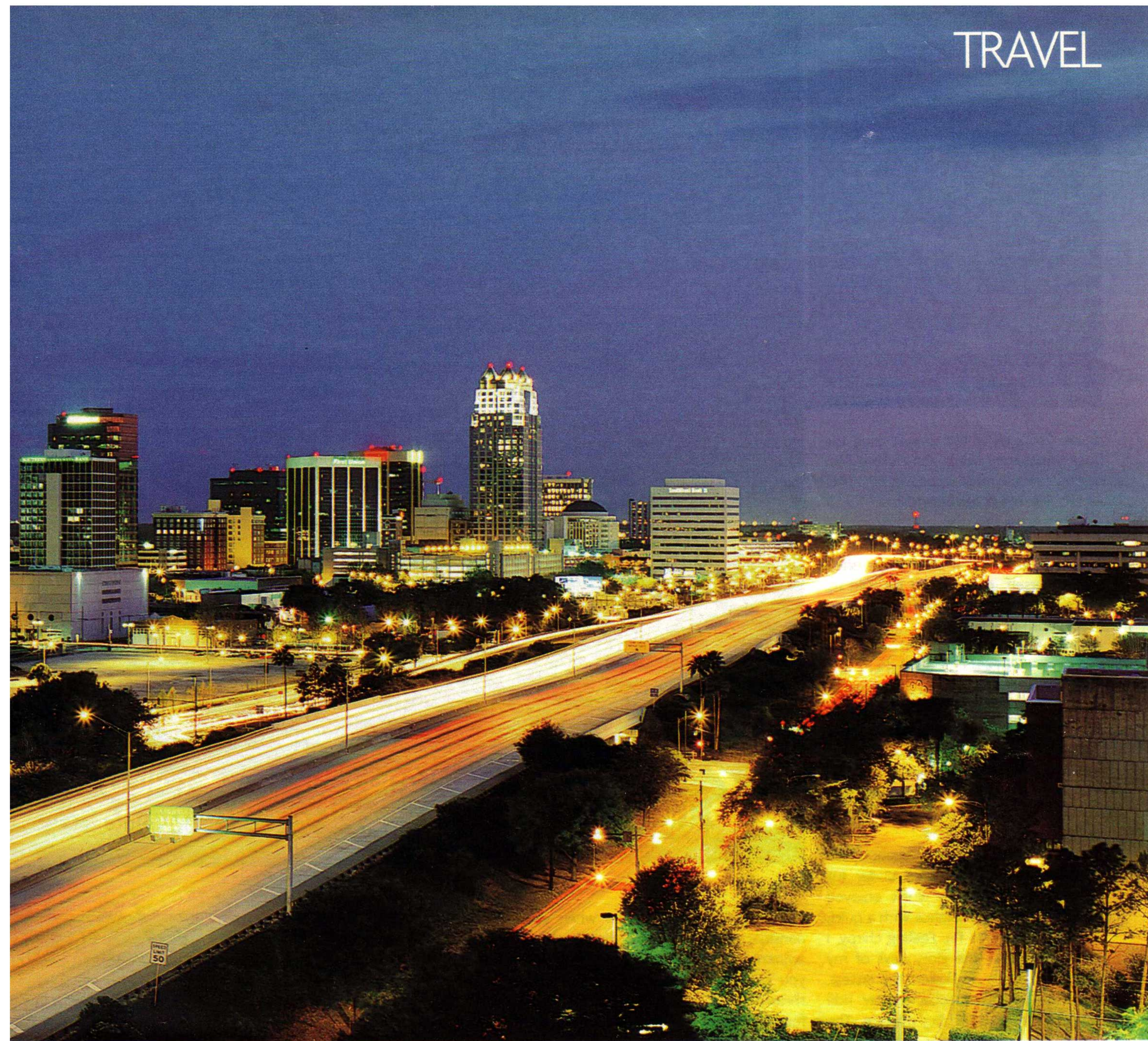




A DIFFERENT VIEW OF ORLANDO

Traditionally, this city has been best known as the home of the theme park, but, as Jacqui Paterson discovers, dig a little deeper and you'll find a sophisticated destination

There's something almost theatrical about the heavy black clouds that draw across the Florida sky at the same time every day in summer (3.30pm — you can set your watch by it). The show is always the same — deep crackling of thunder, bright flashes of light. Then, suddenly, it's all over. Blue skies reclaim the heavens, and the temperature sneaks up again.

