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AMERICA

YOURS TO DISCOVER

Top American Trips 2019

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Knowing that the publication of *America Yours To Discover* would immediately follow my High Sierra California road trip, I saved the task of writing my editor's note for a place synonymous with inspiration: the Yosemite Valley.

As I scratch this note from Glacier Point, expansive valley views of Half Dome and Yosemite Falls frame a single thought: surely this feeling of wonder I'm awash in is

the essence of *America Yours To Discover*.

But in the months that we've spent assembling the issue, there have been moments of hesitation. Our wanderlust for America can change with the single publication of a 280-character (un)presidential tweet. One moment, I'm dreaming of kayaking mysterious bayous or following empty desert highways; the next, I'm gobsmacked by politics.

When Justin Trudeau met with Vice President Mike Pence in May, he raised the issue of women's reproductive rights in America. Pence replied that "those are debates within the United States" – which, to me, sounds like a diplomatic way of saying "it's none of Canada's business." In one sense, Pence is right. It is America's business...that will be affected. Canadians may not have a democratic vote, but some of us will assert our values by voting with our travel dollars.

Recently, I attended a U.S. Travel Association tourism conference where I learned international visitation to the United States grew by three-and-a-half per cent. An increase to be sure, but international travel grew twice as fast, meaning travellers took their business elsewhere. At that same conference, I spoke with a tourism manager for a Florida county. I asked her how politics have affected her tourist numbers. She noted, "Our Canadian snowbirds are returning, but Germans, well, they always travel with their politics."

In America, state lines make it easy to vote with your dollars. You can choose blue or red counties. You can travel to "sanctuary cities," patronize immigrant-owned businesses, enjoy Indigenous tourism or spend time away from it all in nature, just as I am today.

Whether you pack your politics or not, and to what degree, there is no right or wrong answer; the choice is entirely yours. Seated high atop the Yosemite Valley, I have made my decision: one man's politics won't shut me out of America – for now.

• Jenn Hubbert, Editor-in-Chief, jenniferh@mypassionmedia.com

CANADIAN Traveller

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, Jennifer Hubbert

ART DIRECTOR, Gordon Alexander

CONTRIBUTORS, Jennifer Samuel, Bill Fink, Alison Karlene Hodgins, Devorah Lev-Tov, Linda Barnard, Rebecca Field Jager, Doug O'Neill, Terry Ward, David Webb, Tami Fairweather, Jill Gleeson, Kate Morgan, Vawn Himmelsbach, Chloe Berge, Tamara Gruber, Josephine Matyas, Ron Stern, Candice Walsh, Liz Fleming, Jennifer Bain

WESTERN REGIONAL DIRECTOR
– North America, James Mohr

NATIONAL ACCOUNT MANAGER, Joanne Tichborne
GENERAL ADVERTISING INQUIRIES, 1-888-924-7524
adsales@mypassionmedia.com

PRESIDENT, Brad Liski
PUBLISHER, Jennifer Prendergast

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ON THE COVER: Oak Alley Plantation, Vacherie, Louisiana

CANADIAN Traveller | SPECIAL EDITION

AMERICA

YOURS TO DISCOVER

Top American Trips 2019

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BE INSPIRED

Tanking on the Middle Loup River



Walt Rhoades readies the tank

GETTING TANKED IN NEBRASKA

BY JENNIFER SAMUEL

WE LODGED ON OUR first sandbank just moments after wheeling our two-metre wide aluminum livestock tank into the North Loup River in the Nebraska Sandhills. My son leapt into the ankle-deep water to push our tank back into the current, where we swirled along a cattail-lined bank.

What a delightfully lazy way to travel, I thought, as we sat in lawn chairs inside the circular tank. Its shape left us facing each other, and I could see the joy written on my kids' sun-kissed faces. Rarely were we all this relaxed. We had no paddles or life jackets, just potato chips, Gatorade and trust that the river would take us where we needed to go.

Welcome to Nebraska, a state that pokes fun at itself. After being named 50th out of 50 states tourists would like to visit for four years straight, it launched

a tourism campaign with the slogan, "Honestly, it's not for everyone." I had come to realize that was a good thing. We drove for miles without seeing any sign of human life, which gave us plenty of time to take in the green bluffs, prairie fields and sunsets.

Thousands of years ago, the winds in the northwestern part of Nebraska whipped the loose sand into large dunes. Today, they're carpeted in prairie grass. The slightest tear can lead the wind to "blow out" the ground covering, exposing hundreds of feet of sand.

Some ranchers use ecotourism like "tanking" – the name given to river floating – to earn a supplemental income to stay on their land. Other outfitters offer higher-end tanking experiences akin to tailgating; their tanks, fabricated from plastic or galvanized metal, are custom-fit with picnic tables seating three to six people.

At Uncle Buck's, a rustic lodge in Brewster, a town of 17, the experience was simple. Owner Walt Rhoades, whose wife's family has worked the land since 1881, drove us out a dirt road with a tank hitched to the back of his pick-up truck, and then helped us roll the tank down a weedy bank.

My kids jumped in and out of tank, clung to the back of it and dragged their legs in the water to wash off the heat of the sun. The tank never tipped. As they played, I gazed out over the land. In some ways, it was unremarkable, nothing but undulating hills and open spaces. But the longer we were on the river, the more I began to appreciate our solitude. It made me feel like we had found what we longed for as a family: quiet in an increasingly noisy world of chirping phones.

Four hours later, we reached our pick-up point, a low-lying beam bridge. My daughter sprinted around a sandbar while my son and I helped Walt tug the tank back up the bank. I did so reluctantly. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to the river just yet; its simplicity seemed to sweep away every bit of modern stress.

It's not that there's nothing in Nebraska, I thought. It's that there's too much everywhere else. ★

When you go

Our writer tanked the North Loup River but options abound. Tank the Calamus River with **Calamus Outfitters** in Burwell, **Tank Down the Elkhorn** near Waterloo, float the Cedar River with **Crazy Rayz Tanking** or **Get Tanked in Spalding**, while **Little Outlaw** tanks navigate the Niobrara River.



BE INSPIRED



Blue Moon Saloon

Lafayette: LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

BY DOUG O'NEILL

A GUY WALKS into a bar. Okay, you've heard that one-liner before. But this one is different.

A guy walks into a bar – only he's on his own. A stranger in town, he has no idea what style of dance has taken over the sawdust-littered floor and the music is like none he's heard before – yet he has the time of his life.

That's the kind of thing that happens in Lafayette, the laid-back city of 127,000 located along the Vermilion River in south Louisiana. Lafayette is known as the centre of Acadiana and Cajun (a word evolved from "Acadian") traditions

influence the city's customs, food, language (Louisiana French is widely spoken), music and character.

The Acadians, the French who were expelled by the British from eastern Canada in the late 18th century after France's defeat in the Seven Years' War, made their way to the bayous and swamps of southern Louisiana to start life anew. The Cajun culture that evolved still thrives today – a culture that doesn't permit wall-flowers as I found out one Sunday afternoon when I sauntered into the Vermilionville Living Museum & Folklife Park and was immediately pulled onto the dancefloor along with 80

or so folks who were two-stepping across wooden planks in the middle of the day.

Trent Angers, author of *The Truth About Cajuns*, identifies *joie de vivre* (a joy of life) as one of the key traits of Acadians: "*Joie de vivre* is more of a disposition, a way of looking at things. It is the ability to enjoy life, to appreciate and even relish the good things life has to offer. It's a condition of the mind and heart. A person who has *joie de vivre* does more than just exist; he rejoices over his lot in life, no matter how modest." That would explain an expression I frequently overheard in Lafayette: "*Laissez les bons temps rouler*." Let the good times roll. ➤



Atchafalaya Basin

Cajun jam session

And they do it well – and insist that you join in.

That's how it rolled one evening at the iconic Blue Moon Saloon in downtown Lafayette where a band called The Revellers let loose with a two-hour performance of swamp pop music, intensely emotional, lovelorn lyrics accompanied by a pianist playing wild honky tonk. No one, not even the solo visitor from out of town, was left standing off to the side nursing his beer.

On another evening, I had no choice but to kick it up at the Grant Street Dance Hall which offers two options to spin your partner around the dance floor: the saloon side or the club. Fancying myself a saloon-type of guy, that's where I got an impromptu lesson in the Cajun Jitterbug, a frenetic kind of dance involving endless turns and spins that leave you panting and laughing (not to mention thirsty). And it's where one very patient partner chided me for dancing so lightly: "The more scuff you hear on the floor, *mon beau*, the better the dancer you are." So, stomp harder I did.

Other cultures influence the vibe of Lafayette. The traditions of the Creoles

(those of French ancestry mixed with Spanish and/or African and/or Native American) have long been intertwined with Cajuns, and at times it's challenging to distinguish between the two. And, of course, Zydeco music, which first surfaced in 1930s Louisiana, is also popular in Lafayette.

Zydeco gets its name from a colloquial Creole French expression "*Les haricots ne sont pas salés*," which basically translates to "the snap beans aren't salty" – which is their way of saying "the times are hard." As one music historian explained, "Zydeco offered a way for the rural poor to both express and escape the hardships of life through music and dance."

Zydeco music is thriving at the iconic Randol's seafood restaurant and pub, where, after filling up on fried alligator and crispy fried boudin balls on a Friday night, I burned off the calories as I perfected (term used rather loosely) the Cajun Jig, which is a distant to the merengue. Rest assured, everyone on the dance floor had a good time. And there weren't any wallflowers.

That's how the good times roll in Lafayette. ☆

When you go

WHAT TO DO: **Vermilionville Living Museum & Folklife Park** looks like a museum but it's actually a happening spot for live music and dancing. **Le Bal du Dimanche à Vermilionville** hosts live music and dancing (two-stepping, Jitterbug and other dance forms) for beginners and experienced enthusiasts alike. **Blue Moon Saloon** has attracted a following for its downhome Cajun music. It hosts live music all week long: acoustic, back-porch, jazz and Zydeco. **Grant Street Dance Hall** (which opened its doors July 4, 1980) is a favourite go-to on a Friday night. The 100-year-old brick and cypress honky tonk was originally built as a fruit warehouse.

WHERE TO DINE: **Prejean's** is considered the world's first Cajun-themed restaurant. It's also a dance club and music venue. Come for the nightly Cajun music, games and seafood, including alligator and crawfish gumbo. **Randol's** seafood restaurant is known for its popular jam sessions highlighting Zydeco music, along with excellent Cajun cuisine (mostly seafood). Plus, there's a large dance floor.

WHERE TO STAY: Centrally located, **Tru By Hilton Lafayette River Ranch** offers a vibrant and hip space at an affordable price point. Lobby board games and semi-private workstations are welcome bonuses. **The Juliet Boutique Hotel**, a quaint property located in downtown Lafayette, is just steps from dining, museums and galleries. It's known for its customer service, but guests also love the spacious rooms and bathtubs. **The Carriage House Hotel** is nestled in the Village of River Ranch and is well suited for travelling families. Its 21 suites are outfitted with kitchenettes and the property boasts amenities including an outdoor pool, fitness centre and tennis courts.



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Georgia music festival

*Traveller on tour:***A MUSICAL ODYSSEY THROUGH GEORGIA**BY **BILL FINK**

GEORGIA HAS SOUL. And it starts with Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, the “Mother of Blues.” I saw it in her restored shotgun shack in Columbus and in the 1920’s-era sepia photos on the walls of her home-turned-museum. I felt it on the keys of her banged up piano, and heard it in the scratchy sounds of vintage 78 records; in the throaty, raunchy lyrics of *Deep Moaning Blues*, appropriate in the thick, humid air I breathed along the Chattahoochee River on the border of Alabama.

For one week, I travelled around Georgia and across musical genres, to experience life inside the ultimate jukebox of American sounds, from gospel and jazz to rock, soul, country and hip-hop. If it’s got a beat and you can dance to it, you’ll find it in Georgia.

ON THE OPPOSITE END OF THE spectrum from Ma, I followed preppy University of Georgia students crossing the “khaki line” in their college town of Athens to hear bands playing in legendary local venues like the 40 Watt Club. Athens launched the careers of the B-52s, REM, Widespread Panic and the Drive-By Truckers, so I kept my ears open, hoping to discover the great new sound of tomorrow playing in a dive bar, but still found time to go to the grand Georgia Theatre to catch a big name act.

“HEEEE-YOW!” SHOUTED DEANNA Brown Thomas, daughter of James Brown, as she led my bus tour in her late father’s hometown of Augusta, some 160 kilometres and 50 years away from the modern Athens music scene. “Daddy just *looved* the fried chicken at this here

corner shop.”

Our James Brown Family Tour brought us to the Augusta Museum of History where we viewed Brown’s funky stage costumes. “You know I TOLD daddy this jumpsuit was NOT something a 70-year-old man should be wearing,” she clucked. “But did he listen?! Oh no he didn’t. Zipped it open to his belly button, showing off all that chest hair.”

Riding through the sometimes gritty, depressed backroads of the home of the “Hardest Working Man in Show Business” gave me a feeling of just how hard the Godfather of Soul had to work to rise above his humble beginnings.

The Allman Brothers were humble too, begging for meals at H&H Soul Food Restaurant in Macon, when the then (literally) starving artists couldn’t



muster enough cash for lunch. When the Southern rock icons hit it big, they still visited the diner, as I did, to enjoy genuine Georgia fried chicken, collard greens and biscuits. Up the road a piece, the Allman Brothers' Tudor-style "Big House" is now a museum filled with band memorabilia and tours are given by life-long fans. In the attic, I grabbed one of the guitars lying about and eked out a few chords of *Ramblin' Man*. My tour guide visibly winced, but I happily imagined I was jamming with the boys back in the day.

GEORGIA MUSIC HERITAGE

combines past, present and future in Atlanta, the capital and biggest city in the state. Atlanta's urban sounds of the "Dirty South" created hip-hop stars like Outcast, Ludacris and Young Jeezy, and continues with the more recent chart-topping successes of locals Young Thug and 2 Chainz, showing that the story of Georgia sound is still being written. I grabbed day-of tickets at big Atlanta venues including the Fox Theatre and Tabernacle and then caught some up-and-coming artists.

My only regret on my Georgia music odyssey? That I didn't have the time to continue criss-crossing the state to soak my soul in some of the dozens of different music festivals that happen year-round. But with a unique musical heritage of well over a hundred years, I know Georgia will offer encore presentations for as long as I want to return. ☺

When you go

SUGGESTED ROUTE:

Start your tour in **Atlanta**. Catch a stadium headliner or an intimate live performance at one of the city's many small stage venues. Southern rock or hip-hop? How about both? Next, drive 174 kilometres southwest to **Columbus** to tour **Ma Rainey House and Blues Museum**. From Columbus, head 156 kilometres east to **Macon**. Join **Rock Candy Tours** for a two-hour melodic deep dive, visiting the homes, crash pads and haunts where Macon music history was written. Don't miss **The Allman Brothers Band Museum at The Big House** and before departing, catch a show at **Hummingbird Stage and Taproom** or **The Grand Opera House**. From Macon, drive 194 kilometres north-east to Augusta. Pay a visit to **Local Legends**, a permanent exhibit at the **Augusta Museum of History** which chronicles the famous personalities that made the city a musical epicentre. From Augusta, head west to **Athens** (152



The Allman Brothers Band Museum

kilometres). Drop by the visitor centre to grab a self-guided walking tour (or download the map in advance) to visit 24 hot spots rich with Athens music history. Unmissable highlights include **The 40 Watt Club**, **Morton Theatre** and **The Foundry**. End your road trip here or loop back to Atlanta, a distance of 115 kilometres from Athens.



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Wild Willy's Hot Spring near Mammoth Lakes

California's High Sierra: WATERFALLS, HOT SPRINGS, AND THE MOUNTAINS IN BETWEEN

BY ALISON KARLENE HODGINS



EVERYTHING HURTS.

The icy water cascades over my pink, blistered toes, runs across the smooth granite rock and plunges over the cliff, vanishing in an effervescent mist. The waterfall would be a quick way down, I note, as my feet grow numb. I scoot back and dry my skin in the sun before tugging on my dirt-crust boots.

Jenn, my hiking partner, materializes next to me. "Right now, we're closer to Half Dome than the Valley Floor," she reports with a heavy sigh.

I struggle to stand. "We probably shouldn't have underestimated Yosemite,"

I say as we cross the quaking foot bridge that spans a swollen Nevada Falls.

