

Cypress Gardens

This is where it all began. Yes, it's true, Silver Springs was running glass bottom boats before the turn of the century, but that was simply a matter of capitalizing on a ready-made attraction. In the opinion of many, the Central Florida theme park phenomenon actually began when Dick Pope carved a man-made paradise out of a patch of swampy cypress forest along the east shore of Lake Eloise to create Cypress Gardens in 1936. Cypress Gardens became world-renowned for its spectacular botanical gardens and its innovative water ski spectacles. As theme parks boomed in the 1970s, Cypress Gardens retained much of the easy-going, leisurely air that characterized its early days.

The story of Cypress Gardens' development and of Dick Pope's single-minded boosterism is almost as entertaining as the park itself. When he launched his enterprise on little more than a dream and a hunch, most people thought he was nuts. One newspaper called him "the Swami of the Swamp." Opening day brought in gate receipts of \$38. Hardly a propitious sign. Fortunately, Pope, whom the *Orlando Sentinel* calls "the flamboyant father of Florida tourism," was blessed with an instinct for publicity that P.T. Barnum would have admired. Within five years, Cypress Gardens was drawing half a million visitors a year.

Pope did it with publicity — free publicity. He staged photo shoots of pretty girls in his picture perfect park and mailed copies by the thousands, in gardenia-scented envelopes, to newspapers and magazines throughout the country. The media took the bait. One photograph of a skyborne water skier appeared in 3,670 publications. Of course, Cypress Gardens was mentioned in the caption. Pope lured filmmakers and

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television stars to Cypress Gardens. Esther Williams, Mike Douglas, and scores of others used Cypress Gardens as a backdrop. He staged outrageous stunts like playing the piano for a ballerina while both of them were being towed behind a speedboat, she on water skis, he on a piano-sized platform. Taking a cue from the Miss America pageant, he started crowning a new queen of something or other on an almost daily basis. All of it became grist for Pope's voracious publicity mill. Pope and his wife were also inspired improvisers, creating new marketing strategies on the spur of the moment. Some of Cypress Gardens' most revered traditions, like the water ski shows and the Southern Belles, came about almost by accident.

The story seemed to come to an end in 2003, when Cypress Gardens closed, seemingly forever, a victim to changing tastes, declining attendance, and mounting financial losses. The tourism drought caused by the attacks of 9/11 was the final straw. It looked like the park's prized lakeside real estate would be turned into luxury home sites. But the park had its fierce partisans and the idea of Cypress Gardens refused to die.

Then Kent Buescher, an amusement park owner from Georgia, decided to rescue (some would say ruin) Cypress Gardens. The results have been mixed. Buescher cut back on many of the park's best features. The ski show is a shadow of its former glory, the ice show is smaller, there is less horticulture than before, and a somewhat cheesy amusement park has been tacked on. On the other hand, Buescher has retained the robust line up of musical concerts featuring oldie-but-goodie stars and old timers can easily avoid the newer elements and enjoy the somewhat diminished pleasures of the park's older areas.

And speaking of old timers, Cypress Gardens has long had a reputation as a park for senior citizens. While that perception may not accurately reflect the breadth and scope of the park's appeal, the fact remains that on the typical day you will see a majority of silver-haired guests. I wouldn't let that dissuade younger readers from coming and bringing the kids. There's plenty here to enchant visitors of all ages, just so long as they don't come expecting another Universal Orlando or SeaWorld.

Before You Come

If you'd like to get advance information on what will be going on at Cypress Gardens during the time of your visit, give them a call at (863) 324-2111. They'll be happy to fill you in on the events calendar or send information. Cypress Gardens also maintains a colorful web site at

www.cypressgardens.com.

When's the Best Time to Come?

Traditionally, Cypress Gardens' high season extends from fall into spring, the months when "sunbirds" flock south from cooler climes. That may change now that the park has added an extensive selection of amusement park rides, drawing a younger clientel. Generally speaking, you will find more activities happening during the winter than during the torrid summer months. The size of the crowds, however, is never a factor in picking the date of your visit; Cypress Gardens is rarely mobbed. And thanks to the wizardry of the horticultural staff, there's always something to see.

I recommend spring and fall, since the weather is close to ideal; the summer can be stifling and winter is unpredictable, with temperatures ranging from pleasant to quite chilly. Whenever you visit, plan to stay late enough to enjoy the spectacular sunsets over Lake Eloise.

