

# The Best of Florida

**A**lthough it's the state nickname, describing Florida as the Sunshine State is like calling Katie Couric "perky." Sure, it's true, but not all the time—and it doesn't nearly begin to describe the state's other marketable assets. There's a lot more to the state than just sunshine—which, by the way, isn't even a 24/7 given; it does rain here. Weather aside, choosing the best of Florida is by no means simple. While millions of visitors flock here to escape the bleakness of winter and landlocked locations, they don't all come down for sun, fun, and Mickey Mouse. Granted, the promise of (mostly) clear skies and 800 miles of sparkling, sandy beaches is alluring, as are the animatronics and roller coasters in Orlando and Tampa, but there's much more to the state than that. In fact, in many ways, Florida is like a beautiful, blond beauty queen whom everyone thinks is all fluff until they find out she happens to be a Rhodes scholar. More than meets the eye has made this one of the country's most popular year-round vacation destinations.

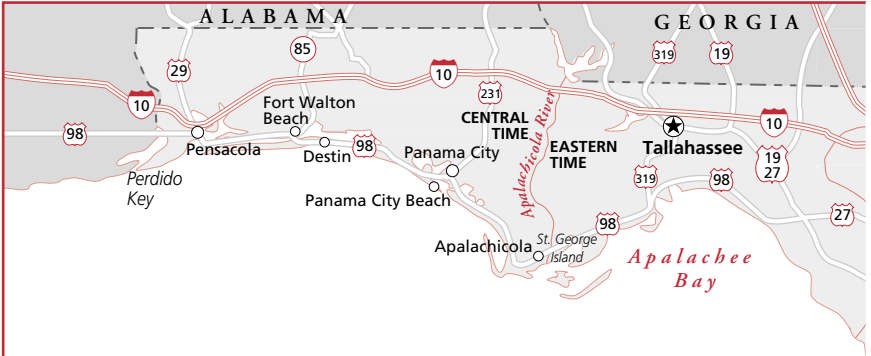
Here you can choose from a colorful, often kitschy assortment of accommodations, from deluxe resorts to mom-and-pop motels. You can visit remote little towns like Apalachicola or a multicultural megalopolis like Miami. You can devour fresh seafood, from amberjack to oysters—and then work off those calories in such outdoor pursuits as bicycling, golfing, or kayaking. Despite overdevelopment in many parts of the state, Floridians have maintained thousands of acres of wilderness areas, from the little respite of Clam Pass County Park in downtown Naples to magnificent Everglades National Park, which stretches across the state's southern tip.

Choosing the "best" of all of this is a daunting task, and the selections in this chapter are only highlights. You'll find numerous other outstanding resorts, hotels, destinations, activities, and attractions described in this book. And with an open mind and a sense of adventure, you'll come up with bests of your own.