OUR SECOND DAY IN CALIFORNIA'S most iconic national park started innocently enough: a 4.6-mile trek up the erroneously named Four Mile Trail, terminating at Glacier Point lookout. A thundering noise like stampeding horses followed our footsteps up the broken pavement. I assumed it was traffic until I glanced across the valley and saw towering Yosemite Falls rupture the adjacent ridge like a gashing white wound.

Perhaps it was because we had ascended 3,200 feet in a matter of hours that the math

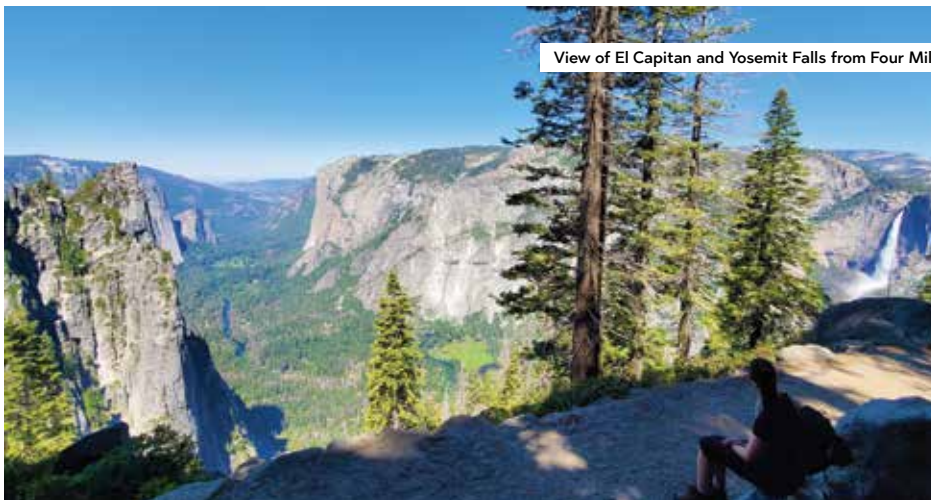
was messing with our heads. "What's that, like six kilometres?" I guessed. "And 800 metres of elevation gain?"

"I don't know...but it's not as difficult as the Grouse Grind," Jenn conceded, referencing a grueling trail we had both climbed back at home in British Columbia.

THE MAIN REASON I LOVE TO travel is to try new things and meet new people. One of those well-intentioned new people led us to our next trail, and a body-wrecking adventure we'll likely never forget.

"You two look spry," said the cashier at the Glacier Point gift shop as we pur-

View of El Capitan and Yosemite Falls from Four Mile Trail



chased souvenir stickers and postcards. "Usually folks are pretty whipped after Four Mile Trail. You should continue on to the Panorama Trail."

"Is it exposed?" Jenn enquired, referring to sun exposure.

"Not at all," he replied, referring to vertical drop.

Our misunderstanding went unacknowledged and we decided to tackle Panorama Trail. Fortunately, I re-filled my three-litre hydration reservoir at a water fountain before descending the winding eight-mile stretch.

Unlike Four Mile Trail, Panorama Trail is aptly named: unparalleled views of Half Dome and Nevada Falls unfolded before us as the tourist crowds thinned and the hum of car engines faded away. We passed park rangers on switchbacks permeated with wildflowers and songbirds. Under a blazing afternoon sun, Jenn and I exchanged expressions of empathy for the oncoming hikers who were only beginning their ascent. "So much for not being exposed," I mused.

Across Illilouette Creek, we were greeted by a 243-metre climb; only this time, in the glaring sun. We shade-hopped from tree to tree, watching geckos sunbathe and much more spry hikers, including families with small children, pass us by.

But for the most part, the trail was quiet. Jenn and I walked in staggered succession, straining our eyes as majestic waterfalls poured over sleek rockfaces. California's High Sierra received a staggering amount of snowfall over the winter, which succours the powerful rivers that gush over the sides of the mountains.

We leave Nevada Falls and descend via the John Muir Trail. I'm keen to trek the trail named for one of California's

most influential conservationists and well-known writers, but I get more than I bargained for: excess snowmelt has created a temporary waterfall, one that drains directly over the trail. Jenn takes off her sneakers, but I march straight through in my boots, laughing as the frigid water cools my sunburnt shoulders.

By the time we cross over to the Mist Trail, I'm no longer laughing. My body protests the sustained downward motion. My hiking boots feel like weights strapped to cracking ankles holding up gelatin calves.

"I think we may have miscalculated this hike," Jenn says.

I check the conversion on my phone. "If this is right, we've hiked just over 16 miles," I say, dispelling a sharp exhale of disbelief. "That's 26 kilometres!"

Feeling more relief than accomplishment, we reach the Valley Floor and take a seat to wait for the next shuttle bus. I'm not sure I can stand back up.

We miss the last connecting El Capitan shuttle back to the trailhead, where we parked the truck and started our ambitious climb some 10 hours earlier.

"We have to walk across the Swinging Bridge," Jenn says glumly while consulting a park map. Half-crazed with exhaustion, I strip off my hiking boots and plod the remainder of the trail in my socks.

THE NEXT DAY, WE DRIVE TO Mammoth Lakes. We spot grubby Pacific Crest Trail thru-hikers on journeys of more than 3,000 kilometres that put our 26-km day trek to shame.

Snow is only beginning to melt on Mammoth Mountain. This lava dome volcano boasts one of the longest ski seasons in the U.S. Luckily for my glutes, there's still enough geothermal activity in the area to create natural hot springs.

I ease myself into a heart-shaped spring, but there's no need: the bottom is soft gravel and the temperature feels like a fresh-run bath. I stretch my legs in the steaming water and feel my muscles relax. Behind me, the Sierra Nevada Range beckons. I smile and glance at my soothed, puckered, blistered feet, wondering where they'll take me next. ☺

When you go

WHAT TO DO: Must-see sights in Yosemite National Park include **Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias**, **Yosemite Falls**, **El Capitan** and **Half Dome**, and **Tunnel View** and **Glacier Point** lookouts. **Discover Yosemite** leads full-day private and public tours in air-conditioned shuttles, departing from the South Entrance; pick-ups include Bass Lake, Oakhurst and Fish Camp. If you base yourself in Mammoth Lakes, skiers can get their fix on **Mammoth Mountain** well into summer. If you'd rather bask in the glow of the mountains than climb them, follow the boardwalk from the parking lot to **Wild Willy's Hot Springs**.

WHERE TO DINE: The burgers and craft beer at **South Gate Brewing Company** in Oakhurst are not to be missed. For a special occasion, treat yourself to a glass of wine on the patio at **Ducey's on the Lake** at Bass Lake. In Mammoth Lakes, start your morning with a cappuccino and an Earl Grey muffin at **Black Velvet Coffee** or a hearty bagel at **Old New York Deli & Bakery Co.**

WHERE TO STAY: If you don't want to stay in Yosemite National Park, base yourself just outside one of the five entrances. At the South Entrance, consider **The Pines Resort** at Bass Lake. The rustic chalets exude a family camp charm. East of the park, and while Tioga Pass is clear of snow, enjoy the modern aesthetic and central location of **The Village Lodge** in Mammoth Lakes. Take advantage of the **Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System** (YARTS), an affordable coach service with seasonal daily departures from Mammoth Lakes to Yosemite National Park.



St. Pete Beach

IT'S BYO-BABY TO ST. PETE

BY **DEVORAH LEV TOV**

BEFORE WE HAD KIDS, the beach had always been a breezy vacation destination for my husband and me; sun, sand and big waves spelled fun and relaxation. When my son Sammy was born, suddenly everything was overwhelming. Memories of throwing our bathing suits and towels in the trunk and hitting the open road felt like they belonged to someone else. Now, we couldn't leave the house without bags of clothing and supplies, a stroller, car seat and a kitchen cupboard's worth of snacks.

But I've never been one to remain housebound and as my son approached his first birthday, I knew I wanted him to experience the beach. I booked us tickets to what I'd heard was one of the nicest, friendliest beaches in Florida: St. Pete. I was intrigued by its location on the Gulf of Mexico rather than the cooler, Atlantic

Florida coast. Somehow, it seemed safer and more welcoming for baby. Warm, turquoise waters and powder-soft sand in the United States? It seemed too good to be true. And when we discovered St. Pete was home to a robust arts scene, restaurants owned by famous chefs and beautiful nature, we knew we'd picked the right place.

Laden with multiple bags (how does such a tiny person need so many things?) we survived the plane ride, landing in sunny, warm St. Pete.

On our first day we hit the beach with toys, blankets and sunscreen in tow. St. Pete Beach was better than I imagined: wide and long with calm, clear water. I set Sammy down in the soft sand – no rocks or pebbles for him to taste-test – and he immediately dug his tiny fists into it, squealing with pleasure.

The heat of the afternoon sun coaxed

us to take a dip. Though the Gulf waters barely churned with waves, I sat Sammy down in a shallow tide pool with water as warm as a bath. As I sprinkled saltwater on him, he giggled and smiled harder than I'd ever seen – confirming we had a beach baby on our hands.

Once we got our beach time in, the three of us set off to explore the city. We were especially keen to admire St. Pete's art scene which boasts some amazing museums, but we didn't think Sammy would fully appreciate the surreal sophistication of Salvador Dali. After grabbing tender and juicy Cuban sandwiches and fresh-squeezed juice at Bodega, we strolled to FloridaCraft, a vibrant studio and exhibition space for local artists that is filled with multimedia art as eye-catching as it is innovative. From there, we wandered the city's famous murals. St. Pete hosts the annual Shine Mural Festival and as a result, colourful murals are splashed across buildings all over the city. We peeked around corners and investigated hidden alleys to find unique murals painted by artists from around the world. One of my favourites was a pink-hued portrait of the Mexican artist Frida Khalo, juxtaposed with another mural of intricate, colourful mandalas set against a black background.

That evening, we ventured to Locale Market, a multi-level space from star chefs Michael Mina and Don Pintabona. Arriving on the early side was a smart parent move: we dined before the crowds descended but more importantly, before Sammy got too cranky. As a primer to dinner, we followed our noses to the lower-level market to sample locally made snacks and pastries. A peanut butter chocolate banana cupcake was a potentially dinner-spoiling dessert



Waterfront dining

together in the kayak, it struck me that Sammy wouldn't remember this moment – or any of his beach vacation firsts – but my husband and I always would. I smiled to myself, knowing that only we would recount the memories from our family trip to St. Pete, but also that this beach trip was just the first of many to come. ✪

When you go

WHAT TO DO: Marine life sightings are guaranteed at **Clearwater Marine Aquarium**, which functions as a marine hospital, rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing sea critters. Voted no. 1 Best Beach in the U.S. by TripAdvisor in 2019, 2018 and 2016, a visit to **Clearwater Beach** is a must. Don't miss the nightly **Sunsets at Pier 60** celebration with crafters, live music and street performers.

WHERE TO DINE: **Locale Market** spans two storeys. On the first floor, a culinary hub features 11 kitchens vending fresh produce and gourmet take-away. Venture upstairs to dine at **FarmTable Cucina**, celebrated for its Italian-inspired, seasonal and regionally sourced menu. Seafood cravings should be directed to **Olde Bay Café** or **Frenchy's Rockaway Grill** – after all, St. Pete/Clearwater is the "grouper capital of the world."

WHERE TO STAY: The entire family can spread out at **Beach House Suites by The Don CeSar**, a collection of 70 all-suite accommodations that offer the comforts of home with Gulf views, an outdoor heated pool and great proximity to dining and shopping. Families travelling in style should look to **Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach**. Parents will love the luxuriously appointed rooms and the kids will enjoy bunking in an aquatic-themed bedroom. **TradeWinds Island Resorts** boasts two properties on 25 acres of soft white St. Pete Beach sand. A collective seven swimming pools, water park, aquarium, touch tanks and a kids club will surely keep the kiddos busy from dawn to dusk.



Salvador Dali Museum

I just had to taste. Next, we made our way upstairs for a tide-to-table meal at FarmTable Cucina. The server presented Sammy with a kid's menu that included a salad which drew a chuckle. Had a child ever ordered it, I wondered? Instead, we noshed on fresh seafood and even Sammy loved the squid ink tagliatelle with pink shrimp from Key West.

After dinner, we tottered along the waterfront park just outside our hotel: the Vinoy Renaissance, one of Florida's historic pink grand dame hotels. From here, our small family admired Mother Nature's artistic mastery as the sun melted into the horizon over Tampa Bay.

The next morning Sammy rose with the sun, reminding my husband and me whose trip we were really on. With the help of some strong coffee, we used the wake-up call as an excuse to explore the five interconnected islands that make

up Fort De Soto Park. We traipsed around the historic fort built out of coquina shells until the strong midday sun urged us to cool off. We made for North Beach where a pirate ship playground crawled with toddlers and kids while little ones waded in a tidal pool. I plopped Sammy down in the pool and watched as he happily splashed away.

After some debate, we decided to rent a double kayak from Topwater Kayak Outpost, which offered life vests small enough to fit Sammy. Admittedly, I was nervous to take a baby into a mangrove swamp perched in a kayak. But once we found a comfortable position with him on my lap, we paddled off in search of manatees and pink spoonbills. Spotting our first (of many) manatees was thrilling and immediately made the adventure worthwhile.

As our family of three sat bunched

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REVEL IN ISLAND SANCTUARIES





Crash Boat Beach, Aguadilla



Aguadilla: A NOVEL INTENTION

BY REBECCA FIELD JAGER

THE FIRST TIME I laid eyes on Playa Crash Boat, I clutched my paperback with glee. Having visited several beaches in Puerto Rico only to have the riveting performances of surfers divert me from reading, here, with nary a wave in sight, I'd finally be able to bury my toes in the sand and my head in a book.

Situated in the city of Aguadilla on the north-west tip of the island, Crash Boat is a family beach, its swells too inconsistent to deem it a bona-fide surf paradise such as the beaches of nearby Rincon.

As I strolled from the parking lot, an old van with a huge Puerto Rican flag painted on its side, caught my eye. A young man was working out of the back, whacking the tops off of coconuts like a well-practised executioner and selling the coconut water for a buck. I could hardly be expected to turn that down so I lined up and bought one.

As I stood sipping my drink and surveying the land for prime reading real estate, I spied a couple of wee water-winged wonders "swimming" near the shore. Oh, I remember how my children used to crawl along like that, using their arms to propel themselves forward with their bodies floating straight-out behind, like tadpoles with newly developed front legs. I lost myself – and god knows how much time – in a nostalgic trance.

Coming to, I noticed folks were walking by with libations and I wondered where they'd scored their alcohol. I spotted a colourful structure, and moseyed over, tossing my empty coconut on the way. I ordered a beer from a gentleman whose beautifully weathered face peeked out at me from a long rectangular window, and sat down at picnic table nearby. Maybe I'll just read here, I thought. But no, the place was serving lunch snacks and starting to get

busy and I felt badly taking up so much space. I walked back to the water's edge and literally forced myself to sit.

But then, just as a jet ski whizzed and a stand-up paddleboarder glided by, a series of whoops stopped my heart. Uh oh, were the surfers here? Nah, it was just a bunch of teenagers cannonballing off the edge of the pier.

With a silent apology to the author I gave up on even cracking open my book. There was nothing about Crash Boat Beach I wanted to escape from. ☺

When you go

WHAT TO DO: Crash Boat draws enthusiasts of all sorts of activities including swimming, fishing, snorkeling, scuba-diving and stand-up paddleboarding.

WHERE TO EAT: Snack on Latino favourites and cold beverages sold by beach vendors or grab picnic supplies from the grocery store in **Aguadilla**. Dine in at **Rompeolas**, a beach bar and restaurant where locals hang out and you can get a decent sit-down meal.

WHERE TO STAY: A good way to get to know Puerto Rico is by staying in a home-share. Many are located on, or within walking distance, of the beach.



Sanibel Lighthouse

Fort Myers & Sanibel: FLIP-FLOPS & WHY NOTS?

BY LINDA BARNARD

THE SANIBEL CAUSEWAY arcs up and over blue-green San Carlos Bay, a five-kilometre overwater stretch from the southwest Florida coast to Sanibel Island. Over the many years I've been visiting the beaches of Fort Myers with my family, I must have made this brief trip dozens of times. And yet I never tire of the gorgeous view and the peaceful sense I'm leaving the mainland behind for the tropical island getaway next door.

