

By Ellen Albanese
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Be trainer for a day at Gatorland, where nature meets low-tech

ORLANDO — Nothing says Florida like gators, and it would be hard to find a place with more alligators per square foot than Gatorland. The 110-acre theme park and wildlife preserve, which just wrapped up its 70th year, is a throwback to Old Florida, with a focus on nature and low-tech, and just enough kitsch to remind you you're in the Sunshine State.

Gatorland's "Trainer for a Day" program starts early in the morning, before the park opens to the public, when the only sounds are birdsong and the guttural rumblings of gators and other residents getting ready to face the day. The program promises to "give you a glimpse into what it takes to be able to work with, and around dangerous animals." I was equal parts intrigued and terrified.

Joining me were a local family of three celebrating the birthday of their 15-year-old son, and a young couple from upstate New York. As if anticipating our fears, our guide, Michael Brown, introduced us first to baby alligators, just a few months old and only 6 inches long. With his charming mix of knowledge and showmanship, Brown showed us how to hold the little creatures for the camera so they looked five times their actual size. Next we hefted 3- to 4-year-olds, which felt surprisingly heavy for their size. Brown explained that alligators are 80 percent muscle, which is heavier than fat.

As we followed Brown across the park, we learned that American alligators top out at 7 to 11 feet, with females slightly smaller than males; that trainers can control the gender by controlling the temperature of incubation (cooler temperatures produce females); alligators go through up to 3,000 teeth in a lifetime, breaking off teeth and regrowing them; gators have three eyelids: one on top, one on the bottom, and one they can roll back into their heads; and that their low, rumbling bellows — which Brown can replicate perfectly — are a way of calling for females or claiming turf. We practiced distinguishing between alligators and crocodiles. Nile crocodiles are all brown, with black bands, we were told, while alligators are all black with yellow bands. Crocs have a long, skiny snout; gators have a fat, round snout. Cuban crocodiles can run 15 miles an hour, thanks to long back legs that allow them to stand up and kind



PHOTOS BY ELLEN ALBANESE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Clockwise from left: The entrance to Gatorland sets the mood for visitors to the 110-acre theme park and wildlife preserve; feeding time; a baby alligator.

of gallop. "If you jump in here," Brown warned, "I am *not* coming to get you!"

The next challenge was feeding. On a sandy beach abutting the breeding marsh, Brown began hitting the water

with a pole, shouting "Let's go, let's go!" and smacking his lips together. Slowly at first, then with more purpose, the gators moved toward the shore, until they were packed together

so tightly you could practically step across the water on their backs. Brown explained that this is conditioned behavior; they always feed the gators in this spot, so they learn to respond.

Wearing gloves, we each reached into a bucket and selected a chunk of undefined animal parts from a rendering factory. Brown instructed us to toss the meat just to the side of an alligator's jaw, so it would make a big splash. There were a few hits, more misses, and lots of nervous laughter as we got close to the creatures. We all posed for photos, grateful for Brown's long pole.

The Trainer for a Day program culminates with a chance to work hands-on with alligators in the Gatorland arena, where professional trainers put on shows. The arena is a sand pit surrounded by bleachers, with country music in the background and dispensers of Gatorade all around. Brown showed us how to sit astride a 1,400-pound gator (keeping our weight on our knees, not on the animal's back) and stroke its snout, which was taped shut. I have to admit, this was not for me, but the teenager in our party loved it. He recalled watching gator shows here as a kid.

We finished our tour with a visit to Gatorland's albino and rare leucistic alligators, who live a more leisurely life in their own enclosed habitats. Leucistic, Brown said, means a lack of pigment, but the gator's eyes may be blue. Albino alligators are pure white, even their eyes and eyelids.

There's more to Gatorland than alligators. We saw tortoises, snakes, emus, and wood storks, Florida white-tailed deer (tiny by comparison to Northern deer), and Florida panthers. There's a swamp buggy tour and a zip line. The Gatorland Express, a vintage open-air train, makes a leisurely circuit of the property with a soundtrack describing the sights. The bell clangs at the frequent crossings, where signs for pedestrians read: "You can beat the train or the train can beat you. Tying the train, however, will ruin your day."

There's always a crowd for Jumparoo, the oldest show at Gatorland. As fiddle music plays, two feeders compete to see who can get an alligator to jump higher for a piece of raw meat they dangle from the dock, while the spectators applaud. The alligators, of course, are trained to respond to both music and applause. It's as much kitsch as animal science, but it's all in good fun, and no gator goes home hungry.

Gatorland, 14501 S. Orange Blossom Trail, Orlando. 407-855-5496, gatorland.com.

