

Destination Florida

Walt Disney was right: Florida is a place that captures the imagination. The landscape is exaggerated and invites exaggeration. Spanish explorers saw manatees and imagined they were mermaids; Ponce de León saw a crystal-clear spring and imagined it was a fountain of youth. Developers saw swamps and sold them as paradise, but if they are, there's plenty of the devil in them. In its history, Florida has inspired as much madness and murder as it has fantasies of a magical kingdom where dreams really do come true.

FAST FACTS

Capital city: Tallahassee

Population: 18.3 million

Distance from Key West to Cuba: 90 miles

Number of visitors to Walt Disney World annually: 47 million

Number of alligators in Florida: 1.25 million

Number of federally listed endangered species: 57

Number of islands (over 10 acres): 4500

Number of golf courses: 1250

Average winter temperature in South Florida: 68.5°F

Highest elevation: 345ft

Miles of beaches: 663

Number of hotel rooms: 370,000

If you're coming to Florida for a simple beach vacation, this might all sound beside the point. With a looping coil of coastline containing over 650 miles of sandy beaches, Florida knows what side its bread is buttered on. Indeed, the state is organized chiefly to satisfy the singular human desire for a clean room, a cold beer, a quiet beach with gently lapping waves, a palm tree and a rose-tinged sunset.

That's the postcard, anyway. If the actual scene doesn't always materialize – if, say, another condo tower now blocks said view, or the beach is too crowded with others seeking the same reverie – it still happens often and regularly enough to keep people coming. And that is very much the point, from Florida's perspective.

And that's OK. The vision of a seaside paradise can falter, as can the mechanical magic of Florida's phantasmagorical theme parks, and the land – the watery, swampy, humid, shimmering, creature-filled peninsula – remains. In the end, it's this unstable, ever-shifting landscape that never fails to overwhelm and that works its way indelibly inside, never to be forgotten. And it does so both in that grand, uplifting, aching-beauty-of-nature kind of way, and in that fetid, surreal, alligators-in-the-swamp-snakes-in-the-trees-get-me-outta-here kind of way.

Florida, more civilized than it once was, is still seductively and unnervingly fluid. Miami continues to be washed with wave after wave of Latin immigrants, and the city vibrates with energy and culture and change. The Deep South of northern Florida lovingly tends its memories, even as old ways fade or are simply paved over. And just off the coast, another hurricane is always brewing.

So come for the beaches and Mickey Mouse, come for the people and the Everglades, come for the nightlife and the kayaking and the manatees and the gators. But make sure to come. Because Florida is always stranger than you imagine, and it never holds still.

Getting Started

Florida makes its living from tourism, so it's always eager and ready to welcome you. Getting here, renting a car, finding a hotel, a meal, a drink, the beach – Florida makes these details easy, and relatively affordable, so that you can focus solely on having a great time, which ideally inspires you to return again and again.

So far, anyway, that formula has worked pretty well. And it means that you, the visitor, need only decide what you want to do and when you want to do it. The only hitch is that Florida, being so attractive and welcoming and popular, can also get insanely crowded. Advance planning is essential, because like the Magic Kingdom, Florida is all about crowd management: savvy travelers know the best rides fill up fast, and beating those inevitable, growing, snaking lines sometimes requires perfect timing.

WHEN TO GO

Unfortunately (or not), Florida has no single perfect season. The best time to go depends entirely on your agenda.

Always consider the weather first. Similar to the tropics, Florida has essentially two seasons: wet and dry. Winter, Florida's dry season, is from roughly November through April. Temperatures are lower, there's less humidity and rain, and it's the ideal time to hike, canoe and explore nature, particularly in South Florida. Snowbirds (northerners who winter in Florida) love winter because sunny 70°F days mean no snow, ever.

Summer is the 'wet season': from May to October, it's hot, sticky and rainstorms deluge many an afternoon. This is also roughly hurricane season, which peaks in September (for more on hurricanes, see p507).

All this would seem to make winter the best time to come, and it often is; particularly in Miami and South Florida, winter is high season, bringing with it higher prices and more crowds. But in northern Florida, the ocean is a little too cold for swimming in winter, so the Panhandle, St Augustine and others boom in summer.

Orlando's high season is year-round. Here, theme-park lines respond more to school vacations and holidays than to weather. Also, those who brave summer's heat and mosquitoes often find that its dreaded rains can blow through quickly; duck inside for an hour, and it's over before you know it.

Finally, wildlife keeps its own schedule: migrating birds, manatees, sea turtles, whales – all come at different times, so if you're set on seeing a particular animal, find out when it's visiting (see p71 for more on parks and wildlife).

COSTS & MONEY

The rich and famous adore Florida, but you don't need to be either to enjoy its sunny climes. In this guide, we emphasize the middle ground, while providing plenty of choices for travelers to splash out or conserve their pennies as they like.

How low can you go? If you're camping and making most of your own meals, you could spend under \$50 a day. If you're two people staying in budget motels and eating out (even cheaply), budget \$100 a day per person. Whether you rent a car is the real wild card; without one, your expenses plummet; with one, that's a base of at least \$40 to \$50 a day (depending on insurance and gas). However, unless you're staying in one spot, you'll probably want a car, as public-transportation networks do not stretch to all locations in Florida.

