

Circling Lake Weir is a voyage of history, scenery and serenity

By Rick Allen / Staff writer

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Provided you keep sight of the water generally off the same shoulder, you're not likely to really get lost around Lake Weir in southeast Marion County. On the other hand, you could easily be waylaid by the lake's charm, its natural beauty, its history.

Here is a place to splash in refreshing waters at any of several beaches lining the lake, sip a cold one at Gator Joe's as gentle waves lap the shoreline, drive through a microcosm of the state itself — citrus groves and contemporary McMansions, Cracker homes and carefree beach life.

As early as 150 years ago, the lake captured the imagination; journalist T.M. Shackleford described it as “a lake of wondrous beauty” in his 100-page pamphlet “Lake Weir” published in 1883. “Even the ... Seminoles were captivated by its loveliness, and they named it in their musical language ‘Amaskohegan,’ meaning Bright Moon Lake,” he wrote.

It's also a center of history. Five of the county's 30 places on the National Register of Historic Places are in Ocklawaha or nearby East Lake Weir. Then there's the Barker connection: On Jan. 16, 1935, the FBI ambushed the notorious “Ma” Barker and her son, Fred, in a rented house along Lake Weir's shore, killing them in a four-hour gun battle.

The house, off limits to visitors for years and hidden behind greenery, is visible now from County Road 25 on the western entrance to Ocklawaha.

Our Getting Lost route around the 5,685-acre lake begins just west of the Barker house, at the stoplight where Maricamp Road intersects CR 25, and continues clockwise through Ocklawaha, East Lake Weir to Sunset Harbor and Summerfield. We racked up 23 miles circumnavigating the lake.

A brief side trip into Weirsdale before turning onto Sunset Harbor Road added only a couple of miles, but also brought us to the Orange Blossom Opry, the old Weirsdale High School gymnasium that lures some of the big-name country and bluegrass to its tiny stage — a music mecca in what some might consider the middle of nowhere.



Ocklawaha, nestled along the northern shoreline, is the centerpiece on the drive. While many residents work elsewhere, the lakefront town is where they hang out. Lakefront houses stand side by side.

But some come into Ocklawaha for work; Katie Amidei, for instance. A waitress at Gator Joe's, she was born 30 years ago in nearby Moss Bluff, and nowadays lives in Silver Springs Shores.

“It’s just seven minutes away,” she said. “It’s a great job.”

Gator Joe’s Beach Bar & Grill dates back to 1926 when it was called Barnes Beach. It has hardwood floors, pun-filled rafters and windows overlooking the lake and beach just outside. Not only can you quaff a cold brew on a Tiki dock stretching out over the lake, but you can satisfy a hefty appetite with a signature Joe’s Gator Philly or frog legs followed by a tangy slice of homemade key lime pie.

The deck also makes a nice spot to watch the sun setting over the lake.

On display inside the door is a replica of Gator Joe’s head; he was a 15-plus-foot alligator that roamed the area 100 years ago. Lore has it that Ma Barker and boys tried to kill it; a letter from the Barkers mentioning “Old Joe” was intercepted by the FBI, leading them to Ocklawaha and the fateful gun fight.

“Just to be able to walk away from work and relax,” said Rhonda Langley lounging on the dock during her lunch break, “it’s kind of a different world out here on the lake.

“And I love the people here. They’re down to earth, they’re real.”



With Ocklawaha in the rearview, CR 25 goes mostly natural with pines and oaks towering overhead and the occasional home peaking out. At the end of Southeast 134th Street Road is Hampton Beach, a pocket-size park with lots of shade and a small strand for swimming.

Past a scenic overlook, the lake glittering a few hundred yards away, we come into East Lake Weir — a community established in 1874 as a fishing resort. The few hundred residents here are served by the tiny, one-room East Lake Weir Post Office, one of the smallest in Florida.

“You get to know everyone,” said Sandy Donar, postmaster for nine years, “they’re not just an address, but part of your family.”

Not far from it, at 13830 SE 140th Ave. Road, is the Lake Weir Yacht Club. Dating back to 1909, according to its website, it was a playground for socialites and elites. Among their objectives: “to hold launch parades, water carnivals, races, picnics and other functions.” Annual dues were just \$1. The still-active facility is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



The turn onto Sunset Harbor Road can, at first, be disquieting; it’s narrow and doesn’t seem to lead anywhere. Yet when it arrives at Southeast 134th Avenue, the road divides as it continues into a citrus grove. Here, too, a sign beckons to turn to Eaton’s Beach, another historic spot on the lake.

Early this year, Randy and Sue Keuntjes tore down an older building to raise a brand-new Eaton’s Beach Sandbar & Grill, expected to open in a few weeks. “My parents think this is an unbelievable place,” said their daughter, Angie. “There’s a lot of history here, and hopefully we can make some more.”

Beyond the grove, Sunset Harbor Road turns pretty typical of many Marion County roads, winding past horse pastures, new homes and old with the occasional church or small business — even Lake Weir Middle School — along the way.



With the turn at Southeast 100th Avenue, once one of Marion’s famed “red roads,” the lake and its brother, Little

Lake Weir, are nearly out of sight. It, too, passes mostly through residential areas and the small, moss-draped Willoughby Park — named for early pioneers Willis and Odelia Willoughby — to Southeast 132nd Place, which leads to Carney Island County Park, a gem of a multi-use park purchased by the innovative Pennies for Parks program more than a decade ago.

Really a peninsula separating the lakes, Carney Island boasts beaches on each lake, boating, hiking, a playground and preservation lands. For decades it was known as Orange and Lemon Islands and hosted citrus groves established in the 1870s by Capt. John L. Carney. He also wrote letters enticing people to come to Lake Weir, according to Shackelford, and within 10 years more than 1,000 people lived around the lake.

From Carney Island, we head north on Southeast 115th Avenue to CR 25. To the right is Alfie's, a restaurant that long has billed itself as "Ocklawaha's best-kept secret." It isn't, though; the roadhouse has been a popular stop for at least a decade.

Just beyond Alfie's is the stoplight at Maricamp Road, our starting point.

And as we leave the lake behind, Shackelford's words come to mind: "When calm and smooth the lake is beautiful. Sometimes, owing to a peculiar reflection and refraction of light, mirrors of various sizes are formed in the lake that seem encased in solid silver.

"I have seen the lake form a perfect mirror of the sky above."

And now so have we.

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