

Experiencing Florida's Gulf Coast in St. Petersburg and Clearwater, Florida

By Mike Cohen



If you are looking to spend some time on Florida's Gulf Coast, then consider the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area

White-sand Florida beaches with crystal-clear water, an impressive foodie and arts scene and glittering nightlife options that range from craft beer bars to New York-style dance clubs, the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area meets the criteria of whatever kind of vacation you're yearning for, be it rejuvenating or exhilarating.

Along with award-winning beautiful beaches, St. Petersburg is home to the world-renowned Salvador Dali Museum, top-rated restaurants and beautiful Fort De Soto Park. This waterfront escape is a perfect family getaway with so much to explore. The city,

which glimmers between the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay, is known for its warm weather and for holding the title of "most consecutive days with sunshine" at 768. Downtown St. Petersburg is the city's heart, home to great shopping, restaurants, bars and attractions.

After making a stop to check out the largest collection of Dali's work outside of Spain, swing by the Chihuly Collection on picturesque Beach Drive to witness mind-blowing glasswork. Beach Drive anchors downtown shopping, dining and entertainment districts that include outdoor cafes and restaurants, world class museums and a dazzling array of shops, galleries, businesses, hotels and bed and breakfasts that line the city's pedestrian-friendly streets.

We went to the Dali Museum (<http://thedali.org>) on a Thursday evening. Located in the heart of downtown St. Petersburg, this is home to an unparalleled collection of Salvador Dali art. It features more than 2,000 works, comprising nearly 100 oil paintings, over 100 watercolors and drawings and 1,300 prints, photographs, sculptures and art objects. The building is itself a work of art, featuring 1,062 triangular-shaped glass panels, the only structure of its kind in North America. Nicknamed The Enigma, it provides an unprecedented view of St. Petersburg's picturesque waterfront. The Museum has attracted the world's attention, and was listed by AOL Travel News as "one of the top buildings to see in your lifetime."





Downtown St. Petersburg is known for its urban art scene, where you can see dozens of painted murals on a stroll down Central Ave. The St. Pete Mural Tour takes you on a guided journey through the colorful streets of the city with tours led by local artists who uncover the vibrant stories of the creators behind the murals. You might also want to check out the Museum of Fine Arts or the Florida Holocaust Museum.

There are some live theatre options here. Visit the Sunken Gardens, a botanical paradise in the midst of the city. As St. Petersburg's oldest living museum, this 100-year-old garden is home to some of the oldest tropical plants in the region.



We met some people with young kids who really enjoyed the Great Explorations Children's Museum. Designed for children 10 and under, the 24,000 square foot museum is filled with exhibits and activities to stimulate learning through creativity, play and exploration. The museum is a learning playground where children can make a discovery, make a mess, and even make a new friend.

In terms of downtown parking, there are private valets. If you are going to one of the restaurants connected to a specific valet, there is generally validation where you can save half the price. One night I choose a public lot, which was double the price but unlike the valets there was no curfew to worry about.

Clearwater is about 45 minutes away. The Clearwater Marine Aquarium is the home of Winter and Hope, stars of the sequel to box office hit "Dolphin Tale." Clearwater Marine Aquarium operates as a marine hospital with its main mission to rescue, rehab and release.

Consider a Dolphin Cruise aboard the Sea Screamer. Soak in the sunshine aboard a dolphin cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. Watch as dolphins play in the boat's wake by bowing everyone with playful jumps. This area is home to the largest pod of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. Rent a cabana and beach umbrella from a local vendor, or walk toward the more residential north side of the beach for a little serenity away from the bustling scene of Pier 60 and Clearwater Marina. ■

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DINING TIP

Harold Seltzer's Steakhouse, with locations at 3500 Tyrone Blvd. in St. Pete and at Gulf View Square Mall in Port Richey, is reputed to have the best prime rib in town and I can personally attest to how good it is. Harold is a native of Montreal. In 1995 an opportunity presented itself to launch a steakhouse



concept in the Tampa-St. Petersburg, **41** area and Harold jumped at it. He called the restaurant Sam Seltzer's Steakhouse, after his grandfather (a legendary Montreal butcher), and from the first 1,000 seat dining establishment in Tampa it grew into a chain of seven with other locations in such places as Clearwater, Orlando, Sarasota, St. Pete, Port Richey and Fort Myers.

Harold sold his interests in Sam Seltzer's Steakhouse in 2004. One night, six years later, he was watching the news and saw that the entire chain was shutting down. He was shocked and felt particularly bad for the staff who would be out of work. A few days later he purchased the contents of the St. Pete and Port Richey locales and reopened under the new name of Harold Seltzer's Steakhouse.

Harold buys all of his beef in bulk and ages it for five to six weeks to make it more tender. They make their own dough each day in order to serve homemade dinner rolls and croutons and house-made dressings and they have strict meat handling approaches. From the time the meat is produced, Harold has control over it. It is cut in-house and aged a minimum of 35 days. Consider the 10 once rib eye, the filet mignon, a delicious house salad, the lobster bisque and for dessert the Napoleon.

WWW.SELTZERSSTEAKHOUSE.COM

RENTAL CAR ADVICE

It is highly recommended to rent a car while in the area. Fox Rent a Car offers the best rates. A free shuttle will bring you to their headquarters 10 minutes away from the Tampa Airport. Fox, now the fifth largest rental car company in the US, has economy and family-size cars, SUVs, mini-vans and luxury or sport vehicles available for your discount rental. Fox was founded in 1989, as a value-based car rental brand catering to airport travelers. Actively managed and owned by its founders, Fox has enjoyed robust growth for over 25 years. Fox Rent A Car offers consumers great value, convenience and superior service at 20 major corporate owned airport locations cross the US plus more than 90 affiliate locations and a growing roster of international partner locations.

I was very impressed with the Tampa operation, managed by Johnny Hubner. The airport is currently undergoing major renovations. When completed in early 2018, there will be a new rental car facility at which point Fox will relocate.

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