Sanibel and its little sister Captiva lie just off coastal Florida, but they feel a world away. When I arrive, I'm taken with their "Old Florida" vibe wrapped in a welcoming, laid-back personality. Flip-flops, fresh fish, epic sunsets and shell collecting: it's like I've stepped through a door marked "instant vacation."

The first clue this is another world: there are no stoplights on Sanibel's main road. Periwinkle Way is a two-lane route bracketed by lush growths of tropical foliage.

As we drive along it, I admire the elegant Gulf of Mexico-facing luxury homes that draw from classic island architecture. Some are painted in pastels and others in punchier hues and many are accented with plantation shutters. The homes share spectacular seascape views with resorts and bright, candy-coloured beach bungalows. I watch pelicans skimming the waves as kids run along the fine white sand. Palm trees and sea grass nod in the breeze. It's a slice of carefree paradise – but there are pressing choices to be made.

WILL IT BE LUNCH FIRST? MY MIND wanders to the irresistible blackened

grouper tacos served at the fun and funky Sanibel Fish House. It's a place decorated with playful Caribbean beach bar décor, where a musician strums his guitar while crooning Jimmy Buffett hits. In the past, it's also been the kind of place to relieve me of my mainland sensibilities, where I vowed to order a side salad instead of fries. But the melody of *Margaritaville* eased me into a beachy "why not?" state of mind.

Or perhaps I'll get my toes into that white sand, starting with a walk on Bowman's Beach, one of six public beaches on Sanibel-Captiva.

This is where you can join the famous "Sanibel Stoop" brigade, the name given to the folks who come to this shelling paradise from all over the world, to stroll the beaches while slightly bent over and with heads down, to pick from the bounty of seashells.



Outrigger Beach Resort

The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum, the only museum in the U.S. devoted to shells, always provides inspiration. Download its app, a seashell guide complete with images and descriptions, to help you on your hunt.

One of my favourite Sanibel souvenirs is a small, glass-bellied table lamp – you can find them in many shops on the island – that I’ve filled with the seashells I collected on Sanibel’s beaches. It’s a lasting memory of a special place, especially when winter comes.

ALL INTERESTING OPTIONS, TO BE sure. But for me, the first stop has got to be “the Ding.”

J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge covers roughly one-third of Sanibel Island. Protecting a large mangrove ecosystem, it’s a haven for migratory and native birds, as well as other creatures.

I’ve seen an astonishing amount of wildlife while driving the paved road that runs the length of the refuge. (The drive is closed Fridays.) But I see even more as I cycle through the Ding, a great option because renting a bike means I can take advantage of 35 kilometres of flat bike paths that trace the island. Rangers are often found posted along Ding Darling’s paths, especially at popular viewpoints, with binoculars at the ready. They’re quick to offer up a glimpse or share information about the island’s wildlife, from birds to bobcats.

BACK ON THE MAINLAND, FORT Myers boasts its own excellent beaches, sheltered and shallow and strung along 11 kilometres of Estero Boulevard on Estero Island. I always walk out on Fort Myers Pier to watch hungry pelicans doing their best to snatch a catch away

from the anglers. Following their lead, I snag my own catch at nearby Times Square, a prime spot for beachside shopping and dining.

As the day winds down, people turn up. They gather at the pier, at beach bars, on restaurant patios and along the shore for the ritual of admiring a Fort Myers sunset. We have a family tradition of taking a sundowner to a waterfront park overlooking the beach to toast the setting sun and another day in this Florida paradise – because, why not? ☺

When you go

WHAT TO DO: The Edison and Ford Winter Estates are a must-see in Fort Myers. Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were snowbirds and spent winters with their families on the Caloosahatchee River. The site includes historic homes to tour, gardens, the **Edison Ford Museum** and more. Another of Edison’s legacies are the hundreds of magnificent Royal Palms lining McGregor Boulevard that you’ll pass along the way.

WHERE TO DINE: Dixie Fish Company bills itself as “an original Florida fish house.” Enjoy grouper or Florida pink shrimp and live music on the Estero Bay waterfront at Matanzas Pass. On Sanibel, order the coconut shrimp at **The Fish House Restaurant**, an eclectic eatery that rocks an island feel. Get your fill of conch fritters here, too.

WHERE TO STAY: Pink Shell Resort & Marina on Fort Myers Beach offers a full resort experience along with a great beach with a protected swimming/no-wake zone, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards. Sanibel’s all-suite beachfront resort **Casa Ybel** has watersports, yoga and bikes. Grab lunch or a sunset drink poolside or dinner at Thistle Lodge. Bonus: the suites have kitchens. The historic **Island Inn on Sanibel Island** has undergone a recent renovation to one building, creating 12 Gulf-view luxury suites, with private screened balconies and full kitchens. Located on the beach, it also has cottages for larger groups.



Hot chicken dinner



Fried green tomatoes

Birmingham: DINNER TABLE OF THE SOUTH

BY DOUG O'NEILL

HERE'S THE DEAL: I don't mind dining alone when I'm travelling. As a food-obsessed traveller determined to sample a city's full range of flavours, I can quite confidently march into a restaurant, sit at a table all by my lonesome and nosh away to my tummy's content.

Unfortunately, solo dining is always served with an unwanted appetizer: a cold dish of pity. A stream of plates delivered to a table for one inevitably garners the attention of the dining public. Their stares betray their thoughts: "What a porker!" says one onlooker, while another whispers, "Poor sad sack, eating all alone."

So, I came up with a solution, one that worked well on a trip not too long ago to Birmingham, Alabama, a city meant to be savoured. My new modus operandi: determine the mix of dishes that constitutes a local dinner table and

then enjoy them one at a time, each in a different restaurant.

Consensus on what constitutes standard fare at a Southern dinner table in Birmingham wasn't instantly clear – depending on whom I consulted. I was fairly sure I'd be noshing on grits, fried chicken, gumbo, fried green tomatoes, biscuits, pork (slow-roasted and pulled) and quite likely, catfish and other seafood. My informal poll generated some debate but most contentious were hush puppies, delicious balls of deep-fried cornmeal dough and green onions. My Uber driver cautioned me: "You be careful with that one. We Southerners cook hush puppies so they must be Southern, right? But I've actually heard they were created in France – by nuns. But I didn't tell you that."

Sworn to secrecy, I exited the car at the first stop on my gastro-tour. First up on the Birmingham dinner table: fried green tomatoes.

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES: TRADITIONAL MEETS TRENDY

The movie version of Fannie Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes*, about the goings-on in the fictitious Alabama eatery known as the Whistle Stop Café, was my first introduction to the traditional Southern dish of unripe tomatoes (hence, green), which are coated in cornmeal and fried, and typically served with a dipping sauce.

If you want to truly honour the legacy of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, head to the Irondale suburb, some twenty minutes east of downtown Birmingham. That's where I found Irondale Café, which serves an excellent version of fried green tomatoes and so it should: established in 1928, the cafeteria-style restaurant was reportedly the inspiration for Flagg's Whistle Stop Café. Irondale's fried okra, another signature Southern standby, gave the fried green tomatoes a run for their money.

But my favourite fried green tomatoes were served at the contemporary Southern Kitchen and Bar in the trendy Uptown District. I was delighted to find feta sprinkled atop the dish but it was the house-made bacon-tomato jam that seared the dish into my memory.

FRIED CHICKEN (THAT WILL KICK YOU IN THE MOUTH)

For many Birmingham foodies, fried chicken is the quintessential dinner dish. And indeed, it's delicious. But I warn



Birmingham Highlands Bar & Grill grits

you: sometimes the menu will read “hot chicken” and other times not. Trust me, it’s almost always hot.

For diners with a capacity to withstand the fires of hell scorching the roof of their mouth, I suggest Hattie B’s. Hattie B’s range of heat says it all: Southern (“No Heat”), Mild (“Couch of Heat”), Medium (“Warming Up”), Hot (“Feel the Heat”), Damn Hot! (“Fire Starter”) and a level I’ll never try: Shut the Cluck Up! (“Burn Notice”).

For a variation on fried chicken, I followed some locals to Miss Myra’s Pit Bar-B-Q, which has been serving up barbecued everything for almost 35 years. The moment I stepped inside the laid-back eatery I was taken by the genuine family ambiance – which is not surprising: proprietor Myra Grissom Harper was the youngest of 10 children in a family where “everybody took their turn at the stove.” Miss Myra’s serves a homemade mayonnaise-based white sauce, which is kinder to tender tongues like mine who can’t always stand the heat from the kitchen, and side dishes deliver a hearty homestyle touch: potato salad, baked beans, slaw, green beans, turnip greens and deviled eggs.

GRITS – BY ANY OTHER NAME

I’ve not always enjoyed a trusting relationship with grits, for the simple reason I couldn’t quite “get to the heart” of the boiled cornmeal dish.

How to describe grits to the uninitiated? It’s not poetic, but I’ve

concluded grits are a hybrid of polenta-meets-porridge-meets-ugali (a hot breakfast dish I once had in Kenya). While chatting with a local Birmingham foodie, he shook his head and said, “You need *real* grits. Go to Highlands Bar.”

Highlands Bar & Grill was named the most outstanding restaurant in America at the James Beard Awards in 2018. So off I went early one evening and ordered the famous stone ground baked grits. Star ingredients of prosciutto, mushrooms and thyme elevated grits for me in the same way fancy toppings like miso have forever changed poutine back at home. If I hadn’t already ordered Highland’s equally famous fried catfish, I would have doubled down on grits.

Slightly less upscale but just as tasty were the grits at the multi-award winning SAW’s Soul Kitchen. The grits had a calming effect on the spice-laden barbecue pulled pork, which is your main reason to dine at SAW’s.

THE EVER-CHANGING DINNER TABLE

I had no problem finding the other Southern fare on my list: collard greens were plentiful, gumbo was ubiquitous and seafood restaurants were found in abundance. But just to ensure no specialty escaped my fork, I made my way to the recently established Pizitz Food Hall emporium.

At Waffle Works, I chowed down on cornbread waffles while the fellow at the next table ordered shrimp and grits

waffles. I quickly copied his order. Across the hall at Alabama Biscuit Company, I noticed they honoured the traditional Southern biscuit with “just a biscuit,” but the “pecan butter and honey biscuit” (made with house-milled organic pecan butter and local honey drizzle) was a definite nod to changing food tastes.

I bore witness again to hints of this evolution in Southern fare when I went in search of pork belly. To my surprise, I found it at a sleek Japanese eatery, whose traditional broth contains, what else, citrus-braised pork belly.

Steadfast Southern staples may dress the Birmingham dinner table, but times, and taste buds, are a-changing. 🍴

When you go

(MORE) GREAT EATS: **Chez Fonfon** for its award-winning burger, **Bottega Café and Restaurant** for farm-raised meats and a lovely patio, trendy **Ovenbird** for globally-inspired “live fire” small plates, **Gianmarco’s** for Italian, nestled in the charming Homewood neighbourhood, and **Café Dupont** for fried oysters and okra with cayenne butter sauce.

WHAT TO DO: Touch history in the **Birmingham Civil Rights District**, admire the galleries of **Birmingham Museum of Art** and then put on your dancing shoes for a Saturday night backyard party at **Gip’s Place**, one of America’s last real juke joints.

WHERE TO STAY: The art and curiosity-filled **Grand Bohemian Hotel** for a boutique sleep, **Elyton Hotel** for its landmark historic beauty and Moon Shine rooftop bar, the iconic **Tutwiler Hotel** for a visit drenched in white marble, and **Renaissance Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa** for hand-some digs with a round of links.

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Tampa Riverwalk

TAMPA BAY, ON TWO WHEELS

BY TERRY WARD

IT'S A TYPICALLY SUNNY Tampa morning as I pedal my bike along Bayshore Boulevard, the city's favourite pedestrian and cycling path. It skirts Hillsborough Bay on the southern end of the peninsula, carving a route past some of downtown's most leafy and historic neighbourhoods. Touted as the longest continuous sidewalk in the world at 7.2 kilometres long, the urban jaunt is all about enjoying the ride.

I arrive at Ballast Point Park just as the sun begins burning off drops of dew from the well-trodden boards of the 182-metre-long pier. One of my favourite spots to commune with nature in the city, the park has picnic tables under gazebos, barbecues and a pathway skirting a thick tangle of mangroves on the bay's edge where egrets and herons stalk the shallows for minnows.

I stroll the length of the pier, pausing among the pelicans and a few human

early birds casting their fishing lines. A mother and son fiddle with bait buckets in a cherry red wagon they've wheeled down the pier. Off in the distance, the skyscrapers of downtown shimmer in the morning light. As for cities that bring the salt life to their doorstep, Tampa is a poster child. Exploring it on two wheels makes for an idyllic and active day out.

Heading north from Ballast Point Park, Bayshore Boulevard's sidewalks lead through tunneling oak trees and streets lined with pretty homes before widening into a pathway that hugs the edge of Hillsborough Bay into the heart of downtown. Pedestrians share the sidewalk with inline skaters practicing their techniques, kids on training wheels and friends slow-pedaling sky blue Coast Bike Share bicycles along the long curve of the bay. I pause to relax on a concrete bench and that's when I spot the delicate tips of a school of stingrays breaking the water's glassy surface. The creatures,

slightly larger than dinner plates, are a common sight along Bayshore Boulevard.

Pedaling north, I arrive where the bay meets the Hillsborough River, right in the centre of the city's handful of skyscrapers, where another beloved Tampa bike and pedestrian pathway awaits.

The Tampa Riverwalk stretches 3.8 kilometres along the riverbank and is lined with places that tempt you to park your bike. Spend the day learning about the fish and reptiles that inhabit Florida's mangroves or board a dolphin-spotting cruise at the Florida Aquarium. Right here along the Riverwalk is also where you'll find some of the city's hippest foodie hangouts.

My eyes bounce back and forth from the sidewalk to the river as I pedal along, barely outpacing folks on stand-up paddleboards and cool floating bikes they've rented from the Tampa Bay Water Bike Company. ➤



I ditch my bike outside Armature Works, a former warehouse for the city's trolleys that's now home to a much livelier scene. Here, the Heights Public Market has stylish restaurant counters and artisan food stalls selling ramen, hearty steak-frites and custom cuts of grass-fed Florida beef you can take home for the grill. The latest buzz at Armature Works is a new rooftop bar, M. Bird, which opened in time for the summer season with a sprawling deck on the second floor of the historic building. It's named after the state bird – a mockingbird, I'm surprised to learn.

I jump on my bike to backtrack toward the tall buildings of downtown, where an exciting new district is rising.

Tampa's newest outdoor waterfront entertainment area, Sparkman Wharf, opened within the city's evolving downtown Water Street Tampa district in late 2018. When the three-billion-dollar development project finally wraps up in 2027, downtown will have completely reinvented itself with new urban parks, Ian Schrager's The Tampa EDITION hotel and sleek buildings full of housing and office space – all facing the water. The city's first JW Marriott Tampa Water Street is slated to open in late 2020, and visitors are already pouring into the recently renovated Tampa Marriott Water

Street, a central base for exploring all the city offers.

I sit in the open-air beer garden called Fermented Reality at Sparkman Wharf, overlooking Garrison Channel, where more than 30 taps of beer include a local wheat that makes me feel like I'm in Germany. It's a good perch for taking in the changes afoot in the city I call home.

The wharf is the first major debut in Water Street Tampa, and some of Tampa's top restaurants have reinvented themselves in a more casual and counter-service-only setting, selling everything from Vietnamese *bánh mì* sandwiches to fresh Gulf of Mexico oysters within pop-up style shipping containers that lend a quirkiness downtown was missing. Friends gather quayside, Tampa-brewed craft beers in hand, to play shuffleboard and corn hole. And families with young kids play atop the faux grass lawn and stage impromptu picnics. Several days a year, cruise ships pull up to the quay to dock, creating much excitement for onlookers.

Later, pedaling my way back along Bayshore Boulevard toward my home, something draws my eyes toward the water. It's a dolphin speeding just below me, hunting prey my eyes can't see. The animal moves so quickly I give up trying to keep pace and just enjoy the ride. 🐬

When you go

WHAT TO DO: Test your mettle on the scream machines (roller coasters) at **Busch Gardens Tampa Bay**, then come face-to-face with giraffes on a safari ride through the Serengeti Plain animal park. Find your sea legs at **Urban Kai Stand Up Paddleboarding** to admire views of downtown from the waterline; keep your eyes peeled for dolphins and manatees. Sports fans should catch a pro game: the Lightning (hockey), the Rays (baseball), the Buccaneers (football) and the Rowdies (soccer) all call Tampa Bay home.

