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Insider's Guide to Florida's Gulf Coast

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Image courtesy of The Henderson Beach Resort & Spa

Florida's Gulf Coast is all about sun, sand, and a slower pace of life. Along 30A in the Panhandle, you'll find charming beach towns with pastel cottages and family-friendly vibes.

Tampa mixes city energy with waterfront dining and pro sports, while nearby St. Petersburg adds an artsy edge and lively downtown. Sarasota blends culture with white-sand beaches, from its opera and art scene to Siesta Key's shoreline. Further south, Fort Myers is known for easygoing beaches, while Naples is home to luxe real estate and brings a polished feel with upscale shops, golf, and dining.

Families, couples, and groups who want a mix of laid-back beach days and a small-town feel within reach of city experiences will like it here. Read on to learn where to stay, what to do, and how to plan your Florida Gulf Coast getaway.

Need to know



For a Gulf Coast visit, keep in mind beach etiquette—quiet music, tidy setups, and cover-ups off the sand. Remember sun protection, swimming near lifeguards, and checking weather alerts for riptides. If you're visiting June through November, it's worth staying informed about hurricanes.

Airports:

- **30A (Panhandle):** Depending on which part of the Panhandle you're staying, Pensacola (PNS) and Panama City (ECP) offer the most direct flights across the US.
- **Tampa and St. Petersburg:** Tampa (TPA) is the main hub with extensive domestic and international routes, plus easy access to both cities and surrounding Gulf beaches.
- **Sarasota:** Sarasota Bradenton International (SRQ), midway between Tampa and Naples, has direct flights from major US cities east of the Rockies.
- **Fort Myers and Naples:** Southwest Florida International (RSW) is the main gateway, with direct connections across the US.

Transportation: A car rental is the most practical way to explore multiple beach towns. Bike paths line many beaches, with bike rentals readily available. Look for public transport options like Tampa's historic streetcar, St. Pete's buses, and seasonal trolleys between Fort Myers and Naples. Water taxis and ferries connect to outlying islands.

Best time to visit: The sweet spot for visiting the Florida Gulf Coast is end of November, as hurricane season winds down, through May. Cooler winter months still deliver sunsets, fresh seafood, and plenty of charm. The weather starts to warm up for beach days around March.

Ideal length of stay: A long weekend is perfect for sampling the Florida Gulf Coast's beaches and waterfront towns. If you have a week to 10 days, you can slow down, explore multiple islands, and soak in that unhurried coastal rhythm.

Signature dishes and drinks:

- **Cuban sandwich:** Pressed, melty perfection layered with ham, roasted pork, Swiss, pickles, and mustard.
- **Grouper sandwich:** A local staple, best eaten blackened with a squeeze of lemon.
- **Stone crab claws:** Sweet, meaty, and usually served chilled with mustard sauce during the fall/winter season.
- **Gulf oysters:** Freshly shucked and briny, paired with white wine or a cocktail.
- **Key lime pie:** Tangy, creamy, and often found with a graham cracker crust.
- **Rum punch:** Classic island-inspired cocktail made up of rum, lime, and fruit juices.
- **Smoked mullet dip:** A smoky, creamy Gulf tradition with flaked smoked mullet, mayonnaise, and various seasonings served with crackers.

- **Alligator bites:** Crispy, golden-fried morsels of alligator meat with a mild, chicken-like flavor, often served with a zesty dipping sauce.

What to wear: Summer days are hot and sunny, wear breathable fabrics like cotton and linen, along with comfortable shoes for walking. Evenings can stay warm and humid, opt for light, airy layers. A light cover-up or shawl is useful for air-conditioned spaces or winter months.

Travel tips:

- **Natural areas:** Respect local wildlife and natural areas. Don't feed birds or marine animals, and follow signs in parks and preserves.
- **Parking:** Be mindful of parking rules, especially in tourist-heavy cities and resident-specific areas where passes are required.
- **Facilities:** Developed beaches like Clearwater, Siesta Key, and Naples offer restrooms, showers, parking, and food vendors. More secluded beaches may have limited facilities.
- **Local rules:** Many beaches prohibit glass containers, fires, and alcohol without permits. Check each beach's rules, especially in protected areas or state parks.