Getting There

Cypress Gardens is a leisurely one-hour drive from Orlando (less, if you drive like the locals who take the 65 miles per hour speed limit as a suggested minimum). The easiest way to get there is to follow I-4 to Route 27 South. Turn right off Route 27 at State Route 540 (it is well marked). Cypress Gardens is a bit less than four miles along on your left.

Parking at Cypress Gardens

Cypress Gardens' parking is \$7 for cars and \$9 for RVs and trailers in a long narrow lot at one end of the park property. When crowds warrant, a tram pulled by a large pick up truck ferries arriving guests from the far reaches of the lot to the entrance.

Be aware that parking is *not* free for annual passholders, as it is at most other theme parks. Annual passholders can opt for a \$25 annual parking pass, which is discussed below.

Opening and Closing Times

Unlike many area theme parks, Cypress Gardens does not open early but it often boogies late. The park opens every day of the year at 10:00 a.m. Closing time varies from 6:00 p.m. during slower periods to 7:00, 8:00, 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. The schedule is somewhat erratic; a color-coded calendar on the web site will be invaluable in planning your visit. The park is closed on Christmas and Easter.

It's a shame Cypress Gardens never offers early admission since the early dawn hours would be an ideal time to avoid the heat of a stroll through the botanical gardens.

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The Price of Admission

Cypress Gardens sells admission by the day and by the year. At press time, prices (not including tax) were as follows:

One-Day Pass:

Adults:	\$34.95
Juniors (3 to 9):	\$29.95
Seniors (55+)	\$29.95

Annual Pass:

All ages:\$64.95

Annual Parking Pass:

All ages:\$25.00

The one-day admission currently (December 2004) offers a second day free. This is not automatic, however. To take advantage of the offer, you must visit Guest Services and get a pass for the second day. The second day privilege must be used within six calendar days and is, of course, non-transferrable.

The annual pass, called a Passport, offers admission to Wild Adventure in Valdosta, Georgia, Cypress Garden's sister park. It also offers admission to all concerts at the park. It does not offer free parking, however, as is the case at most other theme parks. If you will be visiting often enough for an annual pass to make sense, then you are pretty much forced to purchase the \$25 Annual Parking Pass. As all but the densest of guests will realize, this raises the effective cost of an annual pass to \$89.95, before taxes.

The pass will probably make the most sense for Florida residents or others who find themselves in the Winter Haven area on a regular basis. If you decide you want one, step into Guest Relations; they will create your photo ID Passport while you wait.

In December 2004, there was some unconfirmed speculation that the one-day price would rise when the park was more fully complete, but that the price of the annual passport would remain the same.

Staying Near the Park

If Cypress Gardens is your primary destination, or if you just want to spare yourself the drive back to Orlando, you may want to stay near the main gate. Although the hotel below is practically adjacent to the park walls, it is a long walk to the entrance. So you may want to consider the motels found three to four miles west along Route 540 (Cypress Gar-

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dens Boulevard) in the town of Winter Haven. None is within walking distance.

Best Western Admiral's Inn

5665 Cypress Gardens Boulevard

Winter Haven, FL 33884

(800) 247-2799; (863) 324-5950; fax (863) 324-2376

Standard mid-range motel.

Price Range: \$\$

Amenities: Pool, restaurant, lounge

Walk to Park: 15 minutes

Special Events

The elaborate floral festivals, tied to seasons, seem to be a thing of the past, which is bad news indeed to the gardening buffs who looked to Cypress gardens for inspiration.

However, Cypress Gardens continues to offer a robust schedule of musical events — 35 have been announced for 2005. Most of the headliners are stars who shone much more brightly several decades ago. The acts range from easy-listening bands like Les Brown, to country stars like Loretta Lynn and Glen Campbell, to aging rockers like Chubby Checker, with the occasional comedy act thrown in for good measure. The events take place in the expansive, open-air Star Haven Amphitheater, which can hold several thousand fans. It often fills up.

If the musical selection is to your taste and you live within hailing distance of Cypress Gardens, this is one of the best arguments for an annual pass and an indisputable entertainment bargain.

Dining and Shopping at Cypress Gardens

Your dining choices at Cypress Gardens are limited. Most of it is of the fast-food variety and very little of it justifies the prices being charged. There is one full-service restaurant, Aunt Julie's Country Kitchen which was not yet open in early December of 2004.

Like the dining, the shopping is not a reason in itself to visit the park. There are some nice things to be found at several of the shops and if you need to stock up on decorations for your Christmas tree, Kringle's Christmas Shop a wide selection of tasteful tree ornaments along with decorative accessories for the rest of the house.

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Good Things to Know About . . .

