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Marion County

A FLORIDA COUNTY GUIDE · CENTRAL FLORIDA

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REGION

Central Florida

COMMUNITIES TO START WITH

**Ocala, Belleview,
Dunnellon**

PRINTED

October 6, 2026

Horse country, springs, forest access and Ocala's growing healthcare and logistics base give the county a distinctive inland identity.

Marion County says it holds more horses and ponies than any other county in the United States. It also claims around 35 percent of Florida's horses, 46 percent of its thoroughbreds, and more than 195,000 acres under equines. Those are the county's own figures, published without a date or a study behind them — but nobody in the business disputes the shape of them, and you can see it from the road.

There are roughly 1,200 horse farms here, about 900 of them thoroughbred operations. Needles won the Kentucky Derby out of this county in 1956. Affirmed, the last horse to take the Triple Crown for thirty-seven years, was raised here.

That matters to somebody moving here for a reason that has nothing to do with horses. It is land use. Drive west of Ocala on Highway 27 and the fences run for miles — white board, black board, limestone pasture, oak hammock. Very little of it is available to a homebuilder and most of it never will be.

In December 2021 the World Equestrian Center opened on 378 acres with more than two thousand climate-controlled stables and a 248-room hotel. It is the largest equine facility in the country. It did not add horses to a horse county. It added money, hotel rooms and a national audience.

Marion counted 375,908 residents at the 2020 Census. The 2025 estimate is 442,660. That is roughly 66,750 more people in five years — about 18 percent. Very few counties in America absorbed that.

Hold those two facts together and you have the thing anyone moving here needs to understand. A large share of the county is committed to an industry that does not sell to developers, and the population is growing at close to four percent a year. Everything that arrives has to go somewhere, and the somewhere keeps shrinking.

You feel it as traffic on I-75, and as houses going up on ground that was pasture last year. Before you fall for a street, find out what sits behind it and who owns that. Pasture is not a permanent condition. It is a current use.

Lifestyle: Equestrian · Springs · Acreage

Marion County by the numbers

Population
2025 estimate

442,660

At the last full count
2020 Census

375,908

Growth since 2020	about 18%	Median age 2020 Census	50.3
Aged 65 and over	29.7%	Under 18	18.0%
Median household income	\$61,010	Median home value	\$243,100
Homeownership	77.5%	People per household	2.37
Average commute	26.8 minutes	Land area	1,530 sq miles

At 1,530 square miles this is one of the largest counties in Florida, and “Marion County” is not one housing market. Shopping for it as one is the most common mistake made here.

The age mix is worth noticing too. Nearly three in ten residents are over 65 — but 18 percent are under 18, and that is a genuinely mixed county. Citrus, an hour west, is 38 percent over 65. People lump the two together and they are not alike.

Communities to compare

Ocala

Ocala is the county seat and where the jobs, the hospitals and the interstate all are, with the World Equestrian Center on its western side. Compare the north and southeast sides separately rather than treating Ocala as one housing market.

Dunnellon

Dunnellon is at the western edge of the county where the Rainbow River meets the Withlacoochee, small, older, and built around the water. Time the drive into Ocala on a weekday morning, because most of the work is there.

Bellevue

Bellevue sits south of Ocala on US 441, between the city and the Lake Weir area, and a good deal of the county's newer building has gone in around it. Drive US 441 at rush hour before deciding — it is the road you would be using.

Questions to answer for Marion County

Schools

Marion County Public Schools is a single county-wide district running around 25 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, four charter schools, and a technical college alongside virtual and e-learning programs.

It is one district across 1,530 square miles, so the practical question is not which district you land in — it is how far the bus goes.

Healthcare

Two hospital systems serve the county, both in Ocala.

HCA Florida Ocala Hospital is licensed for 585 beds and is the region's only Comprehensive Stroke Center. Florida designates it a Level II trauma center; the American College of Surgeons verifies it at Level I.

AdventHealth Ocala is the second, formerly Florida Hospital Ocala.

For a county where three in ten residents are over 65 and much of the population lives thirty or forty minutes from the city, the distance to Ocala is a real consideration and not a detail.

Ocala, and the horse farms

Ocala is the county seat and the center of everything — employment, hospitals, the interstate. Belleview sits south of it, Dunnellon west toward the Rainbow River, Silver Springs east.