See Climate Charts (p505) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- strong sunscreen, high-quality sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat
- a bathing suit
- binoculars for wildlife- and bird-watching
- a great road map
- your mp3 player loaded with great beach tunes
- leaving half of what you think you'll need at home
- a spiffy black outfit if you're heading to Miami
- a copy of your passport, driver's license and 800 numbers for your credit cards

For comfortable midrange travel, budget \$150 to \$200 per person a day. 'Comfort' is relative, but with this budget, expect to mix up a nicer B&B with a budget hotel and to balance days at expensive destinations (Miami and Orlando theme parks) with days at free ones (the beach and state parks). Going in a destination's high season also significantly affects your costs, particularly in beach-resort towns like Sanibel and Amelia Islands. And of course, if you spend all your time in Miami's art-deco hotels and nightclubs, or bounce from theme park to theme park, the sky is very nearly the limit.

One thing in the traveler's favor is the intense competition for business in Florida, which generally keeps prices lower, and which inspires a blizzard of promotions, deals and discounts. If you plan ahead, check the web, call and ask, and are a little flexible, you'll find numerous opportunities to trim your costs here and there.

HOW MUCH?

Canoe rental per half/full day \$25/35

Disney one-day adult admission \$71

Everglades frog legs \$15

Daytona Beach ATV rental per hour \$25

South Beach art-deco hotel room \$150 to \$300

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Like Hawaii, Florida is a uniquely beautiful and even rare place that is constantly in danger of being loved to death. And like Hawaii, Florida's record of caring for itself is spotty (to put it mildly). This means that, perhaps more than elsewhere, visitors to Florida need to travel with an awareness of their impact.

In fact, there is very little agreement among Floridians about the environmental, ecological and cultural impacts of many popular activities. For instance, are Everglades airboats terrible or no big deal? It depends on who you ask, and even the authors of this book disagree. So, throughout this guide, we have tried to highlight issues and provide information so travelers can make their own informed decisions.

One resource is the 'GreenDex,' p548, which is an index of what we consider environmentally friendly businesses included in this guide. For more on specific activities, begin with the boxed texts, p75 and p56. If you prefer farmers markets to supermarkets, visit www.florida-agriculture.com for a statewide list.

Established in 2004, Florida's **Department of Environmental Protection** (www.dep.state.fl.us) tackles the state's ecological and sustainability issues head-on and provides a wealth of practical information. In particular, check out **Green Lodging Program** (www.dep.state.fl.us/greenlodging).

TRAVEL LITERATURE

What is Florida really like? We are so glad you asked.

In *Dream State* (2004), bawdy, gimlet-eyed journalist Diane Roberts weaves her family's biography with Florida's history to create a compelling,

TOP PICKS



Gulf of Mexico

FLORIDA

Miami

FOLK ART & ODDITIES

With its kitschy billboards and quaint postcards, Florida pioneered the very idea of the roadside attraction. Here are a few worth stopping for, though not all are along the road.

- Coral Castle (p174) – this quintessential roadside attraction is a modern-day Stonehenge commemorating a scorned groom's grief.
- Pelicans in Paradise, Pensacola (p492) – colorful fiberglass pelicans waddle downtown.
- Dog Wall, Grayton Beach (p488) – a community mural on which local dog owners paint portraits of their canines.
- Venetian Pool, Coral Gables (p116) – the world's most beautiful swimming hole, this 820,000-gallon, spring-fed pool was formed from a coral rock quarry.
- Bahama Village, Key West (p206) – though not what it once was when Hemingway loved it, Key West's old Bahamian district still has a colorful Caribbean flair.
- Ochopee post office (p171) – this former tool shed is the nation's smallest postal facility.
- Christ of the Abyss (p186) – glass-bottom boat tours sail over this bronze statue at the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.
- Vehicle Assembly Building (p341) – the place where the Space Shuttle is assembled is so big that it makes its own weather.

TACKIEST SOUVENIRS

Nothing says Florida like a tacky souvenir, but some scream this could *only* be from Florida. Here are some we found and couldn't pass up.

- 'Fidel es Muerto' champagne and 'Burn in Hell, Fidel' hot sauce, Little Havana
- Velvet paintings of sad-eyed manatees, St Augustine
- Photo T-shirt of yourself 'riding' a real-live 12ft alligator, Gatorland, Orlando
- Pirate-emblazoned bongos, Fort Lauderdale
- Mickey Mouse ears, Walt Disney World, Orlando
- 'I Love to Fart' T-shirt, Key West
- Henry Flagler action doll (just kidding, but we'd love one!)

CLAIMS TO FAME

Florida has never been shy, and a number of Florida towns make grandiose self-congratulatory claims that at times we find a touch, well...dubious. Here then is Florida's gallery of famous, almost-famous, and we-really-hope-no-one-Google-this titles.

- Miami: 'Capital of Latin America'
- Key West: 'Southernmost City'
- Daytona: 'World Center of Racing'
- Orlando: 'Theme Park Capital of the World'
- Florida: 'Fishing Capital of the World'
- Stuart: 'Sailfish Capital of the World'
- Palatka: 'Bass Capital of the World'
- Destin: 'World's Luckiest Fishing Village'
- Ocala: 'Horse Capital of the World'
- Ybor City: 'Cigar Capital of the US'
- Panama City Beach: 'Wreck Capital of the South'
- Deland: 'Athens of Florida'
- Winter Park: 'Venice of the US'
- Venice: 'Shark's Tooth Capital of Florida'
- High Springs: 'Friendliest Town in Florida'

And the historic award goes to...1920s Miami, which adopted the slogan: 'The Most Richly Blessed Community of the Bountifully Endowed State of the Most Highly Enterprising People of the Universe.'

unique, hilarious masterpiece: Roberts is like the troublemaking cousin at Florida's family reunion, bumming cigarettes and dishing the dirt everyone else is too polite to discuss.