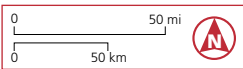
## 1 The Best Beaches

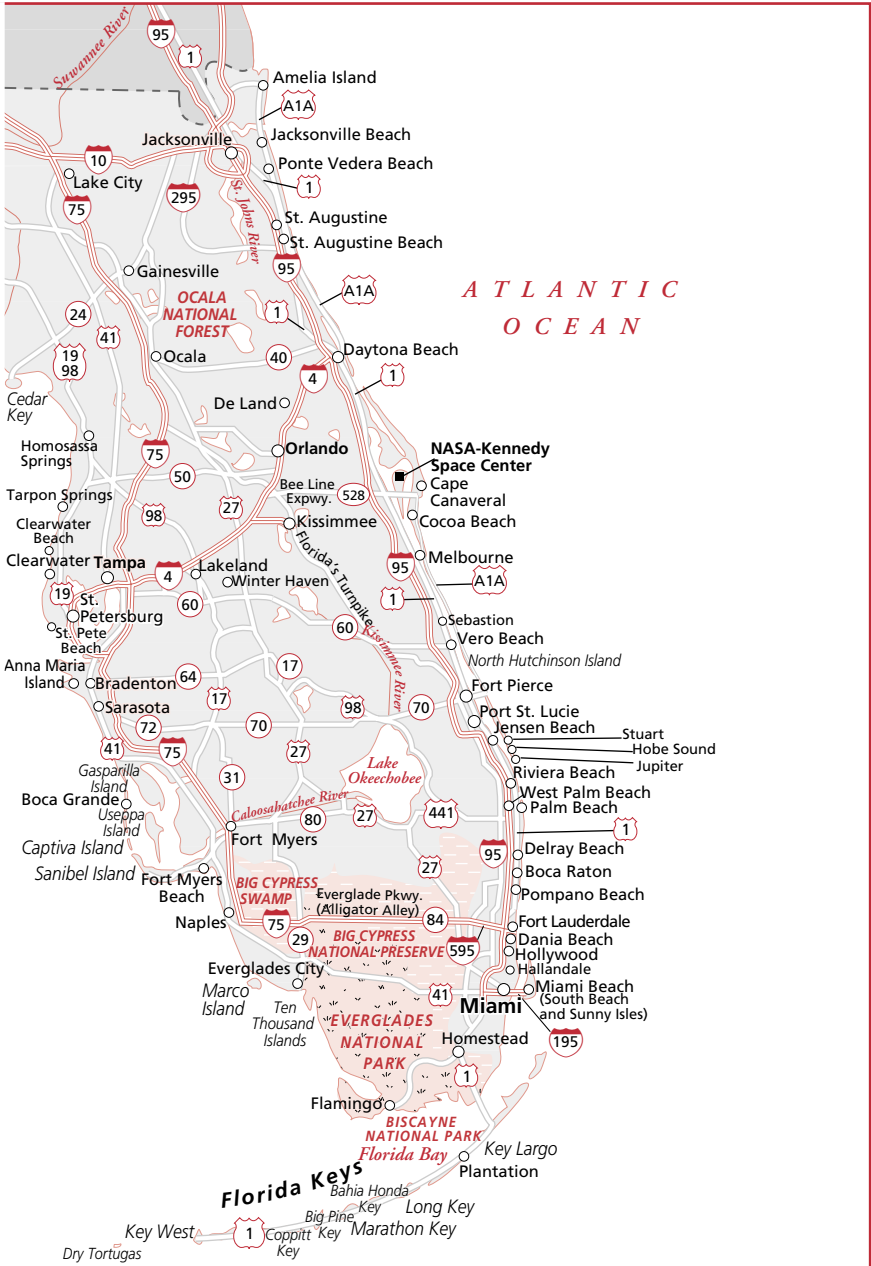
- **Virginia Key** (Key Biscayne): The producers of *Survivor* could feasibly shoot their show on this ultra-secluded, picturesque, and deserted key, where people go purposely not to be found. See p. 124.
- **Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park** (Key Biscayne): The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, Bill Baggs radiates serenity with 1¼ miles of sandy beach, nature trails, and even a historic lighthouse that recalls an era before pristine places like this one gave way to avaricious developers and pollutants. See p. 132.
- **Lummus Park Beach** (South Beach): This beach is world-renowned, not necessarily for its pristine sands, but for its more common name of **South Beach**, on which seeing, being seen and, at times, the obscene, go hand in hand with the sunscreen and beach towels. The 12th Street section is the beach of choice for gay residents and

