

# Understand Florida

## **FLORIDA TODAY.....464**

Climate change and political division loom large in Florida, even as her population surges with immigrants and transplants.

## **HISTORY .....466**

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

## **PEOPLE & CULTURE .....476**

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

## **THE ARTS .....481**

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

## **FOOD & DRINK.....486**

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

## **OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES .....491**

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

## **LANDSCAPES & WILDLIFE.....497**

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

# Florida Today

Florida is undergoing seismic shifts in demographics, state identity, and – if the environment doesn't improve – state topography, thanks to immigration, economic recession and resurgence, and climate change. These developments, and how the state will adapt and respond to them, will shape life in the Sunshine State for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, the state is constantly re-evaluating and evolving her tourism infrastructure to accommodate an ever-increasing amount of visitors.

## Best on Film

**Scarface** (1983) Al Pacino.

**The Birdcage** (1996) Robin Williams and Nathan Lane as gay lovers.

**Sunshine State** (2002) Florida developers vs mermaid.

**Adaptation** (2002) Surreal adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*.

## Best in Print

**Pilgrim in the Land of Alligators**

(Jeff Klinenberg) Profiles of wacky Floridians.

**Salvaging the Real Florida** (Bill

Belleville) Moving nature essays on a fragile landscape.

**Paradise Screwed** (Carl Hiaasen) *Miami Herald* columns of biting sarcasm and outrage.

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

## Wild Etiquette

**Wildflowers** Never pick them, especially orchids.

**Beaches** Never approach nesting sea turtles or hatchling runs. Adhere to lights-out policies.

**Coral reefs** Don't touch them when snorkeling or diving.

**Dolphins & manatees** Admire but don't touch, chase or feed them.

**Alligators** Never feed – they bite.

## Preserving the Peninsula

One of Florida's deepest cultural fault lines runs across the debate over development versus conservation. For years, development held sway in the state, which has long had one of the most robust housing markets in the country, and not coincidentally, one of the fastest growing populations. As of this writing, Florida was poised to overtake New York as the third-most populous state in the country.

All of those people need places to live, and in Florida, the need for housing and businesses has traditionally taken precedence over preservation. But a new check on growth has emerged that even some of the most gung-ho developers are noting. In the environmental debates of the 21st century, low-lying Florida is on the ecological frontlines of the climate change and water table debates.

Florida is a largely below-sea-level peninsula, and the ocean is rising even as the peninsula is crumbling. The culprits behind the crumble are artificial canals and waterways dredged in the early 20th century. Those public works directed water away from the Everglades and the South Florida aquifer, eroding the wetlands and depleting freshwater reserves. State leaders seem to have recognized how untenable the situation is, and as of the time of research, it seems that the Florida legislature may have the political will to redirect the natural flow of run-off water from Lake Okeechobee.

While the interior of the state is trying to re-establish a base of water, coastal areas are trying to ward water away. Rising sea levels can be traced to climate change; rains in Miami that would have been an afterthought a decade ago are now flooding main thoroughfares. Local governments are moving forward with climate change plans to deter the worst fallout of a potential ecological disaster.