

The Best of Florida

Although it's the state nickname, describing Florida as the Sunshine State is like calling the former *Today* show hostess 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 Florida than just sunshine—and, yes, we get those pesky hurricanes. 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 many ways, Florida is like a beautiful, blond beauty queen who everyone thinks is all fluff until they find out she's a Rhodes scholar.

Here you can choose from a colorful, often kitschy assortment of accommodations, from deluxe resorts to the few-and-far-between mom-and-pop motels. You can visit remote little towns such as Apalachicola or a multicultural megalopolis such as 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 the magnificent Everglades National Park that stretches across the state's southern tip.

Choosing the "best" of all 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. 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* or *Lost* could feasibly shoot their show on this ultra-secluded, picturesque, and deserted key, where people purposely go to not be found. See p. 146.
- **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 such pristine places gave way to avaricious developers and pollutants. See p. 154.
- **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

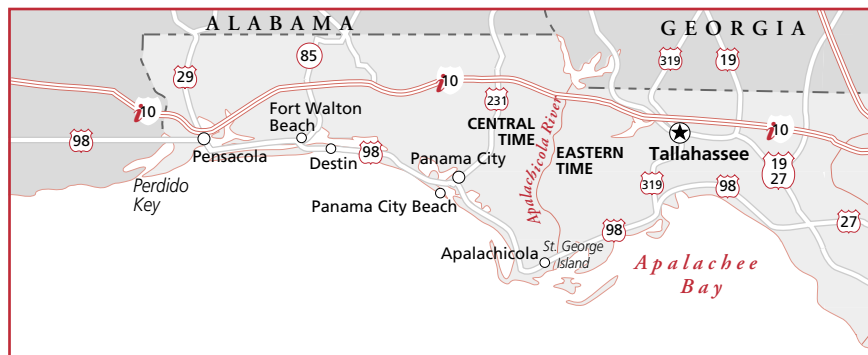
travelers. Often this beach has some of the liveliest parties South Beach has ever seen. See p. 86.

- **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.
- **Bahia Honda State Park** (Bahia Honda Key): This is one of the nicest and most peaceful beaches in Florida. It's located amid 635 acres of nature trails and a portion of Henry Flagler's railroad. See p. 210.
- **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. 266.
- **Lovers 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. 349.
- **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. 373.
- **Naples Beach** (Naples): Many Florida cities and towns have beaches, but few are as lovely as the gorgeous strip that fronts Naples' famous Millionaires' Row. You don't have to be rich

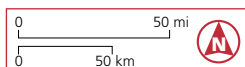
to wander its length, peer at the mansions, or stroll on historic Naples Pier to catch a sunset over the Gulf. See p. 379.

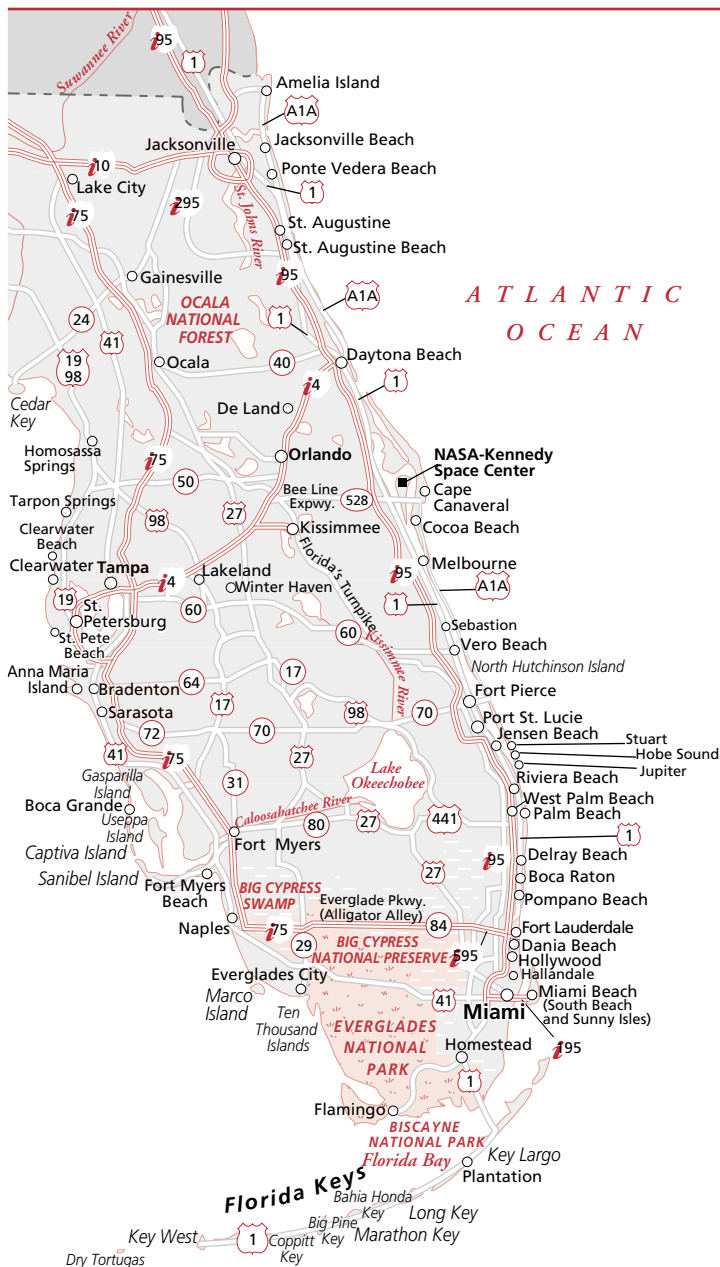
- **Caladesi Island State Park** (Clearwater Beach): Even though 3½-mile-long Caladesi Island is in the heavily developed Tampa Bay area, it has a lovely, relatively secluded beach with soft sand edged in sea grass and palmettos. In the park itself, there's a nature trail where you might see one of the 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. 432.
- **Fort DeSoto Park** (St. Petersburg): Where else can you get a good tan *and* a history lesson? At Fort DeSoto Park, you have not only 1,136 acres of five interconnected islands and 3 miles of unfettered beaches, but also a fort 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. 434.
- **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. 528.
- **Gulf Islands National Seashore** (Pensacola): 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

Florida



Gulf of Mexico





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. 590.

