

Orlando Sentinel
TRAVEL & ARTS



Children and families enjoy a real snow hill on tube sleds during Wekiva Island's Winter Wonderland in Longwood on Thursday, Dec. 5, 2019. PATRICK CONNOLLY/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTOS

A CENTRAL FLORIDA CHRISTMAS

Real snow, Lake Eola lights and a trip aboard the 'The Polar Express'



PATRICK CONNOLLY
Central Florida Explorer

The sun sets early and holiday lights turn on as dusk approaches. Inflatable Santas and reindeer expand in front yards and occasionally, there's a slight nip in the Florida air.

There's every sign to suggest it's the holiday season. Salvation Army bell ringers chat with shoppers as they shuffle into stores, trees are strapped to SUVs and parents rush out the door to their child's choir or band holiday concert.

But even as I experience my second Christmas season in Orlando, I find it hard to wrap my head around the mild winters Florida affords me, as hailing from up North, I'm accustomed to cold, snowy Yuletides.

It has taken some getting used to, but I enjoy informing my folks back in Pittsburgh of temperatures here in the mid 70s here while they work on shoveling the driveway.

During my second trip around the sun in the Sunshine State, I'm finding new ways to make holiday memories while enjoying the mild



A holiday "sleigh" boat ride is one festive activity at Wekiva Island's Winter Wonderland in Longwood.

weather. I saw Candlelight Processional for the first time at Epcot and relished Universal's "Grinchmas Who-liday Spectacular" and holiday parade — plus the park's holiday tree scavenger hunt.

This year, I also explored a few other unique seasonal offerings in Central Florida and even saw some real snow along the way.

Mele Kalikimaka at Wekiva

Florida's holiday season might

not feel quite the same as the Hawaiian Christmas alluded to in the song "Mele Kalikimaka," but it's not far off. After all, we have palm trees that sway here, too.

Wekiva Island is a popular Central Florida destination for summertime hangs on the water and enjoying adult beverages in the sun. During the region's mild wintertime, there are still activities to be enjoyed at this outdoor destination.

Throughout December, the island offers visits from Santa, a holiday boat "sleigh" ride, outdoor

movies, snow flurries and even a real snow slide, among other activities.

During my visit, I observed young Floridians enjoying the slide constructed with a mound of finely shaved ice (throughout the winter, Wekiva anticipates using 72 tons of the stuff). It's staged inside an air-conditioned tent in an effort to help the snow stay intact.

Feeling my inner child spring to life, I grabbed a sled and gave it a shot.

There was little friction between the ice and the sled, and I flew. It was a short ride, but the experience harkened back to the winter days of my youth, speeding down a hill near my backyard.

Then it was time for a "sleigh" boat ride (available Saturdays and Sundays). On the weekends and some evenings, Santa is around, but he wasn't during my visit. Instead, I enjoyed the ride by chatting with fellow visitors, observing birds along the Wekiva River and enjoying the sunset as it reflected in ripples on the water.

It was nearly dark by the time we returned to the island, but I stuck around just long enough to enjoy some snow flurries. Though it may have just been a foamy replica of the real thing, the falling white stuff invoked the same magical feeling of watching a real snowfall, as I did gazing up.

As Wekiva is also known for its

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