



Travel



# The Road Less







# Traveled

Away from the beaches and theme parks, Florida offers spring break adventures around every turn

Photos, clockwise from top left: Crystal River manatees; Cedar Lakes Woods & Gardens; Florida Cracker Trail; Cedar Lakes Woods & Gardens



PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: KRISTAL O. RADLINSKI (1, 3); MAURICE RIVENBARK/VISIT FLORIDA; FLORIDA CRACKER TRAIL ASSOCIATION

**W**ith millions of tourists flocking to Florida for a warm spring break, the theme parks and beaches can get pretty crowded. While these popular Florida hot spots are undoubtedly worth a visit, consider going where the locals go to enjoy spring break while avoiding the crowds. Throughout Florida, these hidden gems deliver unique experiences the whole family can enjoy while still giving you the balmy climate you crave.

From horse farms, manatee habitats and prehistoric caves to botanical gardens, mangrove swamps and pioneer trails, unique Florida adventures beckon you away from the crowds. Need some inspiration? Try these off-the-beaten-path ideas for spring break.

## 1 DIVE INTO PREHISTORIC CAVE SPRINGS

As a peninsula, Florida offers plenty of in-the-water activities for visitors. But if you want a unique diving or snorkeling experience, head to Devil's Den in Williston to explore the underground spring tucked inside a prehistoric cave. With crystal clear waters plunging to a depth of 54 feet, the 120-foot-wide spring boasts 72-degree water temperatures year-round.

The cave itself features ancient rock formations with stalactites and fossil beds dating back 33 million years.

## 2 TOUR A WORKING FARM

With tourism and agriculture ranking as Florida's top industries, it makes sense for some crossover activity. Called agritourism, these farmland adventures feed travelers' growing interest in sustainability, food sources and farm-to-table

experiences. One to try in Homestead: Robert is Here, a family-owned fruit stand specializing in rare, exotic fruits and vegetables that also offers an animal farm, kids' play area, picnic tables and live music on weekends.

## 3 SOAK IN THE NATURAL BEAUTY

Waterfalls in flat Florida? Yes, you can find several at the beautiful Cedar Lakes Woods and Gardens, built on a 110-year-old abandoned limestone



quarry in Williston and nurtured for decades into a stunning public green space. Meander through this 20-acre botanical garden dotted with more than 50 garden displays and koi ponds. Learn about the area's flora and fauna in one of their educational programs or special events. Plus, explore the adjacent 64-acre nature conservation easement filled with oaks, cedars, pines, pecans, hickories and dogwoods.

## 4 VISIT A WINERY

On a spectacular 127-acre estate sits Lakeridge Winery & Vineyards in Clermont, just 25 miles west of downtown Orlando. As Florida's largest premium winery, this worth-a-taste destination overlooks more than 80 acres of planted vineyards and serves up tours, food trucks, a tasting room, an outdoor bar and year-round weekend events. The winery's muscadine grape varieties

flourish in the Sunshine State thanks to their disease resistance and adaptability to Florida's warm, humid climate.

## 5 DISCOVER OLD FLORIDA

Long before theme parks existed in Florida, orange groves, cows and country roads crossed the state from east to west along the Old Florida Cracker Trail. It connected the Gulf Coast to the Atlantic Coast, allowing easier passage for pioneers moving cattle in the early 1800s. Today, the trail spans 120 miles from Bradenton to Fort Pierce, giving you a glimpse into old-fashioned rural downtown areas, 100-year-old hotels and the oldest state parks in Florida.

## 6 JUMP IN THE SADDLE

Known as the "horse capital of the world," Marion County boasts more horses in residence than any other U.S. county. Take a guided Insider's Tour of Ocala's working farms through Farm Tours

of Ocala. While in the area, stop by the 500-acre Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park – one of Central Florida's premier venues for equine, agricultural, educational and sporting events, and the official training site for the U.S. Equestrian Team.

## 7 CAMP IN THE EVERGLADES

For a truly unique camping adventure, book a Pearl Bay Chickee experience in Everglades National Park. These sheltered camping platforms jut out of the mangrove swamp, offering an open-air "mini-island" in the Florida Everglades. Get your backcountry camping permit from Flamingo Visitor Center, rent a canoe from Flamingo Marina then paddle through mangroves to set up camp.

## 8 MEET THE MANATEES

For an up-close-and-personal wildlife experience, head to prime viewing spots to glimpse Florida sea cows. Manatees head to freshwater Florida springs between November and April, when water temperatures steadily hover around 70 degrees. Try TECO Manatee Viewing Center in Apollo Beach, Manatee Lagoon in Riviera Beach or Three Sisters Springs in Crystal River.

– Lisa A. Beach



Photos from top:  
Farm Tours of Ocala,  
Lakeridge Winery  
& Vineyards