- **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 the area is home to foxes and a herd of deer. See p. 620.

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 for "eating fish" such as snapper and grouper and back-country 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. 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 fishermen who wait for barracuda, and dolphin to bite. See p. 199.
- **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. **Note:** 2005's Hurricane Wilma stirred up the polluted sediments at the bottom of the lake. As of press time, cleanup was ongoing. See p. 335.

- **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 the fish run with the lure. See p. 320.
- **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. 338.
- **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. 605.

3 The Best Snorkeling & Diving

- **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** (Key Largo): This is the country's first undersea preserve, with 188 square miles of protected coral reefs. The water throughout much of the park is shallow, so it's an especially great place for snorkelers to see an incredibly vibrant array of coral, including tree-size elkhorn coral and giant brain coral. See p. 196.
- **Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary** (Bahia Honda State Park): With 5½ square miles of gorgeous coral reef, rock ledges up to 35 feet tall, and a colorful and motley marine

community, you may never want to come up for air. See p. 212.

- **Hutchinson Island:** Three popular artificial reefs off this island provide excellent scenery for divers of any level. The **USS Rankin**, sunk in 120 feet of water in 1988, lies 7 miles east-northeast of the St. Lucie Inlet. **Donaldson Reef** consists of a cluster of plumbing fixtures sunk in 58 feet of water. **Ernst Reef**, made from old tires, is a 60-foot dive located 4½ miles east-southeast of the St. Lucie inlet. See p. 320.

4 The Best Golf Courses

- **Biltmore Hotel** (Miami): The beautiful, rolling, 18-hole golf course designed by Donald Ross at the majestic Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables is open to the public and is a favorite of Bill Clinton's. See p. 164.
- **Doral Golf Resort and Spa** (Miami): Four championship courses make the Doral one of Miami's best golf destinations. The legendary Blue Monster course hosts the annual Doral-Ryder Open. See p. 164.
- **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 they are among the city's best. See p. 164.
- **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. 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. 379.

- **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. 378.
- **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 rentals are also available. See p. 423.
- **The Westin Innisbrook Resort** (Tapon 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 worldwide come here to play the 600 acres of courses. See p. 440.

- **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. 510.
- **Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Resort** (Orlando): No Bermuda shorts are allowed on the four Jack Nicklaus–designed courses, including three 9-hole courses that are played in three 18-hole combinations, and an 18-hole course called the New Course. See p. 478.
- **Ladies Professional Golf Association/LPGA International** (Daytona Beach): This “women-friendly” course has multiple tee settings, unrestricted tee times, a great pro shop, and state-of-the-art facilities. Designed by Rees-Jones, the older course here was chosen as one of the “Top Ten You Can Play” by *Golf* magazine. See p. 538.
- **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. 568.
- **Ocean Hammock Golf Club** (Palm Coast, between Daytona Beach and St. Augustine): With 6 of its holes skirting the Atlantic Ocean, this Jack Nicklaus–designed course is the first authentic seaside links built in Florida since the 1920s. See p. 555.
- **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. Each is open only to resort guests. See p. 581.
- **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. See p. 621.

5 The Best Luxury Resorts

- **The Setai** (South Beach; ☎ 305/520-6100): Simply put, there is no hotel like this anywhere else in Florida. With a *discounted* rate of \$1,000 per night, this hotel breaks the bank and takes luxury to a new level, with its imported, not imitated, Asian decor and staff, outstanding Pan-Asian cuisine, and celebrity clientele. Who else can afford these prices? See p. 91.
- **Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne** (Key Biscayne; ☎ 800/241-3333 or 305/365-4500): In addition to 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. 102.
- **Mandarin Oriental, Miami** (Brickell Key, Miami; ☎ 305/913-8383): The swank and stunning Mandarin Oriental features a waterfront location, residential-style rooms, superb service, a spa frequented by J.Lo, and several upscale dining and bar facilities. See p. 104.
- **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 (a tanning butler!), amenities, and ocean frontage, everything else is very much in the immediate present. See p. 90.

- **The Atlantic** (Fort Lauderdale; ☎ 800/325-3589 or 954/567-8020): Set on a golden sand beach, the Mediterranean-style Atlantic brings a fresh sense of modern luxury to Fort Lauderdale, not to mention a fabulous chef hailing from NYC's acclaimed Tribeca Grill. See p. 272.
- **The Breakers** (Palm Beach; ☎ 800/833-3141 or 561/655-6611): This stately, historic hotel epitomizes *la dolce vita*, Palm Beach style, with an elegant lobby, impeccable service, expansive manicured lawns, and a very scenic golf course that is the state's oldest. See p. 302.
- **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 hotel. Luxurious but hardly stuffy, the Four Seasons was the stay of choice for the quintessential aging rockers of Aerosmith, who took great advantage of post-concert pampering. See p. 303.
- **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. The resort has four unique pools, two lagoons, an outdoor whirlpool, the Tiki Bar, the 4,500-square-foot Spa-Ter, 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. 384.

- **Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples** (Naples; ☎ 888/856-4372 or 239/593-2000): This luxurious 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. 385.
- **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 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. See p. 385.
- **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. 436.
- **Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-7639): This magnificent Victorian inn has a grand five-story lobby topped by an opulent Tiffany-style glass dome. The glass-enclosed brass cage elevator and Chinese Chippendale aviary are examples of the very refined style that runs throughout the entire resort. An orchestra plays big-band music every evening near Victoria

& Albert's, the resort's five-star restaurant, and afternoon tea is a daily event. See p. 472.

- **Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Resort** (Orlando; ☎ 800/233-1234 or 407/239-1234): The impressive facilities at this luxury resort include a half-acre pool with a dozen waterfalls, caves, and grottoes; three spas; 12 tennis courts; four Jack Nicklaus–designed golf courses; a 45-acre nature walk; a private lake with its own stretch of white-sand beach; and

some of Orlando's best restaurants. See p. 478.