Access for the Disabled

Almost all of the park is wheelchair accessible, although some of the inclines are best negotiated with the help of a companion. The exceptions are the boat rides which may not be able to accommodate all disabled guests. Both wheelchairs and electric scooters can be rented just inside the entrance. Wheelchairs are \$9 per day. Electric scooters are \$30 a day, plus tax.

Babies

Strollers can be rented near the entrance, on your left as you enter. Single strollers are \$7 per day, doubles are \$9. Diaper changing stations can be found in most rest-rooms, men's and women's.

Emergencies

Medical personnel are available during park hours. If you or someone in your party has a problem, contact the nearest park employee. If you lose a child, do the same; park staffers are far better able than you to comb the underbrush for your little ones.

Leaving the Park

You may leave the park and return during the day. Just make sure to have your hand stamped as you leave. This is true even if you have an annual pass!

Lockers

Coin-operated lockers (50 cents for each use) can be found in the entrance arcade near the Resort Wear gift shop.

Money

There is an ATM located in the park, but as of early December, 2004, its location was uncertain.

Pets

There is a small kennel for cats and dogs

Safety

Cypress Gardens is open to all the birds and animals who take it into their minds to pay a visit. The park warns people not to feed the birds or other little critters because they are wild and unpredictable and may

become aggressive. That's good advice, but the squirrels are hard to resist. It's unlikely that you'll see an alligator during your visit but, if you do, remember that feeding wild alligators is not only stupid but illegal.

Special Diets

If you have special dietary needs, your best bet is Aunt Julie's Country Kitchen, which offers a number of special meals on request.

Weddings

In its heyday, more than 300 weddings were performed at Cypress Gardens each year, and once you've seen the place you'll understand why. As of December 2004, however, no decision has been made as to whether the new Cypress Gardens will continue this tradition.

Smelling the Flowers: Your Day at Cypress Gardens

Cypress Gardens can easily be seen and appreciated in a day. You may not see everything, but as you read through the descriptions that follow, you will probably find there are some things you won't mind missing.

Cypress Gardens' fame rests primarily on its spectacular gardens, but the park has developed an eclectic blend of attractions. The major themes are:

The Gardens. Not only are "the original gardens" (so called to distinguish Pope's original creation from later innovations) still growing, but the formal *Plantation Gardens*, and *Topiary Trail* await to dazzle visitors..

Water Skiing. The Cypress Gardens water show was the original and, even in its current, truncated form, is still worth seeing.

Variety Entertainment. Cypress Gardens presents a regular schedule of family-style entertainment, from singers, to magicians, to an ice show.

Nature Shows. In addition to the gardening shows already mentioned, Cypress Gardens presents show-and-tell presentations starring some of nature's most interesting birds and reptiles.

Rides. Thanks to the investment by Kent Buescher, Cypress Gardens is now a "ride" park, albeit on a rather small scale.

This is not a large park, although when you take into account the meandering paths through the many garden areas, you can walk a fair distance during your visit. The park comprises 200 acres and runs north to south along the shore of Lake Eloise; the sole entrance is at the south

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end and it is a long walk to the far northern reaches of the park. The park is divided (at least in my mind) into two main areas. Jubilee Junction is your introduction to the park. It is primarily a dining and shopping venue, modeled on an old country village. Off Jubilee Junction are Nature's Way, housing the park's animal attractions, and Adventure Grove, housing the new amusement park rides. The other major area is the northern end of the park, what I call "The Gardens," which encompasses the original botanical gardens, the ski show arena, and *Topiary Trail*.

The One-Day Stay

As you enter the park, pick up a copy of the large one-sheet flyer with a map of the park and a schedule of shows and events. Scan this for the show times of the entertainments you most want to see and plan accordingly. In my opinion, the water ski show and the ice skating show are must sees. You should also try to catch the animal show in *Nature's Way*.

If you arrive at opening time, the Jubilee Junction area may not be open yet and the first water ski show will be at least an hour away. So a visit to the botanical gardens at the far end of the park is a logical first step. This is also a good time to see them, before the heat of the day. Depending on how long it takes you to see the gardens, you may finish up just in time to catch the first performance of the water ski show. After the show, stroll through *Topiary Trail* en route back to Jubilee Junction. If a show of *Living Gardens* is underway, you may want to pause,

Now you have the afternoon to tour the attractions in Jubilee Junction, Nature's Way, and Adventure Grove and enjoy a leisurely lunch. In addition to the shows recommended above, don't miss *Wings of Wonder*. *Sunshine Sky Adventure* is a fun diversion that can be squeezed in just about anytime you like; it only takes five minutes.