30A (Panhandle)

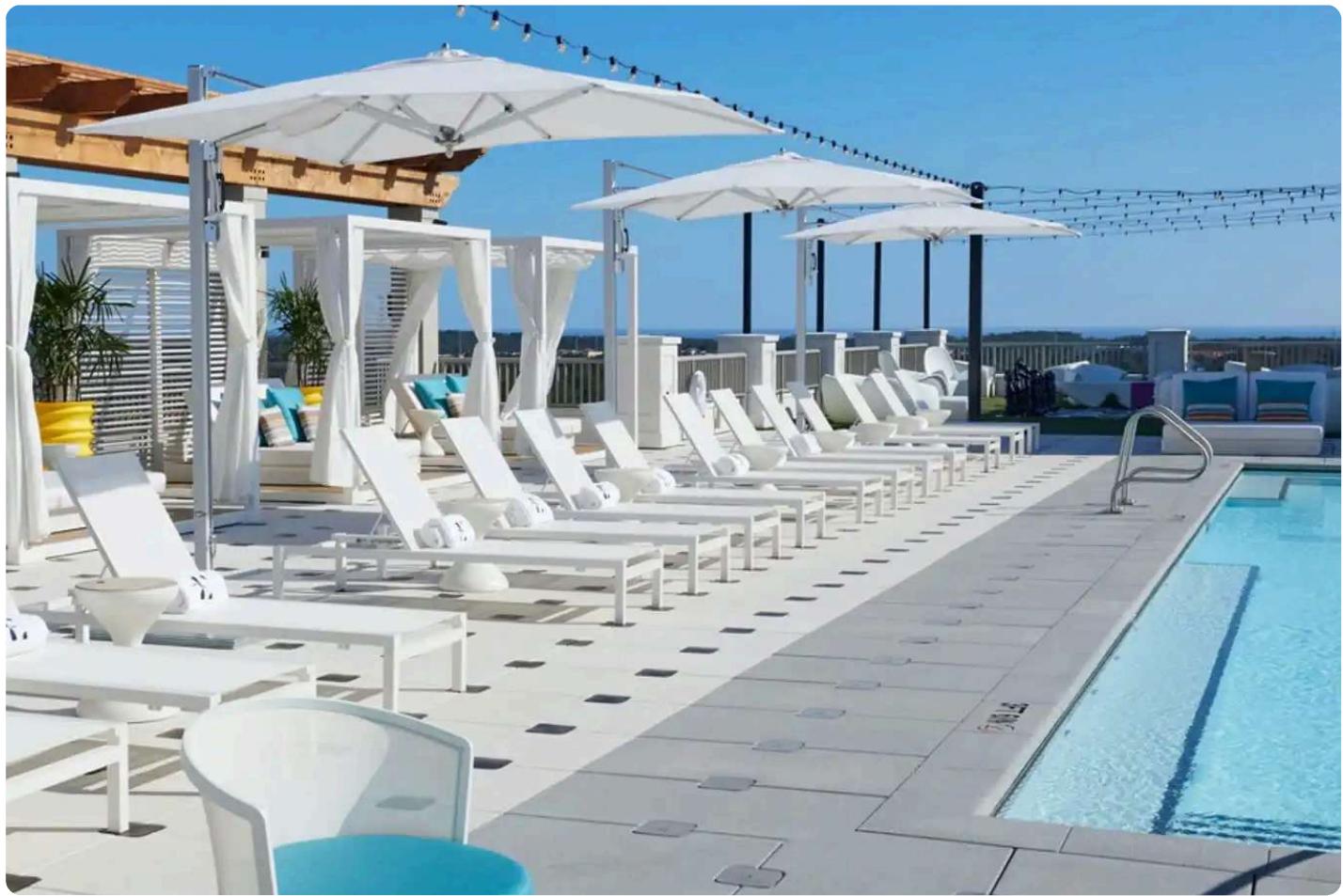


Image courtesy of Hotel Effie Sandestin, Autograph Collection

A postcard stretch of white sand beaches and turquoise water, framed by pastel cottages and bike-friendly towns. Seaside, Rosemary, and Alys Beach each bring their own charm, from farmers' markets to upscale dining. Fresh Gulf seafood, boutique browsing, and nightly sunsets set the rhythm here.

Where to stay

Hotel Effie Sandestin, Autograph Collection: Tucked inside the Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, this retreat blends chic, Southern charm with bayside luxury. Guests can slip between the rooftop pool, celebrity-chef dining, and easy beach access all day long.