Ellen Albanese can be reached at ellen.albanese@gmail.com.



ing views of the Palm Harbor Marina and Intracoastal Waterway; onsite restaurant, Proper Grit, serving locally sourced fare for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; more than 8,000 square feet of meeting and event space; La Bottega spa bathroom products; fitness center; bike rentals; and more. Rates from \$259 in season; \$159 off-season. 561-655-4001, www.thebenwestpalm.com

SUNNY ISLES

Solé Miami, a Noble House Resort, has rebranded and revitalized its oceanside property in Sunny Isles, a centrally located community on Miami Beach not too far from — and not too close to — Aventura, Bal Harbour, and South Beach. Billed as "lavish without the attitude," the 2019 property-wide renovations include 249 guest rooms and suites, lobby features, pool area design, flooring, and furniture. The contemporary accommodations each feature a private terrace, floor-to-ceiling windows (overlooking city lights or sweeping ocean views), pillow-top mattresses, Keurig coffee maker and mini-refrigerator, luxe bathroom and rainfall shower. Amenities include private beach with chair and umbrella services, oceanfront pool and bar, cardio and weight-training facility and business center. Winter rates from \$296. 844-223-5493, www.solemiami.com

BRADENTON

Calling all Parrotheads! Pack your flowery island shirts and tie-dyed tees and head to the Jimmy Buffett-themed Compass by Margaritaville Hotels & Resorts. Located on a 220-acre private island community, 10 miles from the Sarasota Bradenton International Airport, the six-story, 123-room hotel overlooks Anna Maria Sound at the area's newest marina at One Particular Harbour. Scheduled to open in April, the hotel will reflect the Margaritaville brand's colorful and laid-back style, with rooms featuring nature-inspired designs, signature bedding, oversize bathrooms with rainfall showers and smart televisions. Amenities include outdoor pool with light bites and beverage service; complimentary American breakfast buffet; cocktail hour socializing; modern fitness room open 24/7; and Floridays Woodfire Grill & Bar, serving fresh seafood, steaks, and salads with signature cocktails and craft beer. Rates in season \$159/199; off-season \$139/169. 941-741-9700, www.compasshotel.com/AnnaMariaSound

Necce Regis can be reached at necceeregis@gmail.com.

New (and renewed) hotels are popping up across the Sunshine State

By Niece Regis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

When winter temps plummet in New England, Florida's sun-filled beaches and sultry breezes seem to beckon with a new urgency: *Come, take off your parkas, put on your flip flops, indulge in margaritas with the sand between your toes.* In anticipation of an influx of vacationers fleeing frigid temperatures, new hotels are opening this season in the Sunshine State. Here's a look at some of them.

KEY WEST

Following a multimillion-dollar renovation, The Reach Key West, Curio Collection by Hilton re-emerges as the first property for Hilton's upscale collection brand in Key West. Located on a private natural sand beach, the resort's 150 ocean-view rooms — each with its own balcony — combines clean modern design with the nautical themes of the original property. Amenities include state-of-the-art fitness center; oceanfront pool; bocce ball court; sand-sculpting workshops; and on-site partnership with Barefoot Billy's, providing a wide range of activities including island jet-ski tours, snorkeling and coral reef exploration. Four Marlins, an all-day restaurant, was inspired by tropical island fishing lodges from the 1930s. Rates from \$431. 305-296-5000, www.reachresort.com

SOUTH BEACH

The surrounding sand, ocean, and



flora of Miami Beach were inspiration for the multiyear, top-to-bottom renovation of the iconic Ritz-Carlton South Beach. The official reopening in January debuted dramatic transformations to the hotel's 376 guest rooms and suites, full-service spa, Club Lounge, restaurants and bars, lobby, meeting and event spaces, and elevated outdoor pool with private cabanas and ocean view. Along with a renewed design, a new dining concept, Fuego Y Mar, features a fusion of ethnic cui-

Clockwise (from left): A rendering of a room for the Compass by Margaritaville Hotels & Resorts; The Ritz-Carlton South Beach has gone through a renovation; Solé Miami has rebranded and revitalized its oceanside property.

sines from Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, and Columbia. Rates from \$599. 786-276-4000, www.ritzcarlton.com/en/hotels/miami/south-beach

WEST PALM BEACH

With a grand opening date set for Feb. 13, The Ben West Palm debuts as the first water-facing hotel in the downtown area. The 208-room hotel, a new-build Autograph Collection property, was inspired by the Ben Trovato Estate, one of the area's original great homes that was a focal point for socializing at the turn of the previous century. Amenities include a rooftop with expansive pool; private cabanas; bar and Italian dining lounge with sweep-