WHERE TO DINE: With more than a dozen restaurants and bars, mix and match meals at **Heights Public Market**, located in the historic Armature Works building. For a sit-down meal, make a reservation at **Columbia Restaurant**, Florida's oldest restaurant. The menu embodies the owners' Cuban and Spanish roots and Flamenco performances are served as an appetizer six nights a week. Don't leave Tampa Bay without dining at **Rooster and the Till** which has been repeatedly recognized as the city's best restaurant. Located in the hipster haven of Seminole Heights, its open kitchen churns out an ever-evolving menu of approachable gourmet.

WHERE TO STAY: Foodies will fall for **Epicurean Hotel**, a boutique Marriott Autograph Collection property located in the leafy Hyde Park neighbourhood. Score sweeping city views from its rooftop bar or indulge in a spa treatment involving wine. (For real!) The luxurious **Sheraton Tampa Downtown**'s central location appeals to urban explorers. Located along the Tampa Riverwalk, guests can step right off the doorstep and into their morning run or sunset stroll. Design-junkies will swoon for **Le Meridien Tampa** which is housed in the old federal courthouse building. Write yourself a note at the original judge's bench, stroll the original terrazzo floors or dine beneath the coffered ceiling of the former main courtroom.

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The lively social scene at The Knock Back

Freewheeling Portland: SEARCHING FOR THE SOUL OF ROSE CITY

BY DAVID WEBB

“YOU CAN DO WHAT you want. We’re not going to bother you.”

A fine sentiment, though surprising when uttered nonchalantly by a uniformed police officer standing guard over the Starlight Parade setup in downtown Portland, Oregon.

My friends and I are inquiring about suitable spots to ride our e-scooters; ubiquitous app-accessed getaways that have overtaken the city’s central core. We weren’t too sure how local road rules apply to electric scooters and didn’t wish to run afoul in Trump’s America. The uninterested officer wanders off to attend more pressing traffic concerns as our foursome scoots down the parade route toward the Willamette River. And sure enough, no one bothers us.

You can do what you want, we’re not going to bother you, could serve as Portland’s official motto. In the 21st century, this city has become the posterchild for Pacific Northwest hipsterdom, creative thinking and liberal arts. Portland is an

enclave. It’s a town where someone can open a store that only sells spoons without fear of ridicule, or, worse, going out of business. (It’s called “Portland Spoon Co.,” and it’s in the city’s southeast.) Where neck tattoos are considered gentle skin art, not prison stamps. Where a Millennial might commute on a Penny Farthing (yes, I saw this) while the Baby Boomer beside him is sporting punk rock leathers straight out of the ‘70s.

And no one bothers them.

Creativity is a commodity, however. The TV cult-hit *Portlandia* shone a comedic spotlight on Portland’s funky ways, and more recently the show *Shrill* – which walks a similar path as HBO’s star-making *Girls* – chose to set in this city and eschew former epicentres of cool like Brooklyn, Austin or L.A. The cheap housing that originally attracted the city’s creative class is cheap no more. Voodoo Donuts and Stumptown Coffee Roasters originated as Portlanders’ homes-away-from-home; they’re now stuffed with floppy-hat-wearing

Instagrammers who spend more time snapping selfies than savouring treats.

So while scooting around Rose City, the question must be asked – after all this notoriety and change, is the Portland we know still the Portland we love?

Heading north from downtown, Mississippi Avenue is where the city’s offbeat heart still thumps. Prost! Portland decorates the southwest corner of North Skidmore and Mississippi avenues. It’s a taste of Bavaria where German draughts fill *Das Boot* – one-litre mugs – washing down soft pretzels drenched in butter. Across the street, Paxton Gate is a curio shop of old. It’s hard to say exactly what this business is, but if you’re yearning for a dried butterfly or a mounted lion’s head from the 1800s, this is about the only place you need to look.

Midway along Mississippi, Gravy is where folks line up for an hour every weekend morning for the best brunch in the city, often ignoring that Miss Delta, right across the street, is just as good and much easier to grab a seat. Nectar is



The Hawthorne District



Lobby of the Ace Hotel

the prettiest pot shop I've ever seen – it resembles a boutique clothier. Since my home nation legalized cannabis last year, the draw is less of a novelty – lessened more by the Feds' strong disagreement on Oregon's assertion that marijuana is, in fact, legal. (The guy petitioning outside for the decriminalization of psychedelic mushrooms clearly doesn't feel his state's permissiveness has gone far enough.)

Stormbreaker Brewing has the street's best patio and their nachos *are the business*. A collection of parked e-scooters line up at the curbside-cum-vaping area. Wheels turn.

Uber and Lyft are easy. Light-rail transit is convenient. Bicycles are beloved. An electric scooter? Just weird enough to be truly Portland.

Spin, Lime and Bolt: three scooter-share apps and Rose City roses by different names. Portland's e-scooter-share is changing how folks commute in the city core. Download an app, scan a scooter wherever you find one, kick a

push to get going and thumb the electric throttle. Fourteen miles per hour never felt so wild.

Downtown, a man named Bruce is grabbing e-scooters and tossing them into the back of his pickup. He's a harvester – he gathers depleted e-scooters and charges them up for a fee from the provider.

"Stay off the riverfront, there are lots of kids running around and you'll get a ticket," he tells us. (A more accurate version of our mantra: *do what you want, and as long as you're respectful, no one will bother you.*) "It's easy. I get five bucks a scooter, minimum. It only sucks when someone throws one in the river," he continues, explaining that some old-time Portlanders went to war with these e-scooters when they showed up. Here, the bike-versus-car war is in ceasefire; now it's bike-versus-scooter.

Can't we all just get along? Especially when e-scooting is this much fun. In a short hop we've blasted from the Willamette River, through the downtown core, overtop the I-5 and landed at trendy NW 23rd Avenue for tacos and Breakside Brewery Hazy IPAs. Park that hot-rod Razor wherever you feel and find another when it suits. Scan and scoot. Portland's small centre congests easily with cars, and bike lanes – as well as skate lanes – are much quicker than any four-wheeler.

We finally stop off under the Hawthorne Bridge, where the Portland Rose Festival Cityfair is in full swing: mini-donuts, carnival rides and touts beckoning you to win a stuffed bear in one of those games you know are rigged, but you try anyway. A few blocks away, at the Starlight Parade route – where illuminated floats will dazzle in the night – folks have staked out the best seats along Burnside Avenue hours in advance. The following weekend will bring the century-old Grand Floral Parade; a darling of Rose City featuring

throwback pageant queens, equestrians and marching bands. These June days are some of the city's busiest – but in truth, this side of Portland is decidedly less hip. Almost like a taste of Middle America in an artsy outlier.

That's the true soul of Portland. Whether you want to style a metre-high mowhawk, curate lightbulbs, pedal a Penny Farthing or simply settle into a family-friendly parade then grab some cotton candy for a Ferris wheel ride – no one is going to bother you. You can do what you want. ✪

When you go

WHAT TO DO: Urban Dictionary defines "hype beast" as "someone who is a beast (obsessed) with the hype (in fashion)." You can find these folks at **Compound Gallery**. Ever heard the phrase "ethically sourced taxidermy?" Looking for a framed butterfly? A fossil or two? **Paxton Gate** awaits.

WHERE TO DINE: If your group can't decide, hit up **Pine Street Market** and choose from eight eateries, from ramen to organic juices, Korean-fusion to craft ice cream and more. **Cheese & Crack Snack Shop** is an adult version of a childhood favourite: cheese, crackers, sausages, soft-serve ice cream and beer. As my friend Keith said while sipping a Japanese whisky in **The Detention Bar** at creepy McMenamins Kennedy School Hotel: "My new favourite thing is drinking while being scared."

WHERE TO STAY: The **Ace Hotel** in downtown oozes with style, plus the location is walking distance to the best of the Pearl District. **McMenamins Kennedy School Hotel** is probably haunted, so have a nightcap at one of the onsite bars before you tuck in.



Street musicians

New Orleans: A PLACE OF MANY TONGUES

BY TAMI FAIRWEATHER

WELL, WE'RE not dead yet!" My mom says, clutch-

ing a bouquet of orange and green silk flowers, alongside her childhood friend of over 60 years. They've just been wished a happy St. Paddy's Day by a couple dozen Irishmen at the start of the New Orleans's annual Irish Channel Parade, where each flower is presented with a kiss on the cheek. By the time the parade is over, we're draped in beads and have a bag full of produce. Just like a Mardi Gras parade, the float riders toss "throws" to parade-goers, but only at this one do you catch raw potatoes, carrots and heads of cabbage intended to fill the pot for a traditional Irish boiled dinner (just add corned beef).

I could have brought these born-and-raised Boston-Irish ladies visiting New Orleans for the first time to one of the many neighbourhood pubs or Catholic churches for a dose of Irish charm and

charity, but the kisses wouldn't have been a guarantee. When I inquire with Matthew – a third-generation Irish-New Orleanian bar owner – about who first started the kissing tradition, he's uncharacteristically stumped, but then concedes, "It was probably the Italians."

As one wades into the waves of cultures that New Orleans has absorbed in its history, things become as deep and murky as the winding, muddy Mississippi River that gives the city its "Crescent City" nickname. Most cultural groups can lay claim to at least one impressive population statistic that testifies to their influence at different points in time: Irish (one in five residents), Sicilian (80 per cent of the French Quarter), African (outnumbering Europeans six-to-one during the first French occupation), free people of color (doubling in population during the 40 years of Spanish rule), and Haitian refugees who doubled the population of the entire city after the



St. Patrick's Day decor



Haitian Revolution (coinciding with the American purchase of Louisiana from France in 1803). And this doesn't even include the flow of Greek, Cuban, German, Jewish, Latin American and Vietnamese immigrants who also came, or the indelible impact of the Creole culture – a word used to identify a group of people that is loosely translated from Spanish-Portuguese as “native to the New World.”

I understand my mom's mid-parade flood of joy in being alive; New Orleans does that to you. Its sustained capacity for celebration no matter what the occasion – dancing at funerals is not uncommon – is built on a spirit of solidarity in our shared humanity; a recognition that life can be both wondrous and heartbreaking, but we're lucky to be living it for the limited time that we are afforded. The above-ground tombs in New Orleans' cemeteries are a visual reminder of that, as much as the visceral layers of history and all the souls that came here before us and never really left (which explains why ghost tours are so popular).

Nowhere are ancestors more present than in Congo Square. On a walking history tour of the Tremé (America's oldest African-American neighbourhood), our tour guide Malik brings us to the ground where enslaved Africans were once allowed to gather on Sundays; it's a place Indigenous people shared with them. Music historians trace the origin of all American music – jazz, funk and eventually rock and roll – back to this place, where African beats, rhythms, sounds and movement were infused with traditional European instruments, like German brass. It's

also where one of the city's most deeply spiritual Indigenous cultural traditions began. The Black Masking Indians, whose tambourine-driven call-and-response chants of liberation and pride are the foundation of funk music.

On the edge of Congo Square lies a sprawling and wise live oak tree where single pennies have been placed in the deep grooves of its bark and dried red beans and flower petals tossed on the ground around it. This is the Ancestor Tree, a place where sacred offerings and cleansings in the Afro-Caribbean Vodou religion are performed, a spiritual practice rooted in the honouring of ones ancestors. New Orleans is often referred to as the northern-most city in the Caribbean, which is reflected in spirituality, language, music, food and dance.

“There are so many different international cultural influences here, and Louisiana as a whole has many Indigenous cultures that have shaped what we enjoy about music and movement today,” says Moe Joe, a performer, cultural curator and dance fitness teacher who immerses students like me in what she calls a Louisiana Afro-Creole experience of music and dance. “Second lining, bouncing and twerking are ways we follow our rhythms and express our spiritual vitality and freedom unabashedly, and that is a deep magical attraction and remedy for those who visit.”

On our last night, I remember that it's St. Joseph's Day, and every Italian restaurant, Catholic Church and even some houses and dive bars will assemble elaborate altars to honour the saint of relief from famine in Sicily. I decide to try

and get our party of three into Irene's. I warmly appeal to the host, Orlando, to please squeeze us in, and it works. He escorts us to a table right near the candlelit altar with tiers of food platters, fig cookies, figurines, flowers, lemons and a jar in the middle collecting donations to benefit the local food bank. My mom, surprised we got a table, says that Orlando and I must speak the same language, to which he replies, “We do... it's the language of love.”

Before France colonized it in 1718, New Orleans was called “Bulbancha,” a Choctaw word meaning “the place of many tongues.” It has been, and will hopefully always be, a cultural melting pot – newcomers and visitors alike just need to be willing to melt into it. Speaking the language of love helps. ☺

When you go

WHAT TO DO: To start your trip, let Malik at **Know NOLA Tours** immerse you in the culture of the city. Later, better understand the legacy of free people of color in a historic home at **Le Musée de f.p.c.** and then discover the city's street culture traditions at the **Backstreet Cultural Museum**. Try Matthew's grandparent's cocktail recipes at **St. Pat's** in the Irish Cultural Museum. Break a sweat and drop your body deep into the Louisiana dance culture in a class at the **Moe Joe Gallery**.

WHERE TO DINE: Enjoy a Creole-soul food lunch buffet at **Lil Dizzy's Café** in the Tremé, where everyone is interesting (including you). Let the mystique of the French Quarter seduce you at **Antoine's**, the city's oldest restaurant and tour the private dining rooms of the founding Mardi Gras parade krewes. **Irene's Cuisine** will feed you Creole-inspired Italian food and wine with love in an irresistibly romantic atmosphere, year-round.

WHERE TO STAY: Slip into a residential neighborhood oasis at the 1857 **Terrell House Bed & Breakfast** in the Lower Garden District, or the elegant **Eliza Jane Hotel**, located in the converted 19th-century Picayune newspaper downtown office named after the first woman publisher in the nation.

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Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

MYRTLE MELODIES

BY JILL GLEESON

IT'S A COOL SPRING night in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, but inside the House of Blues it's positively swampy. The two-level venue is packed to the rafters with people dancing and clapping along to the bright, jangly music pouring forth from the stage. The joyous bustle has driven up the heat and humidity in the club, and Darius Rucker, the man responsible, is feeling it. There are lines of perspiration escaping from underneath his trademark baseball cap, and his throat, from which his fine, full and utterly distinctive baritone flows like warm maple syrup, is knotted thickly with engorged veins.

He's working hard, I can see that clearly from my spot right in front of him, but he's having just as much fun as his audience is, grinning expansively

at his band. It's no wonder. Rucker, who gained massive fame in the mid-90s as the frontman of the seminal American roots rock group Hootie and the Blowfish, is enjoying a blockbuster second act as a country performer. And, as he's mentioned numerous times tonight, he's from Charleston, just up the coast a bit. He founded Hootie as a student at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, so he's spent a lot of hours playing Myrtle Beach bars. This show is a homecoming for him. He's feeling the love – and giving it back, too.

Rucker's been playing plenty of Hootie favourites, including *I Only Wanna Be With You* and *Time*, which both hit number one in Canada. But he's performing his country stuff, too, which has a distinctly Southern sound. Some of them are flat-out love songs to the region,

like *Southern State of Mind*, a melodic charmer that includes the lyrics:

"I could be anywhere.
In my heart I'm always there...
No matter what state I'm in,
I'm in a Southern state of mind."

Rucker's fans have been warbling along with him to every word of every tune, but this is one that has everyone singing at the top of their lungs.

Before visiting Myrtle Beach – a perfect stop for snowbirds making the long trek to and from Florida – I might have been a bit surprised to discover it so rich with the unique culture of the American South. The city of a little more than 32,000 always seemed like it would offer more of a seaside vacation vibe, less grits and seersucker suits than mini golf and roller coasters. But Myrtle Beach manages to have both. ➤

I found sounds of the American South suffusing musical performances other than Rucker's, including the fun, flashy, breathlessly-paced shows at the Carolina Opry and Legends in Concert. Glitzy lighting, elaborate costumes and plenty of special effects – both productions had it all, just like most country music concerts do these days. The Opry, which opened more than three decades ago as Myrtle Beach's first live theatre, pays tribute to its country roots by serving up some songs that wouldn't sound out of place in a honky-tonk. That included Eric Church's twangy, high-energy *How 'Bout You*, which the entire Opry cast performed with serious gusto.