# Florida



*Gulf of Mexico*





- travelers who come to show off just how much time they've spent in the gym and, of course, catch up on the latest gossip and upcoming must-attend parties and events. Oftentimes, this beach is the venue for some of the liveliest parties South Beach has ever seen. See p. 124.
- **Haulover Beach** (Miami Beach): Nestled between the Intracoastal Waterway and the ocean, especially at the north end, is the place to be for that all-over tan: Haulover is the city's only clothing-optional (aka nude) beach. See p. 139.
  - **Bahia Honda State Park** (Bahia Honda Key): This is one of the nicest and most peaceful beaches in Florida. It's located amidst 635 acres of nature trails and a portion of Henry Flagler's railroad. See p. 185.
  - **John U. Lloyd Beach State Park** (Dania Beach): Unfettered by high-rise condominiums, T-shirt shops, and hotels, this wonderful beach boasts an untouched shoreline surrounded by a canopy of Australian pine to ensure complete seclusion. See p. 241.
  - **Lover's Key State Park** (Fort Myers Beach): You'll have to walk or take a tram through a bird-filled forest of mangroves to this gorgeous, unspoiled beach just a few miles south of busy Fort Myers Beach. Although Sanibel Island gets the accolades, the shelling here is just as good, if not better. See p. 329.
  - **Cayo Costa State Park** (off Captiva Island): These days, deserted tropical islands with great beaches are scarce in Florida, but this 2,132-acre barrier strip of sand, pine forest, mangrove swamp, oak hammock, and grassland provides a genuine get-away-from-it-all experience. Access is only by boat from nearby Gasparilla, Pine, and Captiva islands. See p. 356.
  - **Naples Beach** (Naples): Many Florida cities and towns have beaches, but few are as lovely as the gorgeous strip that fronts Naples's famous Millionaires' Row. You don't have to be rich to wander its length, peer at the mansions, or stroll on historic Naples Pier to catch a sunset over the Gulf. See p. 363.
  - **Caladesi Island State Park** (Clearwater Beach): Even though 3½-mile-long Caladesi Island is in the heavily developed Tampa Bay area, it has a lovely, relatively secluded beach with soft sand edged in sea grass and palmettos. Dolphins cavort in offshore waters. In the park itself, there's a nature trail where you might see one of the rattlesnakes, black racers, raccoons, armadillos, or rabbits that live here. The park is accessible only by ferry from Honeymoon Island State Recreation Area, off Dunedin. See p. 420.
  - **Fort DeSoto Park** (St. Petersburg): Where else can you get a good tan *and* a history lesson? At Fort DeSoto Park, you not only have 1,136 acres of five interconnected islands and 3 miles of unfettered beaches, but also a fort, for which the park was named, that's listed on the National Register of Historic Places. There are also nature trails, fishing piers, a 2.25-mile canoe trail, and spectacular views of Tampa Bay and the Gulf. See p. 422.
  - **Canaveral National Seashore** (Cape Canaveral): Midway between the crowded attractions at Daytona Beach and Kennedy Space Center is a protected stretch of coastline 24 miles long, backed by cabbage palms, sea grapes, and palmettos. See p. 519.
  - **Gulf Islands National Seashore** (Pensacola): You could argue that all of Northwest Florida's Gulf shore is one of America's great beaches—an almost-uninterrupted stretch of pure white sand that runs the entire length of the Panhandle, from Perdido

Key to St. George Island. The Gulf Islands National Seashore preserves much of this natural wonder in its undeveloped state. Countless terns, snowy plovers, black skimmers, and other birds nest along the dunes topped with sea oats. East of the national seashore and equally beautiful are **Grayton Beach State Park**, near Destin; and **St. George Island State Park**, off Apalachicola. See p. 622.

- **St. Andrews State Park** (Panama City Beach): With more than 1,000 acres of dazzling white sand and dunes, this preserved wilderness demonstrates what Panama City Beach looked like before motels and condominiums lined its shore. Lacy, golden sea oats sway in Gulf breezes, and fragrant rosemary grows wild. The area is home to foxes, coyotes, and a herd of deer. See p. 613.

## 2 The Best Fishing

- **The Keys:** The Keys boast world-class deep-sea fishing; the prize is such big-game fish as marlin, sailfish, and tuna. There's reef fishing as well, for "eating fish" like snapper and grouper; and backcountry fishing for bonefish, tarpon, and other "stalking" fish. Dozens of charter-fishing boats operate from Key West marinas and from other, less popular keys. Islamorada, in the Upper Keys, is the sport-fishing capital of the world. Anglers compete for trophy sailfish, marlin, wahoo, and kingfish at many annual big-money tournaments. Seven-Mile Bridge, linking the Middle and Lower keys, is known as "the longest fishing bridge in the world"; it's also a favorite spot for local fishers who wait for barracuda, yellowtail, and dolphin to bite. See p. 175.
- **Lake Okeechobee:** Many visitors to the Treasure Coast come to fish, and they certainly get their fill from the miles of Atlantic shore and from inland rivers. If you want to fish freshwater and nothing else, head for Lake Okeechobee, the state's largest lake, which is chock-full of good eating fish. It covers more than 467,000 acres—that's more than 730 square miles. At one time, the lake supported an enormous commercial fishing industry. Due to a commercial

fishing-net ban, however, much of that industry has died off, leaving the sport fishers all the rich bounty of the lake. See p. 314.

- **Stuart:** Known as the "Sailfish Capital of the World," Stuart is an angler's haven. The fish bite year-round, but peak months are December through March and June through July. Sailfishing is an art of its own—beginners must learn that exact moment to let the reel drag so that the fish run with the lure. See p. 298.
- **Boca Grande:** The deep, shadowy holes of Boca Grande Pass, between Gasparilla and Cayo Costa islands off Fort Myers, harbor the mighty tarpon, the "silver king of the seas." Teddy Roosevelt and his rich buddies used to bag tarpon in these waters, and anglers from around the globe still compete every July in the World's Richest Tarpon Tournament. See p. 355.
- **Destin:** Florida's largest charter-boat fleet, with more than 140 vessels, is based in this Panhandle town, which calls itself the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village." Anglers here have landed championship catches of grouper, amberjack, snapper, mackerel, cobia, sailfish, wahoo, tuna, and blue marlin. See p. 595.