- **Fora's Marriott LUMINOUS** partner perks include a welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

The Henderson Beach Resort & Spa: Bordering the white sands of Destin, it feels like an upscale beach house. Rooms are airy, the spa draws inspiration from the Gulf, and the poolside cabanas are made for lazy afternoons.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast credit, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Tampa and St. Petersburg



Image courtesy of The Tampa EDITION

A coastal hub where arts, food, and waterfront living come together. St. Pete brims with creativity, from the Dali Museum to bold street murals. Tampa hums with nightlife, a lively Riverwalk, and a culinary scene shaped by Cuban roots. Both cities promise plenty of sunshine alongside their cultural punch.

Where to stay

The Tampa EDITION: Sleek, design-forward, and buzzing with energy. Rooms feel like a calm, minimalist retreat from the lively streets below. Its rooftop pool, manicured terrace, and destination dining pull in both locals and travelers.

- **Fora's Marriott STARS** partner perks include a \$100 hotel credit, welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Palihouse Hyde Park Village: Retro-inspired whimsy and neighborhood charm is here under one roof. Its cozy lobby café, leafy courtyard, and playful interiors make it as social as it is stylish. Steps from boutiques, coffee shops, and shaded parks in the heart of Hyde Park Village.

- **Fora Reserve perks** include a welcome amenity, an upgrade, and extended check-in or check-out whenever possible.

The Vinoy Resort & Golf Club: Historic waterfront resort in downtown St. Petersburg. Rooms feature marble bathrooms, guests can sip cocktails at the rooftop lounge, and dine on Gulf-to-table cuisine. It's a refined and memorable escape on Florida's Gulf Coast.

- **Fora's Marriott LUMINOUS** partner perks include a welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Sarasota



Image courtesy of The Gasparilla Inn

Cultural flair meets soft white sand, coastal relaxation, and artistic energy. The city is home to Siesta Key's powdery beaches, the renowned Ringling Museum, and a thriving performing arts scene. Downtown buzzes with galleries, cafes, and waterfront dining. Nearby Lido and Longboat Keys add a quieter, upscale escape.

Where to stay

The St. Regis Longboat Key Resort: An oceanfront sanctuary of modern elegance with signature St. Regis refinement. Pristine white-sand beaches, indulgent dining, an ocean-view spa, and infinity pools make it an effortless blend of barefoot luxury and timeless glamour.

- **Fora's Marriott STARS** partner perks include a \$100 hotel credit, welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

The Sarasota Modern, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel: Playful design, contemporary style and mid-century inspiration define this downtown stay. Airy, minimalist rooms feel both vibrant and laid-back, perfect for those who want Sarasota's cultural energy with a boutique edge.

- Fora's Marriott LUMINOUS partner perks include a welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

The Gasparilla Inn: A storied Boca Grande gem that exudes old charm with a dose of coastal luxury. Choose from main building rooms, cottages, and beachfront homes. Tennis, golf, and a beach club make it an elegant coastal escape that's a destination in and of itself.

Fort Myers and Naples



Image courtesy of The Ritz-Carlton, Naples

A South Florida duo that pairs refinement with relaxation. Naples draws travelers with luxury resorts, fine dining, and designer shopping. Fort Myers serves as the gateway to Sanibel and Captiva's beaches and calm waters. It's a balance of polished indulgence and unspoiled nature.

Where to stay

Naples Beach Club, A Four Seasons Resort: This reimagined Gulf icon blends Four Seasons polish with easygoing Naples charm. The beachfront pool, refined dining, and airy rooms

frame endless ocean views. It's the kind of place where days blend seamlessly into nights by the water.

- When you book Four Seasons with Fora, you'll enjoy exclusive Four Seasons Preferred Partner benefits.

The Ritz-Carlton, Naples: Radiating modern coastal elegance, this retreat is even newly refreshed. Guests split time between two resort pools, powdery sand, and a spa that's as serene as the sea. Sunset here is an event, best enjoyed from the beach bar.

- **Fora's Marriott STARS** partner perks include a \$100 hotel credit, welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort: A sprawling paradise on three miles of beach, it delivers both family fun and grown-up indulgence. From beautiful sunsets, Balinese-inspired spa treatments, and watersports on the Gulf, the vibe is barefoot luxury at its finest.