Legends in Concert, which features five tribute artists, was actually founded in Las Vegas in the early '80s and is now performed throughout the United States. The Myrtle Beach outpost, located at the massive entertainment complex Broadway at the Beach in a nicely intimate theatre, provides a good dose of Southern culture, thanks to its Elvis representative, Travis Powell. Powell, who really does look and sound uncannily like The King, portrayed both young and old Elvis to a rapturous audience.

Elvis, who was born in Mississippi and lived almost his whole life in the South, may be credited for inventing rock and roll, but he loved and sang other genres, too, like *You Gave Me a Mountain*, written by country legend Marty Robbins. Powell performed the song, a weeper detailing a lifetime of trials and tribulations, beautifully, but it was his rendition of *Suspicious Minds*, one of Elvis's signature hits, that gave me goosebumps.

Like the Carolina Opry, Legends in Concert keeps things fresh by rotating performers and songs. In upcoming months you might be able to catch Dolly Parton, Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks and Luke Bryant-alikes tearing up the stage in Myrtle Beach. If you're looking to hear the reunited Hootie and the Blowfish, they'll be playing Toronto August 29 with Barenaked Ladies before moving on to Europe in October. Or, just be patient and wait for Rucker's inevitable return to Myrtle Beach, where he'll croon to you about his love for the South in the very place that helped birth it. 🌟



Carolina Opry

When You Go

WHAT TO DO: Spend a day away from the beach to immerse yourself in the rich history of coastal South Carolina. Head southwest from Myrtle Beach along Route 17 to **Atalaya** to tour the picturesque, Moorish-style winter home of Archer and Anna Hyatt Huntington. Across the highway from Atalaya is **Brookgreen Gardens**, an outstanding 9,000-acre outdoor sculpture and botanical garden. Continue driving 45 minutes past Atalaya to reach Hopsewee Plantation. **Hopsewee Plantation** was one of the South's major rice plantations and the birthplace of Thomas Lynch, Jr., one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Now a private residence, this National Historic Landmark is open for tours and seasonal dining.

WHERE TO DINE: For upscale dining that marries traditional Southern cuisine with locally sourced purveyors, head to **Aspen Grill**. Find unfussy eats at **Big Mike's Soul Food**. The dining room isn't much to look at but the shrimp and grits,

cornbread and barbeque are real-deal, authentic, Southern comfort food. For a fresh start to the day, eat breakfast at **Croissants Bistro and Bakery** or grab baked goods and coffee to-go.

WHERE TO STAY: Design junkies and nostalgia aficionados will love **Waikiki Village**. The property opened in 1963 but received a total makeover that celebrates its retro splendour and Mid-Century modern charm. Bring the entire family to **Crown Reef Beach Resort and Waterpark** which boasts two four-storey waterslides, the longest oceanfront lazy river in Myrtle Beach and multiple pools. Lodgings include rooms and suites which can sleep up to eight guests. An arcade, summertime activities and entertainment round out the family fun. Located on a seven-and-a-half-acre island between the Atlantic Ocean and Whitepoint Swash, **North Beach Plantation** offers chic resort lodging and five-star amenities. Its two towers overlook the water, a collection of pools, a lazy river and private cabanas.

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Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup

Black Hills & Badlands: **STILL A LITTLE WILD IN THE WEST**

BY KATE MORGAN

THERE'S SNOW ON THE ground when I wake up in my cabin on Sylvan Lake on the morning of the Buffalo Roundup. It's not even autumn but the weather, like everything else in South Dakota's Black Hills, is unpredictable and just a little bit wild.

The Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup, a decades-old South Dakota tradition, is like nothing I've ever seen. A herd of 1,300 bison thunders through the valley, spurred on by whooping cowboys on horseback. The air is thick with the smell of prairie sage and the sound of cracking whips; it's easy to feel like I've stepped into another era.

A visit to South Dakota is a bit like travelling via time machine. It's not just that the landscape feels untamed – rolling prairie dipping into the Badlands and rising into the granite spires and pine forests of the Black Hills – it's the people, too, and their connection to generations of pioneers, artists and trailblazers.

Later, after I've watched the Custer

State Park wildlife managers separate, vaccinate and tag the corralled bison herd, I don a hardhat and walk out onto the half-carved, extended arm of the Crazy Horse Memorial. In South Dakota, family and legacy matter, and this remarkable project is no exception.

In the late 1930s, Lakota Chief Henry Standing Bear began writing to Korczak Ziolkowski, a young assistant carver at Mount Rushmore. Henry Standing Bear wanted Ziolkowski to carve a memorial to legendary Lakota warrior Crazy Horse in the sacred Paha Sapa; the Black Hills. Ziolkowski worked on the massive carving for nearly 36 years, until his death in 1982.

Today, the as-yet-unfinished memorial is the largest mountain carving in the world. I'm staggered to learn that the four colossal presidential portraits at nearby Mount Rushmore could fit inside the head of Crazy Horse. Its progress is overseen by Ziolkowski's children and grandchildren.

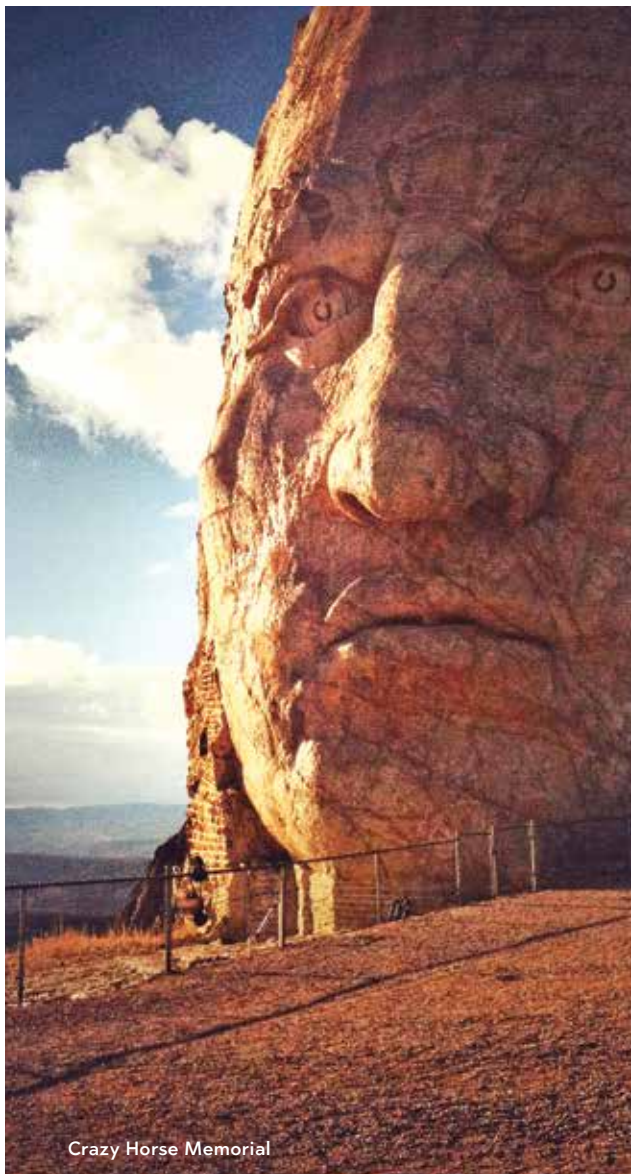
Jeff Hermanson first showed up to

work alongside Ziolkowski in 1979. He calls this a spiritual place, and, gazing up through the September mist at the warrior's faraway eyes, I'm inclined to agree.

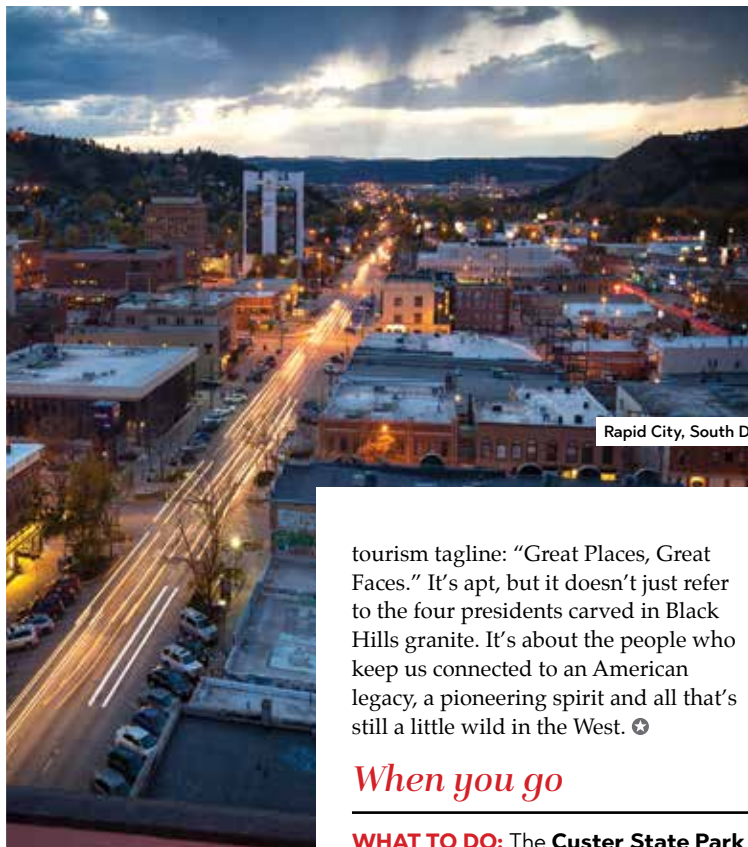
"I'm a part of something here, and it's pretty amazing," Jeff tells me. He knows he may not be here on the mountain when the memorial is finished. There's an estimated 50 years of blasting and chiseling left before Ziolkowski's vision is realized. "There's nothing wrong with passing your work onto someone else," Jeff adds. "I've left my mark."

The next morning, as I hike out into Badlands National Park just in time to watch the sunrise splash the stone with pinks and purples, I'm still thinking about what it means to leave something behind. Over millennia, this place has transformed from prehistoric sea to lush rainforest to wooded river basin. All that time has made its mark, in the form of otherworldly buttes and spires.

Here, too, there are people with an abiding devotion to legacy. In 1931, on



Crazy Horse Memorial



Rapid City, South Dakota

tourism tagline: "Great Places, Great Faces." It's apt, but it doesn't just refer to the four presidents carved in Black Hills granite. It's about the people who keep us connected to an American legacy, a pioneering spirit and all that's still a little wild in the West. ✪

When you go

WHAT TO DO: The **Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup** happens annually, in early September. Take a drive on **Needles Highway** and plan time to visit both the **Mount Rushmore** and **Crazy Horse Memorials**. Head to nearby historic **Deadwood** to get a taste of the Wild West and experience the place where Wild Bill Hickok met his maker. The best time to visit **Badlands National Park** is at sunrise or sunset, when the rocks glow and the temperatures drop.

WHERE TO DINE: Rapid City's **Firehouse Brewing Co.** serves up a great meal and an even better flight of brews. **Wall Drug** serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, but don't leave without trying their homemade donuts. Drop by Mount Rushmore's **Carver's Café** for ice cream that comes with a history lesson: it's Thomas Jefferson's recipe!

WHERE TO STAY: **Frontier Cabins Motel** near Wall offers comfortable, rustic digs a stone's throw from Badlands National Park. The cabins at **Sylvan Lake Lodge** offer cozy fireplaces and all the amenities with one heck of a view. If you're looking for something a bit closer to the airport, check into Rapid City's **Grand Gateway Hotel** (and don't miss the hotel bar's open mic on Sunday nights!)

the wall of the Badlands in a town called Wall, Ted and Dorothy Hustead bought a small pharmacy. They turned that tiny store into one of the most famous attractions in America by offering weary travellers five-cent coffee and free ice water. Today, their affable grandson Rick is dedicated to preserving and expanding Wall Drug: he maintains the now-sprawling store and its restaurant, an old-fashioned soda fountain, and one of the largest collections of Western art in the world. And he still sells the coffee for a nickel.

In so many ways, South Dakota is a place suspended in time; you half-expect to see covered wagons come rumbling over the prairie. But it's full of people who've found the sweet spot between preserving the frontier past and evolving into the future.

Tony DeMaro grew up poor in Rapid City. Before he moved east for school, he says he'd never had tuna that didn't come from a can. He mastered the restaurant business, then moved back to revamp his hometown by buying up dilapidated historic buildings and transforming them into hot spots, including a high-end wine bar, a sports pub and an authentic basement speakeasy. At Press Start, his 80s-themed arcade, I carry around two red Solo cups – one full of beer, the other loaded with quarters – and have the time of my life mashing buttons, flicking joysticks and recalling a bygone adolescence.

A bit too early the next morning (considering how much fun I had at the arcade the night before), I head to the airport. The wheels leave the ground and I'm thinking about South Dakota's



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Spirit of the Swamp

AIR-VENTURES IN KISSIMMEE

BY **VAWN HIMMELSBACH**

I'M IN AN AIRBOAT, on the edge of the Everglades. Spanish moss drips from cypress trees, reflected in water as clear as glass under a cloudless Florida sky. Watching great egrets and roseate spoonbills, I'm almost lulled into a Zen-like state. Almost.

After all, we're here to spot alligators. And despite the serene surroundings, there are more than 4,200 gators in these waters. Oh, and it's nesting season, which means there's a good chance we'll spot some females protecting their eggs.

Chris Miller, my guide with Spirit of the Swamp, seems unfazed by this fact. We're gliding effortlessly over the water when he suddenly slows down, coming to a stop. "Over there," he points toward a patch of sawgrass. I'm straining to see something in this river of grass, something that might view me as a tasty afternoon snack.

I make out the nest, but it takes a few minutes to spot the gator, still as a statue. She's so well camouflaged by her surroundings, I'm both impressed and terrified.

This is part of the largest subtropical wilderness in the U.S., supporting flora and fauna not found anywhere else on earth; it's why the Everglades has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. The king of this wilderness, of course, is the American alligator, and seeing them up close gives me a whole new respect for the Everglades ecosystem.

Spirit of the Swamp is an easy drive from my base at Magic Village Resort, a vacation home rental in Kissimmee, Florida – known as the vacation home capital of the world (yes, it's even trademarked) with 50,000

accommodation options, including 22,000 vacation homes.

From here, it's only a 10-minute drive to Disney's Animal Kingdom and a 10-minute drive to Orlando's city limits, providing easy access to the area's popular theme parks. But it's also my base for accessing Central's Florida's well-preserved natural assets.

While I did take advantage of my proximity to Animal Kingdom to ride a virtual banshee on the Avatar Flight of Passage, I also soared through the air in real life. This required getting up well before the crack of dawn and driving in the dark to a secluded spot in the woods. Not to search for banshees, but to prepare for a sunrise flight with Orlando Balloon Rides.

As the sun poked over the horizon, I stepped into what looked an awful lot



Hot air balloon over Kissimmee

like an oversized wicker basket, with a roaring flame in the centre. As a first timer, my nerves started kicking in. Whoever came up with the idea to soar into the sky in a wicker basket?

But, like airboating, my fears dissipated as I felt myself effortlessly gliding – this time on air instead of water. We floated above misty swamps, subtropical forest and orange groves, all tinted pink from the sunrise. After the initial thrill of ascent, I was once again lulled into a Zen-like state. Until we had to land.

Hot air balloon operators never know exactly where they're going to land; it depends on where the winds take you. So a team in a vehicle on the ground chases the balloon to help coordinate a landing (in this case, in a small park behind a row of houses, causing curious residents to wander outside in their bathrobes, coffee in hand).

The excitement of descent – and a surprisingly smooth landing – was followed by a traditional celebratory Champagne toast, which felt well deserved, even if it happened to be before breakfast.

Another morning, I found myself in the air once again, but this time strapped to a zipline at Forever Florida, also an easy drive from my vacation home. At this nature conservancy, you might spot alligators, armadillos and white-tailed deer, but the real adventure is soaring through the treetops on a two-and-a-half-hour aerial adventure spanning seven ziplines and three sky-bridges.

Admittedly, I did wimp out on the Panther Pounce, which requires stepping off a seven-storey platform into a free fall to the ground below.

After action-packed days exploring Central Florida's natural assets (and overcoming a few fears along the way), I found plenty of ways to unwind: like a bone-in ribeye at the rooftop steakhouse Eleven at Reunion Resort – the area's premiere star-gazing destination – and table-side sangria at the historic Columbia Restaurant in nearby Celebration.

