

The 13 Best Beaches in Florida

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With sand, sun and sea stretching an impressive 825 miles across the state, Florida is the clear choice for visitors who want to enjoy some time at the beach. In fact, about a third of all travelers will head to at least one of the state's beaches while visiting.

Beaches can be found along the state's Panhandle in the north, the Gulf of Mexico in the west and the Atlantic Ocean on its east coast. And don't forget the dozens of islands that make up the Florida Keys along the state's southern end.

While it may be impossible to definitively tell you what the best beach in Florida is, here are several contenders for the top spot.

Florida beaches overview

Depending on where you go in Florida, you could end up swimming in one of two bodies of water. The beaches in the Panhandle and down the west side of the state border the Gulf of Mexico, while those on the eastern side of the state sit on the Atlantic Ocean.

What's the difference? If you're an early riser and want to watch the sun rise over the water, choose a beach on the Atlantic side, where you'll find large waves and golden-brown sand. If you prefer catching a vibrant sunset instead, head to the Gulf, where the sand is often whiter and waves are smaller.

It's warm enough to swim everywhere in Florida between April and October. The further south you go, the warmer the water is in the winter.

During the summer, the Gulf is warmer than the Atlantic. Its waters can reach 90 degrees Fahrenheit or warmer — sometimes the water is even warmer than the air. Meanwhile, the waters of the Atlantic usually remain in the 80s. For some perspective, most people will be comfortable swimming when the water is about 75-80 degrees.

Nerdy Tip

Many Florida beaches have areas where pets can run off-leash, but make sure to check the specific regulations of the beach you're visiting before you bring your pet.

Some beaches have lifeguards on duty as well as amenities like bathrooms and snack shacks, while others are more rustic without much in the way of services.

Best beaches to visit in Florida

1. South Beach

With its Art Deco architecture, hip restaurants and bars, and lots of nightlife, Miami's two-mile long South Beach is the place to see and be seen. Visitors and locals alike also come here to enjoy Lummus Park, a beachside spot featuring playgrounds, walking trails, a fitness area and plenty of popular events.

2. Hollywood Beach

Hollywood Beach, a family-friendly spot just south of Fort Lauderdale, has clean beaches and a pedestrian promenade, known as the Broadwalk, that features restaurants, shopping and hotels.

If the kids tire of sandcastles and waves, they can visit Charnow Park with its playgrounds and interactive fountain. It's a good mix of old-Florida charm and modern amenities.

3. Daytona Beach

Farther north on the Atlantic coast, Daytona Beach comes with hard-packed sand and a gentle slope leading to the water — ideal for learning to surf. Here, you'll find 23 miles of coastline along with plenty of hotels, shops and restaurants.

It's also one of the few places you can actually drive on the beach — very slowly and tide permitting — for \$20 a day per vehicle.

4. Panama City Beach

Up in the Panhandle is Panama City Beach, known for its 27 miles of emerald green waters and sugar sand. Those who fish or dive love the area because of the many artificial reefs just offshore. Plus, the water is some of the clearest in the state.

Many of the beaches face west, meaning the sun sets directly over the water, making for spectacular views.

5. Destin

The Destin and Fort Walton Beach areas are called the Emerald Coast for a reason: The water off the 24-mile stretch of beach is often a vibrant green. Beyond the usual beach attractions of wharfs and piers, Crab Island is a big draw. Not actually an island but a raised sandbar, it's a place where boaters can hang out, enjoy camaraderie and take advantage of a floating bar in the middle of it all.

6. Clearwater Beach

Farther south along the Gulf coast, near Tampa Bay, is Clearwater Beach. Over the years, it's been named by many as the top beach in the country. The beach sits on a barrier island and touts 35 miles of sand along with hotels, restaurants and activities including an aquarium and alligator sanctuary.

Visitors can also visit Pier 60, a 1,080-foot fishing pier that hosts a nightly sunset festival.

The best beaches in Florida state parks

Many of Florida's beaches are located in state parks. They cover 100 miles of coastline across the state, but are usually more undeveloped. Some are home to both nesting sea turtles and shorebirds. The state parks also participate in sand dune and reef conservation efforts to protect the areas from storms, filter out pollutants and serve as fish nurseries.

7. Dr. Julian G. Bruce St. George Island State Park

Located on a barrier island in the Panhandle just south of Tallahassee, St. George Island State Park is a great spot for laid-back beach goers and nature lovers.

It was named the top beach in the country in 2023 by coastal expert Stephen Leatherman ("Dr. Beach"), who releases a well-known annual U.S. beach ranking. The state park's beach won accolades due to its nine miles of undeveloped beaches, natural beauty and clear water.

8. Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park

Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park is on the southern end of Key West, where the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico meet. In addition to swimming, snorkeling and fishing, visitors can tour Fort Taylor, a national historic monument that played roles in both the Civil and Spanish-American wars.

9. Honeymoon Island and Caladesi Island State Parks

Located near Dunedin just north of St. Petersburg, both Honeymoon Island State Park and Caladesi Island State Park consistently top the list of Florida's best beaches.

While Caladesi Island is only accessible by boat, nearby Honeymoon Island's four miles of beach can be reached by car. It's also where you can catch the ferry to Caladesi Island.

Other good Florida beach options

In case you still haven't found the perfect destination for your dream beach vacation, here are a handful of other beaches around the state that may hit the spot.

10. Siesta Key

Located on the Gulf coast about halfway down the state is Siesta Key. The eight-mile island is connected by bridge to Sarasota and has plenty of shopping, dining and sports options. It's loved by visitors because of its clear and calm water, powdery white sand and outdoor recreation opportunities like parasailing and volleyball.

11. Space Coast beaches

The 72 miles of shoreline along the Atlantic Ocean near Cape Canaveral is called the Space Coast. As some of the closest beaches to Orlando, they're a great choice for travelers wanting to combine a beach trip with some of Florida's famous theme parks.

The most popular beach in the area is Cocoa Beach. Home to Ron Jon Surf Shop, the world's largest surfing store, it's a great place to ride the waves and meet fellow surfers. If surfing isn't your thing, you can try other activities like kayaking, deep sea fishing and kiteboarding.

And visitors of all ages can enjoy a visit to the nearby Kennedy Space Center. If you time your visit to the Space Coast right, you might even be treated to a rocket launch.

12. Fort Myers beaches

Before Hurricane Ian slammed into Fort Myers Beach and nearby Sanibel and Captiva Islands in September 2022, the area consistently found itself at the top of many lists of Florida's best beaches.

As businesses continue to rebuild, there's still plenty of sand and sun for those willing to come. Shell collectors should head to Sanibel or Captiva Islands, where these ocean treasures can be had in spades thanks to the region's ocean currents and coastline orientation.

13. Jacksonville beaches

Some of the northernmost beaches on Florida's Atlantic coast are in the Jacksonville area and include St. Augustine and Ponte Vedra. Dubbed the Historic Coast, there are 42 miles of beachfront to explore, including at Fort Matanzas National Monument, which was built in 1742 by the Spanish military to defend the area.

Driving on the sand is allowed in designated areas along St. Augustine Beach for a fee. And if you need a break from the water, Ponte Vedra Beach offers many world-renowned golf courses.

Florida beaches recapped

If you're in the mood for a beach vacation, heading to Florida is a great option. With hundreds of miles of coastline spanning two bodies of water, it would take years — if not a lifetime — to explore it all.

Whether you want to combine your beach trip with a visit to Walt Disney World and the Kennedy Space Center, or you prefer the low-key vibes of a state park, Florida has you covered.

How to maximize your rewards