- **Fora's Marriott LUMINOUS** partner perks include a welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

South Seas Resort: A laid-back island escape with a polished edge. Lagoon-style pools, a full-service marina, and miles of shell-strewn beach make it effortlessly coastal. Golf, tennis, and watersports keep days full, with fresh seafood and sunset views anchoring evenings.

Cruising to and around Florida



Image courtesy of Oceania Cruises

Tampa stands out as the only major cruise port on Florida's Gulf Coast, making it a convenient launch point for a variety of itineraries. From here, cruisers can set sail to Western Caribbean stops like Cozumel, Grand Cayman, and Belize, or head toward Key West and the Bahamas for shorter trips. Extended itineraries to the ABC Islands and Panama Canal can also be found. The port itself is next to downtown, and only 15 minutes from the airport, making it a very convenient city to sail out of.

Notable cruise lines

Norwegian Cruise Line: Known for Freestyle Cruising, you can design your days exactly how you want with no set dining times, no dress codes, just endless possibilities. Expect lively entertainment, diverse dining, and itineraries that range from quick getaways to epic voyages.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$300 Shipboard Credit per stateroom for Oceanview stateroom and above on select voyages.

Royal Caribbean: Big thrills and big ships, with onboard experiences that range from rock climbing walls to a relaxing spa and Broadway-caliber shows. Perfect for travelers who love a high-energy atmosphere with plenty to do between ports.

- **Fora Perks** include a specialty dining experience for balcony cabins and above, plus a spa treatment for one for Junior Suites and above, on 7-night and longer sailings.

Oceania Cruises: With a focus on culinary excellence and destination-rich itineraries, they offer a refined, relaxed atmosphere at sea. With smaller ships, longer port stays, and award-winning dining, it's tailored for travelers who want to savor every detail.

- Virtuoso Voyages Hosted Benefits available on select sailings.

Celebrity Cruises: Blending modern design with elevated service, delivering a polished yet approachable luxury experience. From innovative dining to immersive itineraries, it's a perfect fit for travelers who appreciate style and substance in equal measure.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$120 Onboard Credit when booked in a balcony through AquaClass cabin, or a \$200 Onboard Credit when booked for The Retreat.

History and culture



Florida has been shaped by centuries of layered history. Indigenous peoples, including the Calusa and Apalachee, lived along the Gulf Shores for thousands of years. They built thriving communities tied to the land, sea, and estuaries, seen today through archaeological sites and cultural preservation efforts. This is also the ancestral homeland of the Seminole people, who resisted removal and whose descendants, the Seminole Tribe of Florida, still live and thrive in the state today. The Panhandle once saw Spanish, French, and British control, with fortifications like Fort Pickens and Fort Barrancas built by the US military to secure important ports in the 19th century.