Best of all, I could skip the crowds and watch Animal Kingdom's nightly fireworks from the privacy of my vacation home's pool – an added bonus to a perfect outdoor adventure getaway. ☺

When You Go

WHAT TO DO: First, go wild. Venture out with **Spirit of the Swamp** for an airboat tour into Central Florida's 100,000 acres of pristine wetlands. At **Wild Florida's Gator Park**, come face-to-face with a sloth and the other 200 critters and creatures that call it home. Next, take an urban adventure. Visit **Celebration**, a master-planned community founded by the Walt Disney Company in the mid-1990s. Modeled after historical American small towns, Celebration was named one of America's 10 prettiest towns. Explore it by foot, bicycle, carriage or Segway.

WHERE TO EAT: Founded in 1905, **Columbia Restaurant** is located in Celebration and serves up a century's worth of Latin-style family recipes. Popular menu items include the Original Cuban Sandwich, paella Espanola and the 1905 Salad, tossed tableside for your entertainment. Hungry travellers have a buffet of options at **Disney Springs**, located on the Walt Disney World Resort property but open to non-park guests too. Peek into the exhibition kitchen at **Morimoto Asia** before tucking into celebrity Chef Masaharu Morimoto's mouth-watering pan-Asian menu. Located on the waterfront, **The Boathouse** sets the table for upscale surf n'turf. Dry-aged steaks appeal to hungry carnivores while a raw bar and Gulf-caught seafood mean you might still have room to tackle The Boathouse's famously delicious, yet utterly gluttonous, desert: S'mores Baked Alaska.

WHERE TO STAY: Our writer stayed at **Magic Village Resort**, a concierge-style, gated community with 3- and 4-bedroom furnished townhomes that accommodate up to eight guests. Music-lovers take note: **Margaritaville Resort** is now open and features 1,000 cottage-style vacation homes, a hotel, expansive lagoon pools and a dine-in movie theatre. Travelling with your extended family? **Reunion Resort** offers luxuriously appointed villas and vacation homes and activities to suit everyone: a five-acre water park, spa, tennis courts and three private championship golf courses.

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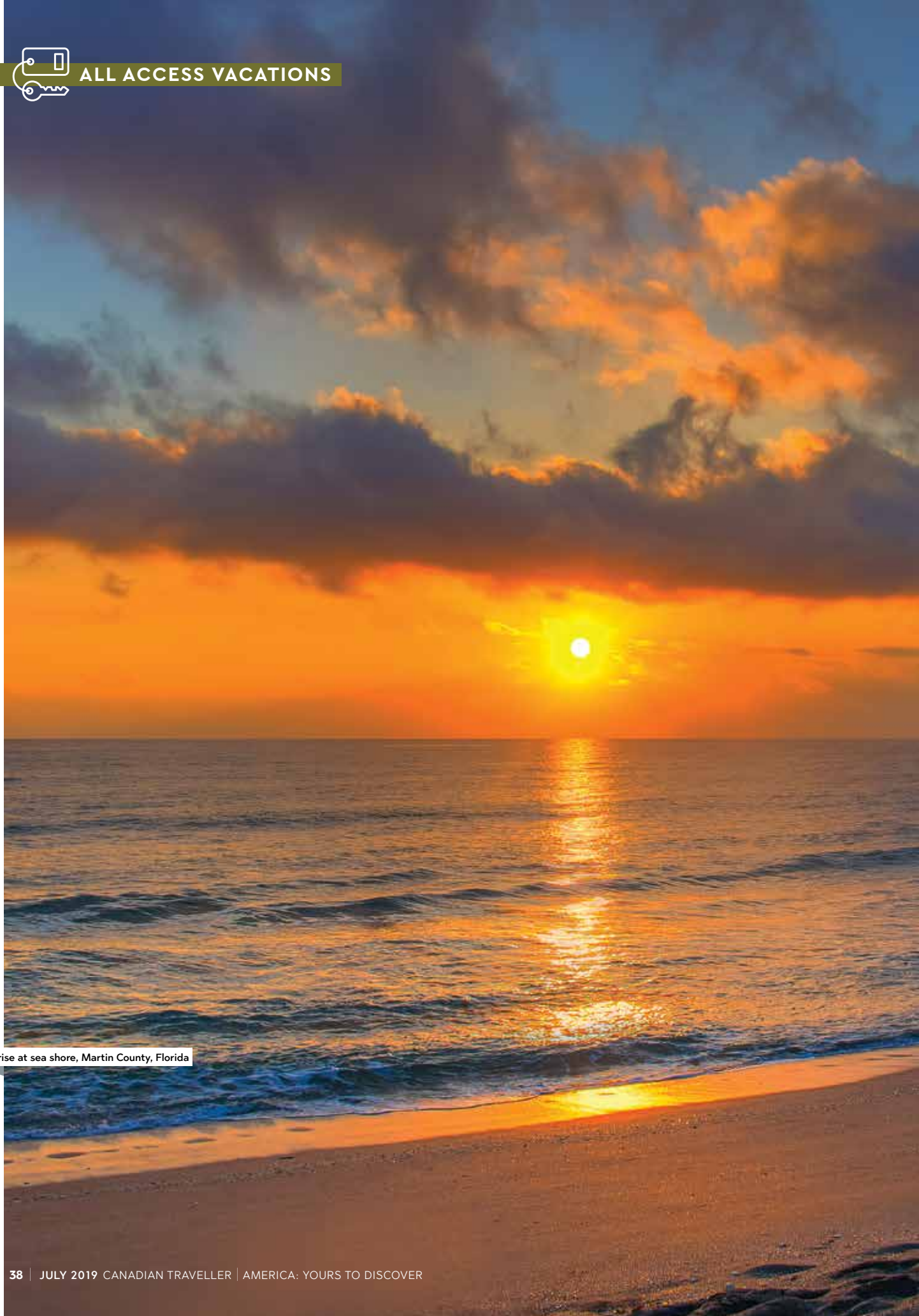
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Sunrise at sea shore, Martin County, Florida

Martin County: HIDDEN JEWEL ON FLORIDA'S TREASURE COAST

BY CHLOE BERGE

THE MUSICAL TRUMPET of a giant conch shell sounds as the front of our boat, the Schooner Lily, knifes through the St. Lucie River. "It's paradise," says Luke, first mate on the decades-old wooden boat, motioning out over the water. The sailor moved here to Martin County, along Florida's Treasure Coast, from the UK when he was 10 years old and he's still smitten.

The sorbet sky and setting sun turns the calm waters gold and casts the palm-lined beach in silhouette. Our boat captain and Treasure Coast Sailing Adventures founder, Fred Newhart, explains that the estuary we're travelling along has a high saline content, which means it's teeming with wildlife, including manatees, pelicans, and peregrine falcons that swoop down from the sky towards us. Just as the last halo of light disappears from the horizon, a pod of dolphins leaps from the water, as if escorting us back to the harbour.

The Treasure Coast gets its name from the loot that's still being discovered to this day from shipwrecked Spanish fleets that sailed the area in the 18th century. But spend a few days in Martin County and you'll realize the real gems are to be found in the towering slash pine trees of its parks, its azure waters – home to sea turtles – and its warm, hospitable people. Indeed, they'll be the first to tell you that in some ways, they wish they could keep their shores a secret. "When I drive into town, I love that you can still see the ocean," says local resident Nerissa Okiye. "It's a calm, peaceful place." A four-storey building restriction means the county has been able to preserve its natural beauty.

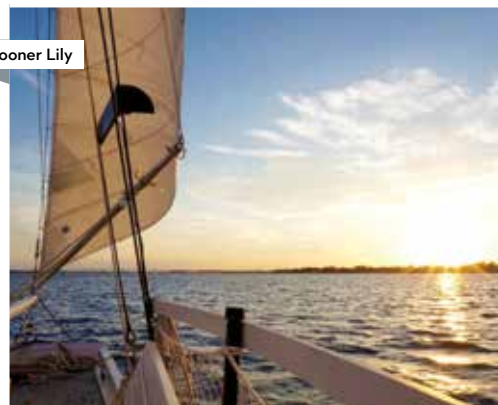
My exploration of the coastal landscape begins at Jonathan Dickinson State Park, named after a 17th-century merchant who found himself shipwrecked in the area. Located in Hobe Sound, the 10,500-acre park is mapped with pine forests, mangroves and river swamps. Biking and hiking trails are flanked by bushy sand pine scrub and leggy slash pine trees that bloom with greenery at the very top, like leafy umbrellas. Rare Florida scrub jays (a close cousin to the blue jay) can be spotted nesting in the trees, and endangered species like the Florida mouse and gopher frog may scurry and hop across your path.

The park is also home to alligators and bobcats, but on the two-kilometre Kitching Creek Nature Trail you're unlikely to cross paths with any. The mostly flat trail winds through low pine flatwoods and along Kitching Creek, a tributary of the Loxahatchee River, where you can pause for a meditative moment ▶

Jonathan Dickinson State Park



Schooner Lily



Sewalls Point Park

in front of its murmuring waters. A hike up Hobe Mountain, Florida's highest natural point of land, will treat you to a view of waterways and farther afield, the Atlantic Ocean.

Outside of the park, I explore the county's mangroves by boat. The naturalist guide at Riding the Waves decides to trust me to drive my own small catamaran through the Jupiter Narrows, a waterway flanked by 2,000 acres of undeveloped public land. I zip around red mangroves, the roots of which are often seen decorated with oysters, which help to filter the water and keep the ecosystem healthy. Wading birds like herons and egrets dot the mangroves' edge, and taller Australian pine trees shelter the nests of osprey, which feed off the plentiful fish found in the waters. We make a stop at Hobe Sound Wildlife Refuge Beach and tread down through the sugary white sand to dip our toes in the azure Atlantic. The area is nearly devoid of people, and this secluded stretch of beach isn't limited to Hobe Sound.

Not far from where I'm staying at the Marriott Beach Resort and Marina in Hutchinson Island, are some of Martin County's most scenic slices of waterfront. Sea turtles build their nests in the sand under the shade of waxy sea grape trees – many of which you'll see flagged and marked off to protect the animals – tall grasses dance in the wind, and sun-kissed surfers dip in and out of the ocean.

Before the blazing Florida sun is too high, I set out on a paddle board at Sailing Fish Flats with Zeke's Surf and Paddle. "I've lived here all my life and I'm still amazed by all the creatures you see here," says co-owner Leisa Bee as our boards skim towards a sandbar. The serene paddle is punctuated by the periodic splash of schools of small, shimmering silver fish that sail over the inlet's surface like synchronized swimmers.

The deep, crystalline water affords views straight down to the sandy bottom, where manta rays swim alongside sea turtles and in between conch shells. Fluorescent comb jellies

can often be seen glowing blue and red on the ocean's floor, says Leisa. I'm not lucky enough to spot anything else on this outing, but floating on my board with only the sound of the wind and waves enveloping me feels like reward enough in itself. ✨

When You Go



WHAT TO DO: While you'll want to get your toes in the sand and surf, Martin County's rich maritime history also merits exploration. Built in 1875, the **House of Refuge** is the only remaining structure of its kind along the Florida coast and has a spot on the National Register of Historic Places. The houses which once dotted the coast were manned by families who would look out for sailors in distress, take them in, and help them find their way back home. A walk through the original house gives a glimpse into the unforgiving life led by the families and sailors alike. Not far from there is the **Elliott Museum**. Named after inventor Sterling Elliott, the airy, two-storey museum boasts permanent exhibits detailing the history of the Treasure Coast, as well as technology and art.

WHERE TO DINE: To start the day, head to **Bunkhouse Coffee** in Jensen Beach for an acai bowl topped with fresh fruit and coconut flakes. In Port Salerno, head to **The Twisted Tuna**, a waterfront pub with postcard views of docked boats and palm trees. Order the smoked tuna dip (a local favourite) or blackened mahi-mahi tacos. If small-town Florida charm is what you're after, head to **The Gafford** in Stuart and order the locally caught swordfish.

WHERE TO STAY: Wedged between the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean and the intercoastal waterway, **Hutchinson Island Marriott Resort & Marina** is a serene home base while in Martin County. Spread over 200 acres, the resort has inviting outdoor pools, two restaurants, an 18-hole golf course, 13 tennis courts, a fitness centre and a mini-spa.

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Red Sands

El Paso: ALLIES IN ADVENTURE

BY TAMARA GRUBER

BUMPING AND SLIDING my way along one of the hundreds of trails that snake through Red Sands, my fingers are clenched in a death grip as I battle an ATV for control. Red-brown earth, which derives its colour from iron oxide deposits, seems to stretch endlessly in every direction, yet I know the sprawling city of El Paso lies just to the west.

As I nudge my vehicle over the crest of yet another dune, I see scrub

brush-rimmed trails stretching in every direction and it is easy to imagine this place for what it once was: the bottom of an ancient sea. Today, these sand dunes are a playground for off-roaders, attracting ATVs, dune buggies and four-wheel drive vehicles by the hundreds on busy weekends.

On this midweek day in late winter, we almost have the place to ourselves. As the sun beats down upon the dunes, as it does over 300 days of the year in “Sun City,” I am glad I have a guide to lead me

through this dusty maze.

My friend, who knows my need for control, looks back and laughs; she realizes what I need to do is relax. Somewhat reluctantly, I acknowledge that I need to step outside of my comfort zone, that going faster will actually help me tame this beast. ►

By the end of the tour, I finally relinquish control and we laugh about it as we return our rentals. I wipe the dust from my face and happily plant my feet firmly back on solid ground.

WE CAME TO EL PASO SEEKING NEW experiences and ready to push some boundaries. From its position at the westernmost point of Texas, straddling the Rio Grande on the U.S.–Mexico border, El Paso knows a thing or two about boundaries; the controversial border is never far from view.

Upon arrival, El Paso strikes you as a military town. With good reason:

it is home to Fort Bliss, the nation's second-largest military installation. Its urban centre looks surprisingly large, that is, until night falls and the different coloured lights across the border remind you that half of that sprawl is actually Juarez, Mexico.

Once you venture downtown and stroll past the colourful street murals, the Minor League ballpark and various arts venues, this border city takes on a new vibe. Hop aboard a retro streetcar with live musical performances during the monthly Trolley Tracks to discover El Paso is youthful and fun.

To the uninitiated, El Paso seems an

unlikely destination for adventure. Yet the city's abundant sunshine and plenitude of parks and mountains attract boundary-pushing athletes from across the country. The region plays host to some extreme sporting events such as the 50K Franklin Mountains Trail Run, the Eagle in the Sun Triathlon, the El Paso Puzzler Mountain Bike Race, Michelob Ultra El Paso Marathon and the Lone Star 100 mountain race.

THOSE CHALLENGES ARE FAR TOO strenuous for me, but I'm willing to try something new; something boundary-pushing.

HuecoTanks sunset



When you go

WHAT TO DO: Marvel at ancient pictographs, hike, rock climb, camp and stargaze at **Hueco Tanks State Historic Site**, 60 km east of downtown El Paso.

Visit **El Paso Museum of Archaeology** to appreciate 14,000 years of prehistory in the area. Next, explore the Mission Trail where three adobe churches serve as living testaments to the faith of El Paso's Spanish and Native American ancestors.

WHERE TO DINE: Start your morning at **Salt + Honey**, a modern bakery and café serving locally roasted coffee and cold-pressed juices alongside home-made pastries. Get your fill of Tex-Mex at **L&J Café**, a local landmark that dates back to 1927 and is fondly known as the “old place by the graveyard.” For international fusion, make a reservation at **Tabla**. The extensive menu spans cool and warm tapas and must-tries include chickpea fries, baked goat cheese and the smoked duck.

WHERE TO STAY: Built in 1912, **Stanton House** is an heirloom on the outside yet ultra-hip on the inside. Design-junkies will love its curated art collection. Situated in the historic O.T. Bassett Tower in the heart of downtown, trendy **Aloft** is one of El Paso's newest, on-point hotels. Travelling families will appreciate the recreational oasis that is **Wyndham El Paso**; nestled between the airport and Fort Bliss, the onsite seasonal waterpark is ideal for the kids.

The next morning, my friend and I head to Franklin Mountains State Park for a guided hike and underground mine tour. El Paso is lucky to have a state park located entirely within city limits, making



Franklin Mountains State Park

Franklin Mountains a popular spot for hikers, rock climbers and trail runners.

