

FLORIDA'S

GULF COAST

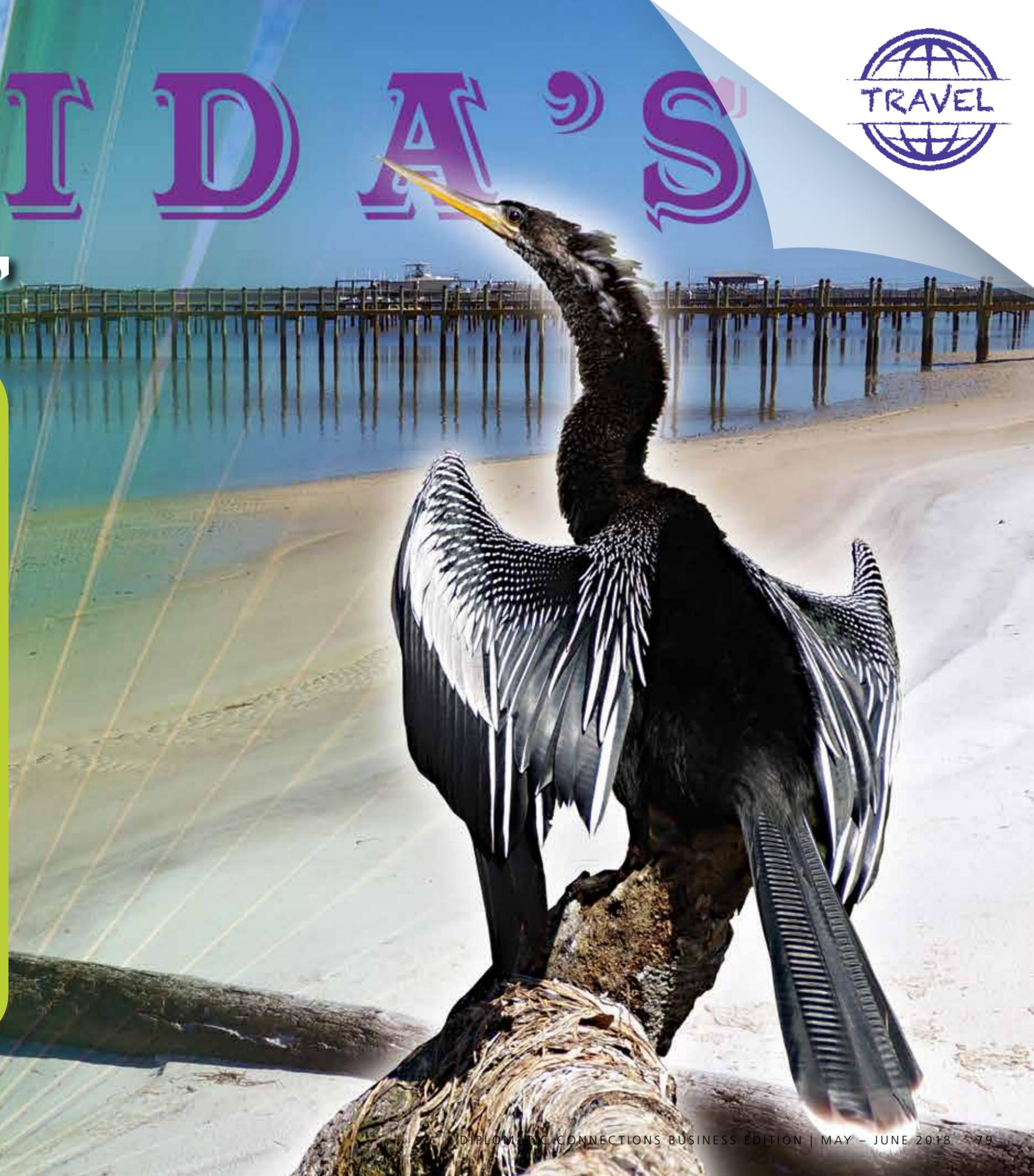
BEYOND THE BEACH

BY MONICA FRIM

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN AND MONICA FRIM

There's a lot more than the venerated sea, sun and sand south of the 31st parallel. Forests, lakes, rivers, marshes and swamps teem with wildlife, both above and below the water. The subtropical menagerie may sometimes seem overshadowed by a giant mouse in a Magic Kingdom, but if you travel along the Gulf of Mexico on Florida's west side, you can get a taste of just about everything—minus the mouse—in one undulating swoop.

