

From Havana to
Panacea, discover
the quirky charm on
the north side of the
Sunshine State.



THE
The Florida

Living in Florida means you don't have to leave the state to enjoy a holiday in a whole different environment. From the Panhandle's southern accent and the classic, Old-Florida charm of the Sun Coast to the little-known world of Central Florida, the state has a lifetime of great getaways—close to home.

BY JUDY DIEDWARDO

The Emerald Coast

FLORIDA'S PANHANDLE

From Pensacola's bleached white beaches on the state's westernmost tip to the towering cypress trees of Tallahassee and Apalachicola National Forest, this is the Florida you may have heard about but never had enough reason to pack up the Explorer and see for yourself.

The Southern hospitality alone is worth the trip. Here, people refer to women as "ma'am" and everybody seems to be on the honor system: When I fueled up at a Chevron self-serve along Route 98 in the town of Perry, the attendant had to ask *me* how much money I owed *him*.

If your idea of a great getaway comes with a waterfront view, the Emerald Coast towns of Destin or Fort Walton Beach should be your first stop. Whether it's the entire family or just the two of you, the 24-mile, palm tree-fringed beachfront boasts a variety of accommodations along the shimmering Gulf of Mexico. And epicureans will be

happy to know that the Panhandle is legendary for its seafood—from freshly caught flounder, grouper and stone crab to Apalachicola oysters named for the township where they are gathered.

Be sure to budget time for the lovely town of Seaside—the award-winning, 80-acre model of "new urbanism"—more than 300 pastel-colored cottages with white-picket fences and wide, wrap-around porches. Once nothing more than sea oats and pine scrub, this Gulfside tract of land, about 20 miles from Panama City and Destin, was created by owner Robert Davis and designers Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk to pay homage to a simpler time. Today, gourmet restaurants, art galleries, boutiques and frequent festivals make Seaside a great place to play, relax or simply get lost.

For a taste of Old Florida that you won't find elsewhere in the state, head to the 2,888-acre Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State



WHERE TO EAT

ANGELO'S SEAFOOD RESTAURANT, Panacea, 850/984-5168. Third-generation landmark restaurant, near Wakulla Springs on the Apalachee Bay. Considered one of the Panhandle's best.

SHARKY'S BEACH CLUB AND RESTAURANT, Panama City Beach, 904/235-3882. Ideal for families, with something for everyone, including the region's legendary seafood.

WHERE TO STAY

HERLONG MANSION BED-AND-BREAKFAST, Micanopy, 800/437-5664. Rates from \$65. Built in 1845, this two-story, mid-Victorian house is surrounded by a lovely garden and statuesque oak and pecan trees, and features leaded glass windows, 10 fireplaces, 12-foot ceilings and inlaid oak floors. Choose from suites, rooms or cottages. (Word to the wise: Call in advance for cottages; there are only two.)

SEASIDE COTTAGE RENTAL AGENCY, Seaside, 800/277-8696. Rates from \$145; \$229 for cottages. Classic beachside cottages, streetside townhouses and motor courts—many with wrap-around verandahs, porch swings and rockers.

STEINHATCHEE LANDING, Steinhatchee, 352/498-3513. Rates from \$105. A recreated 1890s Victorian village, this distinctive 25-acre resort combines ambiance of the past with modern amenities. Choose from houses, townhouses, condominiums and rooms—some with wood stoves, whirlpools, river views or private docks.

WAKULLA SPRINGS LODGE, Wakulla Springs, 850/224-5950. Rates from \$65. The absence of televisions in this landmark lodge, within the Wakulla Springs Sanctuary, makes this one of the Panhandle's most romantic spots.



Pompano Joe's
Ft. Walton Beach

Park and Wildlife Sanctuary, about 17 miles south of Tallahassee. There, beneath 250-year-old cypress trees, you'll see what paleontologists and archeologists have been buzzing about since 1850, when mastodon bones were found in Wakulla Springs. In later years, the remains of at least nine other Ice Age mammals were discovered up to 100 feet below the spring's surface.

Mastodon or not, this is no ordinary spring. Wakulla Springs is believed to be the largest and deepest freshwater spring in the world. Researchers have explored more than a mile of the main cave, and the end appears nowhere in sight. While its source is unknown, the spring is part of the 82,000-square-mile Floridian Aquifer, a mass of water-bearing limestone from which more than 300 other springs arise. At Wakulla Springs, the limestone is even more porous, and water pumps out at a rate of 600,000 gallons per minute. (That's the entire daily water supply for the city of Tallahassee, which has a population of 200,000.)