Our guide leads us up the path toward the abandoned copper mine, pointing out yuccas and barrel cacti. I keep a lookout for wildlife, hoping to spy the coyotes I hear howling in the distance.

The entrance to the mine is the first indication that this is not going to be your average cave tour. After layering up against the cooler subterranean air we will soon encounter, I don a helmet and headlamp. I crawl onto my belly and wriggle into the narrow space, feet first, unsure of what awaits inside.

Down we go, descending through narrow tunnels and across narrow plank bridges. This time, I play the role of fearless cheerleader, urging my friend on, just as she encouraged me the day before. These experiences are the glue that holds our friendship together while reinforcing the importance of girlfriend getaways in maintaining fragile female friendships.

We follow our guide deeper

underground and I am relieved to find the passage is wider than expected. We explore the geology of the mine and admire the quartz and small copper deposits that line the rock walls. Luckily for us, there weren't enough metals or minerals in this exploratory site to turn it into a working mine – or this entire mountain would no longer exist.

Once we have ventured as far as we can comfortably manage, we head back up. We emerge at the surface, drinking in the fresh mountain air. Coated in dust, my friend and I clap a celebratory high-five. I smile as I peel off my hiking shoes and slip my feet into my new Lucchese cowboy boots, purchased a day earlier at one of the bootmaker's local outlet shops. What I don't know yet, is that each time I don these boots I will fondly recall our El Paso gal pal adventure. But for now, I'm ready to quench my thirst by diving headfirst into one of El Paso's famous "Texas-sized" margaritas. ☼

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Gulf Islands National Seashore

Pensacola: WHISPERS ON THE SHORE

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS

IT'S ONE OF THOSE pristine mornings along the Florida Panhandle when the sunrise colours the sand dunes in daybreak orange while waves gently tease the shoreline. The water hasn't yet built up the full head of steam that creates afternoon whitecaps. Early morning is my favourite time to wander the trails, boardwalks, coastal marshlands and dunes of Gulf Islands National Seashore, America's largest national seashore.

EVERY FEW YEARS, MY HUSBAND and I come back to camp on this blissful stretch of barrier island where we can re-wild our urban lives.

Gulf Islands is an oft-overlooked corner of Florida – one of the last bits of land jutting out into the Gulf of Mexico before the Alabama state line. With brackish Pensacola Bay on one side and emerald saltwater and white sand beaches on the other, it's a wilderness that's hooked my heart. And yet it's a short 25-minute drive from the bustle and amenities of nearby Pensacola – a drive well worth the trip, if only to buy fresh shrimp from the docks.

Back at home, mornings are for schedules and productivity; for fielding

electronic notifications and punching out e-mails with haste. Here, a world away, my early morning strolls are a cherished opportunity to breathe deeply, turn on my senses and park the world of work and deadlines.

AS I NAVIGATE THE PATHS AND raised wooden walkways that wind through freshwater wetlands and stands of pine, oak and palmetto, the stillness of the day affords me the opportunity to sneak up on some "locals" going about their morning routine.

One morning I come upon a row of six great blue herons, standing at attention on the boardwalk handrails of the Blackbird Marsh Trail. I hold my breath and watch, focusing my camera and taking only pictures. After several minutes I shuffle forward a few steps and, one by one, the young birds take flight with such grace and fluidity that it plays out like a slow-motion reel. Another morning, it's the snuffling of armadillos as they rummage for their breakfast.

Each time I return to Gulf Islands National Seashore, things are a renewed version of how I left them. On my morning walks I play a game of "spot the changes." Without fail, the biggest change

I notice takes place along the shore. The constant action of the wind and waves wear away some parts of the terrain while building up others, shifting the curves of the sandy barrier islands. It spells a slow march westward, sculpting the dunes into a fragile ecosystem held together by grasses and tall sea oats.

After ambling through the marshlands, I end my walk at the shore, burying my toes in the powder-soft sand. If I stand still enough I can hear the graceful sea oats playing in the breeze, whispering secrets of survival in their ever-shifting world. And perhaps that's the lesson they hold: find strength and resilience in bending with the wind while the world unfolds in its own way, on its own schedule. ☼

When you go

WHAT TO DO: Walking stretches of shoreline, swimming, birdwatching, fishing and exploring historic **Fort Pickens** are atop the list of things to do at Gulf Islands National Seashore. If you feel the tug of "urban time," Pensacola is close by and home to the **National Naval Aviation Museum** – one of the world's largest air museums – and the pretty **Pensacola Lighthouse**.

WHERE TO DINE: You won't find seafood any fresher than right from the docks at **Joe Patti's Seafood** market in Pensacola. The locals come with coolers to stock up for the week.

WHERE TO STAY: Fort Pickens Campground, located in the National Seashore, has tent and RV sites – some with electrical and water hook-ups.



Surfcasting on South Padre Island

South Padre Island: AN UNLIKELY WILDLIFE SAFARI

BY **RON STERN**

WITH TOES IN THE sand, I took a long, deep breath. The salty air seemed to invigorate and calm me at the same time. On this fall day, I was one human among thousands of colourful sea birds that enveloped the tidal flats of the Laguna Madre lagoon. Overhead, the vibrant pink plumage of a roseate spoonbill in flight was a stark contrast to the deep blue sky. I would start my unexpected safari here, on this tiny tip of the Texas coast known as South Padre Island, a location blessed with an abundance of wildlife.

Like most, I was drawn to South Padre Island for the white sand beaches, balmy year-round temperatures and the emer-

ald waters of the Gulf of Mexico. But the island's subtropical climate makes it one of the best places in the world to explore a generous serving of nature's bounty.

My next safari stop was the South Padre Island Birding, Nature Center and Alligator Sanctuary. The facility is gorgeous, with a five-storey viewing tower, five bird blinds and a one-kilometre boardwalk that extends over the salt marshes and tidal flats of Laguna Madre. As I wandered down the boardwalk, I spotted a tricolored heron looking for fish, a reddish egret that seemed to dance in the shallow water with its wings fully spread and redhead ducks, all in a row, of course.

South Padre Island is situated on the convergence of two migratory flyways,

resulting in a huge diversity of birds that funnel through this part of the Texas coast. I missed the spring migration on this visit, but during the season, it isn't uncommon to see 100 species of birds in a single day, including painted buntings, summer tanagers and yellow-throated warblers.

Rescued alligators are The Center's latest addition, and the sanctuary has 70 juvenile gators and two adults, the latter appropriately named Big Padre (male) and Laguna (female).

I didn't have to travel far for my next wildlife encounter. Right next door is Sea Turtle Inc., the perennial top TripAdvisor attraction with 200,000 visitors per year.

As it turns out, South Padre's white sand is the preferred nesting habitat for a variety of sea turtles, including Kemp's ridley, the world's most endangered species of sea turtle. The non-profit Sea Turtle, Inc. provides rescue and rehabilitation for these gentle animals injured by boats, caught in ocean debris or suffering from various diseases.



Horseback riding on South Padre Island

I love interactive exhibits, and as I walked underneath the enormous 12,000-litre saltwater aquarium, I felt as if I were inside a tropical reef. Just outside, large cylindrical tanks house turtles that can't be released into the wild. Observing these graceful creatures swimming up to the windows was quite moving. Right next to me, children were nose-to-nose with one of the turtles causing the kids to giggle with uncontrollable delight.

One of the more fascinating wall graphics demonstrated the turtle species Sea Turtle, Inc. works with on the island. Until this visit, I had no concept of the relative size and beauty of these prehistoric animals. They range from the smallest Kemp's ridley all the way up to the leatherback, which averages two metres in length and weighs hundreds of pounds.

I sat in on an amphitheatre presentation where I learned more about the turtles, conservation and stewardship of our oceans. At the sea turtle hospital I watched as experts performed rehab



Painted Bunting



Laguna Madre Nature Trail

magic with the goal of eventually releasing sick and injured turtles back into their natural habitat. The visit filled me with optimism.

As I drove south along palm tree-laden Padre Boulevard, I headed to another wildlife hot spot: the jetty at Isla Blanca Park. Large stones extend out into the Gulf of Mexico making it a fine place to fish. I saw families unpacking chairs, umbrellas and coolers filled with snacks, all while trying to land redfish, drum, snook and flounder. One old-timer told me that if you bring your catch to almost any restaurant on the island, they'll cook it up any way you like, for free.

I had planned on continuing my safari on the water with a dolphin watching tour, but adverse surf conditions late in the day prevented that. Instead, I detoured across the Queen Isabella Causeway to nearby Port Isabella to visit the Dolphin Research and Sea Life Nature Center where touch tanks lining the walls are filled with fish, crabs, octopi and starfish.

Domino, a large and friendly rescued desert tortoise, came right up to me. I was told he will even sit in your lap if you have the time – they do move slowly! Owner Scarlet Colley is passionate about ecology and helps educate visitors concerning the plight of our oceans and wildlife. She is known to locals as The Dolphin Whisperer and considers herself a "voice for dolphins in the wild." She even has names for each, and they respond to the sound of her voice.

Colley takes small groups out on her boat *The Skimmer* on one-and-a-half-hour tours to see the tribe of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins that live in Laguna Madre Bay. And along for the ride is Rozzi, the dolphin dog who loves interacting with these aquatic creatures. Having studied them for more than 25 years, Colley provides a real-world education about these playful and intelligent mammals.

Back on land, I found my own watering hole overlooking Laguna Madre. As I sipped on an iced tea, I noticed a bird perched on a table a couple of feet away, staring at me with unfettered curiosity. It would seem, I had become a subject of fascination. I chuckled, realizing I was not the only creature experiencing an unlikely South Padre safari. ☺

When you go

WHAT TO DO: Continue your unlikely wildlife safari on the water. Rent a kayak and paddle the calm, clear waters of **Laguna Madre Bay**. (Keep an eye out for dolphins and turtles!) Charter a boat to sink a baited hook into deep Gulf waters or simply wade into the surf to cast a line. Back on land, wander the **Laguna Madre Nature Trail** or scramble some sand dunes. Better yet, amble along the shore on horseback. End the day at **Andy Bowie Park** where you can build a bonfire and admire a Texas-size sunset.

WHERE TO EAT: Dine at **F&B Restaurant** for artfully plated bites like steak tartare and Spanish octopus. Venture to **The Painted Marlin Grille** for bayfront views paired with fresh-grilled fish and oversize, Instagram-worthy cocktails. Or head to **Sea Ranch Restaurant & Bar** for wild-caught seafood pulled straight from the Gulf.

WHERE TO STAY: Families with water babies will love **Schlitterbahn Beach Resort** which boasts both an indoor and outdoor waterpark, complete with waterslides and tube chutes. Those who prefer a refined resort offering should look to **Pearl South Padre Resort**, where ocean views and soft sand beaches abound. At **Isla Grand Beach Resort**, a beach-adjacent property with coastal vibes, two-bedroom condos mean parents and kids need not bunk together.

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Ocala's Rainbow River

Ocala-Marion County: A NEW OLD FLORIDA

BY CHLOE BERGE

DRIVING INTO OCALA, vast parcels of green and gold farmland bloom outside my window. As the highway narrows, smaller streets are lined with oak trees draped in Spanish moss. The bucolic scene is fitting for a place known as the horse capital of the world. Nestled in north-central Florida, Ocala-Marion County has long-attracted equestrians from all over the globe. But I won't be saddling up during my time here. I'm in this slice of Florida to discover its hidden

waterways and natural springs. What I'm most surprised to uncover, however, is a nostalgic simplicity and tranquility that I learn typifies "Old Florida."

"Right there, see?" says Chris, my Get Up and Go Kayaking guide. He's pointing his index finger toward a small island on our left where a family of turtles is sunbathing among the reeds. We stop paddling and glide by quietly in our kayaks to get a better look. The Rainbow River's ecosystem also includes otters and fish, and I'm not just spotting ►



Clear bottom kayak

them on the riverbanks. The sediment in the area makes the aqua river crystal-clear, and I'm also in a clear kayak that affords views beneath me, all the way down to the white sandy bottom.

I let my fingers hang over the side of my kayak, dragging them through the cool water and noticing its perfect temperature. "It's always 72-degrees, summer or winter," says Chris. Aquifers in the Appalachian Mountains produce water that eventually gets fed into Florida's own aquifer system before ending up here in the Rainbow River, which results in a kind of homeostasis, he explains. On the one side, we paddle past sprawling ranchers with front porches and swimming docks, and on the other side of the river, small, shallower tributaries that lead into the mangroves. I didn't expect to find such serenity in Florida but there's something about the area that speaks to a simpler, slower era, when people had time to linger in their front porch rocking chair and contemplate the river.

Indeed, it's not just Ocala's Rainbow River that harkens back to a bygone era. Many of its contemporary attractions are steeped in nostalgia. After kayaking, I head to Rainbow Springs State Park. The area was first settled by pioneers in 1839, developing into a small but flourishing community in the late 19th century that included a sawmill, railroad station and hotel. In the 1920s, it metamorphosed into a theme park with the addition of a zoo, rodeo and a monorail, before being abandoned in the '70s in favour of larger parks like Disney World.

The area was reopened as a state park in the mid-1990s and today its nature trails meander through lush forest that's inhabited by osprey, hawks, the endangered pine snake, indigo snakes and fox squirrels. I wind my way along the trail past man-made waterfalls – remnants of the parks' early days – and down towards the headsprings. Young kids dive into water while their parents picnic under umbrellas on the dock, but it's not hard to imagine the springs as



Silver Springs State Park

they were a century ago when pioneers fished for dinner in its depths under the Florida sun.

The next day brings me to Silver Springs State Park. "Y'all are now aboard the world-famous glass-bottom boat," says our driver in a lilting accent as our small paddlewheeler-style ride leaves the dock. The glass-bottom boat I'm on (or one similar to it, at least) is Florida's oldest attraction, dating back to the 1870s. We crane our necks over the boat's rectangular glass middle, seizing upon postcard snapshots of turtles and fat, silver fish snaking through tall, undulating eelgrass.

We're travelling over some of the largest artesian springs ever discovered and their clarity and turquoise colour

give them a surreal look. Perhaps why, amidst fragments of indigenous dugout canoes and old paddleboats, we also spot movie props and remnants of set designs. The springs hosted film and TV crews in the '50s and '60s and the bright underwater world played a leading role in *Tarzan* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Silver Springs may not be haunted by the campy horror film's prehistoric monster, but it is home to the next closest thing: alligators. We spot them nestled in the reedy, muddy islands that dot the springs, basking in the midday heat and watching us just as closely through their narrow, reptilian eyes.

As I leave the park, I pass a small bistro where, below its faded, striped awning, a young family struggles to capture a selfie amid licks of melting ice cream. I offer to take their picture for them. I hope they keep it, a memento of the simpler, slower time of decades ago on this languid, sultry Florida afternoon. ☺

When you go

WHAT TO DO: After some time on the water, lace up your hiking boots and walk a portion of **The Florida Trail** in the Juniper Prairie Wilderness. Part of **Ocala National Forest**, the trail totals 14 kilometres and is flanked by the world's largest sand pine scrub forest, carpeted in wire grass. Keep your eyes and ears pricked for armadillos, gopher tortoises and rattlesnakes.

WHERE TO DINE: Start your morning on a sweet note at **Symmetry Coffee & Crepes**, where paper-thin crepes are smothered in fresh berries and sweet cream frosting, whipped up from Greek yogurt and cream cheese. The coffee bar is a connoisseur's delight, serving cold flash brew and a roster of slow manual brew options, including a smooth pour-over. After a kayaking trip along the Rainbow River, head to the nearby **Blue**

Gator Tiki Bar and revel in its Florida kitsch. Order crispy frog legs and golden hush puppies on the patio so you can keep your eye out for any stray gators on the banks of the Withlacoochee River. If sustainably-sourced, vegan fare is more to your taste, opt for **Craft Cuisine**, which uses local ingredients to create internationally-inspired, fresh-from-the-farm dishes.

WHERE TO STAY: Stepping into the **Holiday Inn & Suites Ocala Conference Centre**, it feels like you might still be out in the mangroves. The spacious lobby and lounge are swathed in shades of bright green and accented with whimsical decor inspired by the charm of the bayou. Friendly staff serve a hearty breakfast in the main level café and on the sixth floor, **Sky Fine Dining** offers a Southern take on Asian fusion, serving lobster dumplings and curry chicken alongside views of the Ocala skyline.