COVER PHOTOS: An emblematic collage of the Gulf Coast: palm fronds, quartz-crystal sand on a broad beach, and an anhinga with its wings half-fanned to dry.



Ponce de Leon named it the land of flowers in 1513. Now, some 500 years later, we call it the Sunshine State. It's an all encompassing moniker, evocative of subtropical scenes of splashy flowers and sunbathed shores that either squeak with powdery white sand washed by clear aquamarine waters or heave with mangroves dropping tentacled roots into water the color of tea. Elsewhere knobby-kneed cypress trees stand knee-deep in swamps, black and shiny as oil slicks, and moss-bearded live oaks stand sentinel like gargantuan garden gnomes along streets dotted with capacious mansions from a bygone era.

Florida's western shore fluctuates with nibbles and bites from south to north before it curves west into the "Panhandle" and some of the whitest, squishiest sand on the continent. All along, ribbons of beaches alternate with woods and boscage, stretching like taffy past pastel-colored condos and RVs wedged tightly into parks like plates in a drain tray. Here and there, development gives way to deserted shorelines where soft, balmy breezes pucker the sand into sugary dunes studded with sea oats. Off-shore, a variety of gulf islands, some densely populated, others raw and uninhabited, are strewn like pearl necklaces across lagoons that are a paddler's delight. Whether you lean toward noisy beaches thickset with towels and parasols, or secluded spots far from the condos, crowds and carnivals, there's a sanctuary on the gulf that's just what the doctor, or you, ordered.

Fort Myers in southwest Florida is a lovely gateway to the gulf. Here the Caloosahatchee River empties into the Gulf of Mexico and forms part of the Great Calusa Blueway, a paddling trail that meanders for 190 miles through coastal waters teeming with wildlife. Kayakers can sidle up to dolphins and manatees or see birds such as wood storks, roseate spoonbills, herons, ibis, woodpeckers, anhingas and egrets. Hikers and walkers too, can venture into jungle-like parks and eco-preserves such as the Six-Mile Slough where trails and viewing platforms provide sign-posted information on the flora and fauna that inhabit the swamps and wetlands. Bromeliads poke from the trunks of cypress trees, and ferns and palms shelter myriad birds, snakes, alligators, otters, wild pigs and turtles.

In Bowditch Point Regional Park, on the other side of the city, the protected gopher tortoise finds shelter among the foliage and sea grapes that line the walking trails. The park is also a great place to see butterflies or watch dolphins following shrimp boats out in the gulf.



The Gulf Coast's many nature preserves are home to abundant wildlife, including (clockwise from left) crocodiles, turtles, ibis and herons. Paddling the inland waterways is one of the best ways to see them.



THE EDISON & FORD WINTER ESTATES, FORT MYERS

Remains of the Edison Pier, the first structure Edison built in order to receive the building materials for his estate.



Edison Guest House

Sculpture of Mina Edison sitting on a bench.



To the west, a causeway links Fort Myers to Sanibel Island, famed as the best place for seashells in the western hemisphere, and third best in the world (after Africa and the Philippines). More than 400 varieties of shells wash ashore, many of them intact because there are no reefs offshore to break them.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who frequently stayed on adjoining Captiva Island, wrote, "There is refuge in a seashell." Both casual collectors and serious conchologists validate the sentiment as they search for rare and illusive specimens like junonia and lion's paw. Indeed, refuges of all sorts pervade the entire Floridian peninsula.

