

DRIVING FLORIDA'S GULF COAST

Generally running about 400 or more meandering miles along the coastline from the “Big Bend” at Apalachee Bay to Everglades National Park, a road trip along Florida’s Gulf Coast provides a variety of water-focused scenery, activities, dining (think fresh seafood!), and more. From bustling or quiet beaches to lots of nature, Florida’s Gulf Coast makes for yet another great Sunshine State road trip.

While it would be tempting to rush through the region on Interstate 75 and other busy highways closer to the Gulf of Mexico, varied roads (like US 19, US 41, and even smaller coast-hugging roads) right along the coastline create a much better way to explore the area.

The adventure begins in the Apalachee Bay area and the town of St. Marks. Stops here can include excursions to St. Marks Lighthouse (the oldest lighthouse on the Gulf Coast), San Marcos de Apalache

Historic State Park (a Spanish colonial fort and more) and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge (about 70,000-plus sprawling acres of wildlife habitat along 45 miles of Gulf Coast shoreline and inland). Florida’s capital city of Tallahassee is also just a half-hour north on Florida 363.

The town of Perry, about 45 minutes due east of St. Marks on US 98, is next. Perry’s highlight is definitely the Forest Capital State Park Museum. It celebrates Florida’s forest industry, which dates to the 1800s. There’s an excellent museum, an authentic

19th century Florida Cracker homestead, ranger-led tours, special events, and lots of fabled Florida longleaf pines.

The road heading southwest inland from the Gulf of Mexico proper is a combination of US 19, 98, and ALT 27, but Gulf Coast road trippers will want to turn toward the water just south of Perry to head to idyllic coast towns like Dekle Beach, Keaton Beach, and Steinhatchee, providing the first of many excursions to roads, activities, attractions, and dining right on – and sometimes in – the water.

From the Big Bend to the Everglades

By Lynn & Cele Seldon • Photography by Seldon Ink

Situated about a half hour or so from Perry down a heavily forested road, Dekle Beach and Keaton Beach are both quiet waterfront communities with little commercial activity. Next, after another half hour through the lush Tide Swamp Wildlife Management Area and Big Bend Wildlife Management (look for many turnoffs for the popular

Great Florida Birding Trail), the riverfront town of Steinhatchee (located near Deadman Bay) has more retail shops and seafood stops like Kathi’s Krab Seafood. After heading across the Steinhatchee River, the road (FLA 358) leads back out to US 98 at Tennille to continue the drive down the coast. This part of the drive offers many

“out-and-back” possibilities to various points of interest toward and on the Gulf Coast (including Horseshoe Beach, Suwannee, Cedar Key, and more).

Cross City is 15 minutes from Tennille and a meal at historic Putnam Lodge is well worth the stop. Next, Fanning Springs (and Fanning Springs State

▲ Beach and lifeguard stand at Clearwater Beach, Clearwater Beach, Florida

Visiting Tantalizing Tallahassee, Florida's State Capital



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The Sunshine State's capital city is just an hour due north of the Florida Panhandle's Big Bend region (Alligator Point) and is well worth a stopover of a day – or three. Highlights of any visit can include: the Capitol Complex; Florida State University's sprawling campus; Mission San Luis; the Museum of Florida History; Tallahassee Museum; John G. Riley House & Museum; The Grove Museum; Knott House Museum; Railroad Square Art Park; Union Bank of Florida Museum; the Governor's Mansion; the Challenger Learning Center; and a great dining scene, including casual Bird's Aphrodisiac Oyster Shack (ask for Apalachicola oysters!) and creative and upscale Cypress. For more information explore visittallahassee.com

1. Downtown Tallahassee. Photo by Glenn Hastings, courtesy of Visit Tallahassee. 2. Florida History Museum. Photo courtesy of Visit Tallahassee. 3. Tallahassee Museum Zipline Course. Photo courtesy of Visit Tallahassee, ©2010. 4. Florida Governor's Mansion. Photo courtesy of Seldon Ink. 5. Cypress Dining. Photo courtesy of Visit Tallahassee. 6. Railroad Sq Art Park Theater. Photo by Glenn Hastings, courtesy of Visit Tallahassee.



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Park) on the Suwannee River – just another 15 minutes from Cross City – provides a jumping off point to picturesque Manatee Springs State Park (manatee sightings, kayaking, and much more) and the quaint coastal town of Suwannee.



▲ Shopping at Island Trading Post, Cedar Key, Florida.

From Fanning Springs, Route 24 at the US 98 town of Otter Creek leads east about 25 minutes to popular Cedar Key, the Cedar Keys, and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge. Other highlights here include the Cedar Key State Museum, a small beach and grassy waterfront area with benches and views, a large fishing pier, classic coastal shopping (look for Island Trading Post and Sugar Shack), and restaurants like this historic Island Hotel and Restaurant that feature fresh local seafood and more.



▲ Waterfront dining at Paradise Grill, St. Pete Beach.

Back out on US 98 and passing through huge swaths of protected public lands, the next major stop is the town of Crystal River (about 35 minutes from Otter Creek). Crystal River Preserve State Park and lots of water-based activities on the crystal-clear Crystal River like kayaking, canoeing, swimming, and more await.

Homosassa Springs, 10 minutes south of Crystal River, is the next stop, with Homosassa Springs State Wildlife Park among its many attractions. Next, the town of Weeki Wachee and famed Weeki Wachee Springs State Park await. The must-see attraction of Weeki Wachee Springs State Park has been an “Old Florida” classic since 1947, thanks to famous mermaid shows, riverboat cruises, swimming in Buccaneer Bay, paddling on the Weeki Wachee River, and more.

