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Oct. 26, 2025

Place Feature

Jour 3162-002

Focus Statement: The lake at The Shoppes at University Place provides a “third space” where communities can come together and enjoy the nature of the area, including animals, trees, and the lake itself.

Charlotte's hidden nature gem: the lake at The Shoppes

By: Nellie Errett



Photographed by Nellie Errett

Wind travels through the lake by The Shoppes at University Place in Charlotte, N.C., creating ridges in the water and rustling through the weeping willow trees. The lake is the heart of the area, and people sit along its borders. Its inviting nature brings many life forms, such as ducks, fish, turtles, and plants, in addition to the people trickling by and stopping to appreciate the beauty. The collaboration of different types of life truly makes the place alive.

The spot can provide a break from all the brick and mortar of the busy city of Charlotte. While it is obvious there is human intervention in the area, as water is kept clean at a chemically green-blue, the weeping willows are perfectly placed in a line and a concrete path rims the borders of the lake for people to walk, it could still be considered nature, just man-made.



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"The weeping willows, I love those," UNC Charlotte student Maddie Cummings said. "They're so beautiful, and they stuck out to me. It's like green water cascading down, a waterfall down the branches. I like the way the lights reflect off of them."

While not officially listed as a place through Google Search, the man-made lake sits along a shopping, beauty services and dining hub, The Shoppes at University Place. Sitting near are restaurants *Boardwalk Billy's*, *Famous Toastery* and *Crafty Crab Seafood*, along with shops such as *Uptown Cheapskates* and *GameStop*. There is something for everyone to do in the area. The Shoppes also houses beauty services at *Rochelle Salon Suites*, and more. After going to any of the numerous businesses, you can sit at the lake and relax.



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"I mainly came here to get *Ninety's*," UNC Charlotte student Takerra Dent said. "I love *Ninety's Dessert Bar*, but I love sitting out here. We came to get ice cream, and obviously visit the ducks because, you know, that has to happen!"

The ducks at the lake interact with each other as humans do, such as chirping at each other happily or using their beaks to push each other in frustration. That usually occurs when they fight over food being thrown into the lake, whether that be bread from the nearby restaurants or "duck food" that can be bought with a quarter from a bright yellow vending machine specifically selling the small pellets. The ducks peacefully sleep with their heads turned 180 degrees under the weeping willows. The sea of chirping can be heard throughout the park.



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The pond has increased in visitations over the years especially as the COVID-19 pandemic is waning off, as total visits increased from 2.6 million in 2021 to 3.4 million in 2024 according to University City Partners, which is a 42.2 percent increase. They also found that peak visit times are usually during move-in for UNC Charlotte students, as The Shoppes is less than a 10 minute drive away from campus. The beauty of the place can be proven through statistics. Another study from University City Partners showed that out of 1 million visitors of the area, they come back four times on average. Dent has been to the lake 4-5 times, usually bringing her boyfriend to enjoy the experience with.

“I think it was last month, we actually came at like 7 o'clock,” Dent said. “We stayed out here the rest of the night, pretty much. We got on the paddle boats and everything. It was real nice. I loved it. That was my first time on a paddle boat here.”

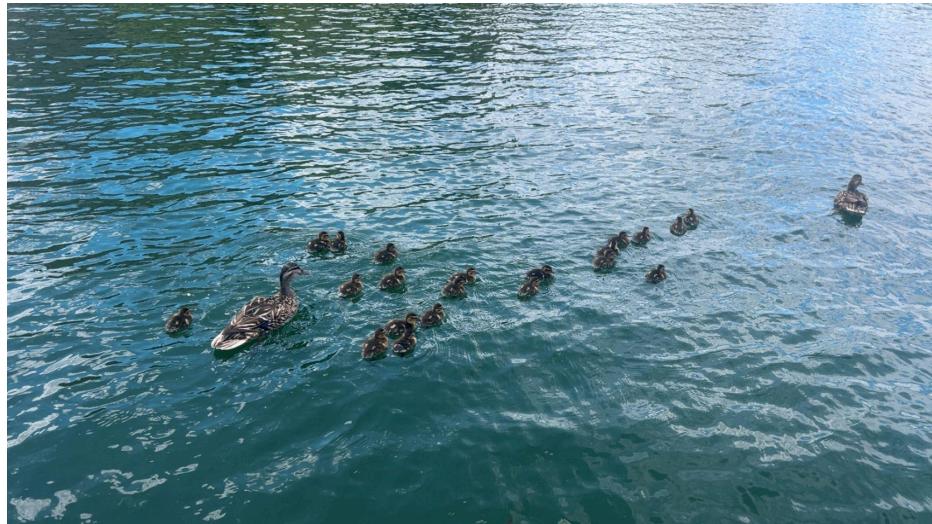
The lake provides opportunities to adventure and sightsee with loved ones. To get more immersed in the experience of the lake, you can ride the sparkly blue paddle boats mounted at the harbor. Staff will greet you and send you on your way to float along the water and see the wildlife up close, if they do not scatter away. This gives you the opportunity to swim near the water fountain that leaves a constant white noise, and sprays you as the wind blows.

“I think that if the lake had a porch swing or a hammock by the weeping willows, it would feel better. More relaxing,” Cummings said.

Somehow, a place filled with people can still be a relaxing experience. Cummings laid across the wooden harbor where the paddle boats were docked. It was peaceful, and the sounds of wind and the water fountain drowned out any disturbing noise. A

Errett, 6

toddler giggled with joy as the ducks approached him and his family to eat the food they were throwing in the pond, as his loved ones held him back so he would not jump in to play with them.



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“It’s very relaxing,” Dent said. “This is somewhere to chill out after a long day, especially after a long day of classes. It’s a very, very nice place. There’s a lot of things to do.”

After speaking with Dent, who had been there many times, she fed the ducks with her boyfriend, even though she had never done that before. She giggled and went back to the yellow vending machine for duck food pellets three times, interacting with the ducks that swam up to her.

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Logistical Sidebar:

As the location can not be specifically placed into Google Maps, you can access the lake by parking in the lot in the center of The Shoppes at University Place. After parking in the lot, you can walk towards *Boardwalk Billy's*, which will lead you to the boardwalk over the lake, and the area will be visible from there.

When you get there, there are a couple different activities you can do. A paddle boat ride, being the most popular attraction at the lake, is \$20 for a 2-seater, and \$40 for a 4-seater, which is great for couples and families. You can swim alongside the ducks, turtles and fish around the lake.

There are many shops and places to venture on the outskirts of the lake, but there is also a walking trail, which is a part of the *Barton Creek Greenway*, along the border of the lake. On this trail, you can see the water fountain up close to hear the sounds and feel potential splashes up close, and get closer looks of the *Hilton* hotel or apartment complexes nearby.