Northeast Florida

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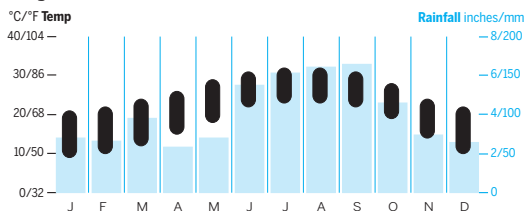
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Why Go?

Florida's already a diverse state in terms of geography and character, but the northeast truly takes things into multiple-personality-disorder territory. At the northeastern border, Amelia Island is a gracious Southern belle who will greet you with a glass of sweet tea on the porch of a Victorian B&B. Forty-five minutes south, Jacksonville is a macho banker type, all high-rises and steel-girded bridges. A stone's throw away resides cultured St Augustine, who can lecture you for hours about Spanish colonial–era architecture (but don't fear; she's got a wild pirate side as well). Then, of course, there's Daytona Beach, the proudly rednecky party king who just wants to whip his shirt off, down a beer and watch some Nascar.

If all those personalities are enough to give you whiplash, you can head inland for a slower pace: cute college towns and antiques villages, pristine springs, and miles of clover-green horse pastures.

When to Go
Daytona Beach

Mar & Apr Spring Break: an influx of booze-happy college students, especially in Daytona Beach.

Jun–Sep Summer is high season on the beaches; temps range from balmy to sweltering.

Mar–Jun & Nov–Dec When weather's cooler, prices rise in non-beach places like St Augustine.

ATLANTIC COAST

In 1902 speed catapulted Daytona into the national psyche when playboy race-car drivers Ransom Olds (of Oldsmobile fame) and Alexander Winston waged a high-profile race along the unusually hard-packed sandy shore, reaching an unheard of 57mph. The Florida East Coast Automobile Association was founded in 1903, and the Winter Speed Carnival (predecessor to today's Daytona 500) in 1904. For the next 30 years Daytona Beach was where speed records were made – and subsequently shattered. Stock-car racing came into vogue during the late 1930s; 'Race Weeks' packed beaches with fans. In 1947 Nascar was born here (see the boxed text below). In 1959, racing was relocated from the beach to the Daytona International Speedway.

Leaving 'The World's Most Famous Beach,' Daytona Beach, zoom north along Florida's Atlantic Coast to historic St Augustine, buzzing Jacksonville and charming Amelia Island, with plenty of picturesque islands, parks and places to explore en route.

Daytona Beach

♪ 386 / POP 65,000

Known for expansive beaches, '50s retro carnival attractions, leather-clad biker culture and Spring Break madness, Daytona Beach's strongest association, however, is with supercharged speed. As home to the Daytona 500, its name is indelibly linked with the ultra-Southern sport of Nascar racing.

Anything but a wallflower, Daytona Beach has an overflowing dance card: it hosts one of the last Spring Breaks on the Atlantic Coast (tamer now than during its halcyon days); its population quintuples during Speed Weeks; and as many as half a million bikers roar into town for motorcycle events in spring and fall. There's also a tame side: Daytona is also home to a gentrified downtown, quality cultural attractions and nesting sea turtles.

Somehow, the thought of the racetrack and souped-up autos everywhere inspires drivers to push the pedal to the metal. Police know this, of course, and quickly curtail any need for speed.

◎ Sights & Activities

Daytona International Speedway
RACETRACK

(☎800-748-7467; www.daytonaintlspeedway.com; 1801 W International Speedway Blvd; tickets from $15) This legendary 480-acre speedway boasts a more diverse race schedule than any other track in the world, hence its billing as the 'World Center of Racing.' Event ticket prices accelerate sharply for big races, but if nothing is going on, you can wander through the gift shop and into the grandstands for free.

Tram tours take you behind the scenes at the track and pits. The standard **Speedway Tour** (adult/child $15/10; ◷11:30am, 1:30pm, 3:30pm & 4pm) is half an hour long and hits the main highlights, while the hour-long **All-Access Tour** (adult/child $17/22; ◷hourly 10am-3pm) takes you to the driver's meeting room, the press box and other special areas. Both are first-come, first-served. Superfans

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NASCAR & THE AMERICAN SOUTH

During Prohibition, production of moonshine (corn liquor with a lightning-bolt kick) was integral to the Southern economy, and renegades with cars speedy enough to outrun cops handled distribution. During their time off, they raced each other; when Prohibition was repealed the races continued. The most alluring venue was Daytona's Beach St track, where driver Bill France began promoting 'Race Weeks' that attracted thousands.

The sport exploded, though some automotive enthusiasts dismissed it as rednecks racing cars any mechanic could build. France knew better and in 1947 set about transforming his obsession into a world-class sport. The result was Nascar, which succeeded beyond his wildest dreams: Nascar is now the most watched sport in America after football.

The appeal of Nascar makes sense when you understand that dumping money at cars doesn't buy victory; winning relies on strategic driving skills and knowledge (when to pit, for example, or how many tires to change). Beneath those colorful product endorsements, the cars are everyday autos that conform to strict regulations to ensure the driver and pit crew – *not* the car – are tested.