

# FLORIDA'S BEACH SCENE



VISIT FLORIDA

## GULF-SIDE OR OCEAN-SIDE?

When planning a beach trip to Florida, the first thing to decide is whether you want to be on the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico.

Florida's ocean-side beaches are blessed with golden sands and clear turquoise-blue waters. Come here if you want to surf, dive, or watch the sun rise.

Florida's gulf-coast beaches have white sandy shores; the best can be found in Northwest Florida, where the water is emerald green. Come here if you want to collect sea-shells or watch a sunset.

The Sunshine State lays claim to 1,100 miles of flip-flop-friendly beaches, each with its own distinct character. Some shores are blessed with snow-white sand, some with an abundance of shells. Others have golden sand perfect for sand-castle building or sea-turtle nesting. Miami Beach has been rated one of the world's 10 best: white sand, warm water, and bronzed bodies everywhere provide just the right mix of relaxation and people-gazing.

Sunbathing, shelling, surfing, sand-castle building, even celebrity spotting—whatever your passion, Florida beaches have something for you. Many are great for families, couples seeking romance, individuals craving solitude, even pets rearing to run and fetch a Frisbee along the water's edge. Water-sports devotees also find ample opportunities, from scuba diving and snorkeling to parasailing and boating.

Your beach experience will vary depending on which region of the state you choose, what activities you're looking for, and when you go.

## BEACHES BY REGION

What's appealing about **Northwest Florida**—especially the Emerald Coast (the stretch of land between Pensacola and Destin)—is that beaches are marked by soft, powdery sands and clear, clean water. In **Northeast Florida**, long, slender barrier islands hug the coast. Their eastern sides make up a broad band of spectacular sand. Except in the most populated areas, development has been modest, and beaches are lined with appealingly funky towns.

In Central Florida, **Tampa** gets rave reviews for having some of the state's best beaches, and because they're within a day's drive of the Orlando theme parks, they're popular with families (this also means they can be extremely crowded in summer). The allure of Tampa-area beaches includes warm water from spring through fall and gentle waves. They're great places to go for romantic walks and stunning sunsets.

To the south, gorgeous white-sand beaches fringe the **Lower Gulf Coast** and barrier islands. Known for their great shelling and kid-friendly waves, the beaches

here range from the natural undeveloped sands of Sanibel Island to the manicured parks of Naples.

On the Atlantic side, the shores aren't as white and fine as Florida's west coast, but the beaches provide good stomping grounds for hikers, well-guarded waters for swimmers, decent waves for surfers, and plenty of opportunities for sand-castle building and shell collecting. The warm waters (the average temperature is 74 degrees year-round) draw tourists to **Palm Beach and the Treasure Coast**. From Jupiter's sandy shoreline, where leashed dogs are welcome, to the broad stretches of sand in Delray Beach and Boca Raton, swimmers, sunbathers, and surfers—and sea turtles looking for a place to hatch their eggs—all find happiness. To the south, a wave-capped, 20-mile shoreline with wide ribbons of golden sand is the draw for **Fort Lauderdale and Broward County**.

And in the **Miami** area? Well, almost every side street in Miami Beach dead ends at the ocean. Sandy shores also stretch along the southern side of the Rickenbacker Causeway to Key Biscayne. The **Florida Keys** have much oceanfront land but fewer natural beaches than one might expect. Those they do have, however, are award-winning, specifically those at Bahia Honda State Park.

## BEACHES BY THEME

**Celebrity Sighting.** If you want to be in close proximity to top-notch hotels—places that fluff pillows for the stars—try **Lummus Park**, aka South Beach (Ocean Dr. between 5th and 10th Sts., Miami Beach, 800/666-4519). The beach opens at 5 AM, perfect for late-night revelers tottering over to watch the

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## WHEN TO GO

Florida is a year-round destination, but not all of its beaches are warm all year. Those that are can be humid in summer—from June through September, 90% humidity isn't uncommon, nor are thunderstorms. More than half the state's rain falls during these months.

For seashelling, winter is the best time to hit the beach because the cold and storms push shellfish ashore. In late summer and fall, jellyfish can be a problem on the gulf side.



sun rise. Celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan, Jennifer Lopez, and Will Smith come here to freshen their tans, frolic in the surf, play volleyball, or rollerblade on the boardwalk.

**Family Fun.** Lifeguards on duty, showers on site, and an area for picnicking are beach requirements for most families; sand suitable for building great sand castles is also essential. One good spot for this is **Clearwater Beach** (Western end of Rte. 60, 2 miles west of downtown Clearwater, 727/461-0011), which features gorgeous white sand, attentive lifeguards, shallow waters that are clear and warm, a pier, and plenty of showers and restrooms. Around Pier 60 there's a big modern playground. Bring cash for parking and amenities like a beach umbrella or cabana, and bring a pail and shovel for the kids.

**Playdate with Your Pet.** Most beaches don't allow dogs, but some do, and they provide fresh water (so our four-legged pals can quench their thirst) and have sand soft enough for an easy-on-the-paws hike along the shore. The beach that sends tails wagging is **Jupiter Beach** (1375 Jupiter Beach Rd., 561/694-2300) in Palm Beach County. Boarded walkways framed by sea grapes lead you to the shoreline, and plastic cleanup bags are provided at each beach entrance. Dogs need to be leashed unless they respond well to your commands, in which case they can take a mad dash into the surf for a refreshing untethered swim.

