

Tampa Bay & Southwest Florida

Includes ➔

Tampa.....	369
St Petersburg	381
St Pete Beach & Barrier Island Beaches.....	389
Clearwater & Clearwater Beach..	393
Sarasota.....	397
Charlotte Harbor & Barrier Islands ...	408
Fort Myers.....	411
Sanibel & Captiva Islands....	417
Naples	420

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Indigenous (p401)
- ➔ Turtle Club (p424)
- ➔ Ristorante San Marco (p408)
- ➔ Columbia Restaurant (p374)
- ➔ Peg's Cantina (p390)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Dickens House (p385)
- ➔ Gasparilla Inn (p409)
- ➔ Inn at the Beach (p408)
- ➔ Hotel Ranola (p401)
- ➔ Tween Waters Inn (p419)

Why Go?

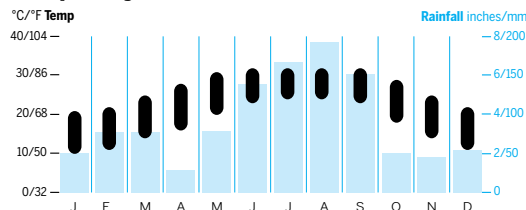
To drive southwest Florida's Gulf Coast is to enter an impressionistic watercolor painting: first, there is the dazzling white quartz sand of its barrier-island beaches, whose turquoise waters darken to silver-mantled indigo as the fiery sun lowers to the horizon. Later, seen from the causeways, those same islands become a phosphorescent smear beneath the inky black night sky.

The Gulf Coast's beauty is its main attraction, but variety is a close second: from Tampa to St Petersburg to Sarasota to Naples, there is urban sophistication and exquisite cuisine. There are secluded islands, family-friendly resorts and Spring Break-style parties.

Here, Salvador Dalí's melting canvases, Ringling's Venetian Gothic palace and Chihuly's tentacled glass sculptures fit perfectly – all are bright entertainments to match wintering manatees, open-mouthed alligators and the peacock-colored, sequined costumes of twirling trapeze artists.

When to Go

Tampa Bay



Mid-Feb–mid-Apr
Peak season, ideal weather, high prices. Best for camping, hiking, manatees.

Jun-Sep Hot and rainy. Low season means beach bargains; some places close.

Nov-Dec Snowbirds arrive. Weather cools and dries; great off-season prices.

History

First established as Fort Brooke in 1824, Tampa was little more than a yellow-fever-plagued minor port for most of its early history. Then phosphate was discovered and Tampa's fortunes changed. In 1883, Henry B Plant built a railroad connecting Tampa with Jacksonville. And in 1886, the first in a wave of cigar manufacturers relocated from Key West to Tampa, in large part because of the easy railroad transportation north.

As in Florida generally, railroads led to increased tourism by northern 'snowbirds.' In 1885, inventor Thomas Alva Edison became one of the most famous, building a winter home in Fort Myers. In another budding winter resort, Sarasota, John Ringling located the winter home of his traveling circus in 1911. By the time the Tamiami Trail was completed in 1928 – connecting the region to Miami – Tampa and neighboring St Petersburg were Florida's third- and fourth-largest cities, respectively.

Then the Great Depression hit. Undermined by the advent of machine-rolled cigarettes, the cigar industry steadily declined (eventually folding entirely with the later 1959 US embargo of Cuba). After WWII, however, GIs who'd served at Tampa's MacDill Field returned to settle down, and new arrivals flooded the region again, with the Tampa Bay area topping 3 million residents in 2007.

Since then, following the 2007–09 global recession, the Tampa Bay area and southwest coast have been defined by a slow-down. Lee County experienced the highest rate of foreclosures in the country and in 2012 the annual Floridian wage declined to 88% of the national average. As elsewhere in the Sunshine State, creating a long-term, sustainable recovery based on economic diversification into health, IT and manufacturing has become the region's mantra.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tampa International Airport (p516) is the main regional hub, 9 miles west of downtown Tampa. Smaller international airports are St Petersburg-Clearwater (p388), Sarasota-Bradenton (p403) and Southwest Florida International (p415) in Fort Myers.

BUS

Greyhound (p379) buses serve the main towns in the region.

CAR

Tampa is 84 miles due west of Orlando via I-4, and 255 miles west of Miami; take I-95 north to I-75 and head west across 'Alligator Alley' to Naples, then continue north on I-75.

TAMPA BAY AREA

Surrounding the gorgeous deep-water Tampa Bay are two major cities and a seemingly endless expanse of urban-suburban sprawl – forming the state's second-largest metropolitan area – which along the Gulf Coast is edged by some 35 miles of barrier-island beaches. Not many places in the country offer as much big-city sophistication mere minutes from so much dazzling sand. Yet since Miami is one of those that does, the bay area is rarely given its due. Both Tampa and St Petersburg burble with cultural and culinary excitement as they spruce up their historic districts and polish their arts institutions. The range of adventures on offer – from fine arts to world-class aquariums to hot nightclubs and dolphin cruises – make this a compelling region to explore.

Tampa

 813 / POP 335,700

Sprawling and businesslike, Tampa lacks the iconic downtown skyline and cultural buzz that gives Miami its distinct persona. Therefore, it's surprising to learn that so many new museums, parks and gourmet South Tampa restaurants have popped up recently that the city is dangerously close to becoming stylish. In the heart of downtown, the revitalized Riverwalk along the Hillsborough River glitters with contemporary architecture and scenic green spaces. Plus, between the zoo, the aquarium, the children's museums and the theme parks, families have enough top-shelf entertainment to last a week. By evening Ybor City's streets transform into Southwest Florida's hottest bar and nightclub scene.

Sights

Downtown, the attractive [Tampa Riverwalk](http://www.thetampariverwalk.com) (www.thetampariverwalk.com) connects most sights. Located along the Hillsborough River, this undulating green space, with playgrounds and restrooms, makes a pretty walk from the museums edging Curtis Hixon Park, past the Convention Center, to the aquarium