A St Petersburg journalist, Jeff Klinkenberg excels at bringing to life the people who make Florida what it is: in *Seasons of Real Florida* (2004) and *Pilgrim in the Land of the Alligators* (2008), Klinkenberg interviews Marjory Stoneman Douglas, the Coppertone girl, the original *Creature from the Black Lagoon* creature, the inventor of the Everglades skiff, and a host of other intriguing natives.

Few writers are as inextricably linked to Florida as Carl Hiaasen. Most know him for his fictional thrillers, but he found his material and honed his outrageous, biting sarcasm as a *Miami Herald* columnist. For a piquant taste, pick up *Paradise Screwed* (2001).

Another mystery writer, James W Hall collected meditative essays on his favorite state and the writer's life in *Hot Damn!* (2002).

Naturalist Doug Alderson helped create the Big Bend Paddling Trail, and in *Waters Less Traveled* (2005) he describes his adventures: dodging pygmy rattlesnakes, meeting Shitty Bill, discussing Kemp's ridley turtles and pondering manatee farts.

When former *David Letterman* writer Rodney Rothman burned out, he decided to test drive 'retirement' in Boca Raton – at age 28. A good Jewish boy who went south too soon, Rothman crafts a very personal anthropological study of the unsentimental world of Florida retirees in *Early Bird: A Memoir of Premature Retirement* (2005). You'll chuckle on the beach all day.

Tim Hollis' *Glass Bottom Boats & Mermaid Tails* (2006) is an openly nostalgic history of Florida's first tourist attractions: the 'Big Five' springs. It's chock-full of postcards, billboards and photos from the era when the Weeki Wachee mermaid's 'adagio' was the pinnacle of entertainment.

For a list of great Florida crime fiction, see the boxed text, p44, and for more great books, see p44.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Florida Smart (www.floridasmart.com) Your one-stop shop for links to everything you ever wanted to know about Florida, from history to hurricanes to phone numbers.

Florida State Parks (www.floridastateparks.org) A wonderful resource serving the nation's best state-park system.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Get fellow travelers' advice, post questions and much more.

Miami Herald (www.miamiherald.com) Find out what's happening from one of the state's major daily newspapers.

My Florida (www.myflorida.com) Florida's official web portal for all government services, with comprehensive links to parks, travel information and media.

Roadside America (www.roadsideamerica.com) For per-capita wackiness, does any state top Florida?

Visit Florida (www.visitflorida.com) The state's official tourism commission, with 'experts' dispensing travel advice.

Events Calendar

Florida throws some of the biggest, weirdest, loudest, most delicious, most stylish, most crowded parties in the country. Whether you fly a freak flag, a pirate flag or a Confederate flag, and whether you prefer wine by the glass or beer by the keg, Florida has a festival that speaks your language.

JANUARY–FEBRUARY

ORANGE BOWL early Jan
One of Florida's biggest sporting events of the year is the Orange Bowl (p127), which often crowns the collegiate champion. It's held at Miami's Dolphin Stadium.

FLORIDA CITRUS FESTIVAL 11 days in late Jan
Winter Haven hosts a well-attended 'state fair'-like celebration of Florida's citrus, with carnival rides, a beauty pageant and livestock shows (p61).

EDISON FESTIVAL OF LIGHT late Jan-early Feb
Fort Myers celebrates the inventor Thomas Edison with a block party (p445), concerts, and a huge science fair. Events culminate on February 11, Edison's birthday, with an incredible Parade of Light.

SPEED WEEKS 1st 2 weeks in Feb
Several hundred thousand folks get their motors running (p358) in Daytona for lots of high-octane partying, a great deal of revving of engines and several big car races.

GARLIC FEST 3 days in mid-Feb
For a decade, Delray Beach (p234) has held an annual three-day salute to the stinking rose. Modeled after California's Gilroy Garlic Festival, Delray has the same orgy of pungent gourmet cuisine (featuring garlic ice cream, naturally) and several cooking contests.

FLORIDA STATE FAIR 2 weeks in mid-Feb
For over a century, the Florida State Fair (p412) has been a classic, drawing Floridians from around the state for its livestock shows, greasy food, loud music and old-fashioned carnival rides and games.

SOUTH BEACH WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL late Feb
This is not your typical paper-plate grub-fest, but a celebration of fine dining and gourmet cuisine, sponsored by the Food Network and *Food & Wine* magazine. South Florida's celebrity chefs headline the show (p128).

MARDI GRAS late Feb or early Mar
Fat Tuesday inspires a smattering of celebrations around the state, but Pensacola Beach (p497), closest to New Orleans, is Florida's best.

MARCH–APRIL

CARNAVAL MIAMI 9 days in early Mar
Miami's premiere Latin festival (p128) hits a lot of high notes: there's a Latin drag-queen show, an in-line-skate competition, a domino tournament, the immense Calle Ocho street festival, a cooking contest, crowning of Miss Carnival Miami, an 8km marathon, and generally, all-around good times.

BIKE WEEK 10 days in early Mar
Half a million bikers come to Daytona Beach for Bike Week (p358), which, similar to Speed Weeks, involves admiring a lot of internal-combustion engines, drinking, racing said machinery, and more drinking, not necessarily in that order.