On the quiet lagoon side of Sanibel Island, walking trails and kayaking routes wind throughout the J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. More than 245 species of birds frequent the marshes along with mammals that range in size from the tiny Sanibel Island rice rat (found only on Sanibel Island) to bobcats, raccoons and river otters. Other visitors include snakes, crocodiles, tortoises, and manatees.

Back on the mainland, museums, theaters, galleries and historic homes serve as sophisticated refuges for the culturally inclined.

At the Edison and Ford Winter Estates visitors can pay homage to two of the most famous icons of the Gilded Age, inventor Thomas Edison and automobile magnate, Henry Ford. In the late 1800s, Edison bought 13 acres of land along the Caloosahatchee River and outfitted it with

buildings that included his home, Seminole Lodge, a laboratory and sweeping exotic gardens. In 1916, Edison's friend Henry Ford purchased the Craftsman bungalow next door, known as The Mangoes.

The estate complex includes both Edison and Ford homes, the Edison Botanic Research Laboratory, and the Museum, which boasts interactive exhibits along with displays of artifacts and inventions. With his name on 1,093 patents, Edison was considered the most prolific patent holder in the United States. He forged a partnership with Harvey Firestone and Henry Ford in the Edison Botanic Research Corporation, and made it his quest to develop a source of rubber in the United States. Toward that end, he planted a variety of rubber producing trees in his gardens, which also featured exotic fare like giant bougainvillea, dwarf pandanus, royal palms, ylang-ylang and bamboo.

Next to the light bulb and the car, who doesn't love a circus?

In Sarasota, Cà'd'Zan, (House of John in the Venetian dialect) may not be the Ringlings' greatest show on earth but it's likely Sarasota's most extravagant. Its famous residents, John and Mabel Ringling, spared no expense in outfitting their refuge—a 36,000 square foot palazzo—with all the hallmarks of a Venetian palace: plush velvet curtains, gilded furnishings, precious art, and lavish collectibles that glow with the sheen of time and money. The villa is part of The Ringling, a museum complex that

Ca' d'Zan at The Ringling, Sarasota



Laid-back travellers can still find undeveloped beaches along the Gulf Coast.



includes the Museum of Art (officially Florida's state art museum), the Circus Museum and Tibbals Learning Center with scale models of circus displays. The grounds include Mable Ringling's Rose Garden, the Secret Garden and the gravesite of John and Mable Ringling. Also in the complex are the historic Asolo Theater, the Ringling Art Library and the FSU Center for the Performing Arts.

Sarasota is considered one of Florida's classiest cities. With a variety of cultural attractions, the city attracts a sophisticated clientele whose penchant for the performing arts draws them to ballet, opera and orchestral works. Unlike many resort cities, Sarasota boasts no amusement rides or carnivals. The kiddies might feel short-changed—unless their idea of rip-roaring fun is spending a quiet evening with *The Barber of Seville*. More child-friendly

fare can be found at Sarasota Jungle Gardens where pink flamingos and performances by parrots and birds of prey bring out the playful spirit in kids and adults alike.

Beach lovers too will find their groove on any of the three nearby keys that stretch for 40 miles along the gulf. The largest is Siesta Key, known for some of the whitest, brightest sand in the country. Its neighbor, Lido Key, is a high end vacation resort lush with blooming bushes, flowers and Australian pines, while Longboat Key bills itself as the "jewel of the keys"—a six-mile stretch of condos with a restrictive development code that has kept development at bay. Trees, shrubbery and flowers are incorporated into the architecture, and tropical flowers bloom all year long along the aptly named Avenue of Flowers, Longboat Key's main shopping area. The island is popular but not overcrowded.

It's even less crowded on Caladesi Island and Honeymoon Island, two undeveloped islands off the coast of Dunedin about 80 miles north of Sarasota. While Honeymoon Island is connected by causeway to the mainland, Caladesi is accessible only by ferry or kayak. Both islands feature miles of sandy beaches gulf side along with virgin slash pines and mangrove-lined inlets lagoon side. Trails and elevated observation decks provide fantastic views of the native denizens in their natural habitats.