**Seashelling.** If you're looking for gifts from the sea, Sanibel is the place to go, specifically remote **Bowman's Beach** (Bowman Beach Rd., 239/432-2006) because it offers the least competition. In fact, islanders here have come up with the nickname "the Sanibel Stoop," for the hunched position shell-seekers assume. You reach this wide sandy venue by traipsing from the parking area through beach grass, pines, wetland, and a picnic area cooled by the shade of pine trees and sea grapes. The likelihood of leaving with a bag of gorgeous shells is high. You might even score one of the island's most coveted shells: from the junonia, an olive-shaped, spotted gastropod (single-shell mollusk); people who hit upon one get their picture in the local paper.

**Romantic Strolling.** Uncrowded shorelines for walking with your main squeeze are found in Florida's state parks rather than public parks, where the masses come to bask in the sun. At **Caladesi Island State Park** (Dunedin Causeway, about 1 mile west of Dunedin, 727/469-5942), on a 3½-mile-long barrier island, water laps a quiet shore, secluded except for the many birds, from common sandpipers to majestic blue herons to rare black skimmers. The park has some of the best shelling beaches on the Gulf Coast, second only to Sanibel. With crystal-clear waters and tiny waves, it's a good spot for swimming and fishing. You can search for seashells, paddle a kayak through the mangroves, hike on the nature trail, or

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## SHELLING LIKE A PRO

People shell for a variety of reasons. The hardcore compete and sell, while others collect and save simply for the joy of discovery, for displaying, or for use in gardens or crafts. Whatever your reason, here's how to do it like a pro:

- Veteran shell-seekers go out before the sun rises so they can be the first on the beach.
- Collect at low tide.
- To pack shells for transit, wash them thoroughly to remove sand and debris. Wrap fragile species such as sand dollars and sea urchins in tissue paper or cotton, then newspaper, and place your shells in a cardboard or plastic box.
- To display them, restore shells' luster by brushing with baby oil or a watered glue solution.



(left) BunnyDo, member fodor's.com; (right) Claudette, member fodor's.com

just unwind with a romantic picnic on the white-sand shore.

**Diving In.** Water clarity and warmth are key factors for selecting your scuba-diving and snorkeling spots, but also important is how much underwater eye candy you'll see. With shallow-water reefs, submerged sculptures (like the 8½-foot bronze *Christ of the Deep*), and 55 kinds of coral, **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** (102601 U.S. 1 [Mile marker 102.5 ocean side], Key Largo, 305/451-1202) is an ideal spot for newbies and veterans. It has been hailed as the Diving Capital of the World and is the country's first underwater park. Under these clear waters, 600 varieties of fish thrive. While here you also can take a glass-bottomed boat tour or walk on two short nature trails.

**All-day Action.** If your visit to Florida is based on beach access and activities, then **Panama City Beach** (Off U.S. 98, 850/233-5070 or 800/722-3224) is where you want to be. Cabanas, umbrellas, sailboats, Wave Runners, and floats are available from dozens of vendors along the beach. For an aerial view of the emerald-green water and 17 miles of snowy-white sand, strap on a parachute and go parasailing behind a speedboat a few hundred yards offshore.

### A FEW OF OUR FAVORITES

One of the most scenic spots along the Gulf Coast, **Grayton Beach State Park** (357 Main Park Rd., off Rte. 30A, Grayton Beach, 850/231-4210) will take you back to Old Florida, where there are no condos, no strip malls, and no beach concessions. Instead there's a 2,220-acre state park that has preserved the area and its sea oats and miles of walking trails for a laid-back time outdoors. Come for the big dunes, ample bird-watching and wildlife viewing, and on-the-water activities like canoeing, fishing, sailing, and swimming. In March, when the dogwoods and azaleas are in full bloom, the surrounding landscape is nothing short of spectacular. Scattered along Route 30A are

a growing number of boutiques selling everything from fine art to hand-painted furniture.

Ever tailgated at the beach? At **Daytona Beach** (Off Route A1A, 800/854-1234) you're allowed to drive your car right up to your beach site from one hour after sunrise to one hour before sunset, so you can spread a blanket and have all your belongings at hand (note that alcohol is prohibited). Heavy traffic in summer and on holidays makes this dangerous for children, so we suggest families opt for the car-free zones during the busy season. Billing itself as the World's Most Famous Beach, Daytona is fronted with a mixture of tall condos and apartments, hotels, low-rise motels, and flashy nightclubs. Jazz, big band, blues, and folk acts perform at the oceanfront bandshell. Other activities include parasailing, golf, cruises, and fishing charters.

If you're in the Keys, you'll discover why **Bahia Honda State Park** (36850 U.S. 1 [Mile marker 37 ocean side], 305/872-2353) is often declared the best beach in Florida. The 524-acre park sprawls on both sides of the highway, giving it 2½ miles of wonderfully sandy coastline—three beaches in all—on both the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. The sand is baby-powder soft, and the aqua water is warm, clear, and shallow. With their mild currents, the beaches are great for swimming, even with little ones. The snorkeling isn't bad either: there's underwater life (coral, queen conchs) just a few hundred feet offshore. Once you've exhausted the swimming, snorkeling, kayaking, fishing, and boating, set out on two wheels (or on foot) on the 3½-mile Silver Palm Trail, looking for rare West Indian plants along the way.

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