



Hello From Orlando - Part 5: The Winter Park Scenic Boat Tour

The Winter Park Scenic Boat Tour, founded in 1938 and located just 15 minutes north of downtown Orlando, is one of these lovely side trips that combine beautiful scenery, a bit of local history, some close-up exposure to local wildlife and vegetation with a relaxing outing in a slow-moving 18-passenger pontoon boat, all complete with expert (and sometimes humorous) narration provided by the boat's captain.

The tour takes you through 3 lakes: Lake Osceola, Lake Virginia and Lake Maitland. On this gorgeous day, with brilliantly blue skies, the boat whisked us past hundreds of beautiful waterfront estates, many of which were originally built in the 1920s and originally sold for \$20,000, while fetching between \$500,000 and several million in today's booming Central Florida real estate market. Even boathouses are worth between \$30,000 and \$40,000.

In Lake Virginia we came up close to the grounds of Rollins College, one of the top rated private liberal arts colleges in the South Eastern United States, founded in 1885 by New England Congregationalists. Rollins College is the oldest recognized college in the state of Florida with a small student body of 1,700 students, housed on a beautiful 70 acre Mediterranean Revival Campus. Our expert captain / tour guide mentioned that tuition at the college is \$38,000 and the ratio of students to professors is 12:1.

Condos are located right next to the college, selling today for between \$450,000 to \$1 million. As we approached the narrow Venetian Canal that would take us from Lake Virginia to Lake Maitland, our captain made us aware of all the interesting vegetation growing alongside the canal: Egyptian papyrus, Spanish moss (an airplant and not a parasite), the Princess flower, colourful bougainvilleas and resurrection fern. We saw a variety of birds, including an Osprey eagle, a snake bird, a great blue heron and a white egret, which used to be the good luck bird of the Seminole Indians.

On Lake Maitland we learned that there was an alligator cave from which 150 alligators were removed into the Florida Everglades to prevent a rather dangerous collision between local wildlife and civilization.

Along the Venetian Canal we also saw variegated ginger and banana trees, as we slowly passed under the arched Palmer Avenue Bridge. Philodendrons, palmgrass, bamboo, a plant called firespikes and an interesting arrangement of "air potatoes", round tubers hanging down from a tree branch, adorned our journey through the canal.



At 450 acres and 30 feet deep, Lake Maitland is the largest of the 3 lakes covered by the boat tour. A dam controls the water level and interestingly, the lakes all drain northwards into the St. John's River which flows into the Atlantic near Jacksonville. The Kraft Azalea Gardens, located on Lake Maitland on Alabama Drive off Palmer Avenue, feature thousands of azaleas, tropical shrubs and trees. Azaleas are in full bloom January through March.

Our expert captain also pointed out various mansions that have been used as backdrops in various movies and commercials. Lake Maitland also features several small islands with rather naked looking trees that house colonies of cormorants, fishing birds that consume up to a pound of fish a day.

We slowly made our way back from Lake Maitland to Lake Osceola where our relaxing and scenic boat tour came to an end. On this gorgeous day it was a fabulous outing that provided an appropriate historical context for a further exploration of the beautiful city of Winter Park.

The Scenic Boat Tour, a Winter Park institution for almost 70 years now, is located at the end of Morse Avenue on the shores of Lake Osceola. It is a very affordable outing at \$8 for adults and \$4 for children (children under 2 ride free). Boat tours run every day from 10 am to 4 pm (except Christmas). For further information contact the Winter Park Scenic Boat Tour.

For the entire article including photos please visit
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