The Villages, the enormous retirement development, spills into the southern edge of the county from Sumter and Lake. Living on that edge of Marion is a different proposition from living north of Ocala, and listings lump them together constantly.

The county is rolling hills rather than flat. The high ground is around 200 feet, which in Florida is a mountain range.

The forest and the water

The Ocala National Forest occupies a large part of eastern Marion. It is the reason the eastern half of the county will never look like the western half — and it is not going anywhere.

Silver Springs, one of the largest artesian spring formations in the world, is a state park. Lake Weir, Orange Lake and Lake George are all in the county or on its line.

There is no coastline here. There is more fresh water than most people expect.

Before you buy here

Four things to do rather than four things to worry about.

READ THE ZONING BEHIND THE LOT. Buying at the edge of pasture on the assumption the view stays is the most expensive mistake being made in this county right now.

TEST I-75 AT FIVE O'CLOCK, NOT AT ELEVEN IN THE MORNING. The road through Ocala is two different roads depending on when you meet it.

TIME THE RUN TO A HOSPITAL from whichever street you are looking at. Both systems are in Ocala. If you are retiring here, that number matters more than the kitchen.

LOOK AT THE SAME PRICE IN THREE PARTS OF THE COUNTY. North of Ocala, the Villages edge and out toward Dunnellon buy very different lives at the same figure.

Places that reveal the county

Silver Springs State Park

About five thousand acres around a first-magnitude spring system discharging over five hundred and fifty million gallons a day, east of Ocala.

Appleton Museum of Art

A two-story museum faced in Italian travertine at 4333 East Silver Springs Boulevard, Ocala, holding more than twenty-four thousand works.

Sholom Park

Forty-four acres of garden southwest of Ocala, opened in 2004 and free to everyone.

Ocala National Forest

Six hundred and seven square miles beginning three miles east of Ocala, established in 1908 and the oldest national forest east of the Mississippi River.

Rainbow Springs State Park

Fourteen hundred and fifty-nine acres around a first-magnitude head spring near Dunnellon that puts out as much as six hundred million gallons a day.

Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing

Two buildings of cars at 13700 Southwest 16th Avenue, Ocala, founded in 1984 by the driver they are about.

World Equestrian Center

Three hundred and seventy-eight acres northwest of Ocala, the largest equestrian facility in the United States.

Silver River Museum

A museum and education center inside Silver Springs State Park, run by Marion County Public Schools with the Florida Park Service.

Juniper Springs Recreation Area

A Civilian Conservation Corps recreation area of 1935 on State Road 40 in the Ocala National Forest, twenty-eight miles from Interstate 75.

Ocala Downtown Square

The public square at Broadway Street and Magnolia Avenue, the center of Marion County since the town was laid out in the 1840s.

KP Hole Park

The county park on the Rainbow River at 9435 Southwest 190th Avenue Road, Dunnellon, and the main launch point for tubing it.

Fort King National Historic Landmark

The reconstructed 1827 fort on the eastern edge of Ocala where the Second Seminole War began.

Santos Trailhead and Campground

The main access to the Santos mountain bike trails at 3080 Southeast 80th Street, on the Cross Florida Greenway between Ocala and Belleview.

The Canyons Zip Line & Adventure Park

Ninety-four acres of flooded limestone quarry north of Ocala, with cliff walls where Florida is supposed to be flat.

Gypsy Gold Horse Farm

The farm at 12501 Southwest 8th Avenue, Ocala, that brought the Gypsy Vanner horse to America.

Where these figures came from

US Census Bureau QuickFacts, Marion County, Florida. Population, age, income, home value, homeownership, household size, commute, education

Wikipedia, Marion County, Florida. 2020 count, county seat, land area, highways, median age, communities, national forest, Silver Springs, the lakes, elevation, horse farm counts, Needles and Affirmed

Marion County government, "Horse Capital of the World". Horse share and acreage, stated throughout as the county's own claim

Robb Report. World Equestrian Center — 378 acres, December 2021, 2,000+ stables, 248-room hotel, largest equine facility in the US

Wikipedia, Marion County Public Schools. School counts

HCA Florida Ocala Hospital, About Us. 585 licensed beds, Level II state trauma designation, ACS Level I verification, the region's only Comprehensive Stroke Center