The coastal road, which is now US 19, then leads toward a myriad of Gulf Coast towns like Hudson and Port Richey, before

entering the historical popular sponging town of Greek-leaning Tarpon Springs. Here, long-time sponge diving operations offer tours, photo ops, and everything “sponge” (along with many other retail shops). The Greek population of Tarpon Springs, also means there are great Greek restaurants, like Hellas, Mykonos, and many more.

US 19 and US 19 ALT continue down the coast, west of the bustling city of Tampa and vibrant Tampa Bay, through Clearwater (Clearwater Marine Aquarium, the wide Clearwater Beach – complete with colorful lifeguard stands, and Palm Pavilion Beachside Grille & Bar are highly recommended)

and lots more beach towns all the way to St. Pete Beach, west of St. Petersburg. Here, beach-loving road trippers will find the classic Don Cesar Resort & Spa (including wonderful waterfront dining), the Gulfway Walkway, lots of waterfront parking with many “Beach Access” points), and fresh seafood at many waterfront restaurants, including casual Paradise Grill.

The road then turns east and inland to cross wide Tampa Bay on the iconic Sunshine Skyway Bridge, before turning south again to head toward Gulf Coast cities like Bradenton (look for its South Florida Museum, including the Parker Manatee Aquarium and Bishop



▲ Don Cesar Resort & Spa, St. Petersburg Beach, Florida.

Florida Camping Abounds

Whether it's hugging the Gulf Coast to the west, cutting across Central Florida to theme parks and so much more, or heading over to the Atlantic Ocean to the east, all the way down to the Florida Keys, a Gulf Coast road trip is just the beginning of a Sunshine State adventure. Visit ThousandTrails.com for even more camping possibilities!

Look for even more Florida road trip features in TrailBlazer Magazine in 2019!



▲ Birdwatching along the Anhinga Trail at Royal Palm, Everglades National Park, Homestead, Florida.



▲ Alligator on the Anhinga Trail at Everglades National Park, Everglades, Florida.



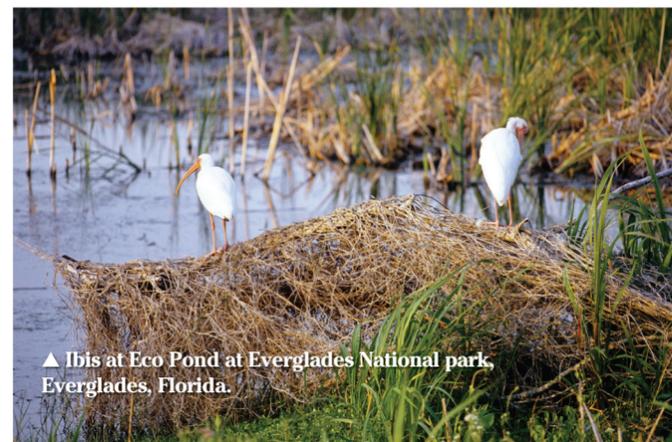
▲ Boating at Everglades National Park, Everglades, Florida.



▲ Boat tour in the mangrove waterways at Flamingo, Everglades National Park, Homestead, Florida.



▲ Boardwalk on the Anhinga Trail at Everglades National Park, Everglades, Florida.



▲ Ibis at Eco Pond at Everglades National park, Everglades, Florida.



▲ The Riverwalk, Bradenton, Florida.

Planetarium, The Marina at Riverwalk, ArtCenter Manatee, and Motorworks Brewing) and Sarasota (featuring the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art), plus quiet Gulf of Mexico beach towns like Longboat Key, Siesta Key, and more. Along the way, it's easy to hop on and off US 41 and I-75 for out-and-back outings to attractions on or near the water.

Divided by the peaceful Peace River, Port Charlotte and historic Punta Gorda are next (just 80 miles as the crow flies from the base of Sunshine Skyway Bridge). Along with great waterfront dining at popular Punta Gorda hotspots like Laishley Crab House, Punta Gorda was once known for its Punta Gorda Hotel, which hosted hosts of luminaries in its heyday – including Clarence Darrow, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Andrew Mellon, and many others.

Fort Myers, Fort Myers Beach, soothing Sanibel Island, and more are just an hour or so from Punta Gorda. Highlights here have to include the Edison and Ford Winter Estates and several other museums and attractions, lots of watersports (parasailing is quite popular), lots of magical banyan trees, and more. Another hour south, Naples and its nearby beaches and attractions are next, after passing through Bonita Springs and other classic coastal towns.

Naples is known for its dramatic Gulf Coast sunsets – especially at the Naples Pier, great beaches (including nearby Marco Island), dining, and shopping.

Heading south out of Naples, the “end” of the Gulf Coast drive gets quite remote quite quickly. The drive on US 41 out to Everglades City, Big Cypress National Preserve, and fabled Everglades National Park provides an introduction to the wildness of the area (including ever-popular airboat tours). Once in Everglades City proper, the Gulf Coast Visitor Center of Everglades National Park, the historic Collier County Courthouse (now City Hall), the Museum of the Everglades/ Collier County Museum (in the Old Laundry building that once housed the Everglades Women's Club), and more await.

Everglades City and nearby Chokoloskee mark the end (or beginning) of a Florida Gulf Coast drive, but the Greater Miami area and the famed Florida Keys are just a pretty two-hour drive east on US 41 through Everglades National Park. It's a great way to extend this Florida road trip! ■