

Florida's BEST-KEPT SECRETS

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

Every destination offers out-of-the-ordinary adventures for all ages and interests and Florida is no exception. This quick-reference guide lists some of the unique experiences the Sunshine State has to offer visitors.

BRADENTON/ANNA MARIA ISLAND/LONGBOAT KEY

Run your hands across sea urchins and calico crabs in the Intertidal Touch Tank at the South Florida Museum (southfloridamuseum.org) where area celebrity and the nation's oldest manatee, Snooty, can be observed in person or online via the "Snooty Cam." Meander through a whimsical collection of galleries, studios, boutiques and cafés housed in colorful cottages at the Village of the Arts (villageofthearts.com) in downtown Bradenton where one-of-a-kind finds from purses made entirely of recycled pop can tabs to handmade ukuleles turn typical shoppers into happy treasure hunters. Close the day Anna Maria Island-style at the Sun House Restaurant (thesunhouserestaurant.com) where every night diners serenade the sunset singing *You Are My Sunshine* and then down a complimentary "green flash" shooter.



BIKES PARKED AT THE PIER ON ANNA MARIA ISLAND • BRADENTON AREA CVB

DAYTONA BEACH AREA

Visit one of the few museums in the country solely dedicated to photography. The Southeast Museum of Photography (smponline.org) presents six exhibition seasons annually and admission is always free. Thirty miles west of Daytona, float through de Leon Springs State Park on the Fountain of Youth Boat Tour (foytours.net), a narrated, eco-history tour onboard the MV *Atuera* that docks nearby the Old Spanish Sugar Mill, a do-it-yourself pancake joint with griddles at each

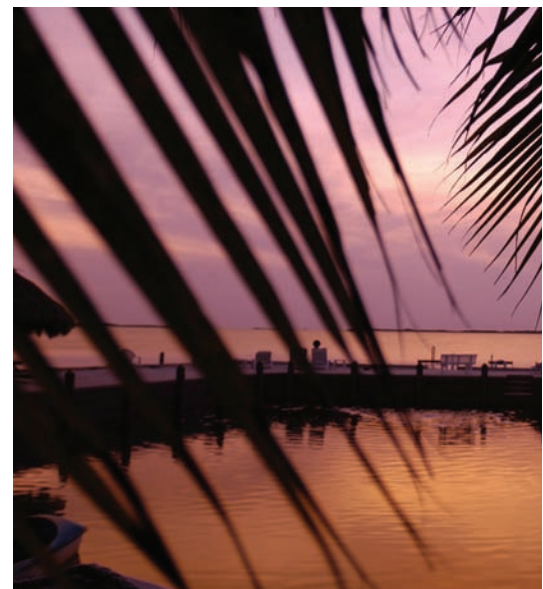


table. Or travel to Cassadaga in Volusia County (cassadaga.org), a 116-year-old spiritualist camp offering palm readings, psychic healings and ghost tours.

FLORIDA KEYS

The unforgettable turquoise water that hugs the highway en route to Key West is a spectacular sight to behold from the Overseas Highway, but views are actually best from a kayak (kayakfloridakeys.com). Paddle these tranquil waters by day or, if the timing is right, opt for a full-moon tour, which gives explorers a double feature—the sunset and the full moon. Turtle lovers will want to visit Marathon's Turtle Hospital (turtlehospital.org), a one-of-a-kind facility that gives guests the opportunity to feed sea turtles and learn about turtle conservation efforts. They even have their own ambulance. Dive into Key West's rowdy nightlife on the "Duval Crawl" (keywestwalkingtours.com), a 2.5-hour guided pub tour through downtown Key West offering a beer or signature cocktail at each bar.