With so many barrier islands strung like multi-faceted beads between Fort Myers and Pensacola, there's an isle for every taste. Access is usually from nearby coastal towns whose attractions developed according to the first settlers' social standings and heritages. Tampa was once the home

of thousands of immigrant cigar workers who left their mark in the historic Ybor district. The streets are still paved with their original red bricks, but the former cigar factory is now a fashionable square with shops, restaurants and a recreated cigar worker's cottage.

Across Tampa Bay, St. Petersburg is a mecca of museums, restaurants and beaches. It holds the Guinness World Record for the most consecutive days of sunshine (768 days) and an average of 361 days a year. No wonder it emerged as the state's most coveted retirement community from the 1940s to 1970s. Today its demographics are more inclusive with attractions that appeal to people of all ages.

One of the city's most prominent cultural venues is the ultramodern Salvador Dali Museum. There's an element of surrealism in the fact that this museum houses the most comprehensive collection of Dali's works in the world. The great Spanish surrealist artist himself never set foot in Florida.

About 30 miles north of St. Petersburg, Tarpon Springs bears the Aegean influences of the Greek sponge divers who settled here at the turn of the century. Today the sponges are a tourist draw, planted at strategic spots where visitors on tour boats can listen to narrations on the sponge industry and watch a helmeted sponge diver bring up a specimen. In 1940 a "red tide" disease destroyed most of the crop. The industry has recovered, but not quite to its former glory due to the popularity of artificial sponges. Still the Greek spirit lives on in St. Nicholas Church and in the bouzouki music that trills out of restaurants that serve specialties such as dolmothakia, moussaka and baklava.

To many people Homosassa and the Crystal River are where the tourist Florida ends and the real Florida begins. Here at the southern endpoint of Big Bend—the curve that joins the Panhandle to the peninsula—is one of the largest manatee populations in Florida. Manatees come to the warm, shallow spring-fed waters to escape the cold gulf waters in winter. Also known as sea cows, manatees are actually closer relatives of elephants. (They even have the same rough skin.) Visitors can swim and snorkel with manatees but are not allowed to touch them, as they are a protected species. Someone should have told the

manatees. It seems that these calm and gentle creatures love nothing more than a belly rub and will sidle up to swimmers and roll over on their backs in anticipation. And so the rule is somewhat loose: you can touch with one hand—but only if the manatee touches you first.

As Big Bend arcs to its northern terminus at Perry, it gives up the sandy beaches and fancy resorts for unspoiled wilderness. Tiny salt-weathered fishing villages and homegrown towns with balconied cracker-style houses crop up like stray seeds among palmetto groves, sea-grape hummocks and sabal palms. This is hunting, fishing and scalloping territory where the locals are friendly and visitors stop only to escape, renew and restore their energy. You might find an occasional saloon but life among the reeds and fluttering fronds here is otherwise as simple as it gets—probably something like what the rest of Florida was like before pastel-colored condos, anthropomorphized mice and large-scale tourism took over.

One of the best places to get a whiff of the old Florida life is at Cedar Key, a place frozen in time at the end of Route 24. Here, beady-eyed pelicans strut among fishermen on piers, or perch on weathered posts, constantly on the lookout for treats. A stilt village of bars, restaurants and artsy shops drives a low-key tourist trade. Viewed from the street, the shops are a kaleidoscope of hippy-era blues and purples, but seen from the gulf, the buildings' salt-blasted rear walls are weathered gray as driftwood. It's a collage of contrasts: a thriving modern arts scene pasted onto an old hurricane-pommelled