SPRING BREAK Mar-Apr
Have you heard? When US colleges release their students for a one-week 'break' in March or April, many of those coeds gather on Florida beaches to drink and drink and drink, sometimes losing their clothes in the process (thank goodness no one ever *records* these embarrassing slips...). Some towns, like Fort Lauderdale (p219) and Daytona (p353), have clamped down on the debauchery, which simply moves to new beaches, like Hollywood (p217) and Panama City Beach (p484). You've been warned.

EPCOT INTERNATIONAL FLOWER AND GARDEN FESTIVAL Mar-May
Amazing topiaries and flowers from around the world fuse Disney characters with Epcot's World Showcase (p305).

PET PARADE

Mar

In Palm Beach (p240), old ladies dress their dogs like humans and flaunt them on Worth Ave, Florida's answer to Rodeo Drive.

FLORIDA FILM FESTIVAL

Mar

Held at the wonderfully quirky Enzian Theater (p286) in Winter Park, near Orlando, this celebration of independent films is fast becoming one of the largest in the southeast.

ART IN THE PARK

Mar

In Winter Park (p284), meander among local art and linger over a glass of wine at one of this quintessential small town's many sidewalk cafés and wine bars.

CAPTAIN ROBERT SEARLE'S RAID

Mar

Jamaican pirate Robert Searle pillaged St Augustine in memorable fashion in 1668, and St Augustine (p363) makes sure no one forgets with a meticulous re-enactment in authentic period garb.

ST PATRICK'S DAY

Mar 17

The patron saint of Ireland is honored with more fanfare elsewhere in the US, but in Miami (p128), a sizeable contingent of loyal folks raise a pint (or three) on St Patty's Day.

WINTER MUSIC CONFERENCE

5 days in late Mar

DJs, musicians, promoters and music-industry execs converge on Miami to rub elbows, strike deals, listen to new dance music, and ooh and aah over the latest technology. These folks also know how to throw a party (p128).

INTERSTATE MULLET TOSS

late Apr

On Perdido Key, near Pensacola, locals have become famous for their annual ritual of tossing dead fish over the Florida–Alabama state line (p501). Distance trumps style, but some have quite a bit of style.

MAY–JUNE**ISLE OF EIGHT FLAGS****SHRIMP FESTIVAL**

1st weekend in May

This three-day festival on Amelia Island (p380) takes its shrimp and juried art show seriously, but when the pirates invade, everyone gets downright silly and lets loose their inner 'aaaarrgh!'

SUNFEST

5 days in early May

A quarter of a million folks gather in West Palm Beach for South Florida's largest waterfront music and arts festival (p251).

MEMORIAL DAY CIRCUIT PARTY

Memorial Day weekend

For late May's Memorial Day weekend, Pensacola (p493) becomes one massive three-day gay party, with lots of DJs, dancing and drinking.

SEASIDE JAZZ FESTIVAL

Memorial Day weekend

Quaint, pastel-colored Seaside (p488) makes a delightful venue for two days of top-flight jazz.

PALATKA BLUE CRAB FESTIVAL

Memorial Day weekend

For four heady late-May days in Palatka (p389), not only can you stuff yourself with as much blue crab as you can handle, but this festival hosts the state championship for chowder and gumbo. Yum.

GAY DAYS ORLANDO

1 week in early Jun

Upwards of 40,000 gay and lesbians don red shirts and gather at the Magic Kingdom on the first Saturday of June for Gay Day at Walt Disney World (p306). Begun in 1991, this event now inaugurates a week's worth of gay celebrations in other parks, hotels and clubs in Orlando.

GOOMBAY FESTIVAL

early Jun

In Miami's Coconut Grove, this massive street party (p128) draws more than 300,000 to celebrate the city's Bahamian culture. One of the nation's largest black-culture festivals, it features Caribbean music and dancing troupes, with the highlight being the 55-member Royal Bahamas Police Band.

SIR FRANCIS DRAKE'S RAID

Jun

The same folks who re-enact Searle's Raid in St Augustine in March switch their clothes to recreate Drake's 1586 sacking of the town (p363). Volunteers are welcome!

JULY–AUGUST**FOURTH OF JULY**

Jul 4

Independence Day for the US is the cause for parades and fireworks, large and small, across the state. Miami does the day justice, with an excellent fireworks show (p128).

STEINHATCHEE SCALLOP SEASON

Jul to Sep

The opening day of scallop season in Steinhatchee (p476) can draw a thousand folks, who take to the waters to harvest by hand this delectable bivalve. It's like a two-month treasure hunt, and anyone can join in.

MIAMI SPICE RESTAURANT MONTH

Aug

Most Floridians do nothing but hunker next to the air-con during the year's hottest month. To draw them out, Miami's restaurants join together in August to offer prix-fixe lunches and dinners (p128).

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER**MICKEY'S NOT-SO-SCARY HALLOWEEN PARTY**

Sep–Oct

On select evenings over two months at Disney World, kids can trick-or-treat in the shadow of Cinderella's Castle, with costumed Disney favorites and a Halloween-themed parade (p296).

EPCOT FOOD & WINE FESTIVAL

Oct

As you would expect from Disney's Epcot (p303), this is a wide-ranging international celebration of food and wine. Its 'Eat to the Beat' music series features national acts.

FANTASY FEST

last week of Oct

Key West pulls out all the stops, and pulls the stopper out of every bottle, for this weeklong costumed extravaganza (p207) culminating in Halloween. Everyone's even more crazy than usual, and Key West's own Goombay Festival competes for attention the same week. Bring plenty of aspirin.