- **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. 581.

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. 109.
- **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. 93.
- **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. 302.

- **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 are no TVs, telephones, or fax machines in the luxurious thatched cottages. See p. 213.
- **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. 232.
- **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. 229.
- **Sundy House** (Delray Beach; ☎ 877/439-9601 or 561/272-5678): With just 11 suites surrounded by more than 5,000 species of exotic plants and flowers, gazebos, and flowing streams, Sundy House is a gorgeous getaway that's close enough to access the beach, but still safely hidden from the mood-ruining madness and conventionality

of your typical tourist-class beach hotel. See p. 289.

- **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, or 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 Gulfside pool. See p. 437.
- **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. 456.
- **Disney's Wilderness Lodge & Villas** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-7639): This impressive resort is reminiscent of the grand lodge at Yellowstone National Park. The spewing geyser out back, the mammoth stone hearth in the lobby, the Artist's Point 360-degree view of Bay Lake, and the towering forest sheltering the resort from the rest of the world are just a few of the reasons to stay here. Some guest rooms have patios or balconies overlooking the lake, woodlands, or meadow. See p. 474.
- **The Villas of Grand Cypress** (Orlando; ☎ 800/835-7377 or 407/239-4700): This luxury condominium resort has lush grounds dotted with bougainvillea and hibiscus, lakes full of 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 Resort. Best of all, the woody grounds make you feel as if you're far, far from Disney, even if it is right next door. See p. 479.
- **The Lodge & Club at Ponte Vedra Beach** (Ponte Vedra Beach, near Jacksonville; ☎ 800/243-4304 or 904/273-9500): Every unit in this intimate hotel in upscale Ponte Vedra Beach has a romantic seat built into its oceanview window, plus a big bathroom with a 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. 572.
- **Seaside** (near Destin; ☎ 800/277-8696 or 850/231-1320): If residents of Northwest Florida don't stay at Henderson Park Inn for their get-aways, 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

- **Chesterfield Hotel and Suites** (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. 95.

- **Catalina Hotel & Beach Club** (South Beach; ☎ 877/SOBEGRP or 305/674-1160): Affordable and hip, the Catalina is a retro fab stay with stylish rooms, Swedish Tempur-Pedic mattresses, a hot bar, and VIP hook-ups at all the clubs in South Beach. See p. 95.
- **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," and each of its 30 rooms and suites is decorated as outrageously as some of the area's more colorful drag queens. See p. 96.
- **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 and happening happy hours. See p. 97.
- **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. 204.
- **Hotel Biba** (West Palm Beach; ☎ 561/832-0094): The mod squad has adopted—and adapted—this '40s-style motel into a futuristic, kitschy, jet-set hangout that provides swank and sleek shelter from the upper-crust hotels that surround it. See p. 305.
- **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. 437.
- **Disney's Port Orleans Resort** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-7639 or 407/934-3400): With the refined surroundings of the French Quarter, the casual atmosphere of Alligator Bayou, and the stately air of Magnolia Bend (the latter two at Riverside), this resort's southern charm appeals to all tastes. The French Quarter's pool sports a water slide that curves from the mouth of a colorful sea serpent, while Riverside's Ol' Man Island has a water hole and playground with a very Tom Sawyer-ish feel. See p. 474.
- **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. To help you relax, the resort will do your grocery shopping so you don't have to deal with the hassle. See p. 48.
- **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 gun-port windows overlooking St. Augustine's historic district. See p. 556.
- **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 areas), 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. 631.

8 The Best Family Attractions

- **Jungle Island** (Miami): We adults think it's overrated and touristy, but kids love it. You'll need to watch your head, however, because hundreds of parrots, macaws, peacocks, cockatoos, and flamingos are flying above. Continuous suitable, but cheesy, shows star roller-skating cockatoos, card-playing macaws, and numerous stunt-happy parrots. There are also tortoises, iguanas, and a rare albino alligator on exhibit. See p. 168.
- **Miami Children's Museum** (Miami): This museum has hundreds of bilingual, interactive exhibits, along with programs, classes, and learning materials related to arts, culture, community, and communication. It also has a re-creation of the NBC 6 television studio and a working music studio in which aspiring rock stars can lay down tracks and play instruments. See p. 150.
- **Sea Grass Adventures** (Miami): This is not your typical nature tour. With Sea Grass Adventures, you will be able to wade in the water on Key Biscayne with your guide and catch an assortment of sea life in the provided nets. At the end of the program, participants gather on the beach while the guide explains what everyone has just caught, passing the creatures around in miniature viewing tanks. See p. 170.
- **Miami Museum of Science and Space Transit Planetarium** (Miami): The Museum of Science features more than 140 hands-on exhibits that explore the mysteries of the universe. Live demonstrations and collections of rare natural-history specimens make a visit here fun and informative. Many of the demos involve audience participation, which can be lots of fun for willing and able kids and adults alike. See p. 150.
- **Busch Gardens Africa** (Tampa): Although the thrill rides, live entertainment, shops, restaurants, and games get most of the ink at this 335-acre family theme park, Busch Gardens Africa also ranks among the top zoos in the country, with several thousand animals living in naturalistic environments. If you can get them off the roller coasters, kids can find out what all those wild beasts they've seen on the Discovery Channel look like in person. See p. 401.
- **MOSI (Museum of Science and Industry)** (Tampa): One of the largest educational science centers in the Southeast, MOSI has more than 450 interactive exhibits in which the kids can experience hurricane-force winds, defy the laws of gravity, cruise the mysterious world of microbes, explore the human body, and more. They can also watch stunning movies in MOSI-MAX, Florida's first IMAX dome theater. See p. 406.
- **Universal Studios Florida** (Orlando): Universal Orlando's original Florida park has many rides based on Hollywood blockbusters or cartoon heroes, such as Shrek, Spiderman, Jaws, and Jimmy Neutron's Nicktoon Blast. Kids can get slimed at Nickelodeon Studios or get thrilled by the pint-size roller coaster and other fun in Woody Woodpecker's KidZone. See p. 511.

