



A Trail of Two Cities

A green weekend beckons along the Withlacoochee State Trail, the longest trail in the state and the gateway to two classic Florida towns.

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By wheel and by hoof, riders pass in Floral City.



Old Courthouse Square in Inverness.



National Historic District in Floral City, Florida.

It's 1 p.m. The sun is ablaze when my childhood friend Laura and I arrive on the 46-mile Withlacoochee State Trail, the longest paved rail trail in Florida. It's the main artery that flows to the very heart of the trail: the lakeside towns of Inverness and Floral City.

We've tucked our keys away for the weekend since our hotel, the aptly named Central Motel, is right in the middle and right on the trail. We can go anywhere we like by bike.

Inverness

We start by cycling a few miles north to downtown Inverness.

Inverness is the hub of the Withlacoochee with its lakeside parks and cozy downtown. Cooled by the breeze, we coast to Lake Henderson, where an egret strikes a graceful pose at water's edge.

This trailside lake and its scenic parks are a big destination for year-round events and festivals. The most popular is late October's Cooter Festival 3 Day Music Festival.

"All our festivals are eco-friendly and bicycle-friendly," Sharon Skeele-Hogan, director of special events for the city of Inverness, tells us. "It's all about the lake and the trail."

Next, we pedal to historic Courthouse Square to view the picturesque

Old Courthouse Heritage Museum. Around it is a wonderfully compact walkable downtown with sidewalk cafes, cozy pubs, an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, and plenty of bicycle parking.

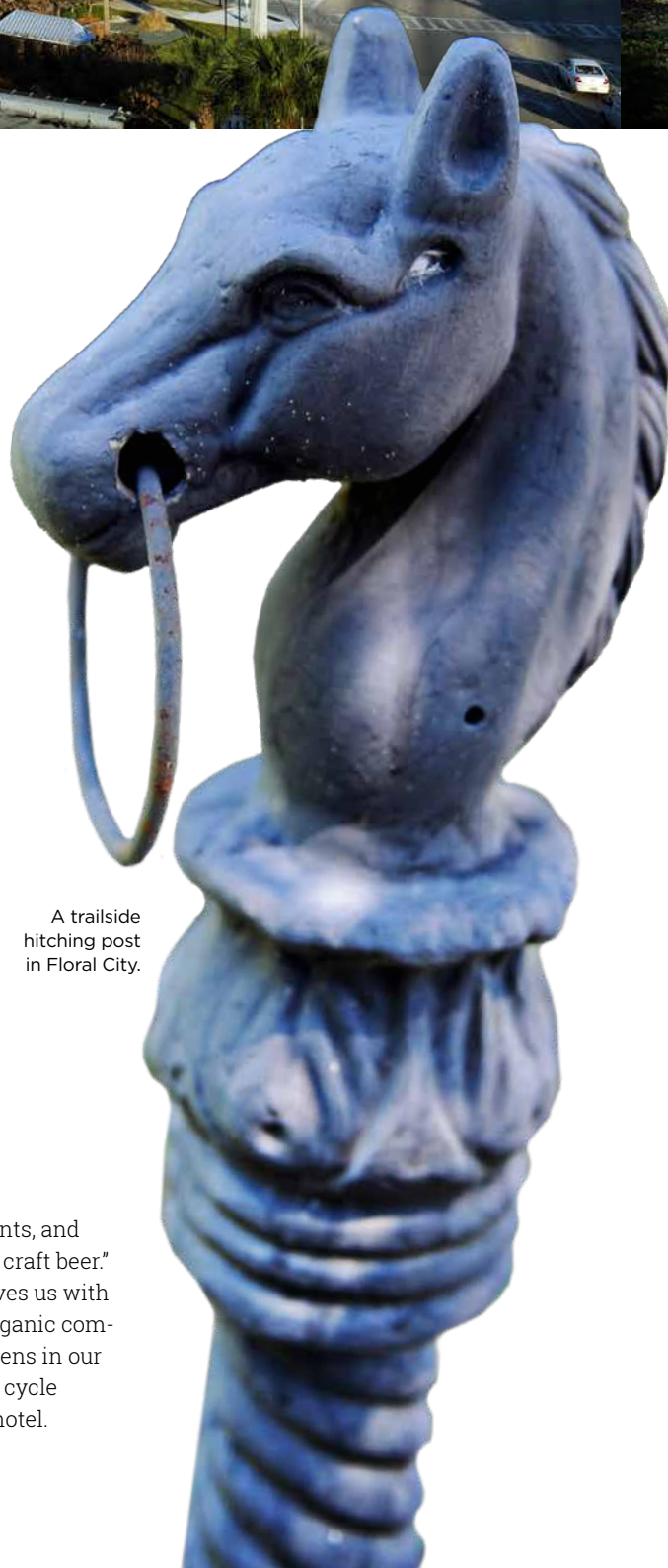
"The trail married itself to the city," says visionary City Manager Frank DiGiovanni. In fact, you might say Frank was the officiant at the wedding. The fabulous waterfront boardwalks, the bike lanes, and inviting signage were all his dream.

"We're looking into the future to building Inverness as the premier cycling center on Withlacoochee State Trail," he explains.

"We're going to build what we call the Depot District, repurposing historic buildings into a trendy trailside experience with retail, foodie

establishments, and maybe even craft beer."

Frank leaves us with visions of organic community gardens in our heads as we cycle back to the hotel.



A trailside hitching post in Floral City.

Floral City

In the morning, Laura and I enjoy a savory breakfast at the hotel's restaurant, the family-owned Dillon's Cinnamon Sticks. It's a local landmark.

After a delectable breakfast, we head south to Fort Cooper State Park, an important stop on the Great Florida Birding Trail with more than five miles of woodland trails directly connected to the Withlacoochee State Trail.

From Fort Cooper, we head for Floral City for something we've been waiting to see: the majestic "Avenue of the Oaks" along East Orange Avenue.

"If you were to fly a drone over the historic district, it looks pretty much like it did 100 years ago," says Frank Peters of the Floral City Heritage Council.

This tunnel of moss-draped oaks is exquisite.

"The town is very protective of these oaks and we're currently replanting them," Frank says with a clear sense of pride.

The rustic beauty we see in this nationally registered historic district reminds us of a simpler time.

At Robin's Country Kitchen, famous for home-baked desserts, people still tether their horses to the railing outside.

And there's always a steady stream of cyclists.

"We go to Ferris Groves during the season for

blueberry and strawberry milkshakes," says Dennis Reiland of Rails to Trails of the Withlacoochee, a volunteer support group for the trail.

Our green weekend without a car ends too quickly. Nonetheless, we feel rejuvenated visiting these classic Florida cities, each with its own distinct character and yet bound together by a common history and a glimmering ribbon of green in between: the fabulous Withlacoochee State Trail.



Riders passing Lake Henderson in Inverness.