MOONFEST

late Oct

West Palm Beach (p245) throws a rocking, riproaring, riotous block party for Halloween. Guests are encouraged to come in costume (the top prize is \$1000!), and dozens of the best local bands play for free.

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER**FLORIDA SEAFOOD FESTIVAL**

2 days in early Nov

Apalachicola (p481) hosts one of Florida's oldest seafood festivals, and the local specialty – oysters – is celebrated in numerous ways, such as with oyster-shucking and -eating contests and the annual blessing of the fleet.

TAMPA CIGAR HERITAGE FESTIVAL

mid-Nov

Tampa's Ybor City has a long history as the cigar-making capital of the US. That heritage, and the cigars themselves, are celebrated in this one-day festival (p412).

ST ARRRGUSTINE PIRATE GATHERING

3 days in mid-Nov

Put on an eye patch and dust off your pirate lingo for this hokey celebration of scurvy dogs and seafaring rascals (p363).

WHITE PARTY

1 week in late Nov

A raucous gay and lesbian celebration (and HIV/AIDS fundraiser), White Party (p129) is a series of parties and nightclub events in and around Miami Beach and Fort Lauderdale. Yes, wear white.

ART BASEL**MIAMI BEACH**

4 days in early Dec

Very simply, this is one of the biggest international art shows in the US, with more than 150 art galleries and over 2000 artists from around the world involved (p129).

VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS STROLL

3 weeks in early Dec

The landmark 1891 Tampa Bay Hotel (now a museum) is given over to Christmas, Victorian style, for three weeks in December, with folks in period costume acting out fairy tales (p412).

KING MANGO STRUT

late Dec

Miami's Coconut Grove has held this wacky, after-Christmas parade, which spoofs current events and local politics, for over 20 years. It's a light-hearted, freak-alicious way to ring in the new year (p129).

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

MIAMI TO KEY WEST

10 Days

Start in **Miami** (p83) for three solid days of arts and culture, fine eats, hedonistic nightlife, South Beach sunning and, of course, serious shopping! On the fourth day, put on your grubby duds for a visit to **Everglades National Park** (p170). Take the low road, from **Homestead** (p173) to the area around **Flamingo** (p175), from where you can explore mangroves, go kayaking and watch the sunset.

Now backtrack and head for the **Upper Keys** (p183). At **Key Largo** (p183), enjoy snorkeling and beachside camping at **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** (p183). For the next day or two, slowly key-hop along: ride a bike around the Keys; swim with the dolphins at the **Dolphin Research Center** (p192) in Grassy Key; fish from **Old Seven Mile Bridge** (p195) in Marathon; and sun and snorkel at **Bahia Honda State Park** (p196). Finally, get thyself to **Key West** (p199) to spend the remainder of your vacation saluting the sunset – or stay active (and sober) and trip out to **Dry Tortugas National Park** (p213).

Is it possible to see more in under 300 miles? From urban, Latin, pastel-hued Miami – both caliente and cool – to the prehistoric swamps and leathery beasts of the Everglades. And thence, past teeming coral reefs to devil-may-care Key West, always lifting a glass to the sunset.



ATLANTIC COAST

Two Weeks

Florida's Atlantic Coast is a symphony of beaches and barrier islands, of mangroves and sea turtles, of nostalgic 'Old Florida' and happening 'new' Florida. With three driving routes to choose from (I-95, Hwy 1 and A1A), pick scenic A1A as often as possible.

Start in **Jacksonville** (p370); take in bustling downtown, a football game and the beaches. Hop a ferry for kayaking at **Fort George Island** (p379), and then it's a scenic drive through the **Talbot Islands State Park** (p380) to pretty-as-a-picture **Amelia Island** (p380) for a moonlight horse ride on the beach.

Heading south, 'Old Florida' doesn't get older than **St Augustine** (p361), with its romantic hostelrys and historic lanes. Keep zooming along Hwy A1A to the 'birthplace of speed,' **Daytona Beach** (p353): drive on the Speedway *and* the sand!

Get back to nature with a canoe trip among manatees and mangroves in **Mosquito Lagoon** (p343) in the **Canaveral National Seashore** (p343). Explore the wonders of space at the **Kennedy Space Center** (p337). Learn how to surf at **Cocoa Beach** (p345) and enjoy an evening cocktail at its **Sunset Waterfront Grill** (p347).

Drop a line in the water at **Sebastian Inlet State Park** (p349), or book a sailfishing charter in **Stuart** (p255). Near Jupiter, take a memorable kayak trip on the **Loxohatchee River** (p254), and make sure to visit the windswept dunes of **Hutchinson Island** (p256). Put on dress clothes and stroll posh **Palm Beach** (p240); work on your tan at **Delray Beach** (p234); and join the party at **Fort Lauderdale** (p219). Finally, hit **Miami** (p83), for Latin culture and cuisine, and for the ultimate cruise, take Ocean Dr, which is the strutting, sexy, art-deco belly of the beast that is South Beach.



Cruise 400 miles down the Atlantic Coast, trailing your hand in the water the whole way. It's the full Florida buffet: kayak among mangroves, stroll Spanish forts, lunch with astronauts, learn to surf, sunbathe next to celebrities, sweat to Cuban hip-hop in Miami nightclubs and more.

