



# Discovering Florida's most beautiful beaches

On a map, the habitually backslashed St. Petersburg/Clearwater area resembles a foot testing the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the warm Gulf of Mexico. In a testament to the area's magnetism, vacationing Midwestern families have been returning here since the 1950s, when a trip to Florida meant packing the family into a car and driving down route I-75 to the Tampa Bay area. Northeastern families drawn to the Sunshine State traditionally took I-95, which delivered them to the Atlantic shore beaches of Daytona, West Palm Beach and Miami. It's a pattern that continues to this day and helps to explain why New Yorkers have been missing out on some of the country's most beautiful beaches.

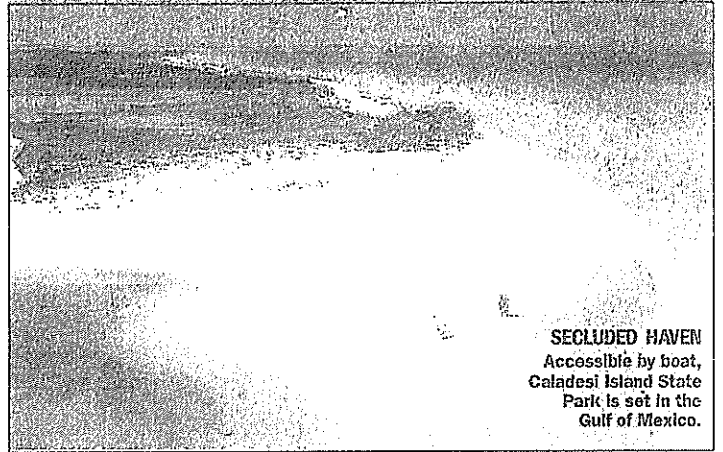
Bordered by the Gulf of Mexico on the west and Tampa Bay on the east, the beaches of St. Pete/Clearwater are characterized by serene blue waters, sugary sand and miles of undeveloped coastline. This year, St. Petersburg's Fort DeSoto Park upstaged Hanalei Bay, Hawaii, to take the No. 1 spot on Dr. Beach's (a.k.a. Stephen Leatherman, Ph.D.) list of America's Best Beaches.

A short drive from downtown St. Petersburg, Fort DeSoto Beach consists of

five islands that have been connected to provide visitors with access to nearly 3 miles of the white sand beaches. In addition to camping facilities, 24-hour fishing, a 6.8-mile biking trail and a dog run, Fort DeSoto features a sheltered lagoon area (Long Beach) with placid shallows ideal for toddlers.

Caladesi Island State Park in nearby Clearwater took fourth place on Dr. Beach's A-list. This secluded barrier island, set in the Gulf of Mexico, is accessible by boat or ferry from nearby Honey-moon Island State Park. Beachcombers can spend hours browsing the white, sand dollar-strewn beach or vying for scallop shells with the many gulls that nest in the surrounding dunes along with Caladesi's resident gopher tortoises. A hotel-free island, it is perfectly suited for a day of picnicking, hiking through palmetto tree forests or sunbathing to the lazy whoosh of Gulf coast wavelets.

Clearwater Beach is as good as its name: Think crystalline waters and powder-fine sand. This municipal beach bordering the town of Clearwater is dominated by Pier 60, a fishing wharf where musicians and crafts vendors gather each evening for a sunset festival. Along with a number of lively beachside eateries, Clearwater Beach hosts lots of activities



**SECLUDED HAVEN**  
Accessible by boat, Caladesi Island State Park is set in the Gulf of Mexico.

for hard-to-please teens, ranging from hair-braiding to bungee-trampoline.

With average temperatures in the mid-70s and about 361 days of sunshine a year, there's outdoorsy fun to be had all over this part of Florida. Golfers can perfect their swings on dozens of distinguished greens before taking a crack at the Copperhead — home of the Chrysler Championship golf tournament located at the Westin Innisbrook Resort in nearby Palm Harbor. Baseball fans can toss back a few cold ones while heavy-hitters like Derek Jeter, Curt Schilling and Sammy Sosa sweat through spring training. The New York Yankees, Florida Devil Rays, Philadelphia Phillies and Toronto Blue Jays all play "Grapefruit League"

warmup games in February and March at small stadiums in the area.

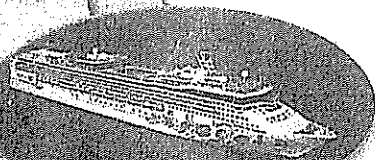
Look for great travel deals during spring break in March. Getting there is an easy two-and-a-half hour flight from New York to Tampa International Airport, a 30-minute drive from the beach. Travelers who fly down should consider renting a car once they arrive. Driving is the best way to visit several area attractions like Busch Gardens, Universal Studios and several Disney parks.

For comprehensive lodging information, visit [www.floridasbeach.com/lodging/rentals.aspx](http://www.floridasbeach.com/lodging/rentals.aspx); for general area beach information, contact the St. Petersburg/Clearwater Area Convention & Visitors Bureau at 1-877-352-3224 or [www.FloridasBeach.com](http://www.FloridasBeach.com).

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