FLORIDA'S SPACE COAST

With guided kayaking tours down the Nyami Nyami River, the Brevard Zoo (brevardzoo.org) in Melbourne gives guests a river's-edge vantage point of the zoo's Expedition Africa animals. For just \$6, guests can paddle their way past giraffes, rhinos and gazelles. Try your angler skills at

Honest John's Fish Camp (honestjohnsfishcamp.com) in South Melbourne Beach where fishermen can rent aluminum boats or kayaks and cruise out onto the Indian River Lagoon where fish like seatrout and redfish bite year-round. Drink in the best views of the Space Coast on a scenic flight inside an authentic 1940 fully restored Waco UPF-7 open cockpit biplane at Florida Biplanes located on Merritt Island (floridabiplanes.com).

FORT LAUDERDALE

Experience one of Earth's most unusual zoos, Butterfly World (butterflyworld.com), a 10-acre sanctuary wholly devoted to the study, care and display of more than 10,000 butterflies, many of which fly freely in picturesque garden aviaries. Traverse Fort Lauderdale by water taxi (watertaxi.com), a trip that not only offers glimpses of the waterfront mega mansions, but promises to deliver passengers to some of the area's best restaurants without

worry about finding a parking spot. Be sure to check out the new Village at Gulfstream Park (thevillageatgulfstreampark.com), a luxurious al fresco shopping and dining destination where visitors can shop 'til they drop at stores like Crate and Barrel and Rock & Roll Religion, eat at gourmet cafés, and sample a brew from the world's largest collection of draft beer at the newly opened Yard House.

FORT MYERS/SANIBEL

Lounge with the locals at Captiva Island's Mucky Duck (muckyduck.com), a hangout loved for its seafood, blueberry sour cream pie and the area's best sunset views. Take a trip to Matlacha on Pine Island (floridascreativecoast.com), a bygone fishing village now home to quaint galleries and restaurants. This tiny slice of Old Florida is home to a thriving artist community as well as Bert's Bar & Grill (bertsbar.us), a dive bar with a more than



70-year-old history and what many consider the best pizza around. Finally, escape to an island paradise only accessible by boat or ferry. Cayo Costa (floridastateparks.org/cayocosta), a pristine barrier island with nine miles of sugary beach, is the ideal getaway for a day of snorkeling. Experience a rustic overnight stay in one of the island's one-room cabins—they don't come with running water or electricity but the view of the stars at night is spectacular.

JACKSONVILLE

Get a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the brewing process (including a sampling directly from a finishing tank) on the new Budweiser Beermaster Tour (budweiser-tours.com), an enlightening experience that's sure to turn the typical hoser into an ale aficionado. Hand-pull your very own candy at Sweet Pete's (sweetpete.net), historic Springfield's new all-natural candy shop.

FANTASY SURF ACTION • KISSIMMEE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU



MATLACHA ON PINE ISLAND • LEE COUNTY VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

Visit the quaint San Marco district, home to the Peterbrooke Chocolatier Production Center (peterbrooke.com), which gives chocolate lovers insights into the world of chocolate making during public tours. Finally, open Saturdays from March until December, the new Riverside Arts Market (riversideartsmarket.com) stocks a kaleidoscope of finds from original art to farm-fresh produce at its location under the Fuller Warren Bridge.

KISSIMMEE

Learn to hang ten at Fantasy Surf, a new 14,000-square-foot indoor surf experience (ultimateindoorwave.com). Bodyboard, kneeboard or stand as 15,000 gallons of water rush through the surf simulator at 30 mph creating the perfect continuous wave. Grab a cool treat at Pure Magic Ice Cream, a modern



CORAL GABLES IN MIAMI • GREATER MIAMI CVB

parlor featuring ice cream created in seconds with a vanilla base that's flash frozen with liquid nitrogen. Be sure to visit Florida EcoSafaris (floridaecosafaris.com) at Forever Florida for nature tours on horseback through a 4,700-acre working cattle ranch and nature preserve. For thrill seekers, the ranch recently added a zip-line safari, which takes guests on a soaring treetop tour 55 feet above the ground.

