

HELPFUL REMINDERS FOR VISITORS

BY KEVIN FRITZ

Take advantage of Orlando's Deal Season from August 15 to September 30.



Smathers Beach in Key West



Florida is one of the most distinct states in America, boasting a diverse collection of quaint towns and ecosystems mixed fluidly with bustling cities and spectacular beaches. Like all destinations, it also has its nuances. Keeping these helpful tips in mind will make your stay even more enjoyable.

ACCOMMODATION

It can be challenging at times to book a place to stay sight unseen from thousands of miles away. Contact the local convention and visitors bureau in the city or county you will be visiting for free assistance—and peace of mind.

BANKS

Money is pretty much available at all times. Good thing—you're on vacation! Most banks are open Monday through Friday from 9 AM to 4 PM, however, Bank Atlantic and TD Bank have locations open seven days a week. ATMs (automated teller machines) can be found at banks, grocery and convenience stores and at

most attractions, venues and festivals. Many stores will allow debit card users to obtain “cash back” above their purchase without charging a transaction fee.

BOILED WATER ALERTS

When a pipe breaks as a result of age, or most often due to a construction mishap, low water pressure inside the pipe may allow some contaminants to enter the water. When that happens, “Boil Water Alerts” are issued. Those affected are notified door-to-door, by signs posted in the neighborhood, and through radio, television and local newspapers. If you find you are under a Boil Water Alert, disinfect any water used for drinking (including pets), cooking, brushing teeth, rinsing contact lenses, shaving and making ice. Water does not need to be disinfected for bathing, showering or laundry.

DEALS

There are plenty of deals to be had in the Sunshine State. Check with the visitors bureau

in the area you will be visiting to take advantage of special offers. Here's a sampling:

- In Miami, PamperPalooza is held in July and August in which spa treatments are discounted to US\$99 at the city's most desired locations.
- August 15 to September 30 is Orlando's Deal Season where you'll find the best prices of the year at theme parks, attractions, hotels, restaurants and more.
- In the Daytona Beach area, less expensive meals can be enjoyed at Inlet Harbor on the water and at Ocean Walk restaurants.

DRIVING

Florida is a wonderful place to explore by car. Bring your own or rent the vehicle of your choice from the many rental companies throughout the state. Visitors ages 16 and up holding licenses from other states or countries may drive in Florida.

Besides Florida's Interstate highways—4, 10, 75 and 95—many other roads and bridges are toll roads. Alligator Alley (also known as Everglades Parkway) between Naples and Miami is a toll road, as is Florida's Turnpike. State Road 408 (East-West Expressway), the Beachline Expressway and State Road 417 (Orlando's bypass) are all toll roads in the Orlando area. US 441 and US 27 provide rural and free alternatives to Florida's Turnpike.

To make your road trips more pleasant, purchase a SunPass Mini transponder at one of the more than 2,000 retail locations for US\$5. It can save you up to 15 to 20 percent off tolls, and make your trip a lot quicker bypassing all the toll booths along the way. A minimum opening balance of US\$10 is required.

Note that some gas stations charge more per gallon for using a credit or debit card. Fuel prices vary, but prices in the Disney World area and Gainesville tend to be higher than other places in Florida. Avoid buying gas just outside the Orlando International Airport, where some stations charge more than US\$5 a gallon.

HEAT

Heat exhaustion can affect anyone, especially young children, the elderly and those who are already sick. Symptoms include mild muscle cramps to dehydration. If you or someone you are with feels faint, get inside—almost every building in Florida is air-conditioned.

Water taxis are an affordable way to see the sights in Fort Lauderdale and Miami.



Respect wildlife: Alligator in swamps of Everglades National Park



Gatorade works well to restore fluids and potato chips or pretzels can help restore salt.

HOLIDAYS

Keep in mind that banks and government offices, including the post office, are closed on major US holidays as are other businesses. However, most attractions remain open year-round. When a federal holiday falls on a Saturday, it is typically observed on Friday. If it falls on a Sunday, it is observed on a Monday. Holidays are listed at the back of this guide.

'GATORS

Florida is home to the American alligator—you may even see one or two sunning along waterways. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, alligators are found in all of the state's 67 counties in marshes, swamps, rivers and lakes. Do not feed the 'gators—it's dangerous and illegal. Don't allow pets to swim, exercise or drink in or near waters that may contain alligators and do not swim with your dog. Alligators are most active between dusk and dawn.

Stay tuned to weather and driving conditions.



OUT AND ABOUT

Smoking is not permitted inside Florida restaurants or bars that serve food, however smokers can enjoy the outdoor patio at some locations. Many public areas, such as parks, have also banned smoking.

Restaurants are air-conditioned and can be quite chilly. Dining is casual at the majority of Florida's eating establishments; resort wear—collars, slacks and jackets—may be required at club houses and upscale restaurants.

Drivers and front-seat passengers must wear seat belts. All children under 18 are required to wear seat belts, regardless of where they are sitting. Children, three and younger, must be secured in a federally approved child-restraint seat in the back seat; children, ages four and five, also must be in the back seat and secured by a child-restraint seat or a safety belt.

Headlights are required during inclement weather. Florida has strict drunk driving laws with zero tolerance for drivers under the age of 21. Texting by the driver is illegal in Florida. Pedestrians always have the right of way at crosswalks. And remember, hot pavement acts like ice when rain first hits it, so be cautious driving during rain showers.