Another option is to save your visit to the botanical gardens for late in the day, towards sunset. Photographers, especially, may find the afternoon sun and the lengthening shadows a plus.

"The Gardens"

At the north end of the park, is what I call "The Gardens," which comprises what the management refers to as "the original gardens" and the water ski arena. Proceeding south, you enter *Topiary Trail*, a gentle valley that extends from the water ski arena to the entrance to Jubilee Junction. In International Gardens you will find the lovely Italian Fountain and the Mediterranean Waterfall. The waterfall is artificial and fed by

thousands of gallons of recycled lake water; the stream that flows from its base to the lake marks the approximate center line of the park. Finally, there is Jubilee Junction, a melange of shops, eateries, and attractions arranged along a pleasant tree-shaded promenade that evokes the antebellum Deep South. Most of the park's attractions are located here.

For this survey of Cypress Gardens attractions, I will start at the north end of the park, describing the “original” botanical gardens and their surrounding attractions, and then move directly to Jubilee Junction at the opposite end. I have not attempted to describe Topiary Trail, except for the *Living Gardens* show, because the displays there change so frequently.

For those with sufficient time, starting at the north end of the park and slowly wending your way southward is a highly efficient way in which to see the entire park. Assuming that there will be a few attractions you will pass up, the entire tour can be done in a day. Those who want to be absolutely thorough will probably have to return a second day to complete their survey.

The Gardens area contains relatively few attractions but they are the ones for which Cypress Gardens is justly famous. The two marquee attractions, the ski show and the botanical gardens, are doozies.

The water ski show area with its twin stadiums is the first thing you see as you enter the park, so we'll start there.

Mango Bay Ski Stadium: “Ski Show Spectacular”

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

Type: Water ski spectacular

Time: 25 minutes

Kelly says: A pared-down classic

An entire industry was born here at Cypress Gardens when Dick Pope inaugurated regular water skiing shows. The story goes something like this: During the early forties, Pope staged a water skiing exhibition for a photographer as part of his ongoing campaign to get free publicity for his park. This time he got something else. A group of soldiers was touring the park after the photo appeared and asked, “What time’s the water ski show?” Thinking quickly, Pope quoted a show time that gave him just enough time to round up some water skiers and put on the first show.

The water ski shows quickly became a Cypress Gardens trademark, one Pope promoted tirelessly. In a never-ending effort to improve the shows and stay one or more steps ahead of the inevitable copycats, Pope

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and his crew kept dreaming up new, bigger, and better stunts. As a result, Cypress Gardens boasts 51 world-record water skiing firsts, the most recent (an eight-man flip off a single ramp) in 1994. Best of all was the human pyramid, a four-level extravaganza in which a bottom row of six men hoisted six lovely “AquaMaids” aloft, the top one waving Old Glory as they zoom in review past the stands.

Alas, the pyramid and the AquaMaids are no more. The new management didn’t want to pay the hefty insurance fees such derring-do demands, and they have cut the cast from 12 skiers to about seven.

Fortunately, Cypress Gardens doesn’t need a cast of thousands to put on a good show. They simply showcase talented athletes who, by dint of hard work, have become the best in the world at what they do. The result is a display of water skiing artistry that moves deftly from the pretty nifty to the truly amazing.

The heart of the show is the stunt skiing, and that is the province of the men. Barefoot water skiing seems amazing enough to me but these guys do it in more ways than you’d imagine possible, from starting out face down and backwards in the water to jumping off regular water skis at 45 miles an hour. On a variety of skis and ski boards, they twist and flip and dismount spectacularly at the foot of the stands.

There is also an interlude of “adagio” skiing, male-female teams on a single pair of skis who engage in a series of graceful lifts as they speed along at 40 miles an hour. The form was borrowed from ice skating and adapted to water skis in the early seventies; I can’t help feeling it’s a lot harder on water.

In the guise of “The Rampmasters,” the guys put on a display of gutsy ramp jumping that involves aerial spins over the heads of their colleagues, back and front flips in unison, and something called a “gainer,” a sideways flip at nearly 50 miles an hour. In every show there is an amiable goof-off who provides an opportunity for some good-natured hijinks and derring-do that may not be pretty but is still pretty amazing.

As a sort of bonus, they throw in something that has little to do with water skiing, except perhaps that the hang glider involved gets his initial lift by being towed behind a boat. The announcer points him out off in the distance and then the crowd gapes skyward as the high flying daredevil circles downward to a pinpoint landing on the waterside stage. Pretty neat if you’ve never seen it done before.