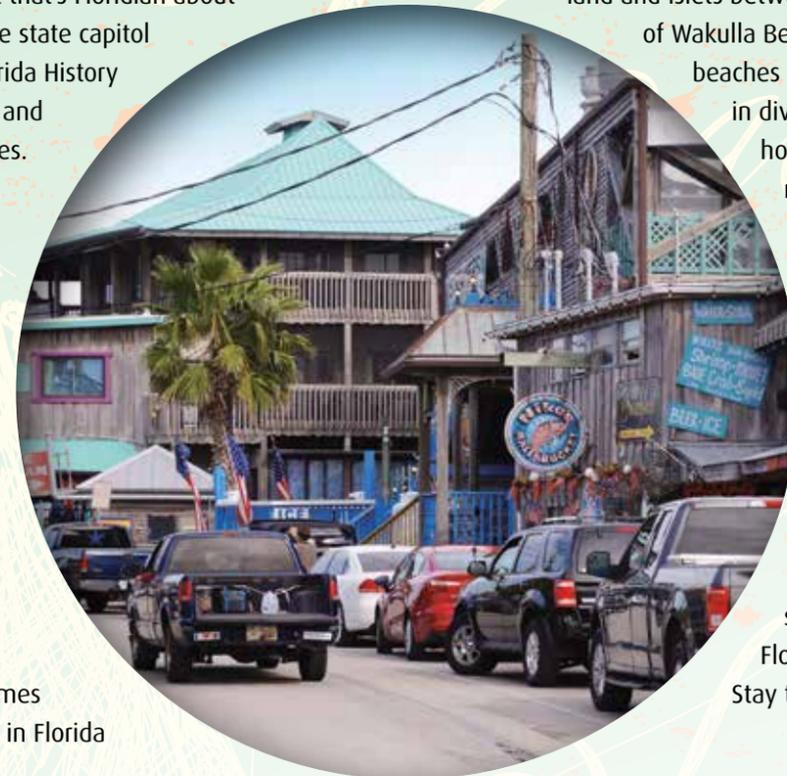
coast. In the village, houses with gingerbread trim and second floor balconies look like something straight out of a Victorian romance novel. The 19th century Island Hotel fits seamlessly into this setting. Reputedly, it is haunted by at least 13 ghosts, none of which have kept it from being one of the most sought after B & Bs listed in the National Registry of Historic Places.

After The Bend, Tallahassee bursts through the foliage in knots and bulges of rolling hills that prove that not all of Florida is flat. Streets canopied with moss-draped oaks and lined with historic mansions dip and wind, suggestive of another time and place—perhaps in the Carolinas or Georgia. There is not a lot that's Floridian about the city except that it's the state capitol and has a Museum of Florida History that's loaded with stories and exhibits from bygone times. Free admission to both the Capitol Building and the museum prove that this is a place where you can get more than you pay for—especially if you park in the lot adjacent to the museum, which provides tokens for free parking to visitors.

While Tallahassee teems with visit-worthy museums and historic homes (including the only house in Florida

designed by Frank Lloyd Wright), there's also abundant fare for outdoors enthusiasts. The Tallahassee area has more than 600 miles of trails that can be explored by bike or on foot. To see Florida's prime meridian marker—the spot from which all land surveys in the state are based—visit Cascades Park. It's one of the city's prettiest green spaces with paths that meander between two ponds joined by a stream and a cascading waterfall.

Southwest of Tallahassee the land returns to beachy shores with jewel-green waters that wash onto vast and often empty stretches of squeaky white spun-sugar sand all the way to Alabama. This is the Panhandle, a ribbon of land and islets between the marshy lookouts of Wakulla Beach and the dune-driven beaches of Perdido Key. It's a study in diversity: condos, beach homes, simple villages, millionaires' enclaves, historic towns and leafy conservation areas form unlikely neighbors. Unbelievably there are still swaths of white virgin sands where you might find yourself alone surrounded by miles of empty, glorious beach. For some, like this scribe, the Panhandle holds Florida's best-kept secrets. Stay tuned for the reveal.



Shops along the waterfront on Cedar Key.



Pelicans on the pier at Fort Myers Beach

Sign at a Fort Myers Beach pier shop.



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