Visitors stay at the park's Spanish-style lodge, built in 1937 by Edward Ball, who purchased the springs in the late '30s. While television sets have never been allowed on the grounds of Ball's oasis, Hollywood directors have been greeted with open arms. Among the films produced here were portions of "Creature From the Black Lagoon," several "Tarzan" episodes, as well as scenes from "Airport 77."

Nearby Apalachicola National Forest is an ideal side trip, with its towering cypress trees and fragrant pine forest—and more of the Panhandle's unforgettable hospitality. Occupying more than half a million acres to the south and west of Tallahassee, the park offers more than 60 miles of hiking, as well as canoeing on the rivers and creeks that wind throughout this pristine habitat.

For those who thrive on less rural stimulation, Tallahassee is ideal for walking, shopping and sightseeing through the state capital's stunning landscapes of moss-draped oaks and historic mansions.

Be sure to allow extra time to explore the northern Gulf Coast towns, where doors still remain unlocked and deals are sealed with a handshake, where live entertainment is a porch-side, rocking-

WHAT TO DO

CHAUTAUQUA WINERY, De Funiak Springs, 904/892-5887. Between Tallahassee and Pensacola, Florida's largest winery opened in 1990 and is known for its native grape muscadine wine, blueberry wine, Mimosa wine (made from Florida orange juice and white wine that's slightly carbonated) and an Emerald Coast Pilsner. Free tours and wine tastings daily.

EDWARD BALL WAKULLA SPRINGS STATE PARK, Wakulla Springs, 904/922-3640. Home to what's believed to be the world's deepest and largest spring. The park features swimming, glass-bottom boat rides and river cruises.

EMERALD QUEEN PADDLE-WHEEL BOAT, Destin/Fort Walton Beach, 850/837-2930. The perfect moonlit excursion for a romantic evening of tandem stargazing and relaxation.

GULFARIUM, Fort Walton, 904/244-5169. The second-oldest marine show/aquarium in the world features dolphin shows and a 10,000-gallon tank with alligator gars, stingrays, sharks and colorful tropical fish.

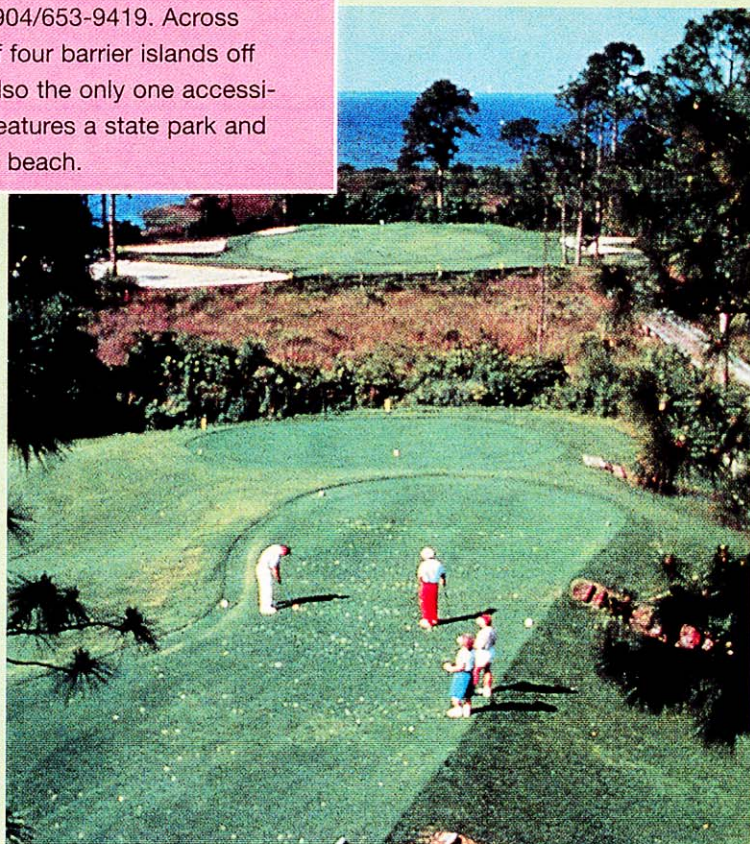
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NAVAL AVIATION, Pensacola Naval Air Station, 904/452-3604. One of the three largest air-and-space museums in the world, this was the country's first Naval air station. The 250,000 square feet of museum space packs in more than 100 Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard aircraft, including the first F-14 Tomcat, the kind flown in the movie "Top Gun."