Mango Bay Ski Stadium: “Night Magic”

Rating: Not yet rated

Type: Laser light show

Time: Unknown

Kelly says: Sounds like fun

The web site has this to say: “Night Magic,” a 3-D laser and fireworks show will light up the night sky over Lake Eloise with beautifully orchestrated lasers and fireworks set to a composition of stirring music.” No opening date had been announced as of early December 2004.

Botanical Gardens

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Type: Beautifully landscaped gardens

Time: 40 to 45 minutes or as long as you wish

Kelly says: Among the best of its kind in the world and a photographer’s paradise

By definition, botanical gardens are a sort of museum. Most botanical gardens seem to strive for order. Succulents here, pines there, palms over there. Tropical plants in this area, temperate plants in that area. That way people can study them better. Completeness is also a goal, trying to have more epiphytes than the next botanical garden, for example. The aesthetics of display, while important, often seem to be a secondary concern, except in the more formal gardens.

The designers of Cypress Gardens, however, seem to have started by asking a simple yet powerful question — “How can we produce the most stunning visual spectacle possible?” — and letting everything else follow from there. The result is a remarkable blend of over-the-top landscaping hyperbole and serene beauty.

These 16 acres contain over 8,000 different kinds of plants, trees, and flowers collected from 90 different countries. There are over 60 varieties of azaleas alone. I have no idea whether that means the collection is unusually complete (I mention azaleas only because it’s a flower I recognize). Nor do I know if the designers have carefully segregated tropical plants from the temperate varieties (I suspect they have not). But I can’t imagine anyone will care.

Here the purely aesthetic experience is paramount. A leisurely stroll, with open eyes and a receptive soul, will yield abundant treasures. And if you’re a typical vacation photographer, bring along a few more rolls of film than usual. You’ll find ample use for them. As large as it is, the garden is not a maze and there’s little likelihood of getting lost.

Tip: The garden is dotted with wooden benches. Bring a handkerchief or paper towel, as many of them are wet in the morning hours,

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before the sun has had a chance to dry them off.

As you enter the gardens, you cross a bridge onto a chain of man-made islands. To your left is Lake Eloise, its shore often guarded by stately cypress trees emerging from the shallow water. To the right is a man-made canal. Must-see sights along this archipelago are the **Big Lagoon**, across which you will see a pretty Southern Belle gracing one of Cypress Garden's loveliest vistas. At the end of the island is a typical Dick Pope inspiration, the **Florida Pool**. This is a swimming pool in the shape of the state of Florida, nestled right against the lake shore. It's fenced off now and used primarily for publicity shots. Its main claim to immortality is its appearance in the 1953 Esther Williams film, *Easy To Love*.

The **Oriental Gardens** are an oasis of cool serenity presided over by a towering Buddha. A wooden "Japanese tea house" offers a place to sit in the shade and survey the scene. Even those seemingly immune to Nature's wonders will be startled by the massive **banyan tree**. This behemoth began its tenure at Cypress Gardens as a 50-pound sapling in a bucket. Today it's larger than your average castle, with its aerial root system creating a charming maze of paths through its very heart.

Tip: Nearby is **Banyan Terrace**, a rental facility for meetings and banquets. When it is not otherwise engaged, the place is pretty much deserted, but you can find a bench on the broad terrace overlooking Lake Summit (where the ski team practices). It makes a nice quiet getaway from the heat and the sun.

Perhaps the most beautiful spot in the entire gardens is the **Gazebo**. This is no rustic wooden affair but a resplendent white-domed structure supported by eight fluted Greek columns and flanked by gently bubbling fountains. Also known as the "Love Chapel," it was the site of the over 300 weddings that took place at Cypress Gardens each year. The Gazebo stands at the top of a rise that looks down across the Big Lagoon and out to Lake Eloise; the view from here is as fine as the reverse view from below. An ingenious **photo op** has been provided here. You stand facing a large mirror with your back to the Gazebo. Place your camera on the small platform (also facing the mirror), set the timer, and smile. You'll get a lovely shot of yourself with the Gazebo in the background and the words "Cypress Gardens" floating on the mirror.

The Southern Belles

The Southern Belles deserve a special note. Although the botanical gardens seem to be their "natural habitat," they will be seen in all areas of the park. The story of their origins is another example of the wonderfully

ingenious and utterly benign hucksterism that characterizes the history of Cypress Gardens.

It seems that in 1940 a devastating winter freeze killed the colorful but delicate flame vines that framed the entrance at that time. The interior of the park had been saved by the heat of many oil heaters and looked just fine. Visitors didn't know this, however, and when they saw the wilted entrance they assumed the worst and kept on driving.