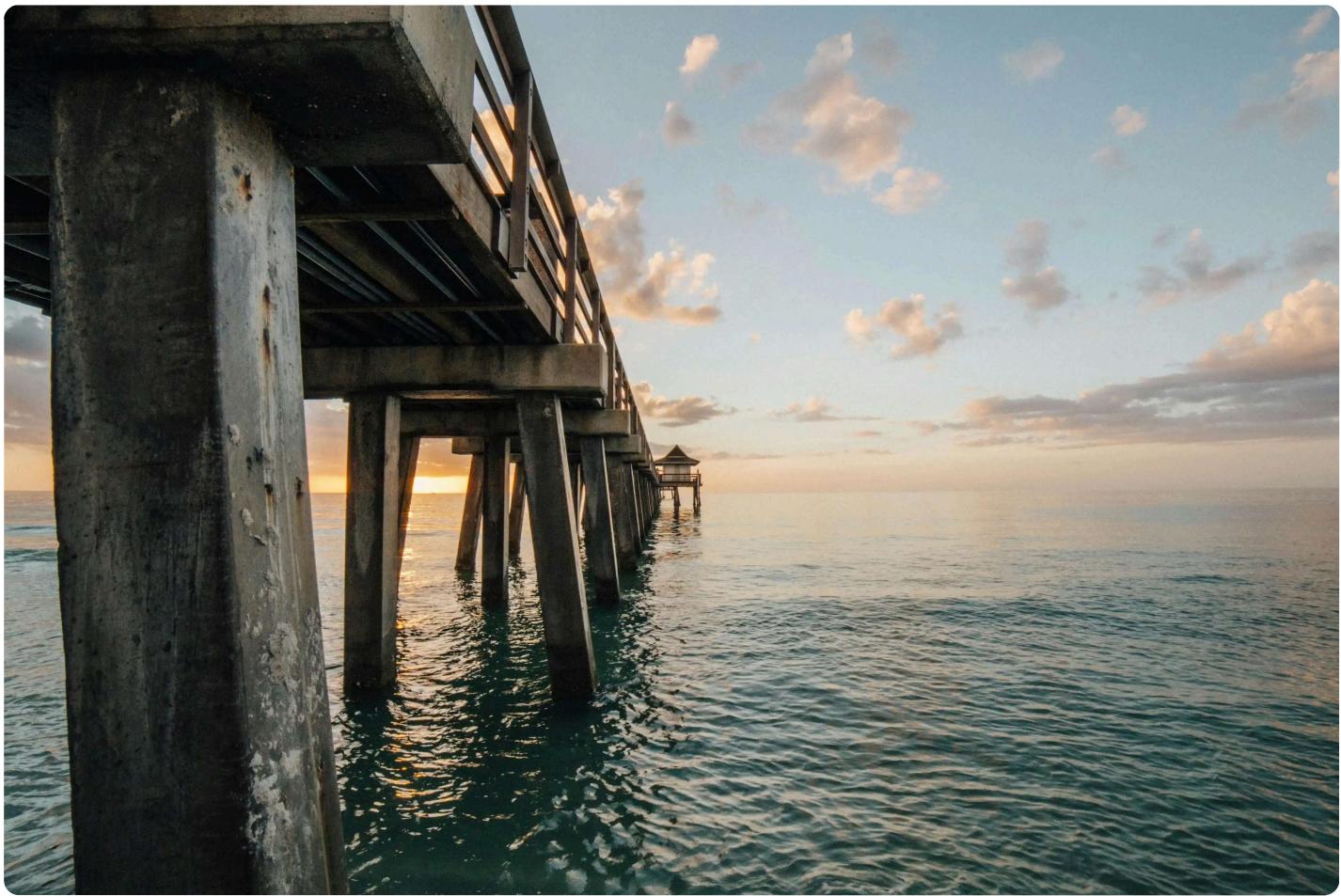
The area remained a quiet fishing and farming area until the late 20th century. Tampa's story is steeped in Cuban, Spanish, and Italian influence, thanks to its role in the cigar trade—most famously in Ybor City, where hand-rolled cigars still draw visitors. Farther south, Fort Myers was shaped by both military history and winter visitors like Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, whose preserved homes remain popular landmarks. Naples, once a remote fishing village, transformed into an upscale coastal enclave with pristine beaches and protected natural areas, like the nearby Everglades. Across all of these destinations, festivals, local markets, and

seafood traditions continue to celebrate the Gulf Coast's rich cultural mix and deep ties to the water.

Cultural celebrations and events

- **Naples Winter Wine Festival (Late January, Naples):** A premier culinary charity event with tastings from top chefs and vintners.
- **Florida Seafood & Music Festival (Late February, Destin):** A family-friendly festival featuring fresh Gulf seafood, local music, arts, and crafts.
- **Mardi Gras in Tampa (February–March, Tampa):** Florida's biggest Mardi Gras celebration, with parades, live music, and vibrant street festivities in Ybor City.
- **Seaside Half Marathon & Beach Festival (March, 30A):** Combines a scenic race along the Emerald Coast with beachside vendors, local food, and live entertainment.
- **Island Hopper Songwriter Fest (September):** A multi-day celebration of live music performances across Fort Myers, Sanibel, Captiva, Fort Myers Beach, and Cape Coral.
- **Fort Myers Beach American Sand Sculpting Championship (November):** World-class artists transform the shoreline into larger-than-life sand masterpieces.

What to do in Florida



From kayaking through mangroves, laying on the beach, to exploring vibrant coastal towns. The Florida Gulf Coast offers endless ways to soak up its sun-drenched charm.