ST. GEORGE ISLAND, 904/653-9419. Across Apalachicola Bay, the largest of four barrier islands off Franklin County's coastline is also the only one accessible by automobile. The island features a state park and nearly 2,000 acres of unspoiled beach.

chair conversation with strangers who instantly become friends.

North of Tallahassee, along the Georgia border in Gasden County, the former tobacco town of Havana has one of the largest concentrations of antique shops in the state—and preservationists have worked double-duty restoring Havana to its former charm.

The romanticism of the Old South comes to life most vividly in nearby Steinhatchee, a sleepy fishing village between Tallahassee and Gainesville, where cottages and inns boast 19th-century Florida architecture. Shopping is available in the nearby town of Micanopy, near the home of *The Yearling* author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Antique buffs, especially, will find plenty to get excited about: A stroll down Micanopy's shady streets leads past shops featuring everything from vintage collectibles to exquisite hand-crafted goods. In case you get the urge for an extended stay, there are plenty of charming B&Bs in this extraordinary little town.



The Sun

C O A S T

TAMPA, ST. PETERSBURG, SARASOTA



Ever since Henry Flagler opened Florida's gateway to tourism, the west coast has been known as the quieter alternative to its noisy and crowded sister coast to the east.

But quiet doesn't mean boring.

The Sun Coast, with its treasure trove of lovely islands and charming little towns, knows how to party like the rest of us. They just do it with less neon.

Built on high bluffs midway down Florida's west coast, Clearwater stands vigil over the Intracoastal Waterway and the Gulf of Mexico. It has the awards to prove that its beaches are some of the best in the country—as if the miles of talcum-soft sand weren't evidence enough.

Clearwater is one of Florida's preferred vacation spots for families, singles and honeymooners alike. From building sand castles to strolling along a remote expanse of beach, Clearwater appears to have it all. Sailing, Windsurfing and fishing are as readily available as volleyball, in-line skating and long walks to view the famous sunsets over the Gulf.

While Key Westers celebrate the end of the day at Mallory Square, Clearwater bids the day farewell at Pier 60. The waterfront is transformed into a street festival, from two hours before sunset until two hours after sunset. Local artists sell their wares while street jugglers, clowns and

magicians perform. Make no mistake: This is nothing like the debauchery of Key West—it's more like Gilligan's Island on laughing gas. In other words, it's safe to bring the kids.

For more hardcore nightlife, you're better off in nearby Tampa, where a full menu of cultural—and not-so-cultural—offerings is at your fingertips. If you've been there already, try a side trip to one of the west coast's up-and-coming hot spots: Ybor City. Set amid historic buildings with Spanish architecture, antique street lamps and wrought-iron balconies, this 110-block collection of bustling cafes and nightclubs looks like a Hollywood set of old Havana.

If sun and surf are all you're really after, pack up the salsa CDs and head directly to St. Petersburg. This seaside town, says the *Guinness Book of World Records*, holds the record for the longest run of consecutive sunny days (768 days from February 9, 1967 to March 17, 1969)—more sunshine than Honolulu. When you get



Harbor Island,
Tampa



tired of sunbathing, reapply your sunscreen and take a hike: St. Petersburg is blessed with some of the west coast's longest expanses of walkable beachfront.

About 30 miles north of Clearwater is Weeki Wachee Springs, popularized by an ex-Navy frogman, who purchased the spring, built the first underwater theater and, in 1947, presented the first live, underwater mermaid show to the public.

The year-round 72.4-degree water made the Weeki Wachee River a popular swimming and picnic area in the early 1900s. However, half a century later, it was the mermaid shows—incredible feats of breath-holding and choreography—that drew record crowds. Sure it's a little hokey, but it shouldn't be missed.

WHERE TO STAY

DON CESAR BEACH RESORT & SPA, St. Petersburg Beach, 800/282-1116. Rates from \$215. Florida's legendary Pink Palace is also one of the west coast's most respected full-service resorts. Features stellar ocean views and beach access as well as a state-of-the-art spa and award-winning gourmet restaurants.

HYATT REGENCY WESTSHORE, Tampa, 800/233-1234. Rates from \$179. One of the city's best hotels, featuring 397 rooms and suites and 48 cottages and villas.