MIAMI

Wander through Miami's chic style and design hub, the Miami Design District (miamidesigndistrict.net), packed with furniture and accessory shops and studios promising to give serious home decorators a glimpse at the next hottest design trends. Visitors will also find eclectic clothing shops, art galleries and a handful of fabulous restaurants. Get a private, self-navigated tour of

Miami courtesy of GoCar Tours (gocar-tours.com). These GPS-guided, storytelling cars allow day-trippers to traverse the city's best sites at their own pace and convenience. Be sure to take a drive over to Coral Gables (coralgablesvenetianpool.com), the meticulously planned luxury community that's home to the Venetian Pool, an 820,000-gallon spring-fed swimming pool built in 1923 and still used today.

NAPLES

Join a photography tour of the legendary Everglades National Park, a 1.5-million-acre area teeming with wildlife and unspoiled vistas. Everglades Area Tours (evergladesareatours.com) offers this and dozens of other unique expeditions including bicycle tours, overnight camping trips and sunset sea kayak paddles. Visit the new chocolate salon created by internationally recognized chocolate artisan Norman Love (normanloveconfections.com) at Parkshore Plaza. Love shows he doesn't mind sharing his secrets by allowing budding chocolatiers to take his baking, fondue-making and

truffle-creating classes. Kids will adore the Children's Garden at Naples Botanical Garden (naplesgarden.org), an interactive learning environment filled with flowers, butterflies, tree houses and babbling streams.

ORLANDO

Skip the life-threatening thrill of an ocean shark dive and opt instead for SeaWorld's tamer version (seaworld.com). Sharks Deep Dive lets shark enthusiasts venture into a 700,000-gallon saltwater aquarium, home to 24 curious sharks. No dive experience is necessary thanks to the Sea Trek helmet, which is used instead of typical scuba gear. International HeliTours (internationalhelitours.com) provides an unmatched vantage point from which to view Epcot's spectacular nightly fireworks show. Watch the show from above as fireworks explode below. Curb any *American Idol* urges at Rising Star, Universal CityWalk's karaoke bar where budding singers flaunt their talent with the help of a live band and backup singers (universalorlando.com/Nightlife/rising_star_karoke.aspx).



PANAMA CITY BEACH

Visit St. Andrews State Park (florida.stateparks.org/standrews), characterized by its rolling white sand dunes. Outdoor enthusiasts can find hiking along scenic trails, camping facilities, unparalleled fishing, kayaking, cycling, diving and more. Experience Miracle Strip at Pier Park (miracle-strip.com), which includes original balloon race rides and other kid-friendly experiences from the former iconic Miracle Strip Amusement Park; parents and grandparents can relax in the shaded pavilion area in the middle of the amusement park. Canoe along Econfina Creek and explore the personality of this ever-changing waterway complete with tight curves and fast water chutes (canoeeconfinacreek.net).

PENSACOLA

The Gulf Islands National Seashore boasts the country's longest continuous stretch of protected beach in Northwest Florida, and in addition to its breathtaking views, offers adventurous ranger-led outings, barrier island walks and tours of historic Fort Pickens—a massive Civil War brick fortress that will whisk you back 150 years in time (nps.gov/guis/florida.htm). Carve out an hour or two on a Tuesday or Wednesday

PALM BEACHES AND BOCA RATON

Experience Florida's only drive-through safari, Lion Country Safari (lioncountry.safari.com), where you can view more than 900 animals in seven themed areas, ride a camel, feed a giraffe or chill out in a mini water park. Visit the Flagler Museum (flaglermuseum.us), Henry Flagler's 1902 estate in Palm Beach, for guided tours and the legendary Gilded Age-style lunch featuring gourmet tea sandwiches and traditional scones served on exquisite Whitehall Collection™ china. Catch a polo match at the International Polo Club Palm Beach (internationalpoloclub.com) where the US Open Polo Championship is played each year.

