

# Understand Florida

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Political allegiances and climate change awareness continue to deeply divide the Sunshine State.

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

## **PEOPLE & CULTURE .....496**

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

## **THE ARTS .....501**

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

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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 adapts and responds to them, will shape life in the Sunshine State for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, the state is constantly re-evaluating and evolving its tourism infrastructure to accommodate an ever-increasing number of visitors.

## Best on Film

**Scarface** (1983) Al Pacino finds the American Dream. Sort of.

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

**There's Something about Mary** (1998) A Miami-set comedy of errors.

**Key Largo** (1948) A classic of Sunshine State noir.

## Best in Print

**Pilgrim in the Land of Alligators** (Jeff Klinkenberg; 2008) Profiles of wacky Floridians.

**Salvaging the Real Florida** (Bill Belleville; 2011) Moving nature essays on a fragile landscape.

**Paradise Screwed** (Carl Hiaasen; 2001) *Miami Herald* columns of biting sarcasm and outrage.

**Weird Florida** (Charlie Carlson; 2005) Too easy. Like shooting two-headed fish in a barrel.

## 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 – said population is projected to double in the period from 2006 to 2060. As of writing, Florida is just behind 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 controversies of the 21st century, low-lying Florida is on the ecological front lines of both the climate-change and water-table debates.

Florida is a peninsula largely below sea level, 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. In the meantime, interior freshwater sources are increasingly under pressure from runaway development, which has led to high levels of nutrients – and subsequent blooms of toxic algae – in lakes including Lake Okeechobee.

While the interior of the state is trying to clean its water sources, 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