Seasonal storms are the trade-off you make for the otherwise fabulous subtropical weather Orlando offers all year round. The Sunshine State is used to its intermittent downpours, and rarely does the rain get in the way of a fine day out.

Years ago, Orlando was considered good for one thing only — theme parks,

which is not surprising, considering this American southeast city barely registered on radar before Disney opened its Magic Kingdom in 1971. Today, eight major theme parks vie for tourist dollars, but there is much more to Orlando than cartoon characters and kitschy resorts.

Florida is also known for attracting 'older folk', a cliché that went unchallenged when I arrived to take the Rivership Romance cruise, and found myself rolling down St Johns River with mostly over-55s. Still, it was nice watching birds in their natural wetlands and alligators basking on the sandy banks. Soaking up some sun on deck, I felt all was well with the world.

Having never been a sporty type, I was dubious about my afternoon session at

the Academy of Golf, part of the stunning 1,500-acre Grand Cypress Resort where I was staying. But after an expensive lesson (around £80 an hour), I hit the driving range and even managed to connect club with ball. For those who prefer life in a faster lane, the nearby Richard Petty Driving Experience allows you to ride shotgun in a stock car, *Dukes of Hazzard* style, as it screams around a track at 140mph — all for around £58.

The next morning, I set off to see the Everglades. Arriving for my 'airboat' tour, I was handed earmuffs, whose purpose soon became clear. Racing down Boggy Creek towards Lake Tohopekaliga, the high whine of the propeller reached ear-piercing proportions. Our expert ►

