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8 unique takes on the Sunshine State

Make a break for a different sort of Florida

By DAVID LANDSEL

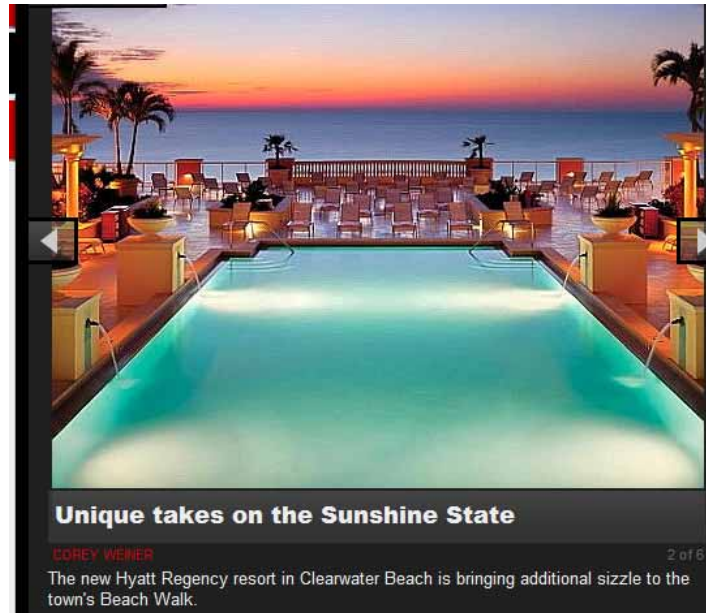
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THERE are certain things we take for granted when it comes to Florida. It's flat. There are palm trees and beaches. Sometimes, our aunts live there.

We know that the CSI team in Miami is nothing like the one helmed by TV's [David Caruso](#) (though those sweeping exterior shots are pretty darn evocative of the real deal) and that also, real estate is essentially worthless, at least for the moment. We also take for granted that there is more than one Florida.

After all, the state is still in many ways a blank slate on which the dreams of sunseekers (and those seeking do-overs) have been able to write their own stories. From the Bible Belter weekend haunt that is charming Amelia Island way up north, to the uninhibited, Cuba-adjacent Key West at the furthest point south, there are all kinds of Florida.



To boot, there are all kinds of ways to experience life along even the most beaten paths. Here are eight fresh looks at the Sunshine State.

APALACHICOLA

What Go to the source for excellent oysters

The details Folks in this quiet town not far from Tallahassee like to brag about the oysters that come out of the surrounding waters, as well they should. Chefs across the south prefer the plump, juicy specimens; the local harvest makes up roughly ten percent of the national supply. As towns go, Apalach isn't much — there's charm, sure, but there's also a lot of dust. Still, if you like Gulf oysters, this is Mecca. Start with a dozen or two over at Up The Creek raw bar and work your way from there. The town isn't just a major player in the shellfish scene, it's also maybe even a little bit haunted — one guest at the historic Coombs House Inn recently reported sitting up all night in her room talking to Mr. Coombs, the former owner of the home who died in 1911. No haunting — as of yet — at the smart Water Street Hotel, a newer arrival to the town. Book one of their condo suites overlooking the Apalachicola River, complete with screened-in porches perfect for evening cocktails. And more fresh oysters.

More info apalachicolabay.org

CLEARWATER BEACH

What New developments are upping the profile of this Tampa Bay town

The details The Hyatt Regency isn't the first big resort on this beautiful Gulf of Mexico beach, but, along with other developments south of Pier 60 in the tidy town near St. Petersburg, are changing the face of things. Centered along a winding, beachfront promenade, the new Hyatt Regency — offering 250 suite-like rooms, all with balconies and views of the Gulf — joins the Sandpearl Resort, an upscale independent property that took the place of the faded, historic Clearwater Beach Hotel.

More info visitclearwaterflorida.com

LA COSTA ISLAND

What One of the last great undeveloped Gulf beaches

The details You may have heard of Boca Grande, that remote little beach community at the tip of Gasparilla Island near, well, nothing — unless you consider Port Charlotte to be something. You may have even heard of Captiva Island, that pretty little resort destination not far from Fort Myers. But La Costa Island? Maybe not so much. That's because this barrier island, which sits at the southern mouth of Charlotte Harbor, is completely given over to the largely undeveloped Cayo Costa State Park, a rustic camping destination with utilitarian cabins (\$40) and campsites (\$22) available to those who don't mind the lack of amenities (or the potential for bug bites). To experience the Florida Gulf as it used to be, this one's a must. Hop a ferry boat from Pine Island, a bridge away from Cape Coral.

