

Beach Bound

Leave your cares and your coats behind. Head to Siesta Key for a paradise of crystal sands, blue water, and golden sunshine.



Siesta Key's Gulf front makes a delightful resting place.

Wriggling my toes into the sun-warmed sand, I smile. My everyday worries slip away as I let my arm drop contentedly to the side of the beach chair. A balmy breeze stirs.

Yes, I've found paradise. I'm one of the fortunate few who've discovered Siesta Key, an 8-mile-long barrier island just south of Sarasota and Longboat Key, perfect for a winter retreat.

Many consider Siesta Key the Sunshine State's most romantic getaway. Others consider it the hidden jewel of Florida's West Coast. To me, it's simply bliss.

The Sands of Time

As a sun worshipper, I'm enthralled with the three distinct beaches. The largest and prettiest, Siesta Beach is known for winning Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute's "World's Finest, Whitest Sand" award based upon its content (99% quartz), texture (crystal shapes), and the amount of shoreline (quite wide). The shallow, robin's-egg blue waters lap the shore, making it ideal for children. Plus, lifeguards patrol year-round. Because of its width, Siesta Beach never feels crowded; you can be happy here all day. It's less than a block from the village (the several public parking lots fill up quickly by midday), so you can walk into town for lunch.

A couple of miles away, Crescent Beach centers around the Stickney Point Bridge to the mainland and ends at Point of Rocks. This is the place to tote your fins and mask for snorkeling around Point of Rocks, which teems with underwater wildlife.

Farther south, Turtle Beach remains the most private. It's also the best place for early-morning beachcombing. There are no lifeguards here. When the parking lots fill at Siesta Beach and Crescent, Turtle has plenty of room.



above, left: The entire island offers excellent bike paths.; above, right: The backwaters adjoining the Intracoastal Waterway provide a delightful place to paddle.

Very Village

Several tiki bars and pub like restaurants line the village's boulevard. My favorite, Daiquiri Deck, serves up a basket of pan-seared shark bites that come with a creamy Caribbean sauce and mango salsa. Afterward, pay a visit to Big Olaf Creamery for homemade ice cream piled high on a cone.

When you just have to shop, January's sales indulge those passions more affordably. Visit Monda's to flip through the racks of resort wear and Foxy Lady to fantasize about the high-end boutique clothes and shoes. At Lotions & Potions, you pick the product (sunscreen, bath oil, foot cream, etc.) and then add a designer scent--all for a fraction of department store costs. Over at Rainforest Flowers, Gifts, and Antiques, you'll discover lovely, one-of-a-kind items such as jewelry and decorating accessories. And the best Florida souvenirs fill the shelves at Beach Bazaar.

Serious About Dining

The island's restaurants are so good, they provide reason alone to visit.

The prettiest setting greets you at The Summerhouse Restaurant. The grounds once housed a garden shop, and it looks as if all the tropical plants jumped out of their pots and took root. Start with the sashimi appetizer--a platter of rare ahi tuna slices served with the requisite wasabi, ginger, and marinated cucumbers (\$10). You'll find heaven in the tender New Zealand rack of lamb (\$34) and the melt-in-your-mouth pork tenderloin (\$25).



above, left: The appetizers and salads at Ophelia's are as impeccable as the entrées.

One of my favorite ethnic restaurants in Florida--Javier's, a Peruvian-American eatery--maintains a strong local following (reservations are a must). I adore the Seafood Puteria (\$15.95), which combines shrimp, scallops, calamari, mussels, fish, capers, and olives in a spicy broth.

For a leisurely breakfast or brunch, join the locals at The Broken Egg, which dishes up special quiches and omelets daily. I especially like the fruit pancakes (\$4.49).

The patio tables at Maximo grab my attention for a fusion of South African and Italian specialties. Try the spinach with pears, grapefruit, Gorgonzola cheese, and balsamic vinaigrette (\$5). They also serve sandwiches and pastas, as well as a full dinner menu.

For pure extravagance, choose Ophelia's on the Bay across from Turtle Beach. The best way to dine here is with a coupon that only Turtle Beach Resort's guests receive. It includes a prix fixe three-course dinner, including a bottle of wine or two drinks per couple for \$70. The menu changes nightly, but during an elegant waterside dinner, you might sup on a savory bisque--chunky with lobster, shrimp, and corn--and munch a



Look to Rainforest for a nice selection of gifts

salad of hearts of palm with pine nuts and goat cheese. If the menu offers it, select the Black Bass en Papilot with hearts of palm, heirloom tomatoes, and black truffle butter for an entrée. Without the coupon, this same meal would cost \$41, plus wine, just for one.

Sleeping in Paradise

Siesta offers a wide range of accommodations, from a chain motel to high-end condos and family homes. Nothing here is very inexpensive during high season (mid-December through April), but you can find some relative bargains. You'll get the best deals on extended stays.

