



Florida

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Stay

- » Pelican Hotel (p447)
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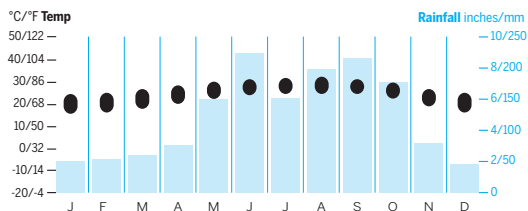
Why Go?

Blessed with almost year-round sunshine, Florida is a hot-house orchid – a bold, sexy, semitropical peninsula edged with bone-white beaches, caressed by teal waters and clad in lurid neon sunsets. Surreal, garish, wacky and perpetually self-amused, Florida is a fantasy-filled swampy wonderland of giddy delights, from alligators, mermaids and Mickey Mouse to Miami's hedonistic, art-fueled, celebrity playground.

Florida's gorgeous beaches are its calling card, and you could visit one every day of the year and still not see them all. But the state offers much more: the prehistoric Everglades, Orlando's phantasmagorical theme parks, the pastel-colored eye candy of South Beach, Key West's nightly carnival, Key Largo's coral reefs. In ways natural and unnatural, Florida's perpetual promise is of escape, both from mundane life and the reasoned constraints of polite society.

When to Go

Miami



Feb-Apr During the last of the winter dry period, the south Florida high season coincides with spring break.

Jun-Aug The hot, humid wet months are peak season for northern Florida beaches and theme parks.

Sep-Oct The ideal shoulder season with fewer crowds, cooler temperatures and warm waters.

Spring Training

Every March, 13 major league baseball teams hold their spring training in stadiums across central and south Florida. That's around 240 exhibition games in 30 days, and it's a pilgrimage for many fans, since the intimate stadiums put you within spitting and signing distance of big leaguers and future hall of famers. For information, visit www.floridagrapefruitleague.com.

AMERICA'S BEST STATE PARKS

Encountering Florida's bizarre, beautiful terrain and its wealth of ancient critters, migratory seabirds and imposing wildlife is unquestionably a highlight. Thankfully, Florida makes it easy for travelers with one of the nation's best state park systems. It is the first and only state to be a two-time recipient of the National Gold Medal Award for Excellence (in 1999 and 2005), and was a finalist once again in 2011.

The state's 160 state parks span an overwhelming array of environments, home to epic coral reefs (John Pennekamp), thousands of alligators (Myakka River), otherworldly limestone karst terrain (Paynes Prairie) and crystal springs (Wakulla Springs). Of course, Florida is also legendary for the quality of its beaches, including such top beach parks as Grayton Beach, Fort DeSoto, Honeymoon Island and St Joseph Peninsula.

For the full list, visit [Florida State Parks](http://www.floridastateparks.org) (www.floridastateparks.org). For advice on wildlife watching (what, when and how), visit the [Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission](http://myfwc.com) (<http://myfwc.com>), which also facilitates boating, hunting and fishing.

Green Florida

Until recently, Florida wasn't known for conservation and ecotourism, but that's changing fast. Here are some resources for local issues and sustainable travel.

- » Department of Environmental Protection (DEP; www.dep.state.fl.us) State-run agency tackles ecological and sustainability issues.
- » Green Lodging Program (www.dep.state.fl.us/greenlodging) DEP-run program recognizes lodgings committed to conservation and sustainability.
- » Florida Sierra Club (<http://florida.sierraclub.org>) Venerable outdoors and advocacy group.
- » Florida Surfrider (<http://florida.surfrider.org>) Grassroots surfer-run nonprofit dedicated to protecting America's beaches; 11 Florida chapters.
- » Greenopia (www.greenopia.com) Rates ecofriendly businesses in six major Florida cities.

HIAASEN'S FLORIDA

Writer Carl Hiaasen's unique, black-comic vision of Florida is a hilarious gumbo of misfits and murderous developers. Try *Skinny Dip* (for adults), *Hoot* (for kids) and *Paradise Screwed* (for his selected columns).

Fast Facts

- » Population: Miami 399,460, Miami-Dade County 2.5 million
- » Distances from Miami: Key West (160 miles), Orlando (235 miles)
- » Time zones: Eastern (eastern Florida), Central Time Zone (western Panhandle)

Kid Stuff

Need to rent baby gear? Want formula and diapers shipped ahead to your hotel? Need a babysitter?

- » Baby's Away (www.babysawayrentals.com)
- » Babies Travel Lite (www.babiestravellite.com)
- » Kids' Nite Out (www.kidsniteout.com)

Resources

- » Visit Florida (www.visitflorida.com) is the official state tourism website.
- » My Florida (www.myflorida.com) is the official government portal.
- » Florida Smart (www.floridasmart.com) provides comprehensive Florida links.