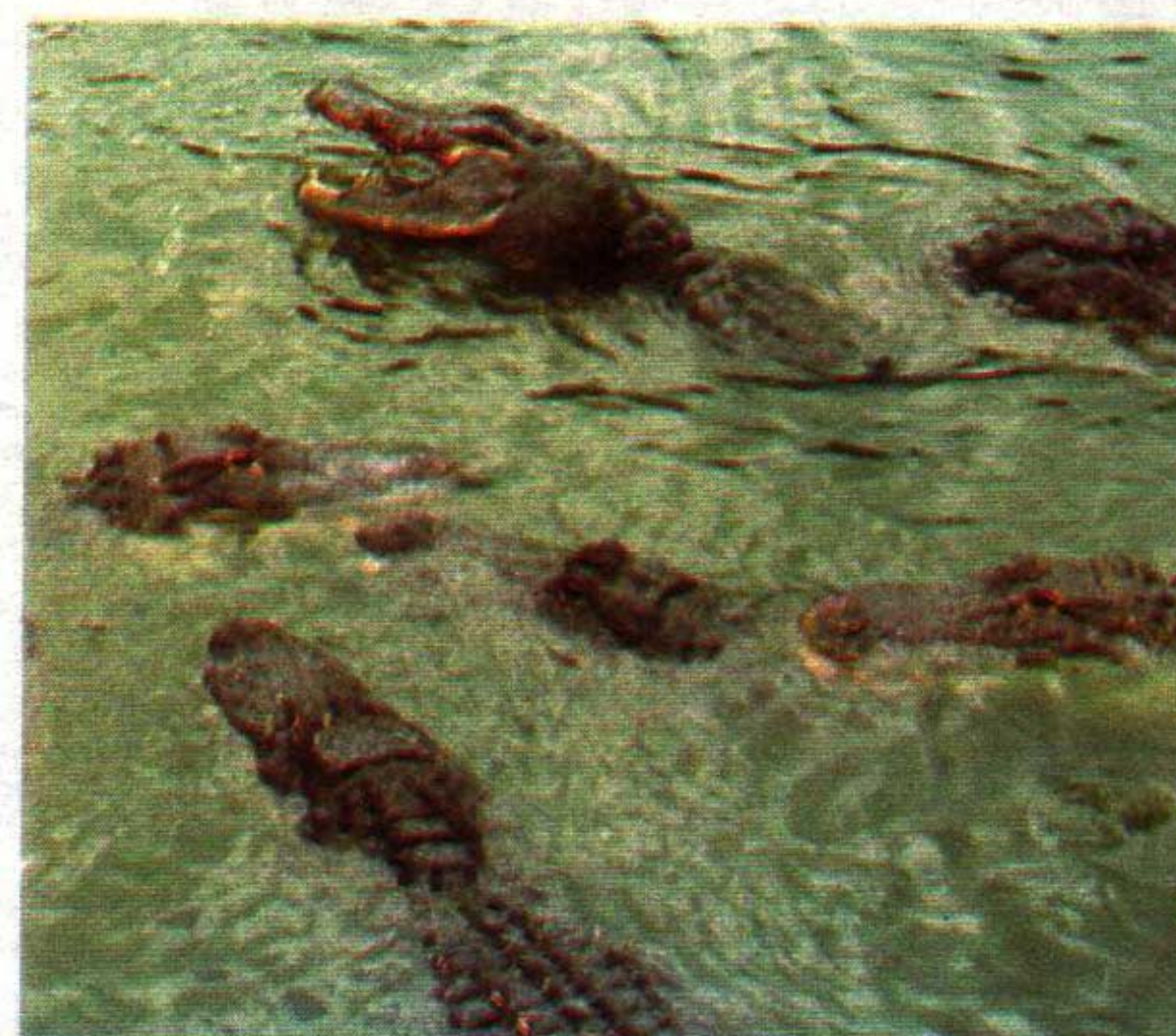
WHERE TO STAY

Affordable luxury The Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Resort (right) is a five-star hotel set in 1,500 acres of sculpted gardens, lakes and beaches — and it's only 15 minutes from Orlando's city centre. Jetsave (0870 161 3403), specialists in Florida holidays, offer a seven-night stay, from £895 per person, based on two sharing.

Good value The Peabody, 9801 International Drive (00 1 407 352 4000). This hotel is famous for its unusual residents: a family of four ducks who march through the lobby every morning to spend the day swimming in the central fountain. Special rates from around £85 per night for a double room.

Budget Disney's All-Star Movies Resort, 1991 West Buena Vista Drive (00 1 407 939 7000). Double rooms from around £50. Orlando Days Inn Midtown, 3300 South Orange Blossom Trail (00 1 407 422 4521), two miles from the city centre. Double rooms from about £26.





Gator Land is the place for visitors to see Florida's most famous inhabitants (above) — preferably from a distance



“Soaking up some Florida sun as we rolled down the river, I felt all was well with the world”

driver, Chad, delighted in skimming the boat across long reeds and pulling 360-degree turns in wide expanses of water — just like in a James Bond film.

Chad knew all the alligator hiding spots, and pulled up alongside a nesting female. ‘Sometimes if she’s angry, she’ll launch herself at the boat,’ he told us. ‘Once, she landed on the front and we had to push her off.’

Orlando may be more than theme parks, but let’s face it, it does them very well. Disney leads the pack, but Universal Studios Florida and SeaWorld follow close behind. Add to these various water parks and nearby Kennedy Space Center, and you’re spoilt for choice. There’s no way to effectively see them all, so pick one or two and dedicate an entire day to having a good look around.

I chose SeaWorld (day pass about £35 for adults, £30 for children under 10), where Shamu the killer whale enjoyed drenching half the audience with a quick flick of his massive fin. Feeling chirpy, I decided to relive the glory days of my youth with a ride on Kraken, the fastest, tallest and steepest roller-coaster ride Orlando has to offer. Big mistake. The carriage has no solid floor beneath your feet, so you literally feel like you are flying through space at 65mph.