### 3 The Best Golf Courses

- **Biltmore Hotel** (Miami): The beautiful, rolling, 18-hole golf course designed by Donald Ross and located at the majestic Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables is open to the public and is a favorite of Bill Clinton. See p. 91.
- **Doral Golf Resort and Spa** (Miami): Four championship courses make the Doral one of Miami's best golf destinations. One course, the legendary Blue Monster, is the site of the annual Doral-Ryder Open. See p. 89.
- **Fairmont Turnberry Isle Resort & Club** (Aventura, North Miami Beach): These two 18-hole courses by Robert Trent Jones, Sr., are open only to guests, but are among the city's best. See p. 90.
- **The Inn at Ocean Breeze Golf and Country Club** (Boca Raton): For over 3 decades, this inn (formerly known as the Inn at Boca Teeca) has been attracting golf fanatics who could care less about the small but comfortable rooms; they're too busy out on the superb 27-hole golf course at the Boca Teeca Country Club, open only to members and guests of the inn. See p. 267.
- **PGA National Resort & Spa** (Palm Beach): This rambling resort, the national headquarters of the PGA, is a premier golf destination with five 18-hole courses on more than 2,300 acres. See p. 293.
- **Emerald Dunes Golf Course** (West Palm Beach): This gorgeous Tom Fazio–designed course (featuring 60 acres of water and stunning views of the ocean) is pricey, but one of only a few in the area open to the public. See p. 275.
- **Champions Club at Summerfield** (Stuart): The best in the area, this rural, somewhat challenging championship course was designed by Tom Fazio. It offers great glimpses of wildlife amid the wetlands. See p. 298.
- **Tiburón Golf Club** (Naples): Greg Norman designed this course's 36 championship holes to play like a British Open—but without the thick thatch rough. The course is now home to the luxurious Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples. See p. 362.
- **Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club** (Naples): One of the state's oldest, this resort course is relatively flat, but small greens and masterful bunkers will test your skills. In addition, one of Florida's most charming resort hotels is across the street. See p. 367.
- **Mangrove Bay Golf Course** (St. Petersburg): One of the nation's top 50 municipal courses, the Mangrove Bay course hugs the inlets of Old Tampa Bay and offers 18-hole, par-72 play. Facilities include a driving range; lessons and golf-club rental are also available. See p. 411.
- **The Westin Innisbrook Resort** (Tarpon Springs): *Golfweek* has called Innisbrook's Copperhead Course, former home of the annual JCPenney Classic, number one in Florida. Each year, 1,000 students go through Innisbrook's Golf Institute. Golfers from around the world come to play the 600 acres of courses. See p. 428.
- **Walt Disney World** (Orlando): The resorts surrounding the theme parks have 99 regulation holes that let you walk in the footsteps (and share the frustrations) of the game's greatest players. Those with a shorter stroke can play the master miniature courses: Fantasia Gardens and Winter Summerland. See p. 499.
- **Ladies Professional Golf Association/LPGA International** (Daytona Beach): This "women-friendly" course (unless you're Anika Sorenson) has

multiple tee settings, unrestricted tee times, a great pro shop, and state-of-the-art facilities. Designed by Rees-Jones, the older of the two courses here was chosen as one of the “Top Ten You Can Play” by *Golf* magazine. See p. 529.

- **TPC at Sawgrass** (Ponte Vedra Beach, near Jacksonville): With 99 holes, Pete Dye’s Tournament Players Club (TPC) at Sawgrass makes top-10 lists everywhere. The 17th hole, on a tricky island, is one of the most photographed holes in the world. See p. 560.
- **Ocean Hammock Golf Club** (Palm Coast, between Daytona Beach and St. Augustine): Opened in late 2000 with six of its holes actually skirting the Atlantic Ocean, this Jack

Nicklaus–designed course is the first authentic seaside links built in Florida since the 1920s. See p. 548.

- **Amelia Island Plantation** (Amelia Island): This exclusive resort has three of the state’s best courses. Long Point Club, designed by Tom Fazio, is the most beautiful and challenging. Pete Dye’s Amelia Links comprises two courses, Oak Marsh and Ocean Links. All are open only to resort guests. See p. 573.
- **Marriott’s Bay Point Resort Village** (Panama City Beach): Thirty-six holes of championship golf at this Marriott include the Lagoon Legends course, one of the country’s most difficult. Nearby is the Hombre, an 18-holer where O. J. Simpson played a round right after his acquittal. See p. 618.