More info floridastateparks.org

JACKSONVILLE

What An unlikely leisure destination is experiencing a quiet renaissance

The details It may be one of Florida's largest cities, but it has never really grabbed the spotlight — it's basically Georgia, and all that entails; hosting the Super Bowl in 2005 didn't exactly turn the place into the new hotness overnight. That could have something to do with how far it is from the beach. And how uninspired its closest beach towns are. (Did we say uninspired? We meant kind of gross.) Still, in this southern-to-the-max city you'll find grand old homes, hip little shopping strips and fun neighborhood hangouts in spots like Five Points. Stop in at Three Layers on a quiet corner in the up-and-coming Springfield area for a cup of coffee, a slice of red velvet cake and the scoop on what's happening around town (1602 Walnut Street).

More info visitjacksonville.com

HAINES CITY

What Not your everyday Florida condo rental

The details When you think of renting a villa, where does your mind wander? Maybe Barbados, Los Cabos or Tuscany? Probably not to Central Florida on the headwaters of the Everglades, where your neighbors are a lot of wild turkeys, maybe a panther or two and there's nary an inch of oceanfront. But Creek Ranch isn't just any rental. It's a 1,400-acre family homestead amid the cypress trees centered on a quiet, nine-mile-long lake, not all that far from Disney World. Up to eight guests can rent out the main house for an eye-popping nightly rate of \$5,000. That does, however, include a chef on call 24/7, all food and drink and on-property activities, which range from horseback riding (under the watchful eye of the two onsite ranch hands) to fishing and canoeing.

More info sanctuary.com

DELRAY BEACH

What A new resort turns a cool town into a real destination

The details People give Florida a lot of heat for its poorly organized cities and endless strips of boring condo towers and tatty shopping centers; too often the ribbing is deserved. Then there are places like Delray, a town that, in a refreshing change of pace, makes (almost) total sense. Its greatest virtue is its walkability — the main drag, Atlantic Avenue, is packed with shops, restaurants, cafes, art galleries and bars, terminating at the ocean. Off the avenue (and sometimes on), you have nice homes, apartments and a few hotels. But no truly great hotel. Well, at least not in recent years. The new Seagate Beach Hotel & Spa isn't waterfront, but it's steps away; hotel guests have access to a nearby private beach club. With just 162 rooms, the mood is boutique-like, the décor is

sleek and modern.

More info seagatedelray.com

ALYS BEACH

What A New Urbanist's fantasy comes to life (in slo-mo)

The details Of all the postcard-perfect communities along the Panhandle's beautiful Route 30A — Seaside, Rosemary, Water Color — the newest is perhaps the most beautiful. And yet, in a feat of miserable timing, the white (and green and blue) Bermuda-like dream that is Alys Beach, began to take shape just before the economy began to unravel. While things may not be nearly as far along as town planners (and likely, property owners) may have hoped, circumstances have led Alys in some interesting directions. For example, its exclusive, residents-only pool club — a lavish, Moroccan-styled play place — now accepts reservations on some evenings for dinner at the indoor-outdoor Caliza restaurant, starting up for the season on March 3. There may not be as many of them as you'd have expected, but the homes that have been built at Alys are already some of the most beautiful in the state. (Ask about rentals.)

More info alysbeach.com

MIAMI

What Taste the bounty of South Florida's Redlands

The details To see one of the upsides of the Miami real estate crash, hop in a car and drive southwest of downtown and into the region known as The Redlands. Those open fields with the dirt that gives the region its name, the orchards, groves, nurseries, even vineyards? They're still there. Driving through the Redlands is about as vintage Miami as it gets; even though the city has changed immeasurably from the time when, say, the Knaus family opened their Homestead berry farm more than half a century ago, you can still pick your own strawberries (yes, they survived the cold snap) or pick up a half-dozen freshly-baked cinnamon rolls — at least until May 1 when they close for the summer. Local expert Robert Burr has put together a self-guided tour and map for those interested; stops include the venerable Fruit and Spice Park, a botanical garden where you can taste the plants on display, or at least what they're bearing, and of course, the up-and-coming Schnebly Redland's Winery where, even if the sweet wines don't float your boat, the nicely-done tasting room and grounds probably will.

More info redlandriot.com