CINDERELLA TO THE SWAMP: ORLANDO & THE GULF COAST

Two Weeks

Let yourself be seduced by the mouse: start this trip in Orlando with several days at **Walt Disney World Resort** (p290), for the magic and mayhem of Earth's most popular tourist attraction. Worth a day as well are the thrill-a-minute theme-park rides at the **Universal Orlando Resort** (p319), the animal shows and roller coasters of **SeaWorld** (p328), a dolphin swim at **Discovery Cove** (p332), and Florida's original theme park, **Cypress Gardens** (p273), with its Southern belles and water-ski shows.

In between all that silliness, chill out in a kayak in nearby **Wekiwa Springs State Park** (p274), and when you've had enough theme-park fun, head west on I-4 to **Tampa** (p405). Enjoy Ybor City and its Cuban history, gourmet eats and nightlife.

In **St Petersburg** (p418) cool off in the surreal Salvador Dalí Museum and unwind on one of Florida's best beaches: **Fort DeSoto Beach** (p428).

Enjoy more museums and fine dining in **Sarasota** (p433) and more wild nature in **Myakka River State Park** (p442). Beach-combing doesn't get any finer than at seashell-littered **Sanibel Island** (p451), nor wildlife-watching any better than at **JN 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge** (p452) in Sanibel.

After a classy meal at upscale **Naples** (p454), go the other extreme: sample some deep-fried alligator in **Everglades City** (p172) before dipping a paddle among live gators with a kayak trip in the Everglades' **10,000 Islands** (p174). Then enjoy the 'Old Florida' tourist traps of the **Tamiami Trail** (p170) on the way to an Everglades tram tour at **Shark Valley** (p171).

This 370-mile trip bookends two overwhelming, creature-filled worlds, one fake, one real: from Orlando's cartoon-filled theme parks, you take in the beauty and culture of Gulf Coast cities and beaches until you reach the Everglades and its decidedly less-cuddly alligator-and snake-filled swamps.



NORTH FLORIDA BACKROADS & BYWAYS Two to Three Weeks

There's a lot of spectacular natural beauty and good ol' warm Southern hospitality to experience in northern Florida and the Panhandle, most of it tucked away along meandering backroads. **Jacksonville** (p370) makes a good arrival point. Spend a few days visiting Jacksonville's museums, Fort Caroline, then Timucuan sites on **Fort George Island Cultural State Park** (p379), and of course, relaxing on gorgeous **Amelia Island** (p380).

Go south, following St John's River to **Blue Springs State Park** (p386), where you can cruise alongside manatees. Visit the nearby Spiritualist community of **Cassadaga** (p386) and explore **Ocala National Forest's** (p392) moss-draped trails.

In **Ocala** (p390), get yourself cleaned up and catch its drag-racing shrines, Don Garlits Museums, and the original glass-bottom boats of Silver Springs.

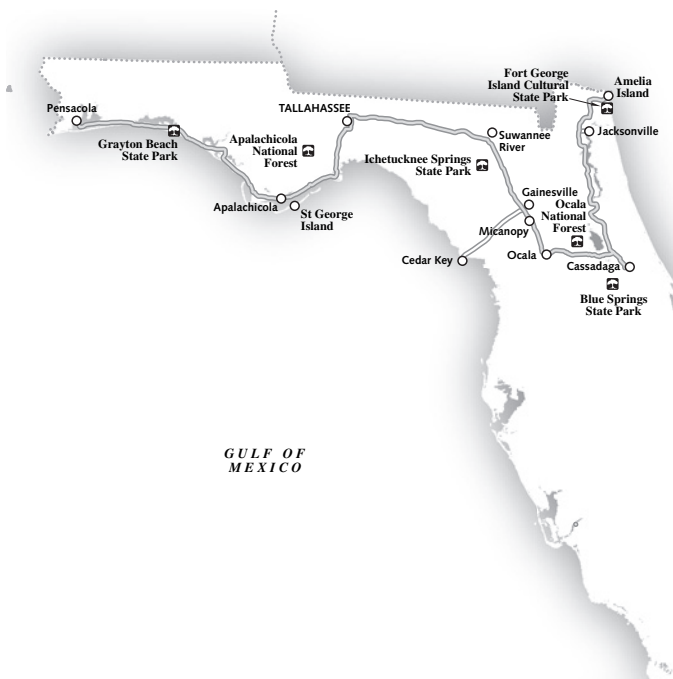
North, Tom Petty's hometown of **Gainesville** (p394) is still a great place to hear live rock and punk and to experience Florida college football. A side trip to **Micanopy** (p401), an 'Old Florida' time capsule, is a must.

Now, shoot southwest to take in beautiful, isolated **Cedar Key** (p478), shuffle up to **Ichetucknee Springs State Park** (p401) for some lazy tubing, then go for a paddle in the **Suwannee River** (p477).

The state capital, **Tallahassee** (p464), makes another good rest stop before more hiking in the atmospheric **Apalachicola National Forest** (p474).

Take Hwy 98 west along the Gulf Coast, be sure to visit **St George Island** (p483), have some fresh-shucked oysters in **Apalachicola** (p481) and lounge on exceedingly picturesque sugar-sand **Grayton Beach State Park** (p488).

Pensacola (p492) and its gorgeous shoreline are a good deal more attractive than its nickname, the 'Redneck Riviera,' suggests. Go diving, go fishing, and go out in Southern style.



There's no hurry along this winding, 700-mile-or-so journey through the mossy forests and towns of Old Florida. Just remember: the seafood is often fried, the springs always 72°F, the drawl Southern, the rivers lazy, the beaches sugar-bright, and the music loud, but it'll be fun.