Give the Tropical Breeze Resort of Siesta Key a try for two- or three-night stays. This property fills assorted homes and apartment buildings across four blocks of the charming neighborhood between the village and the shoreline. Each building comes with its own pool, and the resort also has a centrally located yoga deck.

When you're more interested in saving money and don't plan to spend much time in a motel room, or when lodging amenities aren't as important, then opt for the Best Western. In the village, it's less than a block from the public beach.

Turtle Beach Resort treats you to the most romantic accommodations. On the south end of the island facing Little Sarasota Bay, beautiful furnishings, four-poster beds, and private hot tubs make you feel as if the place is yours alone. The hotel offers a selection of 10 cottages on the bay, a heated pool, plenty of kayaks, canoes, and bicycles, as well as hammocks, boat docks, and a fishing pier. The proprietors prefer seven-night rentals during the high season. But off-season, they'll rent you a room by the night.

Each time I return to Siesta, I fall deeper in love with this enchanted isle. When you visit, look for the lady in total relaxation on the beach. I'll be too blissful to wave hello, so just enjoy the smile.

For more information: Siesta Key Chamber of Commerce, 5118 Ocean Blvd., Siesta Key, FL 34242; (941) 349-3800, 1-888-837-3969, or www.siestakeychamber.com.

Where Florida's Sun Shines

If you're looking for a warm getaway, grab your swimsuit, and head to Florida.

Old Man Winter sheds his coat when he travels to the Sunshine State to mellow. There, he joins the throngs in sunglasses, sunscreen, and colorful loose-fitting shirts. You should come too.

Keep in mind that it won't feel like summer but you'll enjoy lots of warming rays. Here are some tips for a winter fun-in-the-sun trip.

Packing Smart

Layering clothing is essential to comfort throughout Florida now. Although it's warmer here than elsewhere, it's windier too. Some strong cold fronts push south, leaving breezy conditions in their wakes, ideal for a light jacket or a casual overshirt.

Of course, you'll want your swimsuit and a coverup for a dip in a pool. Most resort pools stay heated, while smaller motel pools may not. Again, it's all about keeping out of the wind. You won't find too many locals taking the waters in the Gulf and the Atlantic (except for maybe in Miami through The Keys), but that doesn't stop others from jumping in. In fact, Miamians claim the sun shines on their fair city every single day in January and February. Doesn't that sound good?



Glass walls at The Summerhouse Restaurant bring the lush outdoor garden tableside.



At Turtle Beach Resort, your dog is welcome to come along.

Checking In to Theme Park Land

Most Florida weather professionals agree that the hard freeze line crosses through the state from Ocala to Jacksonville. Freezing temperatures rarely last more than a few hours south of this line. Your Central Florida visit will probably offer soft 70-degree days with chilly nights in the high 40s. Even though most resorts keep pools around 80 degrees, be prepared for cooler water after a cold front drops temperatures for a night or two.

Don't rule out a day in the water parks here either. Some visitors agree that this is the best season. Wet 'n Wild, located on International Drive in Orlando and open year-round, heats all its pools and attractions during cooler weather. So many people come here in the summer that you can stir them with a stick, but in January you avoid long lines for sliding and tubing.



Wandering Along the Western Shores

Up north along the Gulf on the Emerald Coast, expect days in the mid 60s. If you see someone frolicking in the surf, more than likely he or she is a Canadian snowbird who thinks this is delightful. If you like quiet beaches and excellent shopping and dining without the crowds, this can be the perfect month. Some resorts have indoor pools--best for winter swimming.

Roll along city streets to enjoy the island.

You'll notice a marked difference down in the Tampa and St. Pete area. It's definitely warmer. High season takes over in January a few hours south of here in Sanibel and Captiva, and the hotel and dining rates reflect it. "We promise you'll not have to shovel sunshine on Captiva," says one local property owner. Again, it's a great place for pools, but the Gulf water temperatures hover around a chilly 65 degrees.

Coasting in the East

Heading south, the subtropical feel begins around Fort Pierce on the Atlantic. It rarely freezes here. Fort Lauderdale claims mid to high 70s during the day. According to the Sands Harbor Resort and Marina in Pompano Beach (between Palm Beach and Miami), the Atlantic's water temperature is higher here in the winter than it is along some parts of the Eastern seaboard during summer.

Your best bet for taking a dip in the Atlantic starts from Palm Beach south. Because the Gulf Stream (that generator of warm water that flows north from the Caribbean) still hugs the coastline, the blue water stays summer warm. You can slather on the sunscreen and jump right in.

Springing Into Action

Check out the dozens of natural springs this time of year for another water option. They typically stay around 72 degrees. What may feel icy in the summer now feels bubble-bath warm.

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