

10 THINGS We Love About Florida

Everyone—to the far corners of the globe—knows Florida. But the South owns The Sunshine State, and we can get there faster than all the rest.

By Jennifer McKenzie Frazier

Eighty-four million people can't be wrong. That's the number of visitors to The Sunshine State every year. We're with them—we love it too. From the white-sand beaches, crystal clear springs, and over-the-top amusement parks to the world-class culture, untouched wilderness, and fabulous food, there are so many treasures that make us adore Florida. Here are 10 reasons (in no particular order) you should take a trip this year. »

1 WALT DISNEY WORLD Covering 47 square miles, it's the largest entertainment extravaganza on Earth. There are lavish hotels, Cinderella's castle, and magic galore. Disney debuts its "What Will You Celebrate?" event where guests receive free admission to a theme park of their choice on their birthday and can mark other special occasions with experiences such as a nighttime fireworks cruise or dinner with a favorite Disney character. **Tip:** After a thunderstorm, Disney becomes a ghost town. It's the perfect time to try the rides with no lines. www.disney.com or (407) 934-7639.

TO DO

- **Interact with** the movie character Crush, the turtle from the movie *Finding Nemo*, at Epcot's Turtle Talk.
- **Ooh and aah** to Fantasmic!, the light-and-fireworks show at Hollywood Studios (formerly known as Disney-MGM Studios).
- **Fire laser cannons** to infinity and beyond at Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin at Magic Kingdom.

2 KEY WEST It's the southernmost tip of the continental U.S.—quirky, free-spirited, and pure fun. Have some Key lime pie made from fruit grown just down the road. Indulge in a piece from Alice's Key West Restaurant, or try it frozen and chocolate-dipped on a stick at the Blond Giraffe or Kermit's Key West Key Lime Shoppe. After the sweet tooth is satisfied, watch a sunset at Mallory Square or the adjacent Hilton Pier, where artists vie with one another to woo the crowds and cats jump through hoops of fire! **Tip:** The Marquesa Hotel, centered around a tropical pool, features the best 27 rooms in town and a fabulous restaurant. When you return, even months later, the staff will remember you by name. *Key West Visitors Center: 508 South Street, Key West, FL 33040; www.fl-keys.com.*

3 YBOR CITY Steamy Cuban coffee. Flamenco dancers. A warm, pressed Cuban sandwich. Tapas and a glass of sangría. Locals playing chess on outdoor tables and hand-rolling cigars. Founded by Vicente Martinez Ybor as a cigar manufacturing center in Tampa, Ybor City surrounds you with culture no matter where you go. *Ybor City Chamber of Commerce Visitor Information Center: www.ybor.org or (813) 241-8838.*

TO DO

- Enjoy a meal at **Columbia Restaurant** (the oldest Spanish-Cuban dining establishment in Florida, open since 1905).

- Pick up some empty **cigar boxes** (at \$2 to \$5 a box, they're great souvenirs) at one of many cigar shops.

4 SOUTH BEACH Fashionable clubs, Art Deco hotels, and well-known restaurants make this Miami neighborhood fabulous. One of the coolest things going on right now is a guided tour of the Miami Beach Architectural District. A 90-minute walking tour provides an intro to the city's Art Deco style as well as Miami Modern (MiMo) and Mediterranean Revival styles. Tours run every day (\$20 adults) and depart from the Art Deco Gift Shop on 12th Street. Afterward, stop by the recently reopened Eden Roc: A Renaissance Beach Resort & Spa and Fontainebleau, where Frankie (Sinatra, of course) and the Rat Pack used to perform and mingle. www.miamibeachfl.gov, www.mdpl.org, or (305) 673-7000.

5 ST. AUGUSTINE History is cool in the oldest continually occupied city in the U.S., complete with its own forts and re-enactments. Bed-and-breakfasts, classic hotels, horse-drawn carriage rides, sidewalk cafes, and cute boutiques make this town unforgettable. We like the Casa Monica Hotel, a breathtaking 1888 landmark where you feel the Moorish mood. www.stjohnscountychamber.com or (904) 829-5681.

