

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Florida

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Dining in the top restaurants
  - ▶ Landing in the most intimate spots
  - ▶ Playing like an all-star
  - ▶ Partying with the best of them
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**W**hether you prefer diving with dolphins, working on your suntan, or gorging on great food, Florida's wealth of activities, dining opportunities, and entertainment can impress even the most jaded traveler. Millions of visitors flock here each year, drawn by the promise of warm winters, a bounty of beaches, and fabulous attractions — both man-made and natural. But before I dive into the details, I review some of Florida's best places to stay, eat, and have fun. In these first pages, I tell you about some of the things that convince snowbirds, families, honeymooners, and outdoor enthusiasts to come here every year and, in the process, I show you a few things that can fill your to-do list.

Of course, selecting the *best* from such a large, visitor-friendly state is no easy job, and the choices I list here are simply some of the highlights. You can discover hundreds of other hotels, restaurants, activities, and attractions in the following chapters. And, dare I say, you'll probably find a few of your own after you arrive in the Sunshine State. Throughout the book, the "Best of the Best" icon is attached to the places and activities mentioned in this chapter.



I'm going to keep an ace in the hole and save my favorite Florida beaches for Chapter 22, but for now, here are the all-stars.

## The Best Fine-Dining Experiences

- ✓ **Chef Allen's** (North Miami Beach; ☎ 305-935-2900). This outstanding Floribbean (a term used to describe the best of Caribbean and Floridian cuisines' offerings) restaurant boasts a show kitchen and a menu that features goat-cheese-encrusted lamb chops and mesquite-grilled soft-shell crabs. See Chapter 9.
- ✓ **Norman's** (Coral Gables; ☎ 305-446-6767). A perennial award winner thanks to such treats as venison *au poivre* and pork tenderloin with Haitian grits, Norman's is consistently one of So Flo's best. See Chapter 9.
- ✓ **Louie's Backyard** (Key West; ☎ 305-294-1061). This stellar, scenic waterfront spot serves up grilled yellowfin tuna and spice-rubbed venison while you watch a spectacular sunset. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Cap's Place Island Restaurant** (Lighthouse Point; ☎ 954-941-0418). This barge-turned-restaurant on a private island near Fort Lauderdale offers the total South Florida experience, serving excellent, reasonably priced seafood. And there's a bonus: The boat ride to the restaurant is free. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Euphemia Haye** (Longboat Key; ☎ 941-383-3633). This cozy culinary standout offers unique continental cuisine and a romantic atmosphere. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Emeril's** (Universal Orlando; ☎ 407-224-2424). TV Chef Emeril Lagasse's original eatery at Universal's CityWalk beckons with creative Creole dishes, an open-to-view "wine loft" with 12,000 bottles, and a delightful atmosphere. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Beech Street Grill** (Jacksonville; ☎ 904-277-3662). Housed in a historic two-story home, this perennial award winner serves tasty, upscale cuisine. See Chapter 21.
- ✓ **Marker 32** (Jacksonville; ☎ 904-223-1534). This Jacksonville foodie hot spot features a million-dollar view of the Intracoastal as well as a killer chipotle-rubbed beef tenderloin. See Chapter 21.

## The Best Places for Fresh Seafood

- ✓ **Joe's Stone Crab** (Miami's South Beach; ☎ 305-673-0365). This South Beach institution wins the Great Crab War by serving the most succulent stone crab in town (some say it's a monopoly), providing an amusing see-scape of Miami's movers, shakers, and most curious — and crab-crazy — tourists. See Chapter 9.
- ✓ **Atlantic's Edge** (Islamorada; ☎ 305-664-4651). This Keys standout makes a mean Thai-spiced snapper, or you can bring your own catch, and the staff will prepare it for you. See Chapter 11.

- ✓ **Testa's** (Palm Beach; ☎ 561-832-0992). The Palm Beach mainstay continues its 75-year family tradition with seared tuna, almond-crusted prawns, and an amazing seafood marinara. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Ted Peters' Famous Smoked Fish** (St. Petersburg; ☎ 727-381-7931). Life doesn't get much better than sipping a cold beer while diving into red-oak-smoked mullet, mackerel, and more at this open-air St. Petersburg institution. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Blasé Café** (Sarasota; ☎ 941-349-9822). Don't be fooled by the name of this awesome local favorite. There's nothing blasé about Chef Todd's fresh fish du jour. See Chapter 16.