TAILORED TRIPS

KIDDING AROUND

If you have kids, yes, yes of course, please, by all means take them to Orlando's **Walt Disney World Resort** (p290). This is what parents do, and it's something children never forget – particularly sitting curbside as Disney characters parade by, then watching fireworks explode over **Cinderella's Castle** (p300).

And while you're in Orlando, enjoy the thrill rides of **Universal Orlando Resort** (p319) and watch Shamu jump and splash at **SeaWorld** (p328). But then, show them something else.

Take a canoe ride down the **Suwannee River** (p477), stopping at freshwater springs for rope swings and cannonballs. At **Daytona Beach** (p353), build sandcastles and ride all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) along the beach. Take a glass-bottom boat ride in **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** (p183), snorkel the coral reef or perhaps swim with dolphins, if your kids are older, then help them understand what they've just seen at the **Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center** (p201) in Key West.

The **Kennedy Space Center** (p337) has exhibits appealing to all ages that capture the wonder of space and the exhilaration of space flight. **The Everglades** (p164) offers easy boardwalks and accessible canoe trails into its fantastical world. And **Miami** (p83) shouldn't be overlooked: it certainly has great zoos and children's museums, but the city itself will be a memorable experience for all but the youngest. For much more, see Florida for Kids (p63).

SECLUDED STRANDS

For a list of some of Florida's best beaches, see p50. But what if you want a quiet patch of sandy real estate to get *away* from everyone else? Here are a few choices. Some take a little more work to get to, but then that's how you escape all the toddlers, cooler-dragging coeds and four-wheelers, isn't it?

On the Atlantic Coast, a short trek from West Palm Beach, **Singer Island** (p252) is a great place to spread your towel. Near Stuart, aim for **Hutchinson Island** (p256), which gets more secluded as you go north. You really can't go wrong with any of the beaches along the **Canaveral National Seashore** (p344).

Escape the buzz of Daytona at **Flagler Beach** (p361), 30 miles north. Around St Augustine, ditch the tourist hordes at **Anastasia Island** (p366). Finally, near Jacksonville, head for **Atlantic Beach** (p377), and then get in your kayak and paddle for **Little Talbot & Big Talbot Islands** (p380).

On the Panhandle, get yourself out to **St George Island State Park** (p483). Near Tampa, take a boat to **Honeymoon Island State Recreation Area** (p430) and look for shark's teeth on **Venice beaches** (p441). Near Fort Myers, work on your tan on **Lover's Key** (p447) and **Cayo Costa Island** (p450).

Really serious about alone time? Go to the **Dry Tortugas** (p213).



OLD FLORIDA

Maybe it's something in the aquifer, but all Floridians, even those who arrived yesterday, are afflicted by a strong sentimental attachment to 'Old Florida' – which is whatever the state used to be 50, 100, even 300 years ago (for more, see above). Rhapsodies about 'Real Florida' often mourn for disappearing Deep South towns dripping in Spanish moss like **Micanopy** (p401), aka 'the town that time forgot' and home to **Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park** (p402). Other places where the Cracker spirit lives on include **Everglades City** (p172) and **Homosassa Springs** (p460).

'Old Florida' can mean tourist attractions from before the Disney era: the swamp buggy tours, BBQ pits, and gambling halls of the **Tamiami Trail** (p170); the moody cypress and glass-bottom boats of **Wakulla Springs State Park** (p473); the topiary and Southern belles of Orlando's **Cypress Gardens** (p273); and the alligator wrestling of **Gatorland** (p269).

In **Miami** (p83), 'Old Florida' means smoking cigars and betting on jai alai and sleeping in the candy-colored art-deco district.

The entire Florida Keys qualifies, but here, the heart of 'Old Florida' is **Key West** (p199), where you will find Hemingway House and the Wreckers' Museums.

Then there's the oldest 'Old Florida' of all: **St Augustine** (p361), whose houses and Spanish fort, Castillo de San Marcos, are centuries-old, as is Tallahassee's evocative Spanish relic, the 17th-century **Mission San Luis** (p467).



WHAT'S COOKIN'?

Yes, it's easy to eat badly in Florida, but it's just as easy to eat very, very well. Any culinary tour of the Sunshine State begins (and could deliciously end) in **Miami** (p138), where you can sample Cuban, Nicaraguan, Haitian, Caribbean and Floribbean cuisines, to name a few. Celebrity chefs hold court here, and you can also toodle up to **Palm Beach** (p243) for gourmet plates.

From here, it's easy to go chasing the perfect Key lime pie and conch fritters through the Florida Keys to **Key West** (p210), where you can also get toasted toasting the setting sun.

Everglades City (p172) is a good place for adventure: try some deep-fried alligator and frog's legs. Further up the Gulf Coast, we seem to remember somebody saying something about a place with good cheeseburgers – follow your nose to **Cabbage Key** (p450).

Great restaurants are a calling card of both **Sarasota** (p438) and Ybor City in **Tampa** (p407).

In the Panhandle, **Apalachicola** (p481) is famous for its oysters and **Steinhatchee** (p476) for its scallops. More fresh Gulf seafood and Southern specialties are served in **Destin** (p491) and **Pensacola** (p499). Really like Cracker cooking? Grab a seat at **Yearling Restaurant** (p402) in Micanopy.

Meanwhile, **Amelia Island** (p384) is a beautiful place to be, and local eateries maintain the delightful mood.