Noticing this, Julie Pope, Dick's wife, rounded up a bevy of local high school girls and outfitted them in colorful antebellum hoop-skirted gowns. She then placed them strategically in front of the damaged flame vines to wave at approaching cars. Not only did attendance pick up, but the visitors were so enchanted by the girls that another Cypress Gardens tradition was born. Today, the Southern Belles take turns sitting decorously in the hot Florida sun to serve as beautiful props in tourists' photos. In typical Cypress Gardens hyperbole, they are billed as "the most photographed women in the world." Their bright and fanciful gowns are another Cypress Gardens trademark. All of them are made by hand at the park. Each one takes some 13 yards of fabric, 5 yards of lining, over 63 yards of lace, and more than 45 hours to complete. Since that moment of inspiration in 1940, over 800 of them have been created.

The Living Gardens

Rating: ★ ★ ★

Type: Slo-mo "living statue"

Time: 20 minutes

Kelly says: Ingenious but makes its point quickly

This show, with a schedule printed on the back of the park map, couldn't be simpler. An attractive young woman, elaborately made up to resemble an ornate Victorian statue stands in a fountain along Topiary Trail, the garden that links the Botanical Gardens to Jubilee Junction. To the accompaniment of saccharine pop music and operatic arias, she goes through a series of slow-motion poses as water spouts from her finger tips and the top of her elaborate hairdo.

I must say, she brings a remarkable degree of romantic intensity to this little exercise, but after five minutes or so you get the idea and the act become repetitious. For me the best part was the end, when a burly workman unplugs the hoses that create the living fountain, assists the performer during her equally slow-motion dismount, and then carts her off to her dressing room on (I'm not making this up) a hand truck.

Jubilee Junction

At the South end of the park, Jubilee Junction greets you on your arrival, evoking a make-believe antebellum Southland that probably never existed in quite this quaint a form. The long promenade is accented by flowers and shaded by oaks dripping theatrically in Spanish moss. Off this central corridor is artfully arranged a collection of shops, restaurants, and entertainments in gracious pastel-painted clapboard buildings. The area is actually quite compact, yet it seems wonderfully spacious and contains a multiplicity of things to see and do.

The following attractions are described in roughly the order in which you will encounter them as you walk through Jubilee Junction from Topiary Trail:

The Royal Palm Theater: “Cypress Gardens on Ice”

- Rating:** ★ ★ ★ +
- Type:** Ice show
- Time:** 25 minutes
- Kelly says:** Glitzy and fun

The Royal Palm evokes an old Southern playhouse, complete with faux marble columns at the entrance. Inside is an 800-seat auditorium with a standard proscenium stage. The stage area has been converted into an ice rink but, given the shallowness of the performing area, some compromises have been made. Don't expect the electrifying leaps you may have seen in other ice shows where the skaters have the advantage of larger arenas.

That being said, the small cast of performers who grace this show do the most with the space available as they present an entertaining show that changes theme from time to time. A chorus of pretty girls backs a trio of principal skaters who perform a variety of adagio numbers, in which a boy-girl pair perform a series of acrobatic dance moves involving graceful lifts, and solo routines, in which individual skaters show off their specialties. All of this is leavened with light-hearted humorous numbers that are virtually guaranteed to raise a chuckle.

To top it all off, the designers have contributed some lovely costumes and exciting visual effects. There are about four shows a day. If this sort of thing appeals, check the schedule to make sure you don't miss it. However, if you remember the larger shows that used to be mounted in this space, be prepared for a bit of a let down.

Wings of Wonder

- Rating:** ★ ★ ★ ★ +
Type: Butterfly-filled conservatory
Time: Continuous viewing
Kelly says: One of Cypress Gardens' best

[**Note:** This attraction was not open in early December 2004, however it is expected to be much the same as it was before the park closed in 2003.]

What an inspired idea this is! Build a 5,500 square foot Victorian style glass conservatory and run a stream through it. Keep the glass walls and roof sparkling clean. Plant the conservatory with the kinds of trees, plants, and flowers that butterflies love. Then fill the space with over 1,000 free-flying butterflies, exotic waterfowl, and a few iguanas.

The result is pure enchantment and an experience that will reward patient viewing. The more you look, the more butterflies you will see. Some of them are so ingeniously camouflaged, it may be many minutes before you realize they are there at all. A looping path takes you through this wonderland, past babbling waterfalls and quiet ponds as butterflies flutter all about you. At the back, you can see butterflies in the pupal stage, just before they emerge in all their splendor; with a bit of luck, you may see one break through to the light. Somewhere between 700 and 1,000 butterflies are hatched each week in this fashion to keep the conservatory well stocked.