30A (Panhandle)

- **Seaside and Rosemary Beach:** Wander by pastel cottages, indie boutiques, and open-air cafés that create a postcard-perfect backdrop for a slow day by the water.
- **Biking:** Pedal along Scenic Highway 30A, stopping at local galleries and artisan studios between stretches of sweeping Gulf views.
- **Water sports:** Glide across rare coastal dune lakes like Western Lake or Deer Lake by kayak or paddleboard, with calm waters ideal for spotting wildlife.
- **Boating:** Set sail on a private charter from Destin Harbor, toasting the sunset with champagne as the coastline drifts by.
- **Point Washington State Forest:** Hike shaded trails that lead to hidden beaches, quiet dunes, and picnic-worthy clearings.

Tampa and St. Petersburg

- **Hyde Park Village:** Stroll through Tampa's open-air complex with boutique shops, corner cafés, and tucked-away bakeries.
- **EDGE District:** Explore St. Petersburg's downtown, where bold murals, indie galleries, and tiny studios showcase the city's creative pulse.
- **Dalí Museum:** Visit the world's most extensive Dalí collection and rotating contemporary exhibits in St. Petersburg.
- **Beaches:** Relax on Pass-a-Grille or Fort De Soto, known for soft sand, calm Gulf waters, and plenty of space to kayak, paddleboard, or picnic.
- **Boating:** Sail out from St. Pete Marina or Tampa Bay for a sunset cocktail cruise.

Sarasota

- **St. Armands Circle:** Shop and stroll this stylish island district, where sidewalk cafés, boutique storefronts, and gelato shops cluster around a palm-shaded plaza.
- **Sarasota Arts District:** Explore murals, independent galleries, and creative studios showcasing the city's vibrant contemporary art scene.
- **The Ringling Museum of Art:** Spend an afternoon exploring Venetian-inspired architecture, an acclaimed art museum, and the manicured bayfront gardens.
- **Siesta and Lido Key:** Sink your toes into white sand, swim in calm Gulf waters, and linger for beautiful sunsets over the water.
- **Sarasota Bay:** Take a sunset sail sipping craft cocktails.

Fort Myers and Naples

- **Naples Art District:** Browse studios with working artists for an intimate look at the city's creative core.
- **Beaches:** Unwind on Vanderbilt Beach or Clam Pass Park, stretches of soft sand with calm waters. Escape to Tigertail Beach for birdwatching and tranquil shoreline walks.
- **Naples Pier:** Walk the pier at sunrise, spotting dolphins and anglers.
- **Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park:** Spend the day shelling, swimming, and sunbathing.
- **Marco Island:** Visit Tigertail Beach for shelling, birdwatching, and strolls along the sand. Savor the sunset aboard a luxury sailing or catamaran cruise.
- **Sanibel Island:** Shelling at Lighthouse Beach, visiting the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum, kayak through Tarpon Bay, and shop along Periwinkle Way.
- **Key West:** Take the high-speed ferry from Fort Myers to Key West for pastel color buildings, vibrant streets, and lively bars.

Where to eat in Florida



Image courtesy of Tesoro at JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort

From dockside seafood shacks to refined waterfront dining, the Florida Gulf Coast serves up fresh flavors with a laid-back coastal energy.

30A (Panhandle)

- **Pescado Seafood Grill & Rooftop Bar:** Gulf-front dining with fresh, sustainable seafood, craft cocktails, and sweeping sunset views.
- **The Edge Seafood Restaurant & SkyBar:** Upscale, modern restaurant with panoramic Gulf views, inventive seafood dishes, and a chic rooftop bar.
- **Louisiana Lagniappe:** Intimate, candlelit hidden gem specializing in Creole-inspired seafood and fresh oysters.
- **Harbor Docks:** Classic Gulf Coast seafood and sushi with a refined, casual vibe.
- **Stinky's Fish Camp:** Iconic casual spot with funky, art-filled décor, offering fresh fish sandwiches, tacos, and local specialties.

- **Destin Ice Market 30A:** Vibrant, colorful stop for poke bowls, seafood, and cocktails.

Tampa

- **Naked Farmer:** Trendy, farm-to-table café focusing on locally sourced, sustainable ingredients.
- **Ponte Modern American:** Upscale downtown spot serving refined American cuisine with seasonal, locally inspired dishes.
- **Oxford Exchange:** Stylish all-in-one venue featuring an American restaurant, bookstore, gift shop, coworking space, design studio, and event space.
- **Salt Shack On the Bay:** Casual-chic seafood spot with inventive small plates.
- **Rooster & the Till:** Hip, contemporary eatery offering globally influenced small plates and creative cocktails.