6 SCENIC HIGHWAY 30A A narrow road dips down off U.S. 98 in the northwest corner of Florida and runs parallel with the beach between Destin and Panama City. It traces the curve of the Gulf of Mexico, and we love the growing area because it's quaint, walkable, and oh-so family-friendly. Plus, it's laced with award-winning restaurants and super vacation rental cottages.

TOWNS TO STOP IN

- Seaside
- Rosemary Beach
- Grayton Beach

JOE PATTI'S SEAFOOD COMPANY This Pensacola seafood market has been family run since 1935. People line up out the door for the daily fresh catch. Watch the seafood brought in off the boats out back, and then walk inside to buy it. **Tip:** Joe Patti's has the best cheeses, deli meats, and sushi in town—perfect for picnics. Plus, they ship! *524 South B Street, Pensacola, FL 32501; www.joepattis.com or 1-800-500-9929. i turn to page FS4*



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8 BOK TOWER GARDENS Cultivate an affection for these Florida gardens that wind through wooded forests. They boast healthy populations of mockingbirds and squirrels, more than 50 identified varieties of butterflies, and a couple of swans. Brag that you stood on one of the highest points on the state's peninsula, 298 feet above sea level. You can't climb the tower, but pause to listen to its 30-minute live carillon concert, rung daily at 1 and 3 p.m. *1151 Tower Blvd., Lake Wales, FL 33853; www.boktowergardens.org or (863) 676-1408.*

9 JACKSONVILLE This is a town of split personalities. You have cosmopolitan on one side and laid-back surfers on the other (with the Atlantic Ocean a mere 25 minutes away). Hipsters hang at The Jacksonville Landing, located on the St. Johns River, which divides the city in two. This riverfront entertainment complex anchors downtown with glitzy restaurants and club. A must-see: The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, an award-winning gallery on the banks of the St. Johns. (Admission is free every Tuesday from 4 to 9 p.m.) Take the *S.S. Marine Taxi* from The Landing to The Cummer, and get an extra-special view of town (\$3 adults, \$2 ages 4-12 for a one-way ticket). *www.visitjacksonville.com or 1-800-733-2668.*

GET THERE WITH EASE

You can walk to The Landing from these hotels.

- **Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront:** 225 East Coastline Drive, FL 32202; www.jacksonville.hyatt.com or (904) 588-1234.

- **Omni Jacksonville Hotel:** 245 West Water Street, Jacksonville, FL 32202; www.omnihotels.com or (904) 355-6664.

10 FLORIDA SPRINGS The world's largest concentration of freshwater springs (more than 700 in all) bubble up in Florida. Dip in a toe at any time of year—the temperature is always comfortable.

SPRINGS TO EXPLORE

- **Deleon Springs State Park (Daytona Beach area):** www.floridastateparks.org/deleonsprings or (386) 985-4212
- **Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park (Tallahassee):** www.floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings or (850) 926-0700
- **Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park (west-central):** www.floridastateparks.org/homosassasprings or (352) 628-5343
- **Kelly Park/Rock Springs (Orlando):** www.orangecountyparks.net or (407) 889-4179
- **Rainbow Springs State Park (Ocala area):** www.floridastateparks.org/rainbowsprings or (352) 465-8555
- **Silver Springs (Ocala area):** www.silversprings.com or (352) 236-2121
- **Weeki Wachee Springs State Park (west-central):** www.floridastateparks.org/weekiwachee or (352) 596-2062
- **Wekiwa Springs State Park (Orlando):** www.floridastateparks.org/wekiwasprings or (407) 884-2008

THIS MONTH

February is one of the best months to visit The Sunshine State. Attendance is down at the big theme parks, which means lines are shorter. Some hotel and vacation rental rates drop in Orlando, St. Pete, Jacksonville, and the Panhandle (Seaside, Sandestin, Destin, and Rosemary Beach). Events this month include Daytona's Bike Week, Tampa's Gasparilla Pirate Fest, and the Miami's Coconut Grove Arts Festival.