#### 4 The Best Small Towns

- **Sebastian** (Treasure Coast): Known as one of the last remaining fishing villages in Florida, Sebastian is located at the northern tip of the Treasure Coast region in Indian River County. The area’s small-town feel and laid-back, relaxed atmosphere are among its biggest draws. See p. 308.
- **Boca Grande** (Southwest Florida): Founded in the 1880s, this little village on Gasparilla Island retains the flavor of those Victorian times. Luxurious mansions coexist with simple homes of fishermen who guide rich folks in search of tarpon, just as their ancestors did a century ago. The du Ponts, Mellons, and Astors once arrived for the wintertime “social season” at the town’s railway depot, which has been restored and now houses shops and the Loose Caboose Restaurant and Ice Cream Parlor. See p. 355.
- **Olde Naples** (Naples): Started in 1886 as a real-estate development, the original part of Naples retains

much of Old Florida’s charm, with tree-lined streets dividing many of the original clapboard homes. With the houses on Millionaires’ Row virtually hidden by dense foliage and with no high-rises in sight, Naples Beach seems far removed from today’s modern city. See p. 363.

- **Tarpon Springs** (Southwest Florida): Tarpon Springs calls itself the “Sponge Capital of the World” because immigrants from Greece settled here in the late 1800s to harvest the sponges that grew in abundance offshore. Their descendants make Tarpon Springs a fascinating center of transplanted Greek culture. Sponges still arrive at the historic Sponge Docks, where a lively, carnival-like atmosphere and Greek cuisine prevail. Restored Victorian homes facing Spring Bayou also make this one of the most picturesque towns in the state. See p. 432.
- **Fernandina Beach** (Northeast Florida): You can stay at two of

Florida's ritziest resorts on Amelia Island, but real charm can be found in the quaint town of Fernandina Beach, where a 50-block area of Victorian and Queen Anne homes is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. See p. 569.

- **Apalachicola** (Northwest Florida): Located at the mouth of the Apalachicola River, this Gulf-shore town was a major cotton port before the Civil War, and a later timber boom resulted in the fine Victorian homes that still grace Apalachicola's uncurbed streets. It was here that Dr. John Gorrie invented the forerunner of the air

conditioner, which revolutionized Florida's tourism industry. Today, the town's major industry is seafood, with famous Apalachicola oysters eaten fresh off the boats. See p. 621.

- **Pensacola** (Northwest Florida): One of America's oldest communities, Pensacola has preserved its Spanish, French, and English heritage in the Seville Historic District and Historic Pensacola Village. Spanish-named streets are bordered by French-style wrought-iron balconies reminiscent of New Orleans; the English colonial churches resemble those in Williamsburg, Virginia. See p. 579.

## 5 The Best Luxury Resorts

- **Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne** (Key Biscayne; ☎ 800/241-3333 or 305/365-4500): In addition to the Ritz's consistently superior services and amenities, this British colonial-style version of the Ritz rises above its casual Key Biscayne surroundings with a stellar view of the Atlantic Ocean, not to mention an equally impressive 20,000-square-foot spa. See p. 83.
- **Mandarin Oriental, Miami** (Brickell Key, Miami; ☎ 305/913-8288): The swank and stunning Mandarin Oriental features a waterfront location, residential-style rooms (most with balconies), superb service, a spa frequented by J-Lo, and several upscale dining and bar facilities previously unknown in its nearby downtown Miami locale. See p. 87.
- **Ritz-Carlton South Beach** (South Beach; ☎ 800/241-3333 or 786/276-4000): Taking the concept of swanky South Beach to a very literal level, the Ritz-Carlton South Beach may be a landmark building restored to its original 1950s Art Moderne style, but in terms of the hotel's standout service, amenities, and

ocean frontage, everything else is very much in the immediate present. See p. 72.