St. Petersburg

- **Allelo:** Intimate and stylish, this Mediterranean-inspired wine bar shines with small plates and a curated global wine list.
- **Sea Critters Café:** A laid-back waterfront classic tucked along St. Pete's marina.
- **Coconut Charlie's Beach Bar & Grill – St. Pete Beach:** Playful and lively beachfront dining with craft cocktails, coastal American bites, and live music.
- **Crabby Bill's:** A beloved local seafood institution that's bustling and authentic.
- **La Croisette:** Quirky French-American brunch café with colorful retro décor, hearty breakfast platters, and strong coffee.

Sarasota

- **Napule:** A cozy Italian hotspot known for locally sourced ingredients.
- **Blu Kouzina:** A lively Greek taverna in downtown Sarasota.
- **Peachey's Baking Co.:** Sarasota's go-to for artisanal pastries and freshly baked bread.
- **Mirna's Cuban Cuisine:** A beloved neighborhood gem serving classic Cuban favorites.
- **Dry Dock Waterfront Grill:** Set right on Sarasota Bay, this casual-yet-polished eatery shines with fresh Gulf seafood and a patio perfect for sunset dining.

Fort Myers and Sanibel Island

- **South Beach Bar & Grille:** A vibrant waterfront spot serving fresh Gulf seafood, wood-fired dishes, and craft cocktails.
- **The Firestone:** Rustic-chic small plates in a cozy, lively setting.
- **Pinchers Crab Shack:** Casual yet refined with Gulf favorites and waterfront seating.
- **Harold's:** Fort Myers' first farm-to-table restaurant, with innovative weekly dishes emphasizing fresh, local ingredients in a sophisticated atmosphere.
- **Silver King Ocean Brasserie:** Chef-driven coastal cuisine featuring locally sourced produce, blending elegance with adventurous flavors.
- **10 Twenty Five:** Contemporary American cuisine with global influences in a chic, intimate setting.
- **The Bubble Room:** Whimsical, retro-themed Captiva Island restaurant layered with vintage décor, oversized desserts, and playful twists on classic comfort dishes.
- **Tutti Pazzi:** Cozy Italian trattoria on Sanibel Island offering handmade pastas and wood-fired pizzas in a warm, convivial setting.

Naples

- **Tesoro:** Adult-exclusive Mediterranean bar and restaurant on a panoramic terrace with Italian flare and craft cocktails.
- **Alexanders:** Sophisticated, award-winning American cuisine with a focus on fresh, local ingredients.
- **Barbatella:** Trendy yet elegant Mediterranean-inspired spot.
- **Bleu Provence:** French-inspired fine dining with a chic interior and attentive service.
- **Nat Nat:** Casual, cool natural wine bar with a curated tapas-style menu.
- **Celebration Park Food Trucks:** Waterfront casual dining with rotating gourmet food trucks for a relaxed outdoor meal and a lively, local vibe.

If not Florida



Image courtesy of Tucker's Point Golf Club at Rosewood Bermuda

For a new seaside escape, warm weather, and laid-back coastal culture, these destinations offer similar experiences with a different take:

Georgia: Head to Sea Island, anchored by the storied Cloister at Sea Island resort. It exudes old-school Southern elegance with golf courses, a private beach, and five-star hospitality. It's a slower-paced coastal escape where tradition and luxury go hand in hand.

South Carolina: Known for its wide beaches, world-class golf, and miles of bike trails shaded by live oaks. Head to Charleston, Kiawah Island, or Hilton Head for a blend of beaches, historic character, and top-tier golfing experiences.

The Bahamas: A quick hop from Florida, the Bahamas offers powdery beaches, vibrant coral reefs, and that unmistakable turquoise water. Whether you're island-hopping or settling into a luxe resort, it's equal parts adventure and relaxation.

Bermuda: An easy flight from the East Coast, Bermuda pairs pink-sand beaches with pastel-colored architecture. Play a round of golf at the historic Tucker's Point Golf Club at Rosewood

Bermuda. British-meets-island culture and mild climate make it a relaxed getaway.

Get in touch with Gregory

Reach out for travel inspiration, hotel bookings or customized itineraries.

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