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Between 2 Worlds

'Is the Kissimmee area locked into the "cheap and cheerful" side of tourism?'

Kissimmee tries to welcome upscale tourism while staying true to the 'brand' it has built luring Walt Disney World patrons.

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KISSIMMEE

Visitors to the Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate work on their golf swings, float down a winding, man-made river, lounge in private cabanas or attend corporate meetings. They may never find a reason to leave the posh resort, where room rates range from \$135 to \$530 a night.

A few miles away, an enormous orange dome beckons tourists. The owners of Orange World, a souvenir shop-cum-roadside attraction, are content to splash on a fresh coat of paint every few years. As long as there is tourism on West U.S. Highway 192, the owners are confident they'll stay in business.

In the past decade, the Kissimmee area's tourism efforts have developed somewhat of a split personality. Business owners and county leaders have struggled to emerge from Orange County's shadow, all the while spending millions to build a reputation based on their proximity to Walt Disney World and other attractions.

Luxury resorts and convention centers such as the Omni, Reunion and Gaylord Palms have brought some long-sought status to Osceola, even though they have created their own unique destinations. At the same time, the West 192 corridor is still lined with hotels advertising "low, low rates" and discounted theme-park tickets.

"You have the dichotomy of this new sister being born into this market, and then you have the older brother that's been around, hanging around for a long time," said Randy Dillard, a Kissimmee tourism

consultant. "You're starting to see this new face emerge that has a totally different client attached to it."

As they go after customers with deeper pockets, some tourism operators worry that Kissimmee is locked into an image that no longer fits. The area is becoming more than a strip of T-shirt shops, \$20-a-night motels and dinner theaters on the way to Walt Disney World. The question remains, though: How can it move beyond its reputation for inexpensive family vacations without abandoning its lifeblood?

"Kissimmee has a brand built. It's a brand built on 30 years of being adjacent to Walt Disney World. You don't want to throw that away," said John Branciforte, head of marketing for the Omni resort.

A master plan prepared earlier this year by industry representatives suggests that Kissimmee's past may threaten its future. Long gone are The Haunted Mansion, JungleLand Zoo and other Kissimmee kitsch, but the area hasn't shed its reputation as tourism's bargain basement.

"The current image of Osceola County must be overcome. . . . Is the Kissimmee area locked in to the 'cheap and cheerful' side of tourism? The county must convince developers otherwise," the study says. "Developers/owners avoid the 'Kissimmee' address because of the stigma attached."

Changing Kissimmee's image will likely take more than a new name. International travelers can't fly directly to Kissimmee because the city's airport lacks a U.S. Customs agent. Limited public transportation and congested roads make it difficult for visitors to get around.

The county also lacks upscale shopping, restaurants and entertainment. Condos have replaced the tacky attractions, but discount T-shirt and souvenir shops still far outnumber boutiques in Osceola.

"You can market all you want, but if you get to the community, and it looks like a place for bargain travelers, you'll feel like it's bait-and-switch," said Otis White, president of Civic Strategies, an Atlanta-based public-policy consulting firm. "If you want to sell a Cadillac, it better look like a Cadillac."

Businesses say change is in the wind.

At the Meridian Palms Orlando, which replaced a Hampton Inn on West 192 last year, the new owners gutted the dated hotel. They replaced the 1950s-era furniture with modern pieces, put flat-screen TVs in every room and installed double sinks in the bathrooms. Instead of offering cheap cups for coffee in its rooms -- like most hotels in its price range -- it puts out china.

"Kissimmee is coming into its own now," said hotel sales director Judy Kearney. "The hotels that don't do something are going to fall by the wayside."

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