- **The Breakers** (Palm Beach; ☎ 800/833-3141 or 561/655-6611): This stately, historic hotel epitomizes *la dolce vita*, Palm Beach style, featuring an elegant lobby, impeccable service, expansive manicured lawns, and a very scenic golf course that is the state's oldest. See p. 280.
- **Four Seasons Resort Palm Beach** (Palm Beach; ☎ 800/432-2335 or 561/582-2800): "Exquisite" is the adjective most often used to describe this posher-than-Posh-Spice-and-David-Beckham-combined hotel. Luxurious but hardly stuffy, the Four Seasons was the stay of choice for quintessential aging rockers Aerosmith, who took great advantage of post-concert pampering. See p. 281.
- **LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort** (Naples; ☎ 800/237-6883 or 239/597-3123): More intimate than the Ritz, the equally luxe LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort offers spacious rooms, each with a completely private balcony overlooking the pristine waters of the Gulf or Vanderbilt Bay. New to

the completely renovated property are four unique pools, two lagoons, an outdoor whirlpool, the Tiki Bar, the 4,500-square-foot SpaTerre, the 2,700-square-foot fitness center, the Gulf-view Baleen restaurant, and a 6,907-yard championship 18-hole golf course designed by Bob Cupp. See p. 368.

- **Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples** (Naples; ☎ 888/856-4372 or 239/593-2000): This luxurious new Mediterranean-style resort takes full advantage of the Greg Norman–designed Tiburón Golf Club. Guests here can use the beach and spa at the Ritz-Carlton, Naples, nearby. See p. 369.
- **Ritz-Carlton, Naples** (Naples; ☎ 888/856-4372 or 239/598-3300): This opulent 14-story Mediterranean-style hotel at Vanderbilt Beach is a favorite of affluent types who like standard Ritz amenities such as imported marble floors, antique art, Oriental rugs, Waterford-crystal chandeliers, and afternoon British-style high tea. Guests relax in high-backed rockers on the verandas or unwind by the heated pool set in a landscaped terrace, but they must walk through a narrow mangrove forest to reach the beach. See p. 369.
- **Don CeSar Beach Resort & Spa** (St. Pete Beach; ☎ 866/728-2206 or 727/360-1881): Dating back to 1928 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this “Pink Palace”

tropical getaway is so romantic, you may bump into six or seven honeymooning couples in one weekend. The lobby has classic high windows and archways, crystal chandeliers, marble floors, and original artwork. Most rooms have high ceilings and offer views of the Gulf or Boca Ciega Bay. See p. 425.

- **Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort & Spa** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-7639): This magnificent Victorian inn has an opulent five-story lobby complete with a Chinese Chippendale aviary. An orchestra plays big-band music every evening near Victoria & Albert’s, the resort’s five-star restaurant. See p. 461.
- **Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Resort** (Orlando; ☎ 800/233-1234 or 407/239-1234): This standout has some impressive treats, including a half-acre pool with a dozen waterfalls, three spas, 12 tennis courts, four Jack Nicklaus–designed golf courses, and a 45-acre nature walk. All this adds up to luxury. See p. 467.
- **Amelia Island Plantation** (Amelia Island; ☎ 888/261-6161 or 904/261-6161): Set amid magnolias, oak trees, and the Atlantic Ocean, this gracious resort is straight out of the Deep South. It’s more rustic than the nearby Ritz, but it has excellent hiking and biking paths, tennis, swimming, horseback riding, and boating. Golfers can enjoy exclusive use of two of Florida’s top courses. See p. 573.

## 6 The Best Romantic Hideaways

- **Hotel Place St. Michel** (Coral Gables; ☎ 800/848-HOTEL or 305/444-1666): This European-style hotel in the heart of Coral Gables is one of the city’s most romantic options. The accommodations and hospitality are very old-world European, complete with dark-wood

paneled walls, cozy beds, beautiful antiques, and a quiet elegance that seems startlingly out of place in trendy Miami. See p. 92.

- **Hotel Impala** (South Beach; ☎ 800/646-7252 or 305/673-2021): During the heyday of 1990s excess, Miami Beach was known for the