- **Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom** (Orlando): You can introduce your wee ones to Disney's many characters at Mickey's Toontown Fair in the Magic Kingdom—Disney's premier park. There's also a ton of fun on rides themed after Winnie the Pooh, Peter Pan, Dumbo, Cinderella, Aladdin, and Buzz Lightyear. Rides such as Splash Mountain, Space Mountain, and Pirates of the Caribbean make sure older guests have fun, too. See p. 487.
- **Kennedy Space Center** (Cape Canaveral): Especially since the recent multimillion-dollar renovation and expansion, this family destination is a must-see. There is plenty to keep kids

and parents busy for at least a full day, including interactive computer games, IMAX films, and dozens of informative displays on the space program. Try to schedule a trip during a real launch; there are more than a dozen each year. See p. 526.

- **DAYTONA USA** (Daytona Beach): Opened in late 1996 on Daytona International Speedway grounds, this huge state-of-the-art interactive attraction is an exciting and fast-paced stop even for non-race fans. Kids can see real stock cars, go-karts, and motorcycles, and even participate in a pit stop on a NASCAR Winston Cup race car. See p. 536.

9 The Best Offbeat Travel Experiences

- **Jimbo's** (Miami): Located at the very end of Virginia Key, in Key Biscayne, on the lagoon where they shot *Flipper*, Jimbo's has become the quintessential, albeit hard-to-find, South Florida watering hole, snack bar, and hangout for a wacky assortment of colorful characters, from shrimpers and yachters to politicians. Dollar beers and excellent smoked fish are sold from a cooler, vacant shacks serve as backdrops for films, and visitors are able to test their skills in a game of bocce ball. See p. 136.
- **Alabama Jack's** (Key Largo): En route to the Keys, veer off onto Card Sound Road, once the only way to get down there, and follow the Harley-Davidsons to Alabama Jack's. A waterfront biker bar, restaurant, and live-music joint built on two barges, Alabama Jack's on Sunday is the place to be for country line dancers, many of whom are in full *Hee Haw* regalia; lazy folks whiling away the day over beer, conch fritters, and the best Key Lime and peanut

butter pie ever; and just good ol', interesting folks passin' through. See p. 191.

- **Columbus Day Regatta** (Miami): This unique observation of Columbus Day revolves around a so-called regatta in Biscayne Bay but always ends with participants stripping down to their bare, ahem, necessities and partying at the sandbar in the middle of the bay. There is a boat race at some point of the day, but most people are too preoccupied to notice. See p. 37.
- **People-Watching on South Beach and Worth Avenue** (Miami and Palm Beach): As cliché as the notion of people-watching may seem, it's never the same old scenario on Miami's neon-hued Riviera, where equally colorful locals and luminaries proudly prance as if every day were the Easter parade. In Palm Beach, titled nobility, bejeweled socialites, and an assortment of upper-crust folks put on the ritz along the city's version of Rodeo Drive. See p. 300.

- **Swimming with the Dolphins at the Dolphin Research Center** (Marathon): Of the four such centers in the continental United States, the Dolphin Research Center is the most impressive. With advance reservations, you can splash around with dolphins in their natural lagoon homes. It's an amazing experience. See p. 195.
- **Underwater Stay at Jules' Undersea Lodge** (Key Largo): We give this a vote as one of Florida's most romantic retreats, but this underwater hotel is also, hands down, the most unusual. Where else can you have a pizza delivered via scuba diver? See p. 309.
- **Fantasy Fest** (Key West): Mardi Gras takes a Floridian vacation as the streets of Key West are overtaken by wildly costumed revelers who have no shame and no parental guidance. This weeklong, hedonistic, X-rated Halloween party is *not* for children under 18. See p. 38.
- **Babcock Wilderness Adventures** (Fort Myers): Experienced naturalists lead "swamp buggy" tours through the Babcock Ranch, including the mysterious Telegraph Swamp, where alligators lounge in the sun. Although the Babcock Ranch is the largest cattle operation east of the Mississippi (with bison and quarter horses, too), it is also a major wildlife preserve inhabited by countless birds and other creatures. See p. 340.
- **Swimming with the Manatees** (Crystal River, north of Clearwater): Some 360 manatees spend the winter in the Crystal River, and you can swim, snorkel, or scuba with them in the warm-water natural springs of Kings Bay, about 7 miles north of Homosassa Springs. It's not uncommon to be surrounded in the 72°F (22°C) water by 30 to 40 "sea cows" that nudge and caress you as you swim with them. See p. 424.
- **Wrangling an Alligator** (Orlando): Play trainer for a day and meet some of the toothy stars up close and *real* personal at Gatorland. You might even get to be part of the gator show, so hop on and hold on tight. Trainers will snap a quick photo before the gators snap back! See p. 518.
- **Learning to Surf the Big Curls at Cocoa Beach Surfing School** (Cocoa Beach): Even if you don't know how to hang ten, this school will get you riding the waves with the best of them. It provides equipment and lessons for all skill levels—beginner to pro—at the best surf beaches in Florida. See p. 531.

10 The Best Spas

- **Agua at The Delano Hotel** (Miami; ☎ 800/555-5001 or 305/672-2000): One trip to this sublime, celebrity-saturated rooftop spa in a haute hotel overlooking the Atlantic, and you'll feel like you're in heaven. Try the milk-and-honey massage and you'll understand. See p. 86.
- **The Spa at Mandarin Oriental Miami** (Miami; ☎ 866/526-6567 or 305/913-8383): If it's good enough for J.Lo, then it must be good enough for the rest of us. But seriously, this star-studded spa isn't the best because of its clientele, but because of its Chinese, Balinese, Indian, and European treatments applied by professionals well versed in the inimitable Mandarin Oriental brand of pampering. See p. 104.
- **The Spa at The Setai** (South Beach; ☎ 305/520-6100): Nirvana is alive and well at the Spa at The Setai, where the philosophy of relaxation is derived from an ancient Sanskrit legend, natural elixirs, eternal youth,

and Asian treatments and ingredients such as green tea. See p. 91.

