Florida

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For sheer iconic box-ticking, you can’t do better than spending a week taking in Miami, the Everglades and the Florida Keys. First off, explore Miami for three solid days (more if you can). South Beach’s pastel art-deco hotels and hedonistic beach culture? Check. Cuban sandwiches, Haitian botanicas, modern art? Check. Charming the velvet ropes, Latin hip-hop, mojitos? Hey, we’re doing good.

Then take one day and visit the sunning alligators (check) of Everglades National Park. On the way, Homestead has prime Florida roadside attractions (Coral Castle, Robert Is Here – check and check!), and the Flamingo visitor center offers opportunities to kayak among the mangroves (check).

Now spend three days (or more) in the Florida Keys. Stop first in Key Largo, for Key lime pie, conch fritters and jaw-dropping coral reefs (check x 3). Enjoy tarpon fishing in Islamorada (check), beach napping at Bahia Honda State Park (check), and finally, hit Key West to ogle the Mallory Sq freak show (check) and raise a libation as the tangerine sun drops into an endless ocean – salut!
A1A: The Southern Atlantic Coast

Florida's southern Atlantic Coast is a symphony of beaches and barrier islands, of mangroves and sea turtles, of nostalgic Old Florida and nip-and-tucked celebrity Florida, of the wealthy and the you've-got-to-be-kidding-me obscenely rich. Three driving routes can be mixed and matched (I-95, Hwy 1 and A1A), but scenic, two-lane A1A knits the islands together and edges the sands as much as any road can.

A1A starts in Miami Beach, within the art-deco historic district. Naturally, you’ll want to spend three days or so soaking up all that Miami offers. Then, rent a convertible, don your Oakley sunglasses, and nest a Dior scarf around your neck: it’s time to road trip.

Whoops! There already? First stop is Fort Lauderdale. Preen along the promenade among the skating goddesses and be-thonged gay men, ride a romantic gondola in the canals, enjoy fine art and gourmet cuisine: it’s a suite of pleasures the Gold Coast specializes in.

After two or three days, stagger on. Pause for a quiet interlude on the gorgeous beaches of Boca Raton, then repeat your Lauderdale experience in Palm Beach. Ogle the uberwealthy as they glide between mansion and Bentley and beach, stop by the Flagler Museum to understand how this all got started, and each day decamp to West Palm Beach, the hipper, more happening sister city.

After several days, it’s time to detox. Heading north, the Treasure Coast is known for unspoiled nature, not condos and cosmopolitans. Stop first in Jupiter; among its pretty parks, don’t miss the seaside geyser at Blowing Rocks Preserve.

Even better, spend several days in Stuart. From here, you can kayak the Loxahatchee River, book a fishing charter, snorkel the reefs at St Lucie Inlet, and escape the crowds on nearby Hutchinson Island beaches.

If you only have two weeks, then you may have to skip the next offerings. At Fort Pierce, admire manatees in winter and snorkel a Spanish galleon. Surfers should pause at Sebastian Inlet State Park, and birders detour to the nation’s first national wildlife refuge, Pelican Island. We’ve come a long way from Miami, yes?
Many prefer Florida’s Gulf Coast: the beaches aren’t as built up, soporifically warm waters lap blindingly white sand, and the sun sets (rather than rises) over the sea. Plus, it’s easy to mix urban sophistication with seaside getaways and swampy adventures—just like around Miami, only even more family- (and budget-) friendly.

On this trip, spend your first three to four days in Tampa and St Petersburg. Stroll the museums and parks along Tampa’s sparkling Riverwalk, and spend a day enjoying historic Ybor City’s Spanish cuisine, cigars and nightclubs. St Pete offers similar city fun, but above all, don’t miss its Salvador Dalí Museum.

Now head west for the barrier islands. Take their full measure by spending one day on unspoiled Honeymoon and Caladesi Islands, then enjoy the hyper, activity-fueled atmosphere of St Pete Beach.

Next, drive down to Sarasota for three days. You’ll need that long to take in the magnificent Ringling Museum Complex, the orchid-rich Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, perhaps catch the opera and still allow plenty of time to build sandcastles on the amazing white-sand beaches of Siesta Key. If you have extra time, visit Myakka River State Park and kayak among the alligators.

Then skip down to Fort Myers for two days of regional exploring. Take the ferry to Cayo Costa Island for a beach of unforgettable solitude, or go the party route and hit the crowded strands of Fort Myers Beach.

You need to save at least two days for Sanibel Island. World famous for its shelling, it’s also a bike-friendly island stocked with great eats and wildlife-filled bays ripe for kayaking.

Finally, end with two to three days in Naples, the quintessence of Gulf Coast beach towns: upscale, artistic, and welcoming of every age demographic, with perhaps all of Florida’s most pristine city beach. You can eat and shop to your heart’s content, and no question: fit in a day trip to the Everglades. It’s easy—zip along the Tamiami Trail to Shark Valley, and take a tram tour or bike ride among the sawgrass plains and sometimes countless alligators.
North Florida Backroads

North Florida appeals to outdoor-lovers who prefer that days be filled with forests and springs and rivers and fishing, and that evenings be spent reliving these adventures around campfires.

Fly into Jacksonville, and spend the first day embracing the Atlantic Ocean on Jax beaches. For a full dose of Florida’s Southern personality, have dinner at Clark’s Fish Camp and see a show at Freebird Live.

