods run through the fifth-generation Floridian's veins. A day with Delaney rarely comes up empty – if the bass aren't running, he'll fish for bream or cast-net for shrimp or crab.

Back on dry land, more adventures await. South of Welaka off Highway 309, several hiking trails traverse 2,288 acres of Florida outback in the Welaka State Forest. The Mud Spring Hiking Trail leads to a spring boil and boardwalk. Kathleen Joest, a regular trail hiker, has spotted turkeys, eagles, bobcats and, in warm weather, rattlesnakes. Snakes aside, the forest captures what she considers Welaka's best asset: The quiet.

When the great outdoors activates a great appetite, rent a Welaka Lodge golf cart and follow the James E. King Jr. Recreation Trail to Marker 48 Restaurant and Bar at Welaka Inn. The rustic 1920s-era fish camp is perched over the St. Johns facing the Ocala National Forest.

Coins trapped beneath the resin bar top continue to confuse new generations of patrons. “I can't tell you how many people try to pick up those coins,” said bartender Suzanne Hunnicutt.

With its focus on fresh air and fishing, the Inn, like the rest of Welaka, would make Hemingway or your grandfather feel at home.

- NANCY MORELAND

PHOTO



Mud Spring, located in Welaka State Forest, empties 13,750 gallons per hour of clear, spring water into a half-mile spring run that flows into the St. John's River in Welaka, Fla. A two-mile, self guided looped trail, located off of County Road 309, leads hikers to the springs and a picnic area.

Credit: Daron Dean for VISIT FLORIDA