- **The Spa at The Standard Hotel** (South Beach; ☎ 305/673-1717): What used to be an old-school, Borscht Belt-style Miami Beach health spa is now one of the hottest, trendiest places to take a Turkish bath in a bona fide hammam, let out steam in a cedar sauna, or get spritzed in the hotel's sublime Wall of Sound Shower. See p. 94.
- **The Ritz-Carlton Spa, Key Biscayne** (Key Biscayne; ☎ 305/365-4158): This spa is a sublime, 20,000-square-foot West Indies colonial-style Eden where you can indulge in more than 60 treatments, including the Key Lime Coconut Body Scrub and the Everglades Grass Body Wrap in one of 21 treatment rooms. For a real splurge, the Fountain of Youth Balance treatment is a 6-hour indulgence with a facial, massage, manicure, pedicure, shampoo, styling, and lunch served on the oceanfront terrace. See p. 102.
- **Marriott's Harbor Beach** (Fort Lauderdale; ☎ 800/222-6543 or 954/525-4000): This \$8-million, 24,000-square-foot European spa is the first full-service seaside facility of its kind in Fort Lauderdale. See p. 273.
- **PGA National Resort & Spa** (Palm Beach Gardens; ☎ 800/633-9150 or 561/627-2000): This lauded golf resort provides the perfect pampering for sore golfers and bored nongolfers, with its Mediterranean Spa offering just about every treatment imaginable, including special ones for pregnant women. See p. 314.
- **Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa** (Fort Myers; ☎ 800/767-7777 or 239/466-4000): Many call this high-rise resort overlooking Sanibel Island the best spa value in the country. Regardless of the price, the spa obliges your every whim. Try the amazing Betar Bed, a suspended "bed of music" that floats you to a level where stresses disappear. There are also mud, algae, seaweed, and mineral wraps, along with Swiss showers, paraffin facials, and more. Day packages, makeovers, and men's sports packages are popular. The fitness center is also state of the art. See p. 346.
- **Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club** (Naples; ☎ 800/237-7600 or 239/261-2222): This modern spa adds complete relaxation to a stay at this venerable hotel, already one of Florida's most relaxing resorts. A deep-body massage followed by a milk-and-honey wrap will leave you on cloud nine, and a special wedding package will have you primed for the big day. See p. 383.
- **The Ritz-Carlton, Naples** (Naples; ☎ 888/856-4372 or 239/598-3300): An impressive, hard-to-leave, full-service spa will leave you thoroughly relaxed before or after your stroll through the mangrove forest to the white-sand beach at one of Florida's finest luxury resorts. See p. 385.
- **Safety Harbor Resort and Spa** (Tampa Bay Area; ☎ 888/237-8772 or 727/726-1161): Tucked away off the beaten track amid moss-draped oaks and cobblestone streets, Safety Harbor is the oldest continually running spa in the United States, and Florida's only spa built around natural healing springs—the feeling is very European. The Phil Green tennis school is also on the grounds, and many tennis programs are available. See p. 428.
- **Amelia Island Plantation** (Amelia Island; ☎ 888/261-6161 or 904/261-6161): Besides a spectacular resort and a stunning spa facility, the Amelia Island Plantation has a dedicated watsu massage facility on its own island right near the spa. See p. 581.

11 The Best Seafood Restaurants

- **Joe's Stone Crab Restaurant** (South Beach; ☎ 305/673-0365): Open only during stone-crab season (Oct–May), this always-packed Miami institution knows how to reel in the crowds with the freshest, meatiest stone crabs and the side dishes to go with them, from creamed spinach to excellent sweet-potato french fries. See p. 114.
- **The Fish Joynt** (North Miami Beach; ☎ 305/936-8333): Although the name does no justice to this fantastic seafood restaurant, the food makes up for it tenfold. See p. 129.
- **Grillfish** (South Beach; ☎ 305/538-9908): The Liza Minelli of South Beach, Grillfish has weathered the trendy storm of South Beach and still manages to pay its exorbitant rent with a loyal following of locals who come for fresh, simple seafood in a relaxed but upscale atmosphere. See p. 122.
- **Seven Fish** (Key West; ☎ 305/296-2777): It may be a little tough to find and it doesn't have a water view, but the tiny, hip Seven Fish isn't about the frills. A mostly locals' seafood spot, the motto here is "simple good food." We disagree. The food isn't simple; it's simply the best seafood in town, with fresh catches of the day, phenomenal crab cakes, friendly servers, and a cool, in-the-know crowd. See p. 237.
- **Atlantic's Edge** (Islamorada; ☎ 305/664-4651): Of the many seafood restaurants in the Keys, this one is tops, with an innovative menu that includes some of the freshest and tastiest fish around. It's also the most elegant offering in the Keys. See p. 207.
- **Marker 88** (Islamorada; ☎ 305/852-9315): Bahamian conch, stone crabs from the Florida Bay, and shrimp from the West Coast are just some of the fresh items, innovatively prepared, at this Upper Keys institution. See p. 208.
- **Rustic Inn Crabhouse** (Fort Lauderdale; ☎ 954/584-1637): A cacophonous Lauderdale landmark, Rustic Inn is famous for its garlic crabs and equally famous for the symphony of mallets crushing them at the table. Despite the newspaper tablecloths and paper bibs, this place is so good that even diva Barbra Streisand stopped by—though she asked the waiter to de-shell her crabs, probably so she wouldn't break a fingernail. See p. 280.
- **Sunfish Grill** (Pompano Beach; ☎ 954/788-2434): Some argue that this is the best seafood restaurant on the entire Gold Coast, and we won't argue against them, thanks to the chef/owner who buys seafood fresh from local fishermen and prepares it with stunning results. See p. 279.
- **Conchy Joe's Seafood** (Jensen Beach; ☎ 561/334-1130): Known for fresh seafood and Old Florida hospitality, Conchy Joe's enjoys an excellent reputation that's far bigger than the restaurant itself. Dining is either indoors or on a covered patio overlooking the St. Lucie River. See p. 325.
- **Channel Mark** (Fort Myers Beach; ☎ 239/463-9127): Every table looks out on a maze of channel markers on Hurricane Bay, and a dock with palms growing through it makes the Channel Mark a relaxing place for a waterside lunch. The atmosphere changes dramatically at night, when the relaxed tropical ambience is ideal for kindling romance. Congenial owners Mike McGuigan and Andy Welsh put a creative spin on their seafood dishes, and their delicately

seasoned crab cakes are tops. See p. 354.

