

welcome to Florida



Seaside Fantasy

Maybe there's no mystery to what makes the Florida peninsula so intoxicating. Beaches as fine and sweet as powdered sugar, warm teal waters, rustling mangroves: all conspire to melt our workaday selves. We come to Florida to be soothed, to let go – of worries and winter, of inhibitions and reality. For many, it's merely the desire for an indulgent beachy getaway of naps, swimming, seafood and rosy sunsets. Others seek the more excitable hedonism of South Beach, Spring Break and Key West. Still more hope to lose themselves within the perfected phantasmagorical realms of Walt Disney World and Orlando's theme parks. As for Ponce, he traipsed the peninsula seeking mermaids

and the legendary fountain of youth, and in a thousand and one ways, Florida still nurtures these alluring, ever-hopeful fantasies.

Sexy Swamps

Exaggeration comes naturally to Florida. Within its hot, seductive, semitropical wilderness, alligators prowl beside every waterway, egg-white herons strut through reedy ponds, lovable manatees winter in crystal springs and sea turtles nest in summer. Osprey and eagles, dolphins and mighty tarpon, flocks of roseate spoonbills, coral-reef forests, oceans of sawgrass: despite the best efforts of 21st-century humans, overwhelming portions of Florida remain untamed, sometimes disconcert-



Ever since Ponce de León, Florida has cast a sensual spell over travelers, and its surreal landscape, heavenly beaches and prehistoric beasts still quicken the pulse and inflame the imagination.

(left) The beach at sunrise, Fort Lauderdale (p190)
(below) An American alligator (p488)



ingly so. We come to Florida to experience this taste of wildness, to paddle so close to our toothsome Jurassic-era friends that our palms tingle. To meet loggerheads and manatees underwater, eye to eye. To look up and see a single precious jewel-like orchid clinging magically to the trunk of an ancient, moss-draped bald cypress.

Latin-Spiced Culture

Miami is one of America's great immigrant-rich cities, and its mix of Caribbean and Latin American cultures is led by its Cuban community, which long ago carved its own Spanish-speaking city within the city. These Latin flavors spice up everything: the dance floor, the kitchen, the cocktail glass,

the dress code. In Miami and throughout South Florida, this indelible influence has given the state a temperament to match its temperature: the semitropical peninsula is also a cultural transition zone straddling the hot southern latitudes and the cooler northern ones. Wealth and celebrity also play a role in South Florida's cultural life: preserving South Beach's art-deco confections and the grandiose palaces of Florida's railroad tycoons, and supporting a flourishing arts scene brimming with the bold and the beautiful.

In the end, Florida promises escape – whether into the Magic Kingdom, into the swamp, into status-drenched excess, or merely into the calm turquoise ocean that surrounds you on nearly every side.