HYATT SARASOTA, Sarasota, 800/233-1234. Rates from \$175. A favorite hotel among guests who enjoy proximity to the adjacent marina and beaches.

RENAISSANCE VINOY RESORT, St. Petersburg Beach, 800/468-3571. Rates from \$239. A four-star landmark listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the grand Vinoy draws an international clientele. The recently restored 1925 hotel features 360 rooms and suites, some with terraces and whirlpools, and five restaurants.

SADDLEBROOK RESORT, Wesley Chapel, 800/729-8383. Rates from \$149. Five hundred deliciously manicured acres are home to the world-renown Harry Hopman Tennis Program, the Arnold Palmer Golf Academy and a 7,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art spa. Features 790 rooms and efficiencies with lakeside and golf-course views.

WHAT TO DO

BUSCH GARDENS, Tampa Bay, 813/987-5171. Stomach-churning roller coasters, live entertainment and an impressive zoo help fill more than 300 acres of amusement park.

FLORIDA AQUARIUM, Tampa, 813/273-4000. An \$84 million, three-story, 4.3-acre aquarium—one of the nation's largest.

JOHN AND MABLE RINGLING MUSEUM OF ART, Sarasota, 941/355-5101. A major attraction with superb old masterpieces and a fine contemporary collection.

SALVADOR DALI MUSEUM, St. Petersburg, 813/823-3767. Houses the most comprehensive collection of the artist's works outside Spain.

SUNSET CELEBRATION, Pier 60, Clearwater Beach, 813/449-1036. One of the most romantic places for sunset-watching in the area.

WEEKI WACHEE SPRINGS, Spring Hill, 800/678-9335. Home of the famous mermaid shows.

YBOR CITY STATE MUSEUM, Ybor City, 813/247-6323. A glimpse at the city's former cigar industry and other influences on the Tampa area.

WHERE TO EAT

BERN'S STEAK HOUSE, Tampa, 813/251-2421. Seven rooms for dining, plus a dessert lounge, have made this one of the city's premier eateries.

COLUMBIA RESTAURANT, Ybor City, 813/248-4961. Cuban-Spanish food, for which diners sometimes wait up to an hour in line.

MARITANA GRILLE, at the Don CeSar Resort, St. Petersburg Beach, 813/360-1881. An award-winning restaurant featuring inventive Continental cuisine.

OYSTERCATCHERS, Tampa, 813/281-9116. Known for its expansive menu, including fabulous seafood.

The Weeki Wachee River, which flows 12 miles through the Florida wilderness to the Gulf of Mexico, features a 100-foot-wide spring that has been explored to depths of 150 feet and probed to 500 feet of passage. Yet its bottom has yet to be found.

Heading south is the affluent town of Sarasota—a haven for artists, musicians, composers and writers, as well as arts patrons. Highbrow travelers will fall in love with Sarasota's Downtown Cultural District, which contains the Sarasota Opera House, Sarasota Ballet and numerous theaters and nightclubs—all within walking distance of excellent restaurants and art galleries.

Daylight reveals the sparkling, blue-green water and Sarasota County's miles of beautiful beaches, where swimming, beach-combing and sun-worshipping are all considered legitimate sports. Golf enthusiasts will find more than two dozen great courses to play—while tennis fans head to the plentiful courts, many lighted for night play.

The other Central

F L O R I D A

ORLANDO, OCALA, SILVER SPRINGS

If Mickey and Friends are the only images that come to mind when you think of Florida's central region, you're in for a delightful surprise. Gas up the car, load the picnic basket and head north toward Orlando. But keep going. Ocala and its surrounding communities are some of the prettiest in the Sunshine State—full of rolling hills and picturesque paddocks.

It's hard to believe Ocala—one of the nation's prime thoroughbred horse-breeding areas—is only 75 miles from Orlando. Not only is Ocala a great way to see some of Florida's rich farmlands, it's also a great introduction for first-time riders—and an adventure for seasoned equestrians.

Central Florida also has dozens of state parks and more than 1,200 lakes for swimming, boating and fishing. Within the Ocala National Forest alone—the oldest national forest east of the Mississippi—there are 36,000 acres of spring-fed lakes.

There's a bit of Hollywood history here as well. Six original "Tarzan" episodes were shot at nearby Silver Springs in the 1930s and '40s, as well as "The Yearling," scenes from "Creature from the Black Lagoon" and more than 100 episodes of the television series "Sea Hunt."