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The slow road: CHEWING OVER LOUISIANA'S HISTORY ALONG ITS SCENIC BYWAYS

BY **CANDICE WALSH**

MY LOUISIANA ROAD TRIP begins with a charbroiled oyster. More precisely, a half dozen charbroiled oysters.

Before setting out on Louisiana's scenic byways, I find myself at Drago's Seafood Restaurant in Metairie. As I pop a fifth oyster into my mouth, Drago's son Tommy regales me with tales of his family history. The restaurant has been in business since the '60s, shortly after Drago Cvitanovich and his wife immigrated to the United States from Croatia. As I snack on blackened alligator tacos, I think about how impressive it is that the Cvitanovich family can leave a place like Yugoslavia and slip seamlessly into Louisiana life. I, on the other hand, lived in Berlin for a full year and failed to learn a lick of German. It's this can-do

attitude and diversity that follows me along my entire trip.

Louisiana is road trip country; its network of "trails" and byways make up 19 designated driving routes – far too many for me to explore in just a few days. Instead, I narrow it down to a few key points of interest: history, food and bayou life.

THE FIRST ROUTE I SET OFF ON IS the Northup Trail, a 133-kilometre route through the Rapides and Avoyelles Parishes, where visitors are invited to follow Solomon Northup's journey during his 12 years as a slave. You may have seen the award-winning movie based on his extraordinary life: a free man from New York is tricked into slavery under the guise of employment playing violin with a travelling circus. For 12 years, Northup



suffered at the hands of cruel plantation owners while his loved ones had no inkling of why or where he had disappeared to. When Northup met Samuel Bass, a Canadian carpenter, Bass agreed to send letters to Northup's friends and family. It changed everything.

In quiet Marksville, you'd never guess that the charming brick Avoyelles Courthouse, framed with pink blossoms, played such a major role in history. I'm led into a back room, where a woman produces a large archival folder. With gloved fingers, she gingerly flips through the pages to bring forth an important document: the order issuing Northup's freedom, complete with his signature. Goosebumps run up and down my arms as I study the order. It's such a powerful piece of history, right at my fingertips.

Later, I visit the Epps House on the LSUA campus in Alexandria. It's an 18th-century plantation home that was partially built by Northup for Edwin Epps, the former overseer of Oakland Plantation. This is where Northup met Bass. Today, it's a small museum detailing plantation life. Epps House was originally built on Bayou Boeuf, but it was moved to the campus as a place of reference for American history studies. I feel oddly grateful for this, that Louisiana isn't shying away from the difficult and often painful parts of its history. Slavery is widely acknowledged and openly discussed; children study it in school. Epps House was meant to be destroyed, but for Louisianans, erasure isn't an option.

FILLED UP ON HISTORY, I SET OFF along the Bayou Teche byway where Cajun is on the menu. This tasty route leads me through Morgan City and onward through smaller towns, like New Iberia and Breaux Bridge.

My first stop is the TABASCO Factory on Avery Island. Although my Canadian palate isn't well adapted for spicy foods, I leave the gift shop armed with an arsenal of fiery flavours, notably, a raspberry-chipotle blend. TABASCO has been around since 1868 when the McIlhenny family perfected the ultimate Louisiana hot sauce recipe. The recipe hasn't changed but the flavours have. I sample some hot sauce ice cream before settling in at Tabasco Restaurant 1868. Here, I get my first taste of Cajun food: *étouffée* (crawfish smothered with pepper sauce and served over rice), pepper jelly boudin (sausage stuffed with pork, rice and seasoning) and a boudin po boy. By the end of the meal I give thanks for loose pants.

A funny thing happens as I travel the Bayou Teche byway. On more than a few occasions, when locals discover I'm Canadian, the conversation switches to French – and theirs far outrivals mine. After all, this is Cajun country. In the mid-1700s, a group of French people (Acadians) who had immigrated to Canada were exiled and many eventually settled in Louisiana. They turned their cuisine into a style all its own – Cajun – and as I dine my way down the byway, I am grateful that Louisianans have kept this tasty piece of history intact.

BEFORE LEAVING LOUISIANA, I travel the Wetlands Cultural byway. Threading its way through the southeastern part of the state, it serves as a buffer between the country's coastline and the Gulf of Mexico. It's here that I am hoping to learn more about bayou life.

I'm in luck because Captain Billy of Cajun Man's Swamp Tours in Gibson is full of stories and as I cruise aboard his boat, he's happy to share them with me. Captain Billy describes hunting alligators with basic tools, tells us that he's nearly been eaten alive (twice!) and recounts the time he accidentally caught a giant loggerhead turtle in a trap (he let it go, of course).


In the thick of the swamp, alligators gravitate toward our boat as Captain Billy tosses pieces of chicken into the water. The setting is perfect: Spanish moss hangs from the trees, reaching into the swamp; the water is a vivid green and my head is on a constant swivel, searching for egrets and herons. Truth be told, I would have preferred more time in the bayou with Billy, observing the quirky relationship he shares with the gators. But alas, the road calls.

In New Orleans, I'm amused to learn that alligator is on the menu at the New Orleans School of Cooking. My partner and I make alligator piquant, cooked in a tomato sauce and plated on a bed of rice and green onions. The instructor checks our dish and nods approvingly. And if you're wondering what alligator tastes like, no surprise, it's chicken.

As my visit draws to a close, it occurs to me that Louisiana is a complex gumbo of cultural influences, rooted deeply in history and tradition. Like the state byways that lead in all directions, so do the stories they tell. 🌟

When you go

Louisiana has 19 scenic byways begging to be explored. Travel the 54-km **Cajun Corridor** to eat your way through "the most Cajun place on Earth" while admiring *allées*, shaded tree "tunnels." Beaches, boardwalks and birding abound along the 333-km **Creole Nature Trail All-American Road**. Pump the tunes on the 455-km **Zydeco Cajun Prairie**; you'll visit both Mamou, "the 'Cajun Music Capital of the World'" and Opelousas, "the Zydeco Capital of the World." Find a complete list of byway descriptions at LouisianaTravel.com.

A vibrant street scene in Louisiana. In the foreground, the backs of two brass band members are visible, wearing white shirts and dark pants. They are holding large brass instruments, likely tubas or euphoniums. In the middle ground, a group of four women are dancing joyfully on a wide, paved sidewalk. They are dressed in casual, summery attire. In the background, a tall, ornate church with a blue roof and white facade stands prominently. The sky is clear and blue. The overall atmosphere is festive and celebratory.

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Annapolis, Maryland

Maryland: IN SEARCH OF SMALL TOWN AMERICA

BY LIZ FLEMING



Biting into Maryland's famous crab cakes

IT WAS MOVIES like *Field of Dreams*, *The Sandlot* and *Stand by Me* that made me want to believe in small town America – a place where people sit on porch swings in the evening and the ice cream shop lady gives two scoops for the price of one and calls you “hun.” Good news: small town America still exists and it’s as close as Annapolis, Maryland.

Despite being home to the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis has a population of fewer than 50,000 people and it’s your gateway to the string of tiny towns that make up an Upper Chesapeake Bay Loop road trip.

My Chesapeake adventure starts with an afternoon on the Schooner *Woodwind*. As I climb aboard, Captain Mickey Lawlor proudly asks if I

recognize the boat. I certainly should have; *Schooner Woodwind* was the sleek sailboat owned by the wealthy father played by Christopher Walken in *Wedding Crashers*. Since her 2005 cameo, *Woodwind* has enjoyed star status and I feel very Hollywood myself when the captain lets me take the wheel. A stiff breeze blows, and the sails are full as we slice and splash through the waves. Though the sun warms our backs, the wind chills everything else. We head for an old lighthouse in the distance, lost in a meditation of sails, winds and waves.

Fresh air makes you ravenous and Annapolis’ Galway Bay, a popular Irish pub-style restaurant featured on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, seems like a great après-sail choice. Galway Bay is well-known for both crab cakes and an

impressive whiskey collection. As we arrive, a local state senator notices folks he doesn’t recognize and hurries across the street, hand outstretched, and full of sight-seeing suggestions and funny stories. In a flash, he becomes an old friend. That’s the Chesapeake Bay small town welcome.

The next morning, I treat myself to the heartiest breakfast in Annapolis. At Iron Rooster, crispy bacon comes standing up in a Mason jar and you can split one drop-dead-delicious order of chicken and waffles four ways – and still stagger out stuffed.

Full and happy, it’s decided: more time on the water is needed to help us digest. We set sail with Captain Mark Galasso, aboard his charter vessel, to soak up the afternoon sun on a lazy crossing of the bay, en route to Rock Hall. ➤



Annapolis Harbor Sunset

"Some people," says Captain Mark, a lifelong resident of Annapolis, "are all about the fishing." He motions to the rack of fishing rods overhead.

"I take 'em out, turn on the fish finder and see what we can get. Other people don't care – they just want to be out on the water. And that's good too. I make sure everybody gets to enjoy Chesapeake Bay any way they like."

My companions are firmly in the "don't care to fish" camp, so I loll on deck. Despite my recent *breakfast* I find myself contemplating lunch. That's a big part of the small town Chesapeake experience: endless food and the relaxed atmosphere in which to enjoy it. Luckily, Captain Mark drops us off in the tiny, postcard-perfect town of Rock Hall where I find Waterman's Crab House.

On busy summer weekends, Waterman's serves up 55-80 bushels of crab. And that's not counting the hundreds of plates of fish, French fries and coleslaw that stream out of the kitchen. I watch as

diners enjoy their crab whole, using small wooden mallets to crack the shells and then dip the delicate meat in butter or tartar sauce. It certainly appeals, but since trying my first crab cakes back at Galway Bay (meaty, rich and lightly toasted on the grill) I have become a bona fide addict. Waterman's crab cakes are dense and moist with a crispy brown crust, giving Galway Bay a run for their money in a competition I'm happy to be the judge of.

In case you think I did nothing on my Chesapeake adventure but sunbathe, sail and eat, you're wrong – I sipped, too. The Chesapeake Bay area is well suited to growing grapes and, as a dedicated researcher, I visit several wineries including Great Frogs Winery in Annapolis and Crow Vineyard on Chesapeake Bay's eastern shore. For a representative sampler of Maryland's libations, I make a stop at Blackwater Distillery, a small but funky place that makes everything from vodka to rum.

At every location, I encounter not only

delicious food and fare, but also friendly people – like the volunteer docents at Concord Point Lighthouse in Havre de Grace. They eagerly share the history and then urge me not to miss their neighbour, the Decoy Museum and its collection of carved birds. "Best you'll see anywhere in the world," they assured. They were right. The intricately carved decoys provide great insight into the fishing and hunting culture at the heart of the Chesapeake Bay area.

When my full days are finished, I relax into the biggest welcome of all: the Brampton Inn in cozy Chestertown, a stately five-star heritage hotel that makes me feel like the lady of the manor – which, for the duration of my stay, I am kindly treated as such. From the authentic quilts on the beds, to the fireplaces in the rooms and the home-cooked breakfast, this is the kind of place you want to stay forever. Maybe it's the scones, or the rockers on the porch or more likely, the sense that you've finally found small town America. ★

Our writer road-tripped the Great Chesapeake Bay Loop, a route that connects Annapolis, Chestertown, Chesapeake City and Havre De Grace. However, Maryland is home to another intriguing drive itinerary: the 273-km National Historic Road. “The road that built a nation” takes history buffs down one of America’s oldest roads.

Suggested Itinerary:

DAY 1:

Baltimore

HIGHLIGHTS: A waterside tour of the Inner Harbor, B&O Railroad Museum, dining on Chesapeake cuisine, and the views from Royal Sonesta Harbor Court

DAY 2:

Baltimore to Ellicott City (20 km)

HIGHLIGHTS: B&O Ellicott City Station Museum, Thomas Isaac Log Cabin

Ellicott City to Frederick (60 km)

HIGHLIGHTS: Jug Bridge Monument, Flying Dog Brewery, Barbara Fritchie House, National Museum of Civil War Medicine, Weinberg Center for the Arts, the promenade at Carroll Creek Park

DAY 3:

Frederick to Hagerstown (45 km)

HIGHLIGHTS: En route, stop in at Inn BoonsBoro and Vesta Pizzeria & Family Restaurant, both of which are owned by author Nora Roberts. Detour to Washington Monument State Park to hike a sliver of the Appalachian Trail North.

DAY 4:

Hagerstown to Cumberland (109 km)

HIGHLIGHTS: Fort Frederick State Park, Washington Museum of Fine Arts, cycling or hiking the Great Allegheny Passage, a round-trip ride aboard the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad from Cumberland to Frostburg

DAY 5:

Cumberland to Grantsville (39 km)

HIGHLIGHTS: The stone arch Casselman River Bridge and Spruce Forest Artisan Village in Grantsville. From Grantsville, carry on to Pittsburgh (156 km) or make your way back to Baltimore, a distance of 260 km.

Find the full itinerary at

visitmaryland.org/scenic-byways

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Glenrock Paleon Museum

Wyoming: FISHING WITH HAMMERS

BY JENNIFER BAIN

OF ALL THE FISHING trips I've taken in my life, nothing beats the one in Fossil Lake, southwest Wyoming, where I caught my limit of extinct *Knightia* and *Diplomystus*.

There was no actual water involved, just a blistering hot quarry that was once an ancient lake, and so my family was transported to the dusty fishing zone by air-conditioned truck instead of motorboat. There were no rods involved either, just hammers and long, flat-edged blades.

They call it fossil fishing. The goal is to excavate fossils – mainly fish – that are preserved in the limestone layers of the Green River Formation. We did it on leased land near the city of Kemmerer and Fossil Butte National Monument, which calls itself “America’s Aquarium in Stone.” Birds and fish are the most plentiful fossils in these parts, followed by reptiles and mammals, and then amphibians, arthropods and plants. Which brings us back to *Knightia* and *Diplomystus*.

We gently hammered our blades between fine-grained limestone layers as instructed, twisted them to create air pockets and slowly separated the layers to see what treasures lurked between them. Call it beginner’s luck: we found so many fossil fish – some in fragments, others remarkably intact – that we had to prioritize which to keep.

The jagged, fragile pieces of rock were packed into a wooden pallet and taken back to Ulrich’s Fossil Gallery where our guide squared the chunks with an electric saw and then wrapped them for our drive back to Alberta.

WYOMING IS FAMOUSLY HOME TO Yellowstone National Park and two iconic mountain ranges (the Rockies and the Tetons), but the less-travelled area between fossil fish-rich Kemmerer and dinosaur-rich Thermopolis is an unsung treasure.

“Caution: sage grouse crossing the road,” warned one highway sign showing a nuclear family of plump birds.

“Caution: antelope entering highway at 55 mph,” warned another as we road-tripped through sagebrush country.

Those critters stayed out of harm’s way as we drove to the Wyoming Dinosaur Center where we ogled a skeleton of *Triceratops*, the official state dinosaur, and then dodged rattlesnakes and scorpions in a quest to unearth dinosaur bones.

That happened on a private dinosaur dig where we wielded oyster knives, dustpans and artist’s brushes to chip away at limestone mud layers in search of Jurassic-era bones. I’ll never forget how our guide called Wyoming a “geologic Disneyland” and wished more people knew about its paleo-tourism.

Wilting in the unrelenting summer heat, despite the mesh shade erected over the dig site, we learned how to tell rock from bone and unearthed several dinosaur bone fragments, including one that was left buried in the ground but was deemed important enough to get an official number (BS-1785). Back at the centre’s prep lab, we finished with a lesson on how to clean rock away from dinosaur bones with tools like dental picks and sand blasters.

While fossil fishing is all about collecting souvenirs, dinosaur digs are done for research with the off chance your paleo discoveries might one day be publicly displayed.

Not so long ago I contacted collections manager Levi Shinkle for an update on BS-1785. I was chuffed to learn it’s still laying in the quarry. Shinkle noted it was found near an ischium (part of the pelvis) and is “more than likely a portion of a *Camarasaurus* rib.”

Now when I reminisce about Wyoming, I pull out one of my favourite fossil fish and spend a few moments tracing its ancient skeleton with my finger. And then I reflect on how lucky we are to be able to boast that we once dug up the tiniest piece of an actual *Camarasaurus*. 🦕

When you go

Wyoming is thought to have one of the richest fossil records in the nation. A 5-day road trip from **Kemmerer** to **Cody**, with stops in **Rock Springs** and **Thermopolis** will transport travellers through the state’s prehistoric past.



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