



PHOTOS BY GRETCHEN F. COYLE

Mount Dora

*A Bit of New
England in
Central Florida*

For those of us who are used to coastal Southwest Florida, it can be disorienting to visit Mount Dora, a town on a hill in the middle of the state overlooking Lake Dora. The feel is strictly New England, from the greenery to the houses to the 1883 Lakeside Inn, where guests can sit in old rocking chairs to read or watch the activities.

Rolling hills with interconnecting lakes make up the Lake County terrain around

A horse and buggy provide a relaxing way to see Mount Dora.

the town of some 10,000 people. It rises to an elevation of 184 feet above sea level, and Victorian- and New England-type homes are laid out on terraced streets above the lake.

We visited Mount Dora for the 17th Annual Antique Boat Festival, which took place at the end of March. A friendly policeman told us to park “anywhere up the hill around town. You’ll probably have to walk a mile or two; lots going on



New England- and Victorian-style structures, such as this restored beauty, add to Mount Dora's charm.

here today." Parking in a neighborhood near the top of the hillside, we admired well-kept homes, tidy gardens with azaleas in bloom, and a number of residents actually greeting visitors.

The center of town was closed to cars as pedestrians swarmed an antiques and collectibles show lining the main streets and park. Hundreds of visitors milled around, wandering from one dealer to the next. Behind the antiques were so many unusual stores—often with outside displays, welcoming benches, flowers, and window boxes—that it was hard to resist spending a day shopping. In spite of all the people, we saw absolutely no trash.

First named Royellou after an early

pioneer, Mount Dora was founded in 1880 and named after the lake, namesake of a gentleman who befriended federal surveyors. Mount Dora—a self-proclaimed city, but with a village feel—has steadily grown from its original 370 residents.

It boasts a broad variety of shops, most within easy walking distance of one another, as well as such activities as sailing, fishing, biking, lawn bowling, and cruising at sunset. Six city parks have playgrounds, tennis, racquetball, shuffleboard, nature walks, and a boat dock and ramp. A city pool is heated for year-round use.

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Sponsored by the Sunnyland Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society, the yearly Antique Boat Festival draws thousands of old-boat enthusiasts.



*Mount Dora
is home to
a host of
festivals,
celebrating
everything from
antiques to
music and
literature to
bicycling.*

of the Antique and Classic Boat Society, the Antique Boat Festival draws thousands to the lakefront and Gilbert Park during the four-day show.

More than 230 boats were on trailers or tied up at the docks, the sun reflecting off Lake Dora and their newly varnished hulls. Some visitors climbed aboard at the invitation of owners, others got to go for rides, but most simply talked to exhibitors, asking questions and swapping stories.

Feeling as though we were back a half-century, we mingled, wanting to know the history of many of the boats. The festival honored 130 years of Chris Craft boating history with numerous Chris Craft boats and exhibits. Perhaps the most popular boat of all time, more than 100,000 Chris Craft wooden classics were purchased between 1922 and 1972.

Old motors, sponsored by the Florida Antique Outboard Motor Club, were on display everywhere and drew ogling crowds of admiring men, I noticed. Most popular was the Nautical Flea Market

with old goodies and memorabilia for all. I was drawn to the Florida Contingent of Amphicars, those silly cars that double as boats. They calmly cruised from the parking lot into the lake and onto Lake Dora for an afternoon parade.

Numerous food vendors served everything from lemonade to sausage sandwiches, and aromas of all sorts permeated the air. Sitting at one of the many outdoor cafes sipping a drink and watching all the festivities was the perfect way to relax on a warm Saturday afternoon, especially after all the walking. Horse-drawn carriages with content visitors passed by.

Almost directly over the boat show, a train passed slowly by. Run on the tracks of the Florida Central Railroad on rails from the late 1880s, the passenger train takes visitors from Mount Dora to Tavares and back on the Mount Dora and Lake Eustis Railway. A knowledgeable tour guide is aboard and the ride is popular entertainment for the whole family.

Festivals are the norm year-round for

WANT TO GO?



Mount Dora is located northwest of Orlando. Take Interstate 75 north to State Road 44 east at Wildwood, then U.S. 441 south to Mount Dora.

For more information, contact:

- **Mount Dora Area Chamber of Commerce:** P.O. Box 196, Mount Dora, FL 32756-0196; 352/383-2165; www.mountdora.com
- **Antique and Classic Boat Society,** Sunnyland Chapter: www.acbs-sunnyland.com
- **Mount Dora and Lake Eustis Railway:** 150 W. Third Ave., Mount Dora, FL 32756; 352/383-8878; www.mtdorairailway.com

Mount Dora. Residents and visitors alike enjoy activities such as the arts festival, antiques fair, bicycle festival, exotic cars festival, and Renninger's Antique Extravaganza. Craft fairs, plant fairs, and the Festival of Music and Literature offer entertainment for almost any interest. Seasonal and cultural activities attract people from all over the South.

After an exuberating day, we began to climb up the hill to our car, which was at least a mile away. We walked slowly, I with my canvas bag full of purchases over my arm; my husband with a heavy antique light for his 1931 Elco powerboat slung over his shoulder. In no hurry, we admired more Mount Dora homes and bed-and-breakfasts. A brochure for the Mount Dora Historic Inn described our day: "Surround yourself with the dreams of yesteryear with a respite from everyday life and a visit you will cherish for years to come." ❧

Gretchen F. Coyle, who divides her time between Beach Haven, New Jersey, and Useppa Island, has explored and written about many of Florida's destinations.

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