Plantation Gardens

- Rating:** ★ ★ ★
Type: Formal gardens
Time: Continuous viewing
Kelly says: Best for serious gardeners

[**Note:** This attraction was not open in early December 2004, however it is expected to be restored to its former glory.]

Past *Wings of Wonder* a large open area with a stunning view of the lake has been set aside to showcase themed formal gardens. The **butterfly garden** has been designed to attract the local species. The **herb and scent garden** invites you to touch, rub, and taste. If you've never seen a vegetable in the wild, you may spot one of your favorites in the **vegetable garden**. The **rose garden** offers another chance to display this perennial favorite. You might want to stroll across the lush green lawn to the lake's edge, a spot rarely visited by guests.

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Live Musical Entertainment

- Rating:** * * +
Type: Live solo entertainers
Time: About 20 minutes per show
Kelly says: Hit or miss

There are two gazebos in the Jubilee Junction promenade. Here, about every hour throughout the afternoon, earnest young singers accompanied by a synthesized rhythm section attempt to entertain an audience of resting seniors old enough to be their grandparents. It's got to be the toughest job in show business.

Adventure Grove

- Rating:** * * *
Type: Amusement park rides
Time: As long as you (and junior) can stand
Kelly says: Head here with squirmy kids and teens

This large area, about as large as the rest of Jubilee Junction, houses some three dozen amusement park rides, only a handful of them rising above the level you'd expect to find at a well-appointed county fair or traveling carnival. It is this section that is intended to attract a demographic of younger kids and teens that shunned the old Cypress Gardens. Whether it will be successful in this regard remains to be seen. However, for those who are not interested in this sort of thing, the good news is that Adventure Grove is well segregated from the rest of the park and can be avoided with ease.

Among the more interesting rides are the three roller coasters. None will rival the mega-coasters at the major theme parks but they provide modest thrills for the younger set. **Triple Hurricane**, named for the three storms that slammed Cypress Gardens during its refurbishment, is an attractive 20-seater wooden coaster, while **Swamp Thing** [not open in December 2004] is an inverted steel coaster, also a 20-seater, as is **Okeechobee Rampage**, a small steel coaster.

There are two water-park style rides. **Storm Surge** takes 8-person round rafts up a steep hill and sends them spinning down a corkscrew chute. **Wave Runner** is a twin, enclosed water slide that uses 2-person rafts. Some people say it's the best ride in Adventure Grove.

Also of note is **Paradise Sky Wheel**, a ferris wheel that sits over the old sinkhole that graced Cypress Gardens former entrance. There are also plenty of rides set aside just for the littlest visitors.

At present (December 2004), there is only one entrance to Adven-

ture Grove, at its southern end, near the Guest Service building. To enter you walk past the Star Haven Amphitheater and turn left. Eventually, there will be a second exit at the northern end, leading through a shopping and dining venue called the Midway, which will take you out at the water ski stadium.

Farmyard Frolics

- Rating:** Not yet rated
Type: Live kiddie show
Time: Unknown
Kelly says: Your guess is as good as mine

The stage for this open-air show in Adventure Grove is up but no opening date had been announced as of early December 2004,

Sunshine Sky Adventure

- Rating:** ★ ★ ★ ★
Type: Aerial platform ride
Time: 5 minutes
Kelly says: A too-short bird's eye view

Tucked away behind the shops of Jubilee Junction is a 370-ton counterbalance which is used to loft a circular platform 153 feet in the air (roughly 16 stories high), where it rotates to give its passengers a panoramic view of Cypress Gardens and Lake Eloise. Off in the distance, you can see the silhouette of stately Bok Tower, 11 miles away. Seating is single-file around the edge of the platform and once the platform is airborne, you can stand and move to the rail for a better look.

This is a fun way to get another perspective on the park, and the lofty vantage point offers photographers many wonderful **photo ops**. At five minutes from start to finish, this ride is a bit too short for my taste, but it's free and you can ride as often as you wish (or until your film runs out). The location of this attraction and the mobile platform itself have been cleverly hidden behind trees and buildings. You can see the raised platform from elsewhere in the park, but you could spend all day in Jubilee Junction and never suspect it was there.