Picturesque Alexander Springs has the greatest flow of any natural spring on U.S. government land, forming one large, deep pool that's open to swimmers, snorkelers and divers. And the year-round, 72-degree water is always refreshing.

Nearby Juniper Springs is one of the oldest, best-known, national-forest recreation areas in the eastern United States. Built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, it has always been a popular place to swim, snorkel and camp. The seven-mile canoe trail formed by Juniper Springs and nearby Fern Hammock Springs is one of the clearest streams in Florida, flowing through semi-tropical wilderness not found in any other national forest in the continental United States.

To make your emergence back to civilization a gentle one, visit the town of Cassadega—a weird, psychic mecca and a major tourist attraction. A pretty, hour-long ride west of Daytona, Cassadega is home to fortunetellers, tarot-card readers and mystics, who are eager to read everything from the palms of your hands to tea leaves.





WHERE TO STAY

DARST VICTORIAN MANOR, Mount Dora, 352/383-4050. Rates from \$135. Cozy, six-bedroom bed-and-breakfast that will make you feel as though you've landed in the pages of a Victorian novel.

CHALET SUZANNE RESTAURANT & COUNTRY INN, Lake Wales, 800/433-6011. Rates from \$135. A story-book, 30-room country inn trimmed with gingerbread accents and offering dreamy views of the lake, rose garden and manicured courtyard.

OCALA SILVER SPRINGS HILTON, Ocala, 352/854-1400. Rates from \$99. The premier hotel in town, with 198 rooms, a nicely appointed lobby lounge and an English-style pub.

PARK PLAZA HOTEL, Winter Park, 407/647-1072. Rates from \$80. An intimate hotel with brass beds, antiques and an award-winning restaurant.

WHAT TO DO

BOK TOWER GARDENS, Lake Wales, 941/676-1408. The historic bell tower houses 57 bronze bells. Daily recitals and 128 acres filled with azaleas, camelias and magnolias.

MORSE MUSEUM, Winter Park, 407/645-5324. Collection includes Tiffany stained-glass windows and lamps, as well as pottery and late 19th- to early 20th-century paintings.

ORLANDO SCIENCE CENTER, Orlando, 407/896-7151. Planetarium and exhibits.

SILVER SPRINGS, Ocala, 800/234-7458. Crystal-clear springs pump 800 gallons of water a day; glass-bottom boat tours available in this nature park.

SPOOK HILL, Lake Wales, 941/676-3445. Watch your car roll *uphill*. Take I-4 west to U.S. Highway 27. Continue south for 21 miles to Central Avenue. Head east to U.S. 27-A, then north on 27-A to North Avenue. Follow the signs.

YOUNG'S PASO FINO RANCH, Ocala, 352/867-5305. Horseback riding and lessons.

WHERE TO EAT

OLD SPANISH SUGAR MILL RESTAURANT, DeLeon Springs, 904/985-5644. Tables are equipped with grills and batter so diners can cook their own, all-you-can-eat pancakes. Plan to wait: There's usually a line.

PETITE JARDIN, Ocala, 352/351-4140. Just east of downtown, the casual eatery specializes in Continental-American cuisine. Extensive wine list.

TRASTEVERE RISTORANTE, Winter Park, 407/628-1277. The place locals love for Italian food.

If dabbling in the occult isn't your idea of fun, nearby Mount Dora beckons guests with more earthly entertainment. With a population of nearly 8,000, 19th-century clapboard homes and a white-brick city hall that looks like Tara in "Gone With the Wind," the town is a veritable throwback in time. Antique shops line the main street, where you'll find everything from colorful dishes to oak hutches and grandfather clocks.

Tiny Lake Wales is home to one of Florida's least publicized tourist attractions: Spook Hill. It works this way: You drive your car to a marked line in the street, shift into neutral, and watch your car roll several hundred feet uphill. At least that's how it appears. A sign posted nearby says the spot is haunted by the spirit of an Indian chief. Others claim it's just an optical illusion.

As you near Orlando, stop in Winter Park, home to Rollins College and the Morse Museum's Tiffany glass collection. If you've decided to bypass Disney's theme parks, be aware that there are other reasons to visit Orlando—the new, \$44 million, 200,000-square-foot Orlando Science Center, for one. Considered one of the country's top science museums, it features a planetarium, simulated earthquake exhibit and 3-D laser light shows. ◆