Staggering off, I headed for Discovery Cove. At £145 for a day pass, it sounds

outrageously expensive, but when you consider that everything from lunch to swimming with dolphins is included, and you get a seven-day pass to SeaWorld thrown in, it’s not so bad. The complex features man-made snorkelling reefs and beaches, and even an enclosure that leads you to believe you’re swimming among sharks — until you realise that, thankfully, a clear plastic wall separates you and them.

I was led by one of the impossibly cheerful animal trainers to the stingray pond and, amazingly, encouraged to wade in waist deep. ‘It’s OK,’ she said. ‘All their barbs have been removed.’ Clutching a small fish, I held the unfortunate bait underwater as instructed, and almost instantly a stingray slid over and snatched the food from my hand.

Sightseeing certainly takes it out of you, so I relaxed with a Rassoul wrap (about £56) at the Wyndham Palace Resort and Spa. My body and scalp were covered in thick, warm mud, derived from mineral-rich volcanic lava. Then I was wrapped in warmed blankets, to

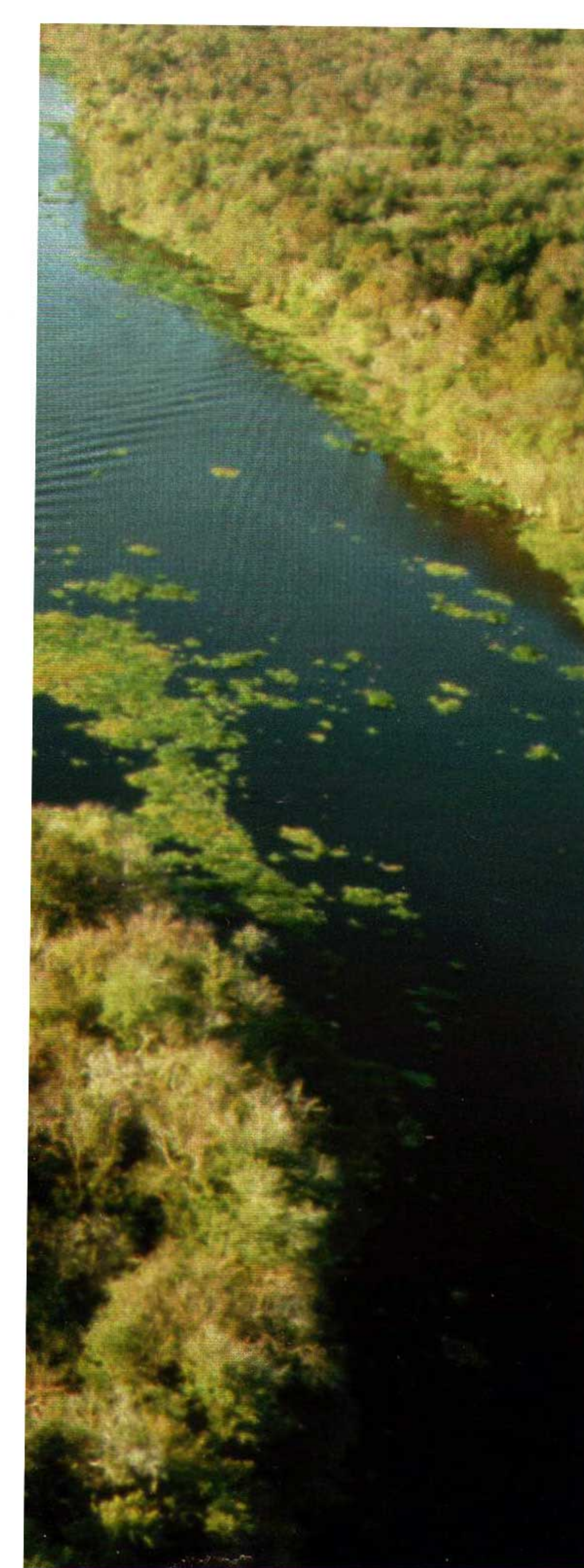
ensure full absorption of the heated nutrients. Absolute heaven. Topping it off with a hot stone massage (about £62), in which steam-heated pebbles were placed over my weary muscles, left me feeling totally fabulous — and hungry.