## The Best Romantic Hideaways

- ✓ **Little Palm Island** (Little Torch Key; ☎ 800-343-8567). This sublime resort, tucked away on a 5-acre isle near Little Torch Key, is only accessible by boat. Kids under 16 are prohibited, and the rooms don't have phones, TVs, or alarm clocks. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Cheeca Lodge** (Islamorada; ☎ 800-327-2888) Cheeca, appropriately pronounced *chic-aahh*, is a world-class resort with a laid-back style that positively encourages the sharing of private moments. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Marquesa Hotel** (Key West; ☎ 800-669-4631). The Marquesa Hotel's 40 rooms have the charm of a romantic bed-and-breakfast, to go along with four-poster beds, marble baths, and private porches. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Renaissance Vinoy Resort** (St. Petersburg; ☎ 800-468-3571). This swank St. Pete stay has a pampering spa and an ambience straight out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Don CeSar Beach Resort & Spa** (St. Pete Beach; ☎ 800-637-7200). This sprawling pink structure is the epitome of a Gatsby-style mansion with a seafront setting. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Peabody Orlando** (Orlando; ☎ 800-732-2639). The Peabody exudes a sophistication that ranges from its famous marching mal-lards to candlelit dinners at its restaurant. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Casa Monica Hotel** (St. Augustine; ☎ 800-648-1888). Built in 1888, the Casa Monica Hotel has the charm and Spanish architecture common to the oldest city in the United States. See Chapter 21.

## The Best Family Attractions

- ✓ **Miami MetroZoo** (Miami; ☎ 305-251-0400). The city's only zoo enthralls visitors of all ages thanks to a petting zoo and 700 critters, including white tigers, black rhinos, and Komodo dragons. See Chapter 10.

- ✓ **Dolphin Research Center** (Marathon; ☎ 305-289-1121). The Dolphin Research Center boasts the best of Florida's swim-with-the-dolphin programs. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Lion Country Safari** (Loxahatchee; ☎ 561-793-1084). This little piece of Africa near West Palm Beach lets you drive through and walk grounds that not only harbor lions but also elephants, rhinos, and wildebeests. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Busch Gardens** (Tampa; ☎ 866-353-8622). Tampa's biggest attraction offers close-up views of African animals as well as guided tours, shows, flume and raft rides, and five roller coasters. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Disney's Magic Kingdom** (Orlando; ☎ 407-824-4321). This theme park of all theme parks is an American classic. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Disney-MGM Studios** (Orlando; ☎ 407-824-4321). A large piece of Hollywood comes to life in central Florida at the Disney-MGM Studios. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Universal Studios Florida** (Orlando; ☎ 800-711-0080). Less kitschy than MGM, you can find lots of action and adventure at Universal Studios. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Islands of Adventure** (Orlando; ☎ 800-711-0080). Thrill rides and cartoon faves make this Universal theme park one of Orlando's must-do's. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Kennedy Space Center** (Cape Canaveral; ☎ 321-449-4444). Blast off with tons of fun centering on the past, present, and future of space travel. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **Daytona USA** (Daytona Beach; ☎ 386-947-6800). A state-of-the-art, interactive vehicular attraction that's even popular with non-race fans, Daytona USA is one of the few places in the world where speeding is a way of life. See Chapter 20.

## *The Best Chills and Thrills*

- ✓ **The roller coasters at Busch Gardens** (Tampa; 866-353-8622). This African-themed adventureland offers five whopping coasters. The newest is **Gwazi**, a wooden coaster whose 50 mph thrills include weightlessness. **Kumba** and **Montu** are 10 mph faster. **The Python** offers a double corkscrew and a 70-foot plunge, while **The Scorpion** has a 60-foot dive and a 360-degree loop. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Summit Plummet** at Disney's Blizzard Beach starts slow but finishes with a 120-foot, wedgie-inducing freefall. You know that this one must be good because there are viewing stands to watch the suckers — er, riders — make the journey. See Chapter 18.