- **Lobster Pot** (Redington Shores, near St. Pete Beach; ☎ 727/391-8592): Come here for some of the finest seafood dishes on the St. Pete and Clearwater beaches. Among the amazing variety of lobster dishes is one flambéed in brandy with garlic, and the bouillabaisse is as authentic as any you'll find in the South of France. See p. 442.
- **Fulton's Crab House** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-2628): Located in a riverboat replica, Fulton's has a nostalgic mood and an array of good seafood, though meals can get a bit pricey if you opt for stone or king crab. There's also an excellent wine list. See p. 491.
- **Todd English's bluezoo** (Lake Buena Vista; ☎ 407/934-1111): This recent addition to the Walt Disney World Dolphin is the hippest dining spot in town. A chic and sophisticated undersea theme combines with a creative menu of fresh seafood and coastal cuisine to make the bluezoo a must for discerning diners. See p. 490.
- **Ted Peters' Famous Smoked Fish** (near St. Pete Beach; ☎ 727/381-7931): The Peters clan has served mouth-watering meals since 1948,

when they started smoking fish and icing draft beer at the end of the causeway that leads from St. Pete Beach to the St. Petersburg mainland. Options include mullet, mackerel, and salmon, or you can bring your own fish to be smoked over the red oak coals, at \$1.50 per pound. See p. 441.

- **Back Porch** (Destin; ☎ 850/837-2022): The food isn't gourmet at this cedar-shingled shack with a long porch offering glorious beach and Gulf views, but this is where charcoal-grilled amberjack originated. Today, you'll see it on menus throughout Florida. Other fish and seafood, as well as chicken and juicy hamburgers, also are prepared on the coals. See p. 613.
- **Chef Eddie's Magnolia Grill** (Apalachicola; ☎ 850/653-8000): Chef Eddie Cass's pleasant restaurant occupies a small bungalow, built in the 1880s, that still possesses the original black cypress paneling in its central hallway. Nightly specials emphasize fresh local seafood and New Orleans-style sauces. Chef Eddie received more than 2,000 orders for his spicy seafood gumbo at a recent Florida Seafood Festival. See p. 632.

12 The Best Local Dining Experiences

- **Blue Door** (South Beach; ☎ 305/674-6400): While the Delano may rise and fall and rise again on the hipster radar, this Claude Troisgros restaurant remains one of Miami's best, with sensual French fare and a surreal, stylish setting that gives stiff competition to the beautiful people who frequent here. See p. 112.
- **Prime One Twelve** (South Beach; ☎ 305/532-8112): This south of Fifth Street steakhouse sizzles with

Kobe beef hotdogs, aged and oversize steaks, and an unparalleled celebrity clientele that has everyone begging for reservations up to two months in advance. See p. 116.

- **Social Miami** (South Beach; ☎ 786/594-3344): The latest in the China Grill empire, Social Miami in the art museum-cum-lobby of the Sagamore Hotel is a dizzying spectacle of scene and cuisine. Michelle Bernstein's fashionably delicious, tapaslike fare

includes mini Kobe beef burgers small enough for even the slimmest supermodel to sneak a bite. See p. 120.

- **Big Fish** (downtown Miami; ☎ 305/373-1770): Located on the Miami River across from the spectacular Miami skyline, Big Fish is indeed just that, in a little pond—or river—with scenic value that is priceless. See p. 131.
- **Dogma Grill** (Miami; ☎ 305/759-3433): A hip hotdog stand on the corner of Biscayne Boulevard's burgeoning Upper East side, Dogma serves more than 20 kinds of hotdogs and has priceless views of urban revitalization in action. See p. 134.
- **Versailles** (Little Havana; ☎ 305/444-0240): This iconoclastic Cuban diner isn't as swanky as its palatial French namesake, but it is full of mirrors through which you can view the colorful—and audible—Cuban clientele that congregates here for down-home cuisine and hearty conversation. See p. 136.
- **Islamorada Fish Company** (Islamorada; ☎ 800/258-2559 or 305/664-9271): We're not sure which is better, the view or the seafood—but whichever it is, it's a winning combination. See p. 209.
- **Blue Heaven** (Key West; ☎ 305/296-8666): What was once a well-kept secret in Key West's Bahama Village is now a popular eatery known for fresh food (it's some of the best in town) and a motley, bohemian crowd. See p. 238.
- **Mai Kai** (Fort Lauderdale; ☎ 954/563-3272): At this fabulous vestige of Polynesian kitsch, you're expected to forget that you're in the middle of a tacky stretch of Fort Lauderdale and pretend you're somewhere in Hawaii or Tahiti as hula dancers and fire-eaters entertain, and potent and sickly sweet cocktails are served in coconuts. See p. 283.
- **Taverna Opa** (South Beach, Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale; ☎ 954/929-4010 or 954/567-1630): Don't get nervous if you hear plates breaking when you enter this raucous, authentic Greek taverna situated directly on the Intracoastal Waterway—it's just the restaurant's lively waitstaff making sure your experience here is 100% Greek. See p. 176.
- **Cap's Place Island Restaurant** (Lighthouse Point; ☎ 954/941-0418): The only way to get to this rustic seafood restaurant, the former bootlegging and gambling hangout of Al Capone, is by boat, but don't be dismayed—it's not the least bit Disneyfied. Churchill, Roosevelt, Marilyn Monroe, and Sylvester Stallone have all indulged in this delicious taste of Old Florida. See p. 279.
- **Farmers Market Restaurant** (Fort Myers; ☎ 239/334-1687): The retail Farmers Market next door may be tiny, but the best of the cabbage, okra, green beans, and tomatoes ends up here at this simple eatery, frequented by everyone from business executives to truck drivers. The specialties of the house are such Southern favorites as smoked ham hocks with a bowl of black-eyed peas. See p. 347.
- **Fourth Street Shrimp Store** (St. Petersburg; ☎ 727/822-0325): The outside of this place looks like it's covered with graffiti, but it's actually a gigantic drawing of people eating. Inside, murals on two walls seem to look out on an early-19th-century seaport (one painted sailor permanently peers in to see what you're eating). This is the best and certainly the most interesting bargain in St. Petersburg. See p. 429.

