



# WELCOME TO FLORIDA'S WINTER WONDERLAND

Get a jump on next season at Clermont's National Training Center.  
By Brad Culp



Courtesy of Kimberly Couch

**B**elieve it or not, there are some serious hills in this country's flattest state. I'm not talking about the mammoth bridges that connect the Florida Peninsula to the Keys—I'm talking about the quad-burning, lung-busting, wish-you-had-a-compact-crank kind of hills. Don't believe it? Head to Clermont, known to many as Florida's "Gem of the Hills." While most of the Sunshine State is known for its ridiculously flat roads, which offer ideal venues for destroying a personal record, Clermont dishes out menacing terrain and near-perfect weather in the winter months. All this makes Clermont the perfect off-season training destination.

Clermont is located in central Florida, about 30 minutes west of Orlando. It's a small town, but like most of Florida, it's growing quickly. Clermont receives substantial rainfall on an almost daily basis in the summer, but conditions become more favorable in the winter months. If your mission is quality triathlon training, December through March is the best time of year to visit. The temperature during these

use our facility."

The gem of the NTC's facilities is its outdoor aquatic center, which operates year-round. The 70-meter by 25-yard pool offers more than 20 lanes and even has a zero-depth entry point, ideal for practicing swim starts.

In addition to a world-class pool, the NTC has a 400-meter outdoor track, a state-of-the-art gym, a rehabilitation center and a human performance lab. Specific training packages are available through the NTC's office and cater to each athlete's individual needs. Plan on spending around \$1,000 if you want the royal treatment, which includes a comprehensive, triathlon-specific human performance evaluation. The lab's "triathlon package" includes: a bike fit,  $VO_2$  max test, lactate threshold analysis, metabolic rate analysis, swim-stroke force analysis, dry-land strength test, spin scan, motion analysis and a body composition test. If you don't mind suffering a bit, you can get all of these tests done in one pain-filled weekend.

**Opened in 2001, the NTC has hosted thousands of triathletes, from back-of-the-pack age groupers to Olympians like Hunter Kemper and Laura Bennett.**

months rarely creeps over 75 degrees and rain is scarce.

The sunshine and topography may be a big boost for your off-season fitness, but the real reason to choose Clermont for a winter training trip is the National Training Center (NTC). It's the only place in the world where you'll find a 37,000-square-foot facility dedicated almost entirely to making you a better triathlete. Opened in 2001, the NTC has hosted thousands of triathletes, from back-of-the-pack age-groupers to Olympians like Hunter Kemper and Laura Bennett. Think of it as an Olympic Training Center that also caters to not-so-elite athletes.

"Sometimes I'll see a sprinter like Tyson Gay doing a track workout and in the lane next to him is someone from Clermont just trying to get in shape," says Kimberly Couch, the NTC's marketing and media coordinator. "There's really a wide range of people who

Further demonstrating its commitment to multisport, the NTC recently hired ITU standout Sara McLarty to build a number of triathlon-specific programs. McLarty has already set up a camp for tri-newbies on Jan. 17-18, as well as a train-with-the-pros camp on Feb. 14-15. Athletes attending the February camp will have the opportunity to train under the guidance of McLarty and a number of other professional triathletes for a weekend. Every athlete in the camp will also receive free entry to Florida's Great Escape Triathlon, held in Clermont on Feb. 15.

Not only does McLarty work at the NTC, she uses the facilities on a daily basis.

"When I moved back to Clermont, I made it my number-one priority that my house be within a mile of the NTC," McLarty says. "I spend that much time there."



Courtesy, Kimberly Couch

The lab's "triathlon package" includes: a bike fit,  $VO_2$  max test, lactate threshold analysis, metabolic rate analysis, swim stroke force analysis, dry-land strength test, spin scan, motion analysis and a body composition test.

## WHERE TO RIDE

Clermont is the unofficial cycling capital of the Sunshine State, which means you'll never have to worry about riding solo while you're in town. The Cycling Hub, Clermont's largest bike shop, hosts rides almost every day of the week. Weekend rides start at 8 a.m. and offer A, B and C groups that cater to different abilities. Most group rides are between 35 and 60 miles and include all of the area's "famous" climbs.

If you prefer to ride without a guide, be sure to get in a few repeats on Sugarloaf Mountain and Buck Hill. Both are located about nine miles north of Clermont, just east of Highway 50. While neither hill is particularly long (this is Florida, after all), they feature grades you won't find anywhere else in Florida.

## WHERE TO RUN

Lake Louisa State Park, only five minutes from the NTC, has about three miles of traffic-free roads and is a great place to get in a quick jog. If you're looking to log some longer miles, head to the east side of Lake Louisa and pick up the Clay Trail at 5 Mile Road. You can follow the dirt trail for about 10 miles and get in a few rolling hills along the way. Be sure to take your own fluids, as there's nowhere to stop for water along the way and there's absolutely zero shade.

## GETTING THERE

Clermont is an easy 30-minute drive from the Orlando International Airport. Book your flights as early as possible, because flights to Orlando fill up quickly with Disney World-bound tourists.

## WHERE TO STAY

The Fairfield Inn and Suites, located on Hunt Trace Boulevard, is literally a stone's throw from the NTC and they serve up a healthy,

carb-lover's breakfast each morning. Make your reservation by calling 352-394-6585. Additional lodging may be found at [Usantc.com](http://Usantc.com).

## GETTING AROUND

The NTC has teamed up with Dollar and Enterprise Rent-A-Car to offer special rates for visiting athletes. Discount information may be found under the "General Information" tab on the NTC's Web site.

## WHERE TO EAT

If there's one thing Clermont is missing it's fine dining. That said, the city's lack of culinary acclaim may be a good thing if you're coming to town to get in shape. There are all the classic chains if you're looking for a quick fix, but our pick is the Bread 'n' Buns Bakery and Café located on Oakley Seaver Drive. They serve a variety of healthy, all-natural breads, sandwiches and salads—perfect for fueling you up for long base training.

## WHAT ELSE TO DO

If you're traveling with kids, taking a trip to one of Orlando's many theme parks is a must. Discounted tickets to a number of parks are available through the NTC. If you're kid-free, you'll be better served to stay out of Orlando—Disney World is only the "greatest place on earth" if you're younger than 12.

If you're in town on a Sunday, head to the mammoth Downtown Farmer's Market, held from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

If you need a night out, try the Sunset Grill and Comedy Club, which has shows just about every Friday and Saturday night. Tickets for the show are only \$8 if you go for dinner as well. ▲

To start planning your trip to the NTC visit [Usantc.com](http://Usantc.com)