



COURTESY OF AMELIA ISLAND TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Riding a horse along the hard-packed coast is a unique way to experience Amelia Island, which features 13 miles of beaches.

Shelling to surfing: Wiggle your toes at these 25 beaches

By **RICHARD TRIBOU** | Staff Writer

With 1,197 miles of coastline, Florida beachgoers have options, but know that if you've seen one Florida beach, you most decidedly have not seen them all.

Some are great for shelling. Some are great for surfing. Some are great for people-watching. Others have no people in sight. All have direct access to Florida's sunshine, but each one has its own gems to offer. From the East Coast to the Gulf Coast, these are the 25 beaches you should visit at least once in your lifetime.

Amelia Island

Starting on the East Coast, the first sign of beach in Florida is one of the best, with sweeping dunes along 13 miles just south of Georgia on an island that's home to Fernandina Beach and the city of Amelia Island. The island is bookended by Fort Clinch State Park on the north and Amelia Island State Park on the south. So the natural state is always in play, but there's levels of sophistication there for those who want it, with The Ritz-Carlton, its Salt restaurant and beachside golfing. The region celebrates its history, claiming to have flown under eight flags including Spanish, French, Mexican, Confederate and the U.S. The No. 1 thing you have to do on this Florida beach, though, is find a horse. There are several outfits that will let you take you a horseback ride along the white, hard-packed coast. You will never experience a sunrise in the same way.

AmeliaIsland.com

St. Augustine Beach

Just over the Bridge of Lions in the nation's oldest city is a stretch of 10 miles of beach from St. Augustine Inlet to Matanzas Inlet. Just south of Anastasia Island State Park is the stretch of the town of St. Augustine Beach that features the St. Johns County Ocean & Fishing Pier and 4 miles of the flat sands great for spotting dolphins and even migrating right whales while building a sandcastle from the fine white sands that have a long flat slope into the Atlantic.

OldCity.com/Beaches



COURTESY OF ANDREI BENJAMIN SUJK

Dawn breaks over St. Augustine Beach. Flat sands are great for spotting dolphins.

EXPLORE FLORIDA



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Cars can drive on Daytona Beach except for a mile north and south of the Daytona Beach Pier.

Daytona Beach

The city bills itself as "The World's Most Famous Beach" and you can credit four wheels for that. Once home to car races on the beach, it's one of the few places in the U.S. you can drive on the beach. Because of the hard-packed sand and one of the widest continuous stretches in Florida, it attracts millions every year. That doesn't mean you can't find your own bit of solitude, but there's room to enjoy the crowds near the center of the action. Of note, driving is now prohibited for a mile north and south of the Daytona Beach Pier with a parking garage at the Ocean Walk complex. That's the same stretch that features Daytona's Boardwalk and Bandshell, the entertainment hub of the beach. If you have the wherewithal, bring or rent a bike and enjoy miles of the flat sand, occasionally splashing through the rising tide line. The waves can be flat or amazing for trying out boogie boards and the sand is fantastic for digging a giant hole, burying mom or dad and making amazing sandcastles. It's also not a bad spot to write a giant message in the sand visible from the countless number of beachfront hotels along the strip.

DaytonaBeach.com

New Smyrna Beach

The beach driving of Volusia County continues south of Ponce de Leon Inlet, but it's the inlet where some of the state's best surfing can be found with consistently large, rideable waves that are great for pulling tricks. The beach gets crowded near the Flagler Avenue approach, but there's solitude to be found if you don't mind the haul along 1.5-mile boardwalk at New Smyrna Dunes Park on the northern end of New Smyrna Beach. It offers a great view of the lighthouse across the inlet as well as the surfers, kite boarders and fishing boats heading out into the Atlantic. It's also great for four-legged friends that can enjoy the small beach along the inlet, but sadly not along the oceanfront anymore.

NSBFla.com



RED HUBER/STAFF FILE PHOTO

Large waves draw surfers to New Smyrna Beach.