- **Moore's Stone Crab** (Longboat Key, off Sarasota; ☎ 941/383-1748): Set in Longbeach, the old fishing village on the north end of Longboat Key, this popular bayfront restaurant still looks a little like a packing house (it's an offshoot of a family seafood business), but the view of the bay (dotted with mangrove islands) makes a fine complement to stone crabs fresh from the family's own traps. See p. 459.
- **Singleton's Seafood Shack** (Mayport/Jacksonville; ☎ 904/246-4442): This rustic Old Florida fish camp has kept up with the times by offering fresh fish in more ways than just battered and fried, yet it has still

managed to retain the charming casualness of a riverside fish camp. Even if you don't want seafood, this spot is worth stopping at, if only for a feel of Old Florida. See p. 576.

- **The Boss Oyster** (Apalachicola; ☎ 850/653-9364): This rustic, dockside eatery is a good place to see if what they say about the aphrodisiac properties of Apalachicola oysters is true. The bivalves are served raw, steamed, or under a dozen toppings ranging from capers to crabmeat. You can even steam three dozen oysters and do the shucking yourself. Dine inside or at picnic tables on a screened dockside porch. See p. 632.

13 The Best Bars & Nightspots

- **The Room** (South Beach; ☎ 305/531-6061): This NYC import exudes that hip Meatpacking District vibe with its simple, yet chic, concept of an impressive international collection of beer and wine only, comfy seats, candlelight only, and a contingency of locals who know about this place and refuse to share it with the other poor souls who don't. See p. 175.
- **Mokai** (South Beach; ☎ 305/531-4166): A small lounge off the beaten path of South Beach proper, Mokai is reminiscent of an après-ski bar in Aspen with its brick walls, dim lighting, and comfy leather couches, but quintessentially Miami with celebrity clientele, star DJs, and astronomical drink prices. See p. 174.
- **Opium/Prive and Mansion** (South Beach; ☎ 305/531-5535): This trendy troika of nightspots is among the hottest in Miami for dancing, drinking, and slews of celebrity sightings. Friday and Saturday are the hottest nights at any of them, and you're

almost guaranteed to spot a celebrity at any given moment. See p. 180.

- **Tobacco Road** (Downtown Miami; ☎ 305/374-1198): Al Capone used to hang out here when it was a speakeasy. Now locals flock to this road-well-traveled place to hear live, local bands perform, as well as national acts such as George Clinton and the P-Funk All-Stars, Koko Taylor, and the Radiators. It's small, it's gritty, and it's meant to be that way here as it's the proud owner of Miami's very first liquor license. See p. 181.
- **Upstairs at the Van Dyke Cafe** (South Beach; ☎ 305/534-3600): Even though this jazz bar isn't in a basement, but rather on the second floor of the Van Dyke Cafe, it resembles a classy speakeasy in which local jazz performers play to an intimate, enthusiastic crowd of mostly adults and sophisticated young things who huddle at the small tables often until the wee hours. See p. 181.

- **La Covacha** (West Miami; ☎ 305/594-3717): This hut, located virtually in the middle of nowhere, is the hottest Latin joint in the entire city. Do not wear silk here, as you *will* sweat. Friday is *the* night, so much so that the owners had to place a red velvet rope out front to maintain some semblance of order. See p. 183.
- **Nikki Beach Club** (South Beach; ☎ 305/538-1111): What the Playboy Mansion is to Hollywood, the Nikki Beach Club is to South Beach. It's here where *Survivor* meets *The Brady Bunch in Hawaii*, with a bit of St. Tropez thrown in for taste. See p. 180.
- **Automatic Slim's** (South Beach; ☎ 305/695-0795): Proudly billing itself as a place where "the beautiful people come to get ugly," Automatic Slim's is a good-time bar in which anything goes and pretenses are left at the door. See p. 173.
- **Twist** (South Beach; ☎ 305/538-9478): South Beach's most popular and long-lasting gay bar, Twist is where the who's who of the gay community convene for cocktails, con-sorting, and, at times, contorting. See p. 182.
- **Le Tub** (Hollywood; ☎ 954/931-9425): This former 1959 Sunoco gas station was transformed into a kitschy waterfront oasis whose resplendent scenery is almost secondary to the decor: old toilet bowls, bathtubs, and sinks—seriously. Not the least bit as gross as it sounds, Le Tub also has the best hamburgers, chili, a 4am closing time, and a strict "no children" policy. See p. 282.
- **Duval Street** (Key West): South Florida's own version of Bourbon Street, Duval Street is party central, with bars galore. See p. 239.
- **Clematis Street** (West Palm Beach): Until recently, nightlife in Palm Beach County was either an oxymoron or reserved for haughty private clubs on the island of Palm Beach. Thanks to a downtown revitalization, downtown West Palm now boasts a strip of its own, with trendy restaurants, clubs, and bars. See p. 309.
- **Las Olas Boulevard/Riverwalk** (Fort Lauderdale): Moving off the beachfront strip and onto the more quaint (but no less calm) riverside, Fort Lauderdale now boasts its very own downtown nightlife scene with restaurants, bars, and clubs. See p. 283.
- **Biba Bar** (West Palm Beach; ☎ 561/832-0094): The harder to find, the hipper it is, so they say, which is why this dimly lit, loungey hotel bar is tucked away in the middle of this mod motor inn—a hangout for in-the-know locals and visitors. See p. 305.
- **The Dock at Crayton Cove** (Naples; ☎ 239/263-9940): Right on the City Dock, this lively pub is a perfect place for an open-air meal or libation while watching the action on Naples Bay. See p. 388.
- **CityWalk** (Orlando; ☎ 407/363-8000): This 12-acre entertainment complex is a collection of eateries and nighttime entertainment spots. It's also a haven for theme restaurant aficionados, featuring a Hard Rock Cafe, the NASCAR Grille, a Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville. Additionally, you'll find plenty of places to dance the night away to the sounds of jazz, reggae, hip-hop, and pop. See p. 522.
- **Pleasure Island** (Orlando; ☎ 407/939-2648): This 16-acre, all-in-one complex of clubs, restaurants, and shops runs the entertainment gamut

from jazz to modern rock to dance music. Catch an improvisational comedy show or hustle along on the disco floor—there's something here for everyone. Big-name artists occasionally make special appearances on the outdoor stage, but a nightly fireworks display ensures that every night ends with a big bang. See p. 521.

