

# Beach bliss

SPRING IS GREAT TIME TO  
HIT FLORIDA'S ISLANDS

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Thinking of escaping to a tropical island this spring? Head to Florida. With 8,436 miles of coastline wrapping this southern peninsula, thousands of islands dot the perimeter. Whether you're looking for a family destination, a relaxing solo adventure or a luxurious couples retreat, Florida has you covered. Try these top island picks.

## Amelia Island

Nestled north of historic St. Augustine, this barrier island attracts foodies, outdoor enthusiasts, luxury seekers and history buffs.

Meander through downtown's historic Fernandina Beach with a walking tour (try the Booze & Bites Tour or Farmer's Market Tour.) Take a bike tour through Victorian-era neighborhoods or a catamaran tour through freshwater creeks and salt marshes.

Explore the outdoors (minus the summer's heat and humidity) by searching for shark's teeth along 13 miles of beaches. Peek at a sea turtle nest during an excavation led by Amelia Island Sea Turtle Watch. Go kayaking along the intercoastal or tee up on championship golf courses.

Dig into history at Fort Clinch State Park, a 1400-acre Civil War-era park perfect for hiking, biking, fishing, and swimming. Time it right to catch an historical re-enactment depicting garrison life in the maritime hammocks.

Looking to renew mind, body, and spirit? Don't miss the Amelia Island Wellness Festival (April 17-19). From yoga and meditation to entertainment and outdoor activities, this spring event empowers you to up your wellness game in an idyllic setting.

For first-class accommodations, stay at either



of the island's luxury resorts: The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island or the Omni Amelia Island Plantation. The properties boast spas, fine dining, upscale shopping, nature experiences, pools, and amazing children's programs. For more budget-friendly options, you'll find charming B&Bs, boutique hotels, and campgrounds at Peter's Point Beachfront Park.

Getting there: If you're flying, from Jacksonville International Airport, it's a 30-minute drive.

## Anna Maria Island

This cozy Gulf Coast beach community gives off an Old Florida vibe. If you're looking for a hopping nightlife scene, venture to nearby Sarasota. But spend your days discovering the charm of the island's three towns: Anna Maria, Holmes Beach and Bradenton Beach. And getting around is easy, especially with the free trolley running throughout the island.

Beach bound? Claim your spot on one of the expansive, sugar-sand beaches, such as Coqui-

na Beach with lots of family-friendly amenities (think playground, barbecue pits and picnic tables).

In the northern end, you'll find historic Pine Avenue lined with shops, cafes, dessert spots and bike/kayak rentals. Pop into the free Anna Maria Island Historical Society Museum and snap a photo at the Old City Jail. Grab some ice cream at Two Scoops before walking to Anna Maria Bayfront Park. The kids can burn some energy at the playground while you soak in the spectacular view of Tampa Bay.

If you're a baseball fan, catch the hometown team, Bradenton Marauders, whose season kicks off on April 9. Afterward, head to Darwin Brewing and Taproom for a thirst-quenching Pirata Pils.

Where to stay? You'll find quaint inns, beach cottage rentals and boutique hotels, but if you're traveling with family or friends, consider staying at the Waterline Marina Resort & Beach Club. You'll love the spacious two-bedroom suites (with full kitchen and living room) just a few blocks from the beach.

Getting there: From Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport, it's a 30-minute drive.

### Duck Key

To explore the Florida Keys string of islands, make your home base somewhere in the middle.

Consider Hawks Cay Resort, a AAA Four-Diamond property located between Key Largo and Key West. A popular family destination, this 60-acre resort also serves as a haven for couples after its \$50 million renovation.

Families love the kid-friendly amenities, such as the Pirate Pool, the teen lounge and the mini-soccer field. Couples love the adults-only Tranquility Pool, upscale dining and soothing spa. And almost everyone enjoys the saltwater lagoon.

Ready to explore? Check out some Keys-flavored sites, such as The Turtle Hospital in Marathon, and History of Diving Museum and The Rain Barrel Village, both in Islamorada. (Look for the village's giant lobster — a perfect Keys photo op). Visit the Dolphin Research Center in

Grassy Key for an up-close look at dolphins and sea lions. And stop in The Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory for a stroll through tropical gardens with hundreds of butterflies and birds flitting by.

While Duval Street famously draws big crowds, explore the Keys' lush natural beauty. Cross the Seven-Mile Bridge for spectacular ocean views, bookended by stunning state parks: Bahia Honda and Curry Hammock. Go kayaking, hiking, snorkeling or beachcombing surrounded

by seagrass beds and mangrove swamps. Head to the remote Dry Tortugas National Park (accessible only by boat or seaplane) for a must-see tour of Fort Jefferson.

Love craft beer? The Keys serves up the colorful Florida Keys Brewing Company (complete with a cat mascot roaming the bar) and Islamorada Beer Company, which produces the fantastic Coconut Key Lime Ale.

Getting there: From Miami International Airport, it's a one-hour drive.