No visit to Orlando is complete without lunch at the Palm Restaurant, which is something of an institution in America. First opened in New York in 1926 near a comic-book company, it used to offer its cartoonist clientele a free meal in return for a caricature drawn on the wall. The tradition stuck, and the Orlando restaurant is covered with cartoon faces of local and international celebs, some with their autographs scrawled underneath.

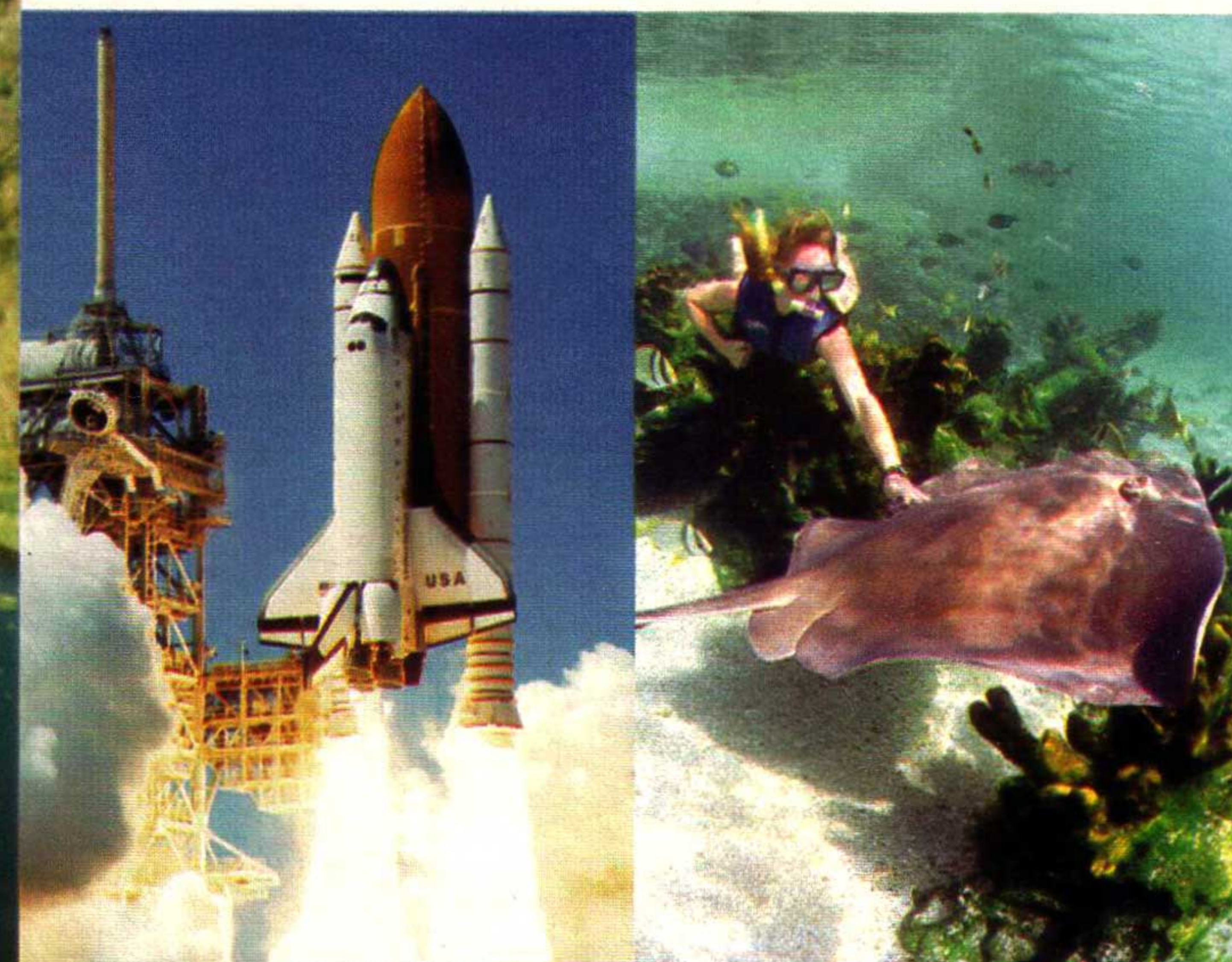
Those who like their holidays to include some serious retail therapy will be pleased to hear that Orlando has top stores like Bloomingdale’s and Tiffany’s — and it’s just as easy to come home laden with Gucci as it is to have spent your entire holiday in theme parks. Yes, Orlando is a city full of fun and games, but there’s plenty on offer if you’d rather give the roller coasters a miss. ■