BLUE ANGELS • THE BLUE ANGELS/US NAVY



morning and visit the home of the world-famous Blue Angels as they practise awe-inspiring aerial maneuvers in the skies (blueangels.navy.mil). Reserve a day for the Blackwater River State Forest, a pristine area of trees and streams perfect for tubing, canoeing, kayaking and camping out while enjoying nothing but pure nature (fl-dof.com/state_forests/blackwater_river.html).

SARASOTA

Experience the Fountain of Youth at Warm Mineral Springs (warmmineralsprings.com), a naturally formed mineral spring with a year-round temperature of 87 F. Leave feeling entirely rejuvenated after a float in the mineral-infused waters, a restorative yoga class, and a massage at the on-site spa. Explore the Myakka River State Park (myakkariver.org) amongst the treetops on the Myakka Canopy Walkway built 25 feet above the ground and extending 85 feet across the tree canopy. Run away with the circus, if only for a day, at The Circus Museum (ringling.org), boasting a world-renowned collection of memorabilia from more than 100 years of Ringling history. Be sure to check out the world's largest miniature circus, a replica of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus from 1919 to 1938.

ST. AUGUSTINE

St. Augustine's Pirate & Treasure Museum (thepiratemuseum.com) contains one of the world's largest collections of authentic pirate artifacts—including an actual pirate flag and treasure chest. Far from your typical museum, this total immersion into the history of piracy also gives a nod to modern-day Hollywood pirates like Johnny Depp's Jack Sparrow. Set aside an afternoon for the Florida Seafood Crabbing tour (904-814-0159). Board the 25-foot Sea Hawk Cruiser and venture out to sea where you'll pull crab pots and carefully remove a single claw from the legal-sized stone crabs before placing them back into the water where they can grow a replacement. Finish the day at the seaside with a romantic horseback ride along the sandy coast (countrycarriages.net).

ST. PETERSBURG / CLEARWATER

Have a blast while breaking a serious sweat during a stand-up paddling boot camp session (standupfitnessinc.com), which combines the tranquility of paddling, the thrill of surfing and the excitement of sailing, all into one glorious exercise regimen. Kayak the Mangrove Tunnels at Caladesi Island's stunning state park (floridastateparks.org/caladesiisland), voted America's No. 1 beach

More history can be experienced at the 52-acre Tallahassee Museum (tallahassee-museum.org), which features an 1880s working farmstead, educational exhibits and classes, plus wildlife exhibits showcasing Florida panthers and other endangered animals. Car lovers will lose track of time in the Tallahassee Automobile Museum (tacm.com), which boasts more than 130 rare automobiles like a 1936 DeSoto and a 1955 T-Bird Convertible.



in 2008. Don't leave out exploring the charm of America's "Most Walkable Small City," downtown Dunedin (dunedin-fl.com). Shop, walk or bike thorough this quaint town lined with galleries, boutiques and restaurants. If you need a break, head to the St. Petersburg Museum of History and rent your own Segway (gyroglides.com) as you cruise the sights, sounds and photo ops of the beautiful waterfront of downtown St. Petersburg.

TALLAHASSEE

See history reborn at Mission San Luis (missionsanluis.org) where costumed re-enactments, hands-on exhibits, re-created period buildings and archaeological excavations take visitors back in time at the only reconstructed Spanish mission in Florida.

TAMPA BAY

Experience close encounters with the world's most mesmerizing mammals at Big Cat Rescue (bigcatrescue.org), a 45-acre wildlife sanctuary that's home to 140 cats ranging from 750-pound tigers to 13-pound bobcats. Check out the interactive Keeper Tour, which offers the chance to prepare food and work side by side with handlers during a training session. Join the crew on Captain Gus' commercial crab boat where amateur crabbers will pull and bait crab traps, then clean, steam and eat their catch of Tampa Bay's stone and blue crabs (crabbyadventures.com). Casually glide through downtown Tampa with Magic Carpet Glide Segway Tours (magiccarpetglide.com) offering views of the Channelside entertainment district, the Tampa Riverwalk Project and the Hillsborough River.