

# GT Globility Global Traveler

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# Paradise Found

Seek your personal seaside bliss among Florida's diverse beaches.

BY SUSAN B. BARNES

## SEASIDE SPLENDOR:

*(Left to right) Fort Walton Beach, Amelia Island, Delray Beach, and a roseate spoonbill at the Wakodahatchee Wetlands in Delray Beach*

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## WITH 1,200 MILES OF SANDY BEACHES

throughout the Sunshine State, plenty could qualify as the best in Florida. Of course, the best beaches can be as different as the beachgoers choosing their next destinations. On the Gulf Coast, travelers enjoy calm waters and sugar-white, powder-soft sand, while across the state rollicking waves and gold-flecked beaches stretch along the Atlantic Ocean. Rather than choosing just one beach to represent the entire state, we divide Florida geographically and offer these suggestions for your next seaside getaway.

**FLORIDA'S PANHANDLE** with its Gulf of Mexico coastline runs from Alabama until the

state's peninsula juts south, just to the east of Apalachicola and Carabelle. One stretch of coastline on the Panhandle beloved by Floridians and visitors alike is the Emerald Coast, encompassing Fort Walton Beach, Okaloosa Island and Destin, known as "The World's Luckiest Fishing Village." Not only are the fish biting in this part of the state, but vibrant species also put on an underwater show for snorkelers and divers. The soft, white-sand beaches remain a main attraction on the Emerald Coast; in fact, nearly 60 percent of the area's beaches are preserved in perpetuity.

These pristine beach conditions attract beachgoers of the human kind and wildlife as well. Ornithologists will want to keep their eyes open and

## INFO TO GO

Travelers can easily access each of the beaches mentioned through airports served by major airlines. Fly into the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport to start a vacation along the Emerald Coast or Jacksonville International Airport to visit Amelia Island. Palm Beach International Airport or Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport lie within close proximity to both Jensen Beach and Delray Beach. To visit Marco Island, fly into Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers, and to get to Longboat Key, Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport and Tampa International Airport are your best bets.



binoculars at the ready to spot shorebirds, seabirds, songbirds, raptors and other winged species which either make their homes in or migrate through the region's 12 birding hot spots. Back on the beach, sea turtles nest on these same beaches in the summertime, continuing their generations-long tradition of nesting near the same spot where they hatched.

**IN THE NORTHEAST**, just below the Florida-Georgia border and about 45 minutes northeast of Jacksonville, Amelia Island's 13 miles of beaches have long attracted visitors. First settled around A.D. 1000 by Native Americans associated with the Timucuan culture, who called the island Napoyca, the barrier island has seen eight flags fly overhead, including those of France, Spain and Britain. Pirates had their fun here, too. During its Golden Age, from 1870 to 1910, wealthy Americans built Victorian-style homes in what became known as the Silk Stocking District in the present-day Fernan-

dina Beach Historic District.

Popular beachside activities include beachcombing, fishing, jogging and flying kites on a breezy day. Dive into the Atlantic waves and enjoy swimming, surfing and boogie boarding, or take your four-legged friend on a walk (remember, stay on leash) and discover the shoreline together. Keep an eye out for fossilized sharks' teeth that wash ashore, a fun, prehistoric find.

**ON THE EASTERN SHORE**, north of West Palm Beach, discover Florida's Treasure Coast, boasting 20 miles of unspoiled beaches and offering a welcome respite from the electric buzz of Miami Beach, about 115 miles to the south. Instead of high-rise hotels and throngs of people, visitors to Jensen Beach (officially known as Jensen Sea Turtle Beach) on Hutchinson Island find arches of native mangroves giving way to wide beaches where one can easily find quiet spots to lay down a towel or blanket and soak in the day. Lifeguards are on duty seven days a week to

## LODGING

### THE HENDERSON RESORT & SPA

This dog-friendly beachfront resort overlooks not only Emerald Coast's beaches but its sunrises and sunsets, too. Luxurious accommodations, an exquisite spa and plenty of dining options ensure you'll never want to leave.