Drive south to small-town-idyllic DeLand. Explore Blue Spring State Park, which attracts manatees in winter, or De Leon Springs State Park and its crystal-springs kayaking. The big daddy down here is the Ocala National Forest, with epic hiking and biking through Florida’s fascinating limestone karst terrain.

Next, scoot over to Ocala. Here, the Old Florida glass-bottom boat tours of Silver Springs and high-revving dragster energy of the Don Garlits Museums beckon. Then go north to Micanopy, ‘the town that time forgot,’ for more eerie hikes at Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park and a taste of Cracker history at Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park.

For the next two to four days, string together these outdoor highlights: drive to Cedar Key, where you can kayak among seabirds and unspoiled mangrove-fringed islands; further north is Ichetucknee Springs State Park, which warrants a half-day of tubing.

Save at least a day for a river trip along the Suwannee River, a muddy-brown moss-draped meander that’s North Florida all over. Reserve ahead for a multiday river-camping trip, and visit the Stephen Foster State Folk Cultural Center.

Nothing personal, but it’s clean-up time. Drive back to Jacksonville, and spend a final day or three on Amelia Island. Spoil yourself with a Victorian B&B and some gourmet seafood.
**Mickey to Manatees**

The kids want Disney, but Mom and Dad want beach time, a good meal and some culture. Oh, and you’ve only got a week.

Presto change-o – here you go! For the first three or four days, stay in **Orlando**. Rather than give in entirely to Walt Disney World, spend two days there and another day at Universal Orlando Resort, particularly if you’ve read any of those *Harry Potter* books.

For the next three or four days, hit **Tampa**. On one day in **Tampa** choose between its tremendous zoo and aquarium and its fantastic museums, then end in historic Ybor City, for Spanish cuisine with a side of flamenco. In **St Petersburg**, even kids will find the Salvador Dali Museum intriguing. Then squeeze in a day trip north for the mermaid shows at Weeki Wachee and the manatees of **Homesossa Springs**. Everybody’s happy!

**City to Seashells**

Geez, you really don’t want to miss sexy, high-energy Miami, but if you don’t get some sandy, leave-me-alone-with-my-novel downtime you’ll never make it when you return to work in [insert name of major metropolis here]. Oh, and you’ve only got a week.

Presto change-o – here you go! Spend the first three days in **Miami** and have a party. Tour the art-deco-district hotels, enjoy the sophisticated art museums, shop for tailored shirts and racy designer dresses, and prance past the velvet ropes to celebrity-spot and dance all night to Latin hip-hop.

Next, spend one day peering at alligators through dark sunglasses in the **Everglades**, just so everyone back home won’t be all ‘What? You went to Florida and didn’t even go?’

For the last three days, chill on **Sanibel Island**. Get a hotel on a private stretch of beach and do nothing but sun, sleep, read and collect handfuls of beautiful seashells as you kick along. Maybe take a bike ride and have a gourmet dinner. But each night, dig your toes in the sand and enjoy the setting sun in romantic solitude.
Let's say you want the warmest weather but the fewest people. Hello, September! This trip is good anytime, but Florida's north is particularly sweet as school starts and summer fades.

Fly into Jacksonville, but don't hesitate: go straight to Amelia Island for several days of romantic B&Bs, luscious food and pretty sand. The good vibes continue as you kayak and explore the undeveloped beaches of Talbot and Fort George Islands, just south.

Then spend two to three days in St Augustine. America's oldest city preserves its heritage very well, with plenty of pirate tales enlivening the Spanish forts and basilicas.

When you've had enough of fine dining and costumed reenactors, spend a few days in Daytona Beach. High-octane thrills include the Speedway as well as the activity-filled beach scene. Perhaps you will even spy nesting sea turtles.

At this point, you've filled a week, but a few more days means more kayaking in Canaveral National Seashore, and perhaps a day or two in the theme parks of Orlando. Where are the kids when they're not in school? In line.

Sure, Florida's Panhandle gets rowdy, yet there's family-friendly warmth and unexpected sophistication along with its spectacular bone-white beaches.

Start your tour with a few days in Pensacola. Relax on the beaches of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, and enjoy Pensacola's historic village and its naval aviation history. The Blue Angels may even put on a show.

Spend another two days in the tourist towns of Destin and Fort Walton Beach, but don't miss the world-class sand of Grayton Beach State Park. If you have kids, a day among the hyperactive boardwalk amusements of Panama City Beach is virtually a must.

Afterward, shuffle along to the secluded wilderness of Cape San Blas and quaint Apalachicola, whose romantic historic village is perhaps not what you were expecting. The local specialty? Delectably fresh oysters.

St George and St Vincent Islands provide more secluded getaways, but if time is short, spend your last day around Tallahassee. Unwind and get a little rowdy in some local live-music joints.

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OUR WRITERS

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Southeast Florida, The Space Coast, Tampa Bay & Southwest Florida Born in Kenya, based in London and married to a man who’s lived half his life on Gulf Coast islands, Paula has spent an awful lot of days at the beach. Who can complain? When not squabbling over shells or the merits of grouper sandwiches with her second half, she’s authored over 30 guidebooks for Lonely Planet, including contributions to New England, USA and Eastern USA. When not researching Lonely Planet guidebooks, Paula writes about culture, travel and food for a variety of websites and travel publications. You can find her tweeting @paula6hardy.

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