WHERE TO EAT

Luxury Palm Restaurant at Hard Rock Hotel, 5800 Universal Boulevard (00 1 407 503 7256). Classy, but well priced. Mains from about £10 for pasta, £20 for seafood. **Mid-range** California Café Bar and Grill, Florida Mall, 8001 South Orange Blossom Trail (00 1 407 816 5555). Stylish dining, with mains around £10 to £13. Or try racing-themed spot Race Rock, 8986 International Drive (00 1 407 248 9876). Mains about £4.50 to £10.50. **Budget** Café Tu Tu Tango, 8625 International Drive (00 1 407 248 2222), which doubles as an art house. Small mains about £2 to £6.

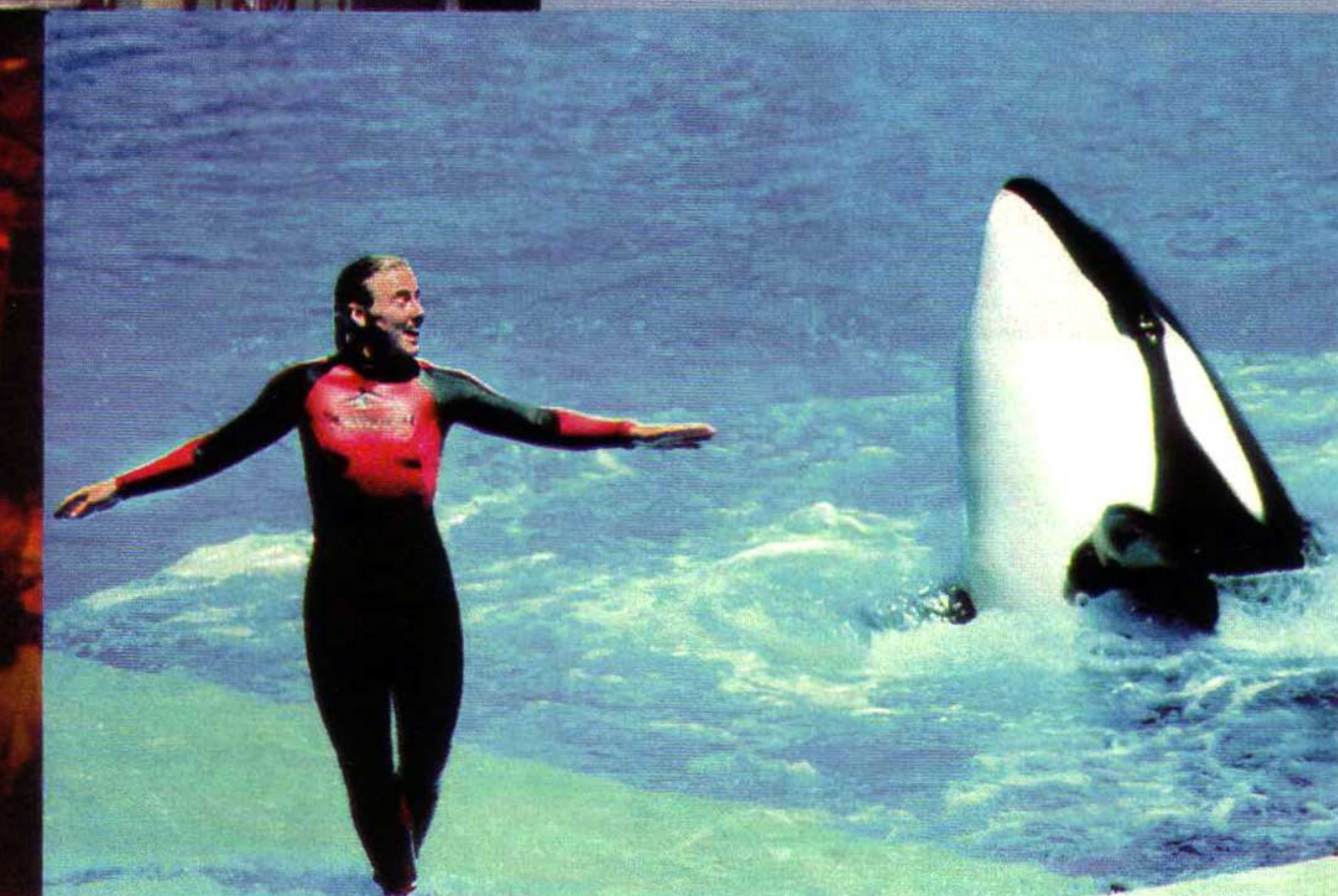
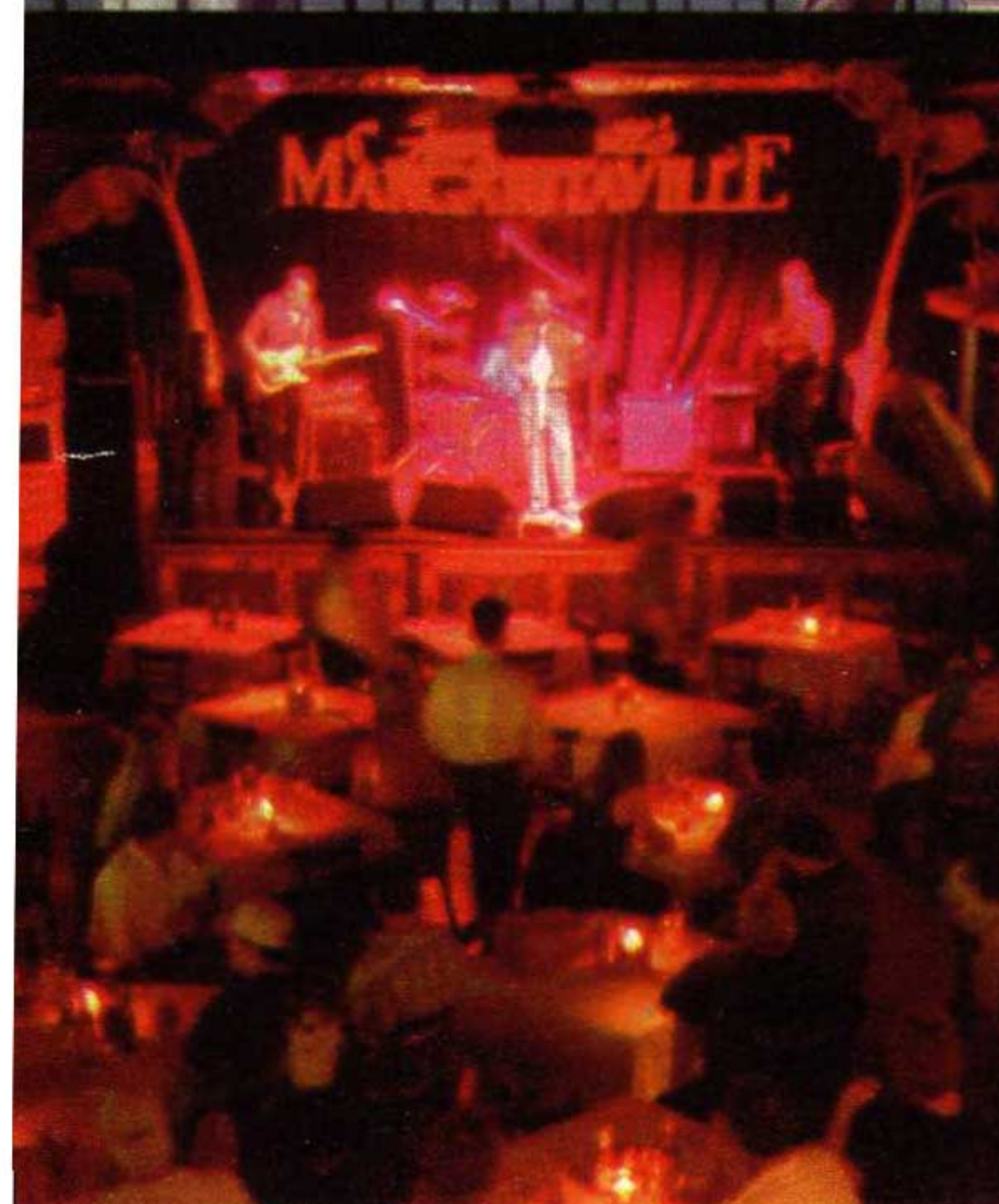