- fabulous parties thrown by the eclectic designer Gianni Versace. The late Versace desired an intimate European-style guesthouse that would please well-seasoned travelers, and the Impala is the result. His personal touch on this renovated Mediterranean inn is still evident, from the Greco-Roman frescoes and friezes to an intimate garden perfumed by strategically planted hanging lilies and gardenias. See p. 76.
- **Abbey Hotel** (South Beach; ☎ 888/61-ABBEY or 305/531-0031): This '40s-revival boutique hotel, tucked away in a mostly residential neighborhood, is a haven from the neighboring South Beach hoopla. See p. 77.
  - **Jules' Undersea Lodge** (Key Largo; ☎ 305/451-2353): Submerge yourself in this single-room Atlantis-like hotel that offers a surprisingly comfortable suite 30 feet underwater. Don't worry; there's plenty of breathing room. See p. 178.
  - **Little Palm Island** (Little Torch Key; ☎ 800/343-8567 or 305/872-2524): Accessible only by boat, this private 5-acre island is not only remote, it's romantic—there no TVs, telephones, or faxes in the luxurious thatched cottages. See p. 187.
  - **Marquesa Hotel** (Key West; ☎ 800/869-4631 or 305/292-1919): Don't be fooled by the Marquesa's location on heavily populated Key West: This charming B&B is in a wonderful world of its own, far enough from the tumult, yet close enough if you want it. See p. 206.
  - **The Gardens Hotel** (Key West; ☎ 800/526-2664 or 305/294-2661): A well-kept secret (until now), The Gardens Hotel is an exotic, lush, serene, and sultry escape from the frat-boy madness that ensues on nearby Duval Street. See p. 204.
  - **Sundy House** (Delray Beach; ☎ 877/439-9601 or 561/272-5678): With just 11 suites surrounded by over 5,000 species of exotic plants and flowers, gazebos, and flowing streams, Sundy House is a gorgeous getaway close enough to access the beach, but safely hidden from the mood-ruining madness and conventionality of your typical tourist-class beach hotel. See p. 266.
  - **Island's End Resort** (St. Pete Beach; ☎ 727/360-5023): Sitting right on Pass-a-Grille, where the Gulf of Mexico meets Tampa Bay, this little all-cottage retreat is a great hideaway from the crowds of St. Pete Beach. You won't have an on-site restaurant, bar, and other such amenities, but you can step from your cottage right onto the beach. And if you get the unit with two living rooms, you'll have a whirlpool tub and your own Gulf-side pool. See p. 426.
  - **Turtle Beach Resort** (Siesta Key, off Sarasota; ☎ 941/349-4554): Sitting beside the bay, this intimate little charmer began life years ago as a traditional Old Florida fishing camp, but today it's one of the state's most romantic retreats. It's a tightly packed little place, but high wooden fences surround each unit's private outdoor hot tub, and one-way mirror walls let you lounge in bed while passersby see only reflections of themselves. See p. 445.
  - **Disney's Wilderness Lodge & Villas** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-7639): This property is reminiscent of the lodge at Yellowstone. The geyser out back, the mammoth stone hearth in the lobby, the dining room's 360-degree view of Bay Lake, and the nightly, electrically lit water pageants are just a few of the reasons to stay here. Some guest rooms have patios or balconies overlooking the lake, woodlands, or a meadow. See p. 464.

- **The Villas of Grand Cypress** (Orlando; ☎ 800/835-7377 or 407/239-4700): This luxury condominium resort offers lush grounds dotted with bougainvillea and hibiscus, lakes fat with largemouth bass and bream, and grounds speckled with trumpeter swans, wood ducks, and the occasional fox or bobcat. It shares a golf academy, racquet club, and equestrian center with the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress. Best of all, the woody grounds make you feel as if you're far, far from Disney, which is right next door. See p. 468.
- **The Lodge & Club at Ponte Vedra Beach** (Ponte Vedra Beach, near Jacksonville; ☎ 800/243-4304 or 904/273-9500): Every unit at this intimate hotel in upscale Ponte Vedra Beach has a romantic seat built into its oceanview window, plus a big bathroom with two-person tub and separate shower. Gas fireplaces in most units add even more charm. One of the three pools and whirlpools here is reserved exclusively for couples. You

can even get married in the semicircular meeting room overlooking the Atlantic. See p. 563.

- **Henderson Park Inn** (Destin; ☎ 800/336-4853 or 850/837-4853): Nestled against the eastern edge of lovely Henderson Beach State Recreation Area, this Cape Hatteras–style B&B offers romantic escapes without screaming kids. The individually decorated rooms ooze Victorian charm, with high ceilings, fireplaces, Queen Anne furniture, and Gulf views from private balconies. Some even have canopy beds. See p. 602.
- **Seaside** (near Destin; ☎ 800/277-8696 or 850/231-1320): If residents of Northwest Florida don't stay at Henderson Park Inn for their getaways, they head for the romantic Gulf-front cottages at Seaside. Built in the 1980s but evoking the 1880s, the Victorian-style village of Seaside (a short drive east of Destin) has several cozy cottages designed especially for honeymooners. See p. 611.