TAXIS, TRAINS, BUSES AND TROLLEYS

AMTRAK provides the Silver Service/Palmetto, connecting Jacksonville and Orlando to either

Tampa or Miami with stops along the way. Greyhound bus service links many Florida cities. Some tips to consider:

- Enjoy the free bus transportation from Sunny Isles hotels to South Beach in Miami.
- Water taxi passes are available through the Fort Lauderdale website where you'll also find an app for the trolley system. The cost is US\$2 for an all-day pass.
- In Orlando, the I-Ride Trolley offers transportation in the International Drive resort area for US\$1.25; kids 12 and under ride for free.

SAFETY FIRST

While Florida is a safe place to visit, don't let your guard down when on vacation. Keep your car doors locked, even while driving, and secure your belongings as best as you can, keeping valuable items in your trunk. When at your hotel, use the safe in your room for jewelry, passports and important papers—that's why it's there. If there is not one in your room, secure valuables with the front desk.

TAXES AND FEES

Florida's base sales tax on purchases is six percent, with some counties adding discretionary taxes. Most hotels charge a "tourist" tax and some will add a "resort or amenities tax" to your bill. There also may be a parking fee. These can all add up significantly, so check with your accommodation prior to booking to know exactly what you will be charged when you check out.

TIPPING

In America, please tip for good service. It's how many in the service industry make their living. Add 15 to 20 percent for wait staff and bartenders; airport shuttle drivers, valets and bellhops, US\$2 per person; maid service, US\$2 per night; tour guides, US\$2–\$10 per person, depending on length and enjoyment; and fishing guides, 10 to 15 percent.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

You can't plan for bad weather, but you can ensure your vacation does not leave you high and dry. If weather does significantly put a damper on your trip, travel insurance policies reimburse you for your expenses if you submit your receipts as supporting documentation.

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Year-round temperatures averaging in the 60s up north to the 70s down south are the reason people flock here. However, summers can be hot and humid, with temperatures between 80 F and 95 F and evenings in the 70s. Nature's way of cooling the air arrives in the form of afternoon thundershowers. Note that hurricane season runs June 1–November 30 and be aware of hurricane evacuation routes. Winters can be cool in Florida, followed by moderate springs. Falls are spectacular.

Keep in mind Florida is the lightning capital of the United States, so the adage "If thunder roars, go indoors" is a serious life-saving expression in the Sunshine State. **FL**

FEATURED LINKS

AMTRAK
amtrak.com
Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles
flhsmv.gov
Florida's Turnpike
turnpikeinfo.com
Greyhound
greyhound.com
I-Ride Trolley
iridetrolley.com
LYNX
golynx.com
Metrobus
miamidade.gov/transit
Superior Small Lodging
superiorsmallodging.com
VISIT FLORIDA
visitflorida.com

PHOTO: V&V HOSPITALITY & MEDIA SERVICES.

THINK YOU KNOW FLORIDA?

BY JILL MARTIN

The Sunshine Skyway Bridge in Tampa



America's 27th state overflows with interesting history, odd facts and quirky events that may leave you scratching your head.

You probably already know Florida is home to the world's greatest theme parks, but do you know which roller coaster is the longest? At 4,429 feet, the new Cheetah Hunt at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay beats Disney's Expedition Everest by a mere five feet.

Here are other fun facts about the Sunshine State you may not know:

SOUTHEAST FLORIDA

- North America's only living coral reef is off the Florida Keys.
- Stretching from north of Key Largo to Key West, the Overseas Highway has been designated one of "America's Scenic Byways" and the only All-American Road in Florida.
- How did a man weighing 110 pounds carve and lift more than 1,100 tons of coral? It's one of the world's greatest mysteries. Explore Cora Castle in Homestead for yourself.
- Fort Lauderdale is known as the "Venice" of America because of its more than 300 miles of inland waterways.

- With more than 350 stores, Sawgrass Mills in Sunrise, Florida, is the largest outlet mall in the US.

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

- Naples has more golf holes per capita than any other city in the US.
- The smallest post office in the nation is found in Ochopee on US 41 near Naples. The bathroom is a couple of miles away.
- Because of their geographic formation lying east to west instead of north to south, shelling on the islands of Sanibel and Captiva is rated among the best in the world.
- The notorious pirate Jose Gaspar is rumored to have buried more than \$30 million in treasure in Charlotte Harbor. It has never been found.
- Carmaker Henry Ford and inventor Thomas Edison both had winter homes in Fort Myers. These neighboring estates are open to the public.

CENTRAL EAST FLORIDA

- The largest single-story building in the world is the Vehicle Assembly Building at

Kennedy Space Center. It's 525 feet tall and covers eight acres.

- There are 203 steps to the top of Florida's tallest lighthouse at Ponce Inlet.
- Once a former training location for the US Navy SEALs, Fort Pierce is home to the National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum.
- The "Sailfish Capital of the World" is Stuart, two hours north of Miami.
- Daytona Beach is one of the few Florida beaches on which you can drive.

CENTRAL FLORIDA

- When the Magic Kingdom opened October 1, 1971, admission was \$3.50.
- Orlando has the second largest number of hotel rooms in the country—more than 120,000.
- There are more than 1,200 horse farms in Ocala, making it the "Horse Capital of the World."
- Half-way between Cocoa and Orlando, you'll find the town of Christmas, where street names include Candy Cane, Sleigh Bell, Frosty and those famous reindeer.
- The world's largest collection of Frank Lloyd Wright-designed structures is found at Florida Southern College in Lakeland.

PHOTO: TAMPA BAY & COMPANY

OUR HISTORY IS NOT
THE SAME OLD

Story

Like dreamers, we imagined spotting Ponce's landing from atop the St. Augustine Lighthouse. As one, we battled the bunkers of the infamous TPC.

Like royalty, we sauntered back to St. George Street for vittles and a drink. And like lovers, we rode off into a starry seaside night at a Ponte Vedra inn.

Through time we traversed. Across ages past. In a place where history is not the same old story.

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