- ✔ **The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man** at Islands of Adventure is a 3-D simulator that dips and twists through comic-book action. Watch out for the simulated, but very realistic feeling, 400-foot drop. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ The **Incredible Hulk Coaster** at Islands of Adventure launches you from 0 to 40 mph in two seconds and then does seven rollovers and two deep drops — you'll feel weightless, and possibly nauseated. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Dueling Dragons**, also at Islands of Adventure, catapults frail bodies on dueling coasters through five inversions at 55 to 60 mph, and — get this — you come within 12 inches of the other coaster on three occasions. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Rock 'n Roller Coaster** at Disney–MGM Studios rips from 0 to 60 mph in 2.8 seconds and goes right into an inversion, as the 120 speakers in your stretch limo blast Aerosmith. And as if that isn't enough, all this takes place in semidarkness. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror**, also at Disney–MGM, is a free-fall experience that leaves your stomach hanging at several levels — Rod Serling would have loved it. See Chapter 18.

## The Best Places to Get Tipsy

- ✔ **Nikki Beach Club** (South Beach; ☎ 305-538-1111). This outdoor oasis is a cross between the Playboy Mansion and an episode of *Survivor*, with tiki huts, teepees, and, of course, bars, not to mention a colorful array of scantily clad barflies. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Alabama Jack's** (Islamorada; ☎ 305-248-8741). Don't drive too fast or you'll miss this converted gas station on the water that's home to delicious smoked fish and a colorful mix of Harley dudes, old-school, Hee Haw–esque line dancers, and passers-by en route to or from the Florida Keys. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Woody's Saloon and Restaurant** (Islamorada; ☎ 305-664-4335). This raunchy roadhouse bar features nightly headliners Big Dick and the Extenders. The leader of the band is a frequently profound and almost as frequently profane Native American who loves to pick on his audience. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Captain Tony's** (Key West; ☎ 305-294-1838). Some believe that this joint was the original Sloppy Joe's frequented by Ernest Hemingway. Undergarments left hanging from the ceiling pretty much set the tone of this dive. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Stan's Idle Hour Seafood Restaurant** (Goodland; ☎ 941-394-3041). This off-the-beaten-path bar-cum-restaurant has gained fame as the home of some odd events, including the Goodland Mullet Festival, the Buzzard Lope Queens, and Polish Octoberfest. See Chapter 16.

## *The Best Places to Party Until Dawn*

- ✓ **South Beach** (Miami). South Beach, a.k.a. Glitter Beach, is just the two southernmost miles of Miami Beach but feels much larger in stature as an Art Deco District with clubs and bars featuring everything from rock to rhumba. See Chapter 10.
- ✓ **Duval Street** (Key West). The Bourbon Street of South Florida, Duval Street is yet another great place to cruise the bars; also take in the Sunset Celebration at nearby Mallory Square. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Las Olas Boulevard** (Fort Lauderdale). What used to be a dirt road leading to the Atlantic is now a tony street of cafes, galleries, boutiques, and bars. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Clematis Street** (West Palm Beach). This downtown West Palm Beach street offers lively action in pubs and clubs. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Ybor City**. This Cuban enclave near Tampa really gets lively with salsa-fied fun after the sun goes down. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Orlando**. The crème de la crème of prefab clubs and bars, most with a specific theme à la Planet Hollywood, Orlando is central Florida's mecca of entertainment. The city has two very themey entertainment districts. Disney's **Pleasure Island** and Universal's **CityWalk** let you party well into the wee hours. See Chapter 19.

## *The Best Places to Cast Your Reel*

- ✓ **The Keys**. The Florida Keys are heaven for game fishermen (blue and white marlin, bonefish, tarpon, and permit) as well as anglers looking to put something on the dinner table. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Fort Lauderdale**. Fort Lauderdale offers good launching points for anglers looking for redfish, trout, snook, Spanish and king mackerel, sailfish, snapper, and grouper. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Treasure Island**. A good place to cast a line for grouper, amberjack, sea bass, and snapper. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Boca Grande**. The fishing off Boca Grande is wonderful, and things really heat up in July when The World's Richest Tarpon Tournament is staged. See Chapter 16.