200 Henderson Resort Way, Destin  
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### HUTCHINSON SHORES RESORT & SPA

The first resort built here in nearly two decades opened two years ago and features 178 oceanfront accom-

modations with private balconies. Enjoy views of the Atlantic Ocean at Drift Kitchen + Bar.

3793 N.E. Ocean Blvd., Jensen Beach  
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**JW MARRIOTT MARCO ISLAND BEACH RESORT** When the exclusive adults-only Paradise by Sirene escape debuted last year, it revealed an all-new level of luxury on the southwest coast, offering curated luxury experiences to its guests. Savor a memorable dinner at Ario.

400 S. Collier Blvd., Marco Island  
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## DINING

### BOSTON'S ON THE BEACH

Diners have enjoyed a taste of New England in Delray Beach for 35 years. The Beach, as it's known by locals, serves one of the best lobster rolls outside of Maine. There's a pooch menu, too, for the pups.

40 S. Ocean Blvd., Delray Beach  
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### HARRY'S CONTINENTAL KITCHENS

For 40 years Harry's has served locals and visitors, and they keep coming back for more. Guests' dinner favorites include the seared sea scallops with a tropical fruit compote.

525 St. Judes Drive, Longboat Key  
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### SALT

Savor the flavor of just-caught seafood and the finest steaks, simply yet elegantly prepared and served in a contemporary coastal setting.

4750 Amelia Island Parkway,  
Fernandina Beach, Amelia Island  
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watch over the frolicking in the waves. If the Atlantic Ocean seems a bit too brisk for a dip, walk or jog along the water's edge. Four-legged travelers are welcome at Jensen Beach, too; just be sure to stay within the permitted boundaries and keep Fido on a leash.

**ABOUT AN HOUR** and a half south of Jensen Beach lies Delray Beach, between West Palm and Fort Lauderdale. Three separate media outlets named this southeast Florida destination the Most Fun Small Town, and it offers plenty to keep busy — or not, if you prefer — during a visit. On the beach, in addition to lazing the days away under the sun or under an umbrella, beach goers can rent kayaks, stand-up paddleboards or catamarans to explore atop the Atlantic Ocean or grab a snorkel and dive in to take a look below the water's surface.

When the sun goes down, the evenings heat up on Atlantic Avenue, stretching a mile or so from the beach and lined with boutiques, art galleries, sidewalk cafés, restaurants and bars. Delray Beach sports a European feel, and one can easily blend right in.

**ACROSS THE STATE FROM** Delray Beach, in southwest Florida, the Paradise Coast boasts 30 miles of wide, white-sand beaches

and comprises the communities of Naples and Marco Island as well as the wilderness of the Everglades. At the southernmost tip of the coast, Marco Island proves a sheller's paradise, where all types of naturally made treasures wait to be found. Let the warm Gulf of Mexico waters wash over your toes as your eyes sweep across the soft sand in search of that special shell or maybe even a sun-bleached sand dollar to remind you of your visit. Take a break from seashell seeking to simply relax under the warm Florida sun, and then watch it set over the Gulf. If you are lucky, you may just spot the elusive green flash just as the sun dips below the horizon.

**BETWEEN SARASOTA AND TAMPA** on Florida's west coast, Longboat Key offers a tranquil beach retreat with not much more to do than sit back, relax and experience the Gulf of Mexico. Sure, you'll find more activity in Lido Key and shopping in St. Armand's Circle, but Longboat Key is where travelers go when they really want to unwind and get away from the everyday world. If a rainy day does come along during a visit, pop down to Mote Marine Aquarium for an up-close look at the marine life that lives under the sea. The aquarium, also a research and rehabilitation center, offers plenty to learn while there.

**DOCKSIDE:**  
*Riverway leading to the ocean on Marco Island*

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