Nature's Way

- Rating:** ★ ★ +
Type: Small zoo
Time: Continuous viewing
Kelly says: Worth a stroll-through en route to the

The Other Orlando

shows in *Nature's Theatre*

[**Note:** Nature's Way was closed and looking a long way from completion in December 2004. However, it is expected (or should I say hoped) that when it reopens it will be much as it used to be.]

This vest-pocket zoo is tucked away in a corner of the park under an attractively shaded canopy of moss-draped oaks. Most animals are held in roughly circular sunken pits, eliminating the need for bars.

Most of the animals are Florida natives (although there is a growing collection of "exotic" animals such as rheas, emus, and wallabies). Best of all are the injured birds of prey for which Cypress Gardens cares; some of them appear in the presentations in *Nature's Theatre* (see below). There is also a magnificent Indian rock python, all 17 feet and 225 pounds of him.

Along the shores of Lake Eloise you will find **Nature's Boardwalk**, a charming area offering a chance to feed the emus and such (50 cents for a small handful of food pellets) and delightful views across the lake. Then you can toss turkey franks to five-foot alligators and gawk at Mighty Mike, a stunning 13-foot specimen in **Gator Gulch**. Also in this area is the **Birdwalk Aviary**, a walk-in exhibit of birds and a few tiny Muntjac, or barking, deer. The big draw here are the chattering, multi-hued lorys and lorikeets which you can feed.

With the possible exception of the python, you can see more, larger, and better displayed specimens elsewhere in the Orlando area. Still, this makes a pleasant time-killer as you wait for the nature shows to begin.

Nature's Theatre: "Animal Encounters"

Rating: ★ ★ ★
Type: Nature show
Time: 15 minutes
Kelly says: Too short

[**Note:** This show was announced but hadn't opened in December 2004. The review that follows is of the show that used to be there. Hopefully, the new show will be similar.]

Nature's Theatre is a simple tarp-covered amphitheater that serves as the venue for a series of educational nature shows hosted by Cypress Gardens' staff members, who show off some of their more intriguing charges. Check the schedule for show times.

Exactly what you will see is hard to predict, but generally the show includes at least one raptor, such as a horned owl or red-tailed hawk. The raptors are Cypress Gardens' lineup of injured birds of prey that can

never be released back to the wild and are living out their lives in the comfort and security of the Gardens. They earn their room and board by posing for your photos during this informative presentation. You may also see macaws, baby alligators, and a snake or two. For each animal, the handlers present a fascinating sampler of natural history tidbits. Some of the critters are paraded in front of the audience for those who wish to touch or take close-up photos.

The reptile portion features the show's true star, an albino Indian rock python with the rather cruel nickname "Banana Boy." The snake retains the camouflage markings of his species but with a pronounced yellow hue. It's a beautiful animal.

Treasure of Cypress Cove

- Rating:* Not yet rated
Type: Live show
Time: Unknown
Kelly says: Your guess is as good as mine

This is another show that has been announced for the Nature's Way area. No further information was available as of early December 2004.

The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring (Tra-La)

As of early December 2004, much of Cypress Gardens was incomplete, despite the announcement of a "Grand Opening." Many of the shops and restaurants in Jubilee Junction have yet to open. The shops that are open seem to have only a minimum of merchandise on display. The major eateries, such as Aunt Julie's Country Kitchen and the food court at Jubilee Marketplace, are also closed, leaving very few satisfying dining choices.

There is still a great deal of work to be done on the Botanical Gardens, which suffered grievously from the hurricanes that roared through the area in 2004. New visitors will nevertheless be impressed. Returning guests will notice how much less lush the gardens appear. There also seems to have been quite a bit of pruning and clearing done to make room for the newer sections of the refurbished park, leaving some doubt as to how well-screened they will be for visitors to the Gardens. Hopefully, the lush Florida climate will work its magic.

Also still on the drawing boards is something called the **Cypress Cove Ferry Line**, which appears to link the Nature's Way section with the Botanical Gardens. Whether it will wend its way through the pictur-

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esque waterways of the Botanical Gardens remains to be seen. The old paddle-wheel steamer that once offered dinner cruises on Lake Eloise can be seen moored on Lake Summit. Its future plans, if any, have not been announced.

The **Midway**, referred to in the description of Adventure Grove above, also seems far from completion. This covered area formed the entrance to the old Cypress Garden and, when refurbished, will house two new fast food eateries, a burger joint and a pizza joint.

The largest addition yet to come is the **Splash Island Water Park**, which is located at the northern end of Adventure Grove, parallel to the Botanical Gardens. I am told that entrance to Splash Island will be included in the admission to Cypress Gardens. Its opening has been announced for "Summer 2005."

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