Canaveral National Seashore

There's 24 miles of solitude to be had between New Smyrna Beach and Titusville. The barrier island that runs from Apollo Beach in Volusia County south to Playalinda Beach in Brevard County is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places and offers a nature preserve that attracts hundreds of species of birds each year. It takes a while to make it out to the coast, and there are miles of beach only accessible by foot. But if you want to get away from it all, this is the beach for you.

NPS.gov/Can



COURTESY OF BOB ROUNTREE

Take boardwalk to Apollo Beach.

Cocoa Beach

Where else can you frolic in the surf and watch a rocket launch? The beach has been famous since the 1950s, the home of Major Nelson in TV's "I Dream of Jeannie" and only miles from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station and Kennedy Space Center. While the shuttle program is finished and new manned missions are years away, you can catch SpaceX, Orbital, Delta and Atlas rocket launches nearly every month from the shores.

It's also home to more great surfing — it's where surfing legend Kelly Slater grew up — and the largest surf shop in the world, Ron Jon Surf Shop. Don't worry about enjoying an alcoholic beverage on the sand. It's allowed. It also happens to be the closest beach to Orlando.

CocoaBeach.com

EXPLORE FLORIDA

Blowing Rocks Preserve

Most Florida coastal cities want to convince you of how majestic their soft sand is. That's not the case with Blowing Rocks Preserve in Martin County's Hobe Sound, which is run by The Nature Conservancy. Here you have natural formations of coquina rock for miles up and down the beach just north of Palm Beach County. Bring some water shoes, tread carefully with sandals or even more carefully barefoot, around the formations that at high tide can send spouts of incoming waves 50 feet high into the sky as they rush into the rocks. At low tide, it's great for exploring the nooks and crannies, especially of interest to the smaller set of humans that can fit through holes and create temporary forts. Bring snorkel gear for when you venture into the surf as there's an abundance of sea life milling about just off shore.

Nature.org/BlowingRocks

Juno Beach

If you can afford to stay at the many beachfront properties, then more power to you, but you can still enjoy the beaches of South Florida on the barrier islands just west of Jupiter in northern Palm Beach County. Unlike many of the beaches in Palm Beach and Broward counties, Juno Beach does not cost anything to park. There are several beachfront approaches including the Loggerhead Marinelife Center that has a playground, showers and bathrooms, but also access to one of the best conservation centers in South Florida. It rehabilitates various species of sea turtles. Entry is free (donations are encouraged) if you can break away from the draw of the surf and sand.

pbcgov.com/parks/locations/junobeach.htm



MICHAEL LAUGHLIN/STAFF FILE PHOTO

Fort Lauderdale, toned down somewhat from its spring-break heyday, features wide beaches.

Fort Lauderdale

There's a reason college kids made this the Spring Break capital back in the 1980s. The lively strip of hotels and restaurants provide great access to the beachfront just across State Road A1A. The beach is wide and full of activity. The waves are not too strong, but big enough to enjoy some body surfing or boogie boarding. Now toned down from its youthful heyday, it's still great for people watching and offers a mile-long beachside promenade that's great for in-line skating and biking. If not staying overnight, parking can be a challenge. Consider heading into Hugh Taylor Birch State Park off of Sunrise Boulevard and walking through the tunnel under the highway and onto the beach. It's a little more quiet, but the sand and shore are just as inviting.

sunny.org/beaches



JOE BURBANK/STAFF FILE PHOTO

Neon signs highlight landmark buildings on Ocean Avenue.

South Beach

There's a daily show in Florida, and it's free. It might be better to say it's nightly, and it's on Miami Beach. Spend the day at the beach and enjoy the ocean and sand in all of its standard fantastic nature, but then migrate to the restaurants along Ocean Drive and watch the show. You'll see the most expensive cars in stop-and-go traffic amid throngs of ogling tourists, but also the most interesting pedestrians. Also make time to venture down to South Pointe Park and watch the procession of cruise ships departing PortMiami. You can climb out onto the rock jetty or just stroll along the inlet walkway.

MiamiandBeaches.com