



Tampa Bay & Southwest Florida

If southwest Florida was a restaurant, it would specialize in tapas. Covering just 225 miles of coastline from Tampa to Naples, this region may be compact, but is far from lacking for diversity. Pearly sand dipped into turquoise-flecked seas, fiery red sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico, alligators, amusement parks, cigars, art and more than 100 barrier islands are just a few dishes on this eclectic menu.

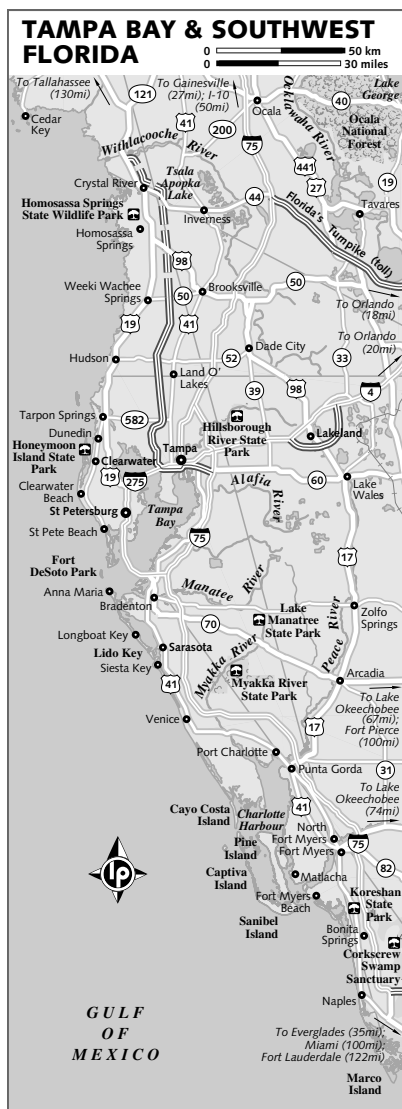
If you've come for the beach, you're in luck. There are plenty of choices. Venice trumps in the laid-back department. Here life involves kicking back at the shrimp shack and sipping a frozen cocktail in the sand. If you need posh, you need Naples. Considered one of the best beaches in the US, streets are strewn with million-dollar mansions, fine restaurants and chic shops. For a good party, pay Fort Myers or St Pete Beach a visit. The college crowd adores both. To get back to nature, go to Sanibel Island; a haven for birders, reclusive millionaires and shell collectors.

Don't fill up entirely on beaches, though, because the menu here extends well beyond surf and sand. Ride an adrenaline-pumping roller coaster at Busch Gardens. Roll your own cigars in Tampa's historic and happening Ybor City. Discover Dali's surreal world in slightly gritty St Petersburg, which competes with Ybor City for the best bar scene. Go cultural in artsy Sarasota, the original circus town, where you can learn the story behind the 'Greatest Show on Earth.' Or take a boat out to Cabbage Key to grab a cheeseburger in paradise, just as Jimmy Buffet did. Who knows? Perhaps this region will inspire you to pen a classic tune as well.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Look for alligators as you canoe down the river at **Myakka River State Park** (p442)
- Take in the casual south-Florida beach-town vibe at **Venice** (p441), which boasts great sand, pretty water and front-row seats to those famous ruby-red gulf sunsets
- Roll your own cigars in **Ybor City** (p407), a historic Tampa neighborhood that also hosts the city's best bar scene
- Mingle with the rich and famous in picture-perfect and posh **Naples** (p454), the chicest beach town around
- Camp out in **Cayo Costa State Park** (p450) – this gulf-island jewel is accessible only by boat, has pristine beaches, and frequent manatee-sightings offshore





History

This area's modern history began in the mid-1800s with the construction of the region's first highway, the Tamiami Trail, running between Tampa and Miami. During this time towns began to grow exponentially as the new highway brought in more settlers, and pushed more American Indians off their land.

Fort Myers became a nationally recognized winter resort after the 1898 construction of the Royal Palm Hotel. The rich, famous and legendary were quick to snap up surrounding property – Thomas Edison and Henry Ford both spent winter in private mansions here. Today, the money has moved down the road to neighboring Naples. This wealthy town features multimillion-dollar mansions, luxury shopping and more Rolls Royces and Ferraris than Honda on its palm-lined streets.

On August 13, 2004 the region, with Fort Myers and Sanibel taking especially hard hits, was damaged heavily by Hurricane Charley, a Category 4 storm that made landfall just north of Fort Myers. Hurricane Wilma clobbered the area the following year, with the majority of the damage centered on Naples this time.

Climate

It's hard to complain. Like the rest of South Florida, west-coast temperatures hover around the 65°F in the winter (November to March). Summertime (June to September) is downright steamy, the mercury pegs about 90°F and there's a high probability of afternoon thunderstorms but the ocean breezes help. Spring and fall, perfectly pleasant, lie somewhere in between.

National, State & Regional Parks

The Bay Area and southwest Florida do not lack green space. Camping and canoeing are prime at the Hillsborough River State Park (p417), near Tampa, while the enormous Myakka River State Park (p442), near Sarasota, excels in hiking and river-boat touring.

Southwest Florida supports a rich ecosystem which in turn supports vibrant and varied bird species. They're best appreciated at Sanibel's JN 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge (p452), while the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge (p460) supports a sweet colony of endangered manatees. These gentle creatures also gather at Lee County Manatee Park (p451).

For great state-run, natural beach parks, Lover's Key (p447), Caladesi Island (p430) and Cayo Costa Island (p450) are definitely a tough trio to top.

Information

The tourist industry is well oiled. Each town has an active chamber of commerce and a visible visitors bureau; details can be found