WEIRD FLORIDA

Alligator wrestling, mermaids, the fountain of youth: so much of Florida is given over to weirdness, it's hard to know where to begin. As a matter of fact, Florida has not one but several 'Fountains of Youth.' The **Fountain of Youth** (p364) in St Augustine is the original, the one Ponce de León himself probably drank from. Have a cup, then search for St Augustine's **ghosts** (p366) while wielding your own 'electromagnetic-field meter.'

Or let ghosts and the dead come to you: have a reading with a Spiritualist medium at **Cassadaga** (p386). Or creep yourself out among the dead in the bizarre **cemetery** (p205) in Key West. Or forget the dead and help search for UFOs and **alien life** (p498) near Pensacola.

Florida's perpetually flowing, crystalline springs are surreal in themselves, but add seductive mermaids and you've really got something: **mermaid shows** (p459) in Weeki Wachee still defy logic. Or, make like a mermaid yourself and sleep underwater in **Jules' Undersea Lodge** (p188) in Key Largo.

Think Florida doesn't mess with your head?

Check out **Coral Castle** (p174), a stone monument to unrequited love, and stop off at **Robert Is Here** (p177) in Homestead, one man's kitschy plea for attention.

In itself, **the Everglades** (p164) pretty much embodies everything strange about nature, and in the Panhandle, go underground for more at **Florida Caverns State Park** (p487).

LATIN FLORIDA

Florida has always enjoyed a close relationship with its Latin and Caribbean neighbors, and particularly in South Florida, the mix of cultures and cuisines makes for a dish that is *my caliente* (very hot).

When you're dubbed the 'Capital of Latin America,' it's a lot to live up to. **Miami** (p83) earns it, though, and a good place to begin is the Cuban exile community of **Little Havana** (p113), strolling Calle Ocho and Máximo Gómez Park for chess and dominoes. But if anything, **Hialeah Park** (p118) is more Cuban than Little Havana.

Visit Miami Beach's **Normandy Isle** (p106) for a meet-and-greet with the city's South American contingent: Argentinians, Brazilians, Uruguayans, Colombians and more. Fix up your mojo with a *botanica* visit in **Little Haiti** (p111). After dark, of course, Miami sizzles with **Latin food** (p138) and spicy **nightlife** (p150).

Next, tramp out to **Key West** (p199), historically a major immigration point for Latin America that pulses with a distinctly Bahamian vibe. **Ybor City** (p407) in Tampa is less Latin than it once was, but its famous Cuban cigar district is a pungent reminder. In nearby St Petersburg, the **Salvador Dalí Museum** (p421) is surrealist Latin.

Finally, hit the button on the way-back machine and experience the original Spanish Florida in **St Augustine** (p361).



PLAY BALL!

Florida is home to two major-league baseball teams: the **Florida Marlins** (p158) in Miami and the **Tampa Bay Devil Rays** (p426), whose field is in St Petersburg. But in March and April, many pro teams hold their spring training games in Florida; these provide a much more relaxed, intimate atmosphere to watch the pros. Then, during summer, most of these stadiums host minor-league baseball, where you can see future big leaguers in action.

Roger Dean Stadium (p254) in Jupiter is home to minor-league affiliates of the Marlins and the St Louis Cardinals. **Jackie Robinson Ballpark** (p357) near Daytona Beach hosts the Chicago Cubs affiliate.

Around **Orlando** (p283), Atlanta Braves' spring training is at Disney's Wide World of Sports, for the Cleveland Indians at Chain of Lakes Park in Winter Haven, and the Houston Astros at Osceola County Stadium in Kissimmee.

The New York Yankees host spring training and minor-league games at **Legends Field** (p416) in Tampa; the field is modeled after the 'House that Ruth Built.' The Devil Rays play spring-training games at **Progress Energy Park** (p426) in St Petersburg.

In Fort Myers, the Boston Red Sox play at **City of Palms Park** (p446), and the Minnesota Twins play at **Lee County Sports Complex** (p446).

There's more, but that's certainly enough to...*play ball!*



THRILL RIDES & ROLLER COASTERS

Pretty much the whole point of Florida theme parks is to provide you with that three-second shot of adrenalin when the whole world goes whoooooosh. So where do you get the best bang for your buck?

Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando is not a mecca for pure thrill-seekers, but **Space Mountain** (p299) is a classic roller coaster that still delivers, and the **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror** (p302) is certainly one heart-stopping elevator ride.

Universal Orlando knows what you want: in Islands of Adventure, make for the **Incredible Hulk** (p324) and **Dueling Dragons** (p326), and do not miss the scare-tastic **Revenge of the Mummy** (p323) in Universal Studios.

Also in Orlando, SeaWorld rates five out of five screams with **Kraken** (p329), as does the 120ft free-fall of the **Skycoaster** (p272).

Busch Gardens (p418) represents for Tampa with the dive coaster SkeiKra and the looping, looping, looping Kumba.

Prefer speeding the old-fashioned way – in a car? Strap yourself into the **Richard Petty Driving Experience** (p356) in Daytona Beach and ride shotgun on the Daytona Speedway.

Want to rocket into space? Well, you can't do that, but the Kennedy Space Center mimics an astronaut's ultimate thrill ride in the **Shuttle Launch Simulator** (p337).

Finally, in Jacksonville, find out how Oz works his magic by taking a behind-the-scenes tour at the **Sally Corporation** (p374), maker of animatronics and 'dark rides.'



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