## 7 The Best Moderately Priced Accommodations

- **Abbey Hotel** (South Beach; ☎ 888/61-ABBEY or 305/531-0031): Off the beaten path, this '40s-revival boutique hotel gives you good reason to get off the main drag and revel in its quiet elegance. See p. 77.
- **Lily Leon Hotel** (South Beach; ☎ 305/673-3767): A true value, this charismatic and hip sliver of property has won the loyalty of fashion industrialists and romantics alike. Built in 1929 and restored in 1996, the hotel retains many original details such as facades, woodwork, and fireplaces. See p. 78.
- **The Creek** (South Beach; ☎ 866/445-4800 or 305/538-1951): Part Playboy penthouse and part Jetsons, the Creek is a kitschy haven for

hipsters who don't feel the need to spend \$400 a night for a cool hotel. Of the three types of rooms, the Waterway Standards are the way to go: 18 signature rooms designed by local artists and designers. With an 8,000-square-foot pool deck, 40-foot fully stocked bar, outdoor barbecues, Ms. Pacman, pool tables, and theater, The Creek is somewhere you wouldn't mind being stuck without a paddle. See p. 79.

- **Pelican Hotel** (South Beach; ☎ 800/7-PELICAN or 305/673-3373): Owned by the creative owners of the Diesel jeans company, the Pelican is South Beach's only self-professed "toy-hotel," in which each of its 30 rooms and suites is decorated as

- outrageously as some of the area's more colorful drag queens. See p. 78.
- **Indian Creek Hotel** (Miami Beach; ☎ 800/491-2772 or 305/531-2727): A charming Key West-style hotel that's full of character, the Indian Creek Hotel takes you back in time, with period furnishings, attitude-free service, and a quaint pool and garden completely lacking water slides, Tiki huts, or calypso bands. See p. 83.
  - **Whitelaw Hotel** (South Beach; ☎ 305/398-7000): With a slogan that reads, "Clean sheets, hot water, and stiff drinks," the Whitelaw stands apart from the other boutique hotels with its fierce sense of humor, but it never compromises on the fabulous amenities found at some of the area's more serious properties. See p. 79.
  - **Conch Key Cottages** (Marathon; ☎ 800/330-1577 or 305/289-1377): This oceanfront hideaway offers rustic but immaculate and well-outfitted cottages that are especially popular with families. Each has a hammock, barbecue grill, and kitchen. See p. 179.
  - **Banyan Marina Resort** (Fort Lauderdale; ☎ 954/524-4430): These fabulous waterfront apartments located on a beautifully landscaped residential island may hear you vow never to stay in a hotel again. See p. 251.
  - **Hotel Biba** (West Palm Beach; ☎ 561/832-0094): The mod squad has adopted—and adapted—this '40s-style motel into a Jetsonian, jet-set hangout that provides swank and sleek shelter from the upper-crusty hotels that surround it. See p. 284.
  - **Island's End Resort** (St. Pete Beach; ☎ 727/360-5023): A wonderful respite from the madding crowd, and a great bargain to boot, this little all-cottage hideaway sits on the southern tip of St. Pete Beach, smack-dab on Pass-a-Grille, where the Gulf of Mexico meets Tampa Bay. You can step from the six contemporary cottages right onto the beach. One unit even has a private pool. See p. 426.
  - **Disney's Port Orleans Resort** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-7639 or 407/934-3400): Here's good value by Disney standards. It has dual Southern charm in its French Quarter and Riverside areas, and the pool has a water slide that curves out of a faux dragon's mouth. See p. 464.
  - **Staybridge Suites** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 800/866-4549 or 407/238-0777): Close to the action of Downtown Disney and the theme parks, this resort's one- and two-bedroom suites have full kitchens and are larger and more comfortable than most of the competition's. And to help you relax, the resort will do your grocery shopping for you, so you don't have to deal with the hassle. See p. 469.
  - **Casa Monica Hotel** (St. Augustine; ☎ 800/648-1888 or 904/827-1888): Built in 1888 as a luxury hotel, this Spanish-style building was gutted and restored to its previous elegance in 1998. Most interesting of the guest quarters are suites installed in two tile-topped towers and a fortresslike central turret. One suite in the turret has a half-round living room with gunport windows overlooking St. Augustine's historic district. See p. 549.
  - **Gibson Inn** (Apalachicola; ☎ 850/653-2191): Built in 1907 as a seamen's hotel and gorgeously restored in 1985, this cupola-topped inn is such a brilliant example of Victorian architecture that it's listed on the National Register of Historic Inns. No two guest rooms are alike (some still have the original sinks in the sleeping area), but all are richly furnished with period reproductions. Grab a drink from the bar and relax in one of the high-backed rockers on the old-fashioned veranda. See p. 625.