



Understand Florida

FLORIDA TODAY.....454

The national housing crisis has sent the state's economy tumbling, and politics are as divided as ever.

HISTORY456

Florida's history is a veritable rogue's gallery of smugglers, pirates, conquistadors, tycoons, speculators and visionaries.

PEOPLE & CULTURE465

One of the nation's most diverse, immigrant-rich states is almost equal parts Old South and Nuevo Latino.

FINE ART & PINK FLAMINGOS470

Tacky, kitschy, bold, loud, lurid, surreal and often pink: Florida's arts are never less than entertaining.

A FLORIDA FEAST475

At last, Florida is using its vast bounty from land and sea for the greater culinary good of travelers everywhere.

FROM BOOTS TO BEACHES480

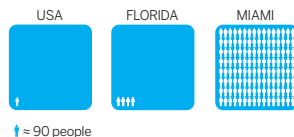
Florida provides epic outdoor adventures, none more important than the trek from towel to ocean.

SWAMP THING485

Florida's natural world is a rare, wondrous spectacle of bizarre landscapes and the often prehistoric creatures who inhabit them.



population per sq miles



Florida Today

House for Sale

Florida is a boom-and-bust place. People find something they can get rich with – oranges, real estate, tourism – and they ride it into the sky until nature, the stock market or their own exuberance sends them tumbling back to earth.

This truism is being keenly felt today as Florida tries to recover from a double whammy. First, there has been the national real-estate market collapse, which began in 2007 (sparked by banking's home-mortgage crisis). Among US states, Florida felt the effects first and hardest. As home prices tumbled, the construction industry tanked and growth essentially flatlined to its lowest point in 30 years. Foreclosures flooded the state, so that by 2010, 18% of Florida homes were vacant. Median home prices, meanwhile, tumbled to virtually half their 2006 value.

Without real estate, construction and population growth, Florida's economy has only one other main pillar: tourism. Yet this suffered a major blow following the April 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (the worst in US history). Even though only Panhandle beaches were touched by any oil, bad press and fear kept visitors away from Florida's entire Gulf Coast. Though impossible to calculate exactly, it's estimated Florida lost well over \$3 billion in tourism-related spending.

By 2011 all Florida's Gulf beaches were clean of tar balls, and the state was sending out an urgent message to you, dear reader: please come back! (For more, see p427.)

Also, while real estate, construction, tourism and growth were again showing a pulse by 2011, it was insufficient to make up the estimated \$3.6 billion shortfall in the state's \$70 billion 2011 budget. How to bridge that gap – whether solely through budget cuts or by a combination of cuts and tax hikes – divided Florida's politics along now-predictable lines.

- » Median home price 2006: \$257,800
- » Median home price 2010: \$143,400
- » Vacant homes 2010: 1.5 million
- » Unemployment rate 2010: 11.5%
- » Population growth 2006–07: +331,000
- » Population growth 2008–09: -56,736

Major Media

Miami Herald (www.miamiherald.com)

Orlando Sentinel (www.orlandosentinel.com)

St Petersburg Times (www.tampabay.com)

Tampa Tribune (www.tampatrib.com)

Florida Reads

Pilgrim in the Land of Alligators (Jeff Klittenberg) Profiles of wacky Floridians.

Salvaging the Real Florida (Bill Belleville) Moving nature essays of a fragile landscape.

Paradise Screwed (Carl Hi-aasen) *Miami Herald* columns of biting sarcasm and outrage.

The Orchid Thief (Susan Orlean) Yankee journalist loses her head in the swamp.

Weird Florida (Charlie Carlson) Too easy. Like shooting two-headed fish in a barrel.