

The Panhandle



Gentle Southern charm, quiet bayous teeming with wildlife and roadhouses serving up red-hot blues may not be what most folks imagine when they think of Florida. But those are among the treasures you'll discover here, in the magnificent Panhandle, where country roads cut through thick, hushed forests and lead to charmingly historic downtowns filled with people who are truly sweet as pie.

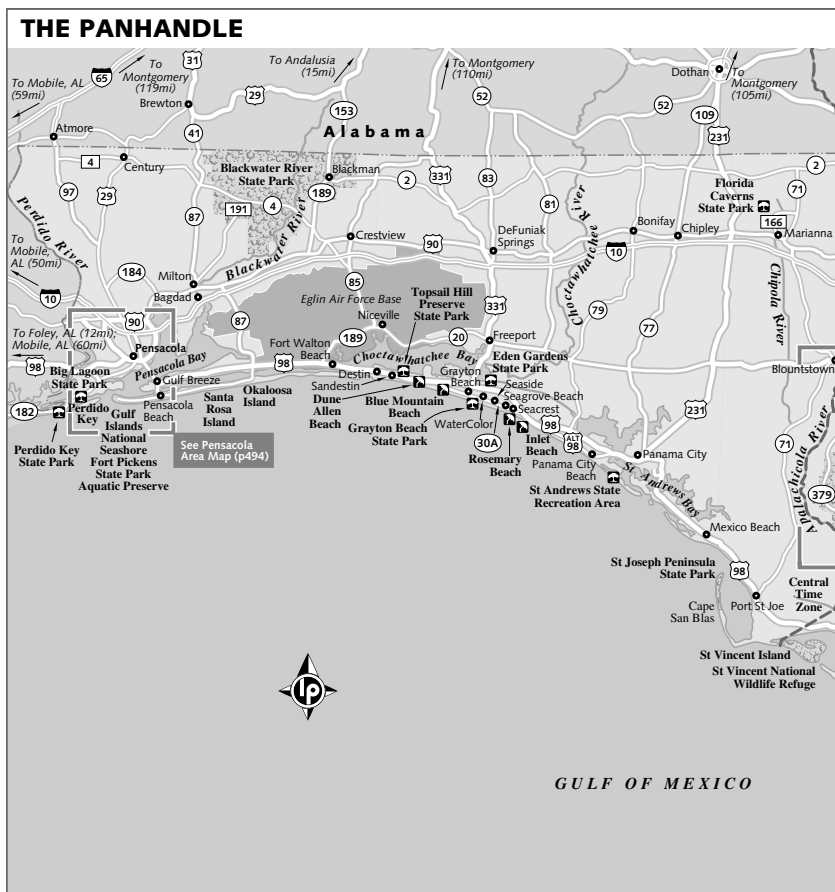
Add to all that the truly gorgeous Gulf Coast beaches – boasting fine, soft-as-sugar sand and crystalline waters whose luscious aqua glow will make you think you've landed in the Caribbean – and you've got a seriously fine region for exploring, no matter where your interests lie. Love nature? Head to one of the area's freshwater springs, like Steinhatchee, or to the forested hiking trails of Apalachicola National Forest, or to the bird-filled quietude of St George Island State Park. Prefer urban-style culture? Then hit Tallahassee or Pensacola, where you can easily fill days by gallery hopping, dining on treats from fresh oysters to fried green tomatoes, bopping your head to excellent live music or simply strolling the wonderfully mellow city streets. You could also just kick back in the sand with an ice-cold brew and watch the small waves lap the shore.

The Panhandle may be the much-traveled state's least-traveled region, but don't spend too much time wondering why; just be glad it's true, and revel in the fact that you won't have to share its myriad of charms with too many others.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Follow the road sign to find the magnificent clay creations at **George Griffin Pottery** (p476), at the end of the sandy, oak-canopied dirt road in Sopchoppy
- **Grayton Beach State Park** (p488), with windswept dunes and luminous gulf waters, has the region's most picturesque beach
- Get a wildlife thrill on a guided river cruise at **Wakulla Springs State Park** (p473), where mossy cypress trees and mangroves mingle with manatees, alligators and a slew of wading birds
- Enjoy the view from the top-floor lookout of Tallahassee's new **Florida State Capitol** (p465); the view spans the low-key city and then undisturbed green in all directions
- Discover the best blues at **Bradfordville Blues Club** (p470), just outside Tallahassee, down a torch-lit dirt road, with a blazing bonfire and sizzling music





History

The area that would become Tallahassee (meaning ‘abandoned fields’) was first inhabited by the American Indians of the Apalachee tribes, who cleared out and were felled by disease after the region was settled by Spaniards in 1539, with explorer Hernando De Soto leading the way. After the US Territory of Florida was founded in 1821, Tallahassee was chosen as the state capitol; a plantation economy soon developed – as did the city’s reckless reputation, with frequent knife and gun fights leading to the formation of the city’s police department. A rail line linked Tallahassee with the gulf port in 1837, making it the commercial center of the region. And, by the late 1800s, cotton estates were snapped up by wealthy northerners, who

turned them into hunting retreats. Eventually, environmentalists reacted against the man-versus-beast behavior of the hunters, which led to the establishment of groundbreaking ecological efforts in the region.

Climate

Unlike much of the rest of Florida, the Panhandle does have a distinct winter. From December to February temperatures drop to around the low 50s to low 60s (°F), though they still soar in summer, with temperatures averaging around the high 70s to mid-90s, on par with the rest of the state. The area can be prone to tornadoes, particularly in February and March, as well as hurricanes, which tend to hit the coast in late summer or early fall.