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NORTHEAST FLORIDA

EAT . DRINK . THINK . EXPLORE . | SEASON BY SEASON

SOUTHERN GROUNDS



JOURNEYS

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Off the Eaten Path:
OCALE

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If the coast and the I-4 corridor are the only parts of Florida you've experienced, an excursion to the less-traveled interior of the peninsula is long overdue. Just a two-hour drive from Jacksonville and St. Augustine, Ocala offers an enchanting getaway with its storied horse culture, plentiful outdoor recreation, a charming downtown square and a growing food and beverage scene.

Like many older cities, Ocala's history and development were greatly impacted by a fire. Downtown was destroyed by fire in 1883, and locals wisely re-built using less flammable material, earning Ocala the old-time moniker of "Brick City." In the 20th century, phosphate mining and agriculture drove the city's growth. Ocala's horse history is more recent, getting its proper start with the establishment of Florida's first thoroughbred farm in 1943. Though horse breeding became a booming industry in Ocala, the industry at first snubbed the area, as it considered the local stock less prestigious than the horses of Kentucky. But the proof was in the running, and Marion County horses won – the limestone minerals in the water built sturdy, healthy winners.

Horses are part of the Ocala vibe, which you'll find in the painted horse statues, horseshoes embedded in a downtown sidewalk, horse art at restaurant staple Brick City, farm tours and most of all these days, the luxurious World Equestrian Center. The largest equestrian complex in the U.S., you'll find shopping, an extensive selection of

dining options, horse-centric events and an on-site hotel and spa.

Downtown Ocala has blossomed into a walkable area full of good eats near the square. Nearly every local has their favorite breakfast spot and there are many to choose from. Near the downtown square, Symmetry Coffee offers high-class cups of joe done up elegantly, along with some gorgeous breakfast options with a quirky sensibility. It's an order-at-the-counter-get-your-own-forks situation, but the arched bricks, fresh ground coffee and well-executed food will make you feel you've arrived.

For a laid-back lunch atmosphere, try Stella's Modern Pantry. Here you can find confections, sandwiches, cheeses and charcuterie boards stuffed into a narrow shop that also sells accouterments including bright aprons and pretty patterned dishes. With picture windows for people-watching and a local lady confab at the back marble counter, it's a chill spot for a relaxing glass of wine. A few steps away from Symmetry, look for upscale French fare at La Cuisine for dinner.

The current downtown night-time hotspot with live entertainment is The District Bar & Kitchen, but it's also available for a daytime bite of elevated bar foods (figuratively and literally, if you eat on their second floor), sandwiches and salads. While they carry the standard fare in beer and wine, they also serve beautiful, well-balanced cocktails.

Left: Smash patties and chips at District Bar & Kitchen.

Top: Artistic dessert creation served at Stirrups Restaurant in the World Equestrian Center.



Ocala is known for its gigantic oaks, which often grow in hammocks, a term for high ground surrounded by wetland habitats. Ocala's oak hammocks are the namesake of the trendiest casual eatery downtown – Big Hammock Brewery & Bites. The owners are serious beer experts (they brew a little of their own) and food includes ramen bowls, bao buns and sandwiches.

For bar hopping downtown, there are two speakeasies within walking distance. A cozy place behind Ivy's on the Square called the Thirsty Cobbler has the best Prohibition-themed atmosphere, but you'll need to find the ever-changing password on social media. They open later, so check their social media posts for happy hour specials and opening times.

If happy hour is what you seek, the zaniest selection is the Topsy Skipper, a fabulous tiki bar with a commitment to the theme, from the drinks, decor and drinkware to the videos of surfer wipeouts and the luau music. The beach drinks, while not as elaborate as some of the tiki-themed mug drinks, include classic executions of a margarita, hurricane, daiquiri, dark 'n stormy and more.

Just on the edge of downtown is Infinite Aleworks, a craft brewery where locals go after First Friday Art Walk. Here you can sample local beers ranging from hop-forward IPAs to summer sippables. In honor of their 10th anniversary, they've brought back some beloved favorites, like their Father Richard's tripel.

If you want an upscale surf or turf dinner with

a focus on local sourcing, try Remington's Prime Steakhouse, a dinner only option off the beaten path in a shopping center that includes a lovely cheese shop, Edie Gourmet Fromagerie, and longtime local favorite Horse & Hounds.

With so much farmland and local produce in the area, be sure to check out one of two weekly farmers' markets. The Ocala Downtown Market takes place on Saturdays under a covered pavilion and has a variety of produce, meat, seafood, crafts and garden plants. The Circle Square Commons Farmers' Market is held Thursdays and features local growers, handmade soaps, baked goods and more.

Ready to experience some of the Florida nature that surrounds Ocala? Try glass-bottom boats in Silver Springs or zip lining through oaks at The Canyons Zip Line and Adventure Park, bird watching at the Ocala Wetland Recharge Park or cycling the Santos Trail. For a rainy-day activity, the Appleton Museum is well worth the entry price for the permanent collections alone. Gifted to the Ocala community by Arthur I. Appleton, a breeder and trainer of thoroughbred horses, the Appleton opened in 1987.

With so much to explore, an overnight stay might be in order. Most of the hotels are located near interstate arteries, but it's worthwhile to get away from the blacktop sprawl of Highway 200 and seek other places to stay, such as the World Equestrian Center and the Hilton Garden Inn Ocala Downtown.



Left: A view of Ocala's downtown square. This page: Emma's Patisserie at World Equestrian Center, Remington's Prime Steakhouse, historic Marion Theatre and tiki cocktail at Tippy Skipper.