- **Ocean Deck Restaurant & Beach Club** (Daytona Beach; ☎ 386/253-5224): Reggae rules at this hot, noisy, packed, and always-fun beach bar near Daytona Beach's municipal pier, the town's "happening" district. By contrast, the upstairs restaurant is suitable for children, and it has great ocean views to accompany its fine and inexpensive fare. See p. 543.
- **Seville Quarter** (Pensacola; ☎ 850/434-6211): In Pensacola's Seville Historic District, this restored antique brick complex with New Orleans-style wrought-iron balconies contains pubs and restaurants whose names capture the ambience: Rosie O'Grady's Goodtime Emporium, Lili Marlene's Aviator's Pub, Apple Annie's Courtyard, End o' the Alley Bar, Phineas Phogg's Balloon Works (a dance hall, not a balloon shop), and Fast Eddie's Billiard Parlor (which has electronic

games for kids, too). Live entertainment ranges from Dixieland jazz to country and western. See p. 602.

- **Flora-Bama Lounge** (Perdido Key, near Pensacola; ☎ 850/492-0611): This slapped-together Gulf-side pub is almost a shrine to country music, with jam sessions from noon until way past midnight on Saturdays and Sundays. Flora-Bama is the prime sponsor and a key venue for the Frank Brown International Songwriters' Festival during the first week of November. Take in the great Gulf views from the Deck Bar, and, if you're coming in late April, don't miss the Interstate Mullet Toss and Beach Party. See p. 601.
- **Shuckums Oyster Pub & Seafood Grill** (Panama City Beach; ☎ 850/235-3214): "We shuck 'em, you suck 'em" is the motto of this extremely informal pub that became famous when comedian Martin Short tried unsuccessfully to shuck oysters here during the making of an MTV spring-break special. The original bar is virtually papered over with dollar bills signed by old and young patrons who have been flocking here since 1967. See p. 627.

14 The Rest of the Best

- **Best Driving Route:** A1A, a gorgeous oceanfront route that runs north up Miami Beach, through Sunny Isles and Hollywood into Fort Lauderdale (starting at Ocean Dr. and 1st St. in Miami, and merging onto Collins Ave. before running north), embodies the essence that is Florida. From time-warped hotels steeped in Art Deco kitsch to multi-million-dollar modern high-rises, A1A is one of the most scenic, albeit

heavily trafficked, roads in all of Florida.

- **Best Place for People-Watching:** Lunchtime at News Cafe on Ocean Drive is the quintessential South Beach experience—lunching at News Café is more of a spectator sport than a dining experience. What the Big Mac is to McDonald's, people-watching is to News Café, whose Ocean Drive location is one of the best sidewalk spots from which to observe the

wacky, colorful mix of pedestrians on parade. See p. 125.

- **Best Place to Hear a Moonlight Concert:** The Barnacle State Historic Site hosts a once-monthly, on or near the full moon (except July–Aug) concert in the backyard of its charming 1908 Coconut Grove bungalow, built on 5 acres of waterfront property. Listeners are welcome to picnic and bask in this sublime setting for a mere \$5. See p. 152.
- **Best Place to Learn the Salsa:** If the only salsa you're familiar with is the kind you put on your tacos, get over to Bongo's Cuban Café, the hottest salsa club north of Havana, where Miami's most talented salsa dancers will teach you how to move your two left feet in the right direction. See p. 179.
- **Best Place to Discover Your Inner Flipper:** The Dolphin Research Center will teach you how to communicate with and touch, swim, and play with the mammals at the nonprofit Dolphin Research Center in Marathon Key, home to a school of approximately 15 dolphins. See p. 195.
- **Best Cemetery:** The Key West Cemetery is funky, picturesque, and the epitome of the quirky Key West image, as irreverent as it is humorous. Headstones reflect residents' light-hearted attitudes toward life and death. I TOLD YOU I WAS SICK is one of the more famous epitaphs, as is the tongue-in-cheek widow's inscription AT LEAST I KNOW WHERE HE'S SLEEPING TONIGHT. See p. 220.
- **Best Way to See the Everglades without Breaking a Sweat:** Airboat rides through the outskirts of the Everglades are particularly wonderful, since the area is unfettered by jet skis, cruise ships, and neon bikinis. The Everglades is Florida's Outback, resplendent in its swampy nature. It is best explored either by slow-moving canoes that really get you acquainted with your surroundings or via an airboat that can quickly navigate its way through the most stubborn of saw grass, providing you with an up-close-and-personal (as well as fun) view of the land's inhabitants, from alligators and manatees to raccoons and Florida panthers. See p. 282.
- **Best Place for a Family Vacation:** With eight theme parks, 80 smaller attractions, and virtually everything with a kid-friendly touch, it's hard to top Orlando and Lake Buena Vista. See chapter 12.
- **Best Blending of Old South with the Modern Era:** There's as much Old South ambience in the state's capital, Tallahassee, as anywhere else in Florida. Here you'll find 19th-century homes nestled among towering pine trees and sprawling live oaks, historic plantations, ancient Native American settlement sites and mounds, gorgeous gardens, quiet parks with picnic areas, beautiful lakes and streams, and myriad outdoor activities. The state legislature is here, along with two college football teams and all the modern conveniences you could want. See p. 633.
- **Best Place for Sunsets:** Florida's panhandle is the Land of the Two-Way Sun. It has spectacular sunrises to the east and equally gorgeous sunsets to the west. One of the best viewing places is Bud & Alley's rooftop restaurant in Seaside. See p. 618.