Clockwise from above: Cruising on the Johns River. Takeoff at Kennedy Space Center. Discovery Cove. Disney MGM Studios. SeaWorld. Wastin’ away at Margaritaville. Universal Studios



WHAT TO TAKE

High-factor sunscreen — minimum SPF15. Even on cloudy days, the sun is very strong and can damage your skin. **Small bills** Needed for tipping your taxi driver/porter/tour-bus driver. As a general rule, if it moves — tip it! **Photo ID** If you’re under 35, you will be asked for ID to get into bars and nightclubs. Legal drinking age is 21.



FIVE FABULOUS THINGS TO DO

1 Take a guided horse ride through the forest at the Grand Cypress Equestrian Center, 1 North Jacaranda (00 1 407 239 1938). From about £30.

2 Visit Jimmy Buffet’s Margaritaville at Universal CityWalk Orlando (00 1 407 363 8000). Listen to the crooner’s classic hits, then watch the fake volcano erupt. Cheesy but fun. Alternatively, try nearby City Jazz for a mellower mix of tunes.

3 Have an out-of-this-world experience at the Kennedy Space Center (00 1 321 449 4444). Tours start from £17 for adults, £10 for children. To order tickets to watch a shuttle launch, visit www.kennedyspacecenter.com.

4 Hop aboard the Boggy Creek Airboat (00 1 407 344 9550) to see some ‘gators. Private tours cost from £12 to £30; children from £8.50.

5 Enjoy a cosy lunch cruise on the Rivership Romance (00 1 407 321 5091). Around £23 for three hours.

WHAT TO BUY

■ **Disney T-shirts** Authentic and cheap — starting at just £5, they make great gifts for kids back home. In fact, Disney trinkets of any kind are welcome.

■ **Alligator jerky** A type of dried cured meat. Sounds disgusting, but is rather like spicy, chewy chicken.

■ **Abercrombie & Fitch** This shop’s trendy sports clothing is scarce in the UK, but plentiful and affordable in Orlando.

■ **Bobble head dolls** The American equivalent of nodding dogs for the back of your car are becoming cult gifts, currently featuring celebs such as the Osbournes.

■ **Sport memorabilia** You can pick up collectable signed baseball bats, balls and photos at reasonable prices.



WHERE TO SHOP

Florida Mall, 8001 South Orange Blossom Trail (00 1 407 851 6255), has 253 shops, from The Disney Store and JC Penney to Saks Fifth Avenue. **Belz Designer Outlet Centre**, 5211 International Drive (00 1 407 352 3632), features bargain clothes and shoes from top labels like DKNY. **The Mall at Millenia**, 4200 Conroy Rd (00 1 407 363 6877), opening in mid-October, promises New York style with favourites Neiman Marcus, Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s.