

# fun & relaxing



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## Eco Tourism

Ecotourism has become a large sector of Florida's travel industry. Preserving the Sunshine State's natural resources through a number of environmentally-friendly programs is first and foremost the concern for many of those who promote the state's visitation.

Whether it's a "Florida Green Lodging" or protected wildlife area, government agencies are rallying together to provide visitors with a natural and beautiful Florida to enjoy for generations to come.

The **Gulf Islands National Seashore** along Florida's Northwest Coast was established in 1971 to preserve the barrier islands, salt marshes, wildlife, historic structures and archeological sites found along the Gulf of Mexico. It's the largest National Seashore and includes 12 separate units stretching eastward 160 miles from Cat Island, Mississippi to the eastern tip of Santa Rosa Island, Florida.

The area is comprised by about 95,000 acres of barrier islands, mainland areas, and adjacent submerged lands along the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Throughout these holdings are areas apparently devoid of vegetation, but each area contains a surprising number of plant species. Over 280

species of birds including songbirds, waterfowl, wading birds, birds of prey, marine birds and shorebirds use the islands for resting, feeding, wintering or migratory rest stops. Sanderlings, for example, stop to feed during an 8,000-mile trip between the Arctic and South America.

Some of the best viewing areas for birds are found on the trails, at the fishing piers, and on the shoreline. Fall and spring are excellent times to view migratory birds. Park rangers and volunteers often lead birding programs during migration season. Field guides and checklists are available at the visitor centers.

In addition to its birding opportunities, reptiles are common here. Alligators bask alongside ponds and lagoons. Lizards, snakes, turtles and frogs crawl or slither among dunes, grass and forest floor. Huge, rare sea turtles crawl ashore to lay eggs in nest cavities they dig in the sand. Near exhaustion, they crawl seaward to return, maybe, another year.

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## For Florida's Space Coast.

Florida's Space Coast is central to the best of Florida and home to legendary Cocoa Beach, Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, Port Canaveral's vacation and casino cruise ships, deep sea fishing, and a nature lovers paradise. As Orlando's closest beaches, Florida's Space Coast is only 45 minutes away from Central Florida's world-famous theme parks.

Log onto [www.space-coast.com](http://www.space-coast.com) for more information about Florida's Space Coast including the **SPECIAL EVENTS CALENDAR**.



1-877-572-3224 | [www.space-coast.com](http://www.space-coast.com)

The largest subtropical wilderness, **the Everglades**, boasts rare and endangered species. It has been designated a World Heritage Site, International Biosphere Reserve, and Wetland of International Importance, significant to all people of the world. The park is known for its rich bird life, particularly large wading birds, such as the roseate spoonbill, wood stork, great blue heron and a variety of egrets. It's also the only place in the world where alligators and crocodiles exist side by side.

The western gateway to Everglades National Park is the Gulf Coast Visitor Center in Everglades City. There's no charge to enter the visitor center's education display area, or to embark via canoe or kayak from the center's docks. Visitors can hop aboard daily guided boat trips into mangrove estuaries. For those who prefer a more native self-exploration, canoe and kayak paddlers frequent the Wilderness Waterway, a 99-mile waterway trail that connects Everglades City and Flamingo. Paddlers may obtain the required backcountry camping permits at the Gulf Coast Visitors Center. The entire waterway trip takes seven to nine days for paddlers and is considered by many to be a trip of a lifetime.

Beyond Orlando's theme park gates lies a more relaxed Central Florida. The **Orlando** area is home to abundant land-based wildlife, from wild turkeys, white-tailed deer and wild hogs to the more elusive Florida panther, black bears, coyotes and bobcats. An eco-tour is the perfect way to go off-the-beaten path. Forever Florida offers open-air eco-safaris of cattle ranches that are home to many native species, and also offers horse-back adventure safaris to accommodate riders of all skill levels. Fun 2 Dive Scuba and Manatee Snorkeling Tours offers full-day manatee snorkeling experiences which include a manatee awareness program and time in the water with these gentle creatures.

Designated a Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists, Orlando offers a multitude of paved fitness trails for people who want to put more fun in their exercise program by biking, in-line skating or walking. Many paths surround scenic lakes or are located in recreational parks. A number of shops offer equipment rentals. The West Orange Trail provides 19 paved miles (30.6 km) with restroom and picnic facilities.

Florida's Space Coast national areas have been ranked 11th in the world among Ecotourist destinations that "give the most enriching experience," by Weissmann Travel Reports (WTR).

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Visitors wanting to experience this nature first hand can trek to the **Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge**, a 140,000-acre sanctuary packed with lush pine and oak hammocks and a shaded boardwalk where birding is at its best with wading birds, shorebirds and raptors. The Enchanted Forest, located in southern Titusville, offers a 400-acre sanctuary providing hiking trails for guests to explore and enjoy the area's untainted views and perhaps spot a white-tailed deer or Florida bobcat. From sanctuaries to forests, the Space Coast guides adventurers along Canaveral National Seashore trimmed with 15-foot sand dunes and wind-swept sea oats. Explore the diversified ecosystems with an airboat ride from Lone Cabbage Fish Camp Airboat Rides, kayak through Cypress swamps with A Day Away Kayaking in Merritt Island or enjoy a narrated tour on the Indian River Lagoon with Space Coast River Tours. With more than 35 educational excursion operators, the Space Coast offers a variety of options to venture into the heart of Natural Florida.

Famed around the globe, the clear, warm waters of the **Florida Keys** attract almost 800,000 scuba and snorkel enthusiasts annually, and there's no better destination to get up close and personal with the undersea environment. Snorkeling requires nothing more than a mask to see underwater, a snorkel for breathing, and optional fins for propulsion, all of which can be easily rented or purchased for a nominal cost. Scuba diving is more complex, requiring sophisticated equipment and instruction by certified teachers. Instruction generally lasts from one day for an introductory lesson to five days for open-water certification.

For those who prefer to enjoy nature from above the water's edge, kayaking is a tranquil way to take in a

plethora of sights and sounds. Both guided tours and kayak rentals are available throughout the Keys, and most guides are eager to share their knowledge about the area.

**Facts and Suggestions to enjoy Florida's Eco Tourism!**

>> Florida's four national forests - Apalachicola, Choctawhatchee, Osceola, and Ocala - cover more than one million acres. Nearly half the state is covered with uninhabited forests.

>> There are 34 major rivers in the state. Certainly one of the best-known rivers is the Suwannee, in the northern portion of Florida. Many of the state's rivers provide the opportunity to "tube" and lazily explore the area.

>> Leave plants, animals, rocks, logs, etc. alone. Although that tropical flower or plant is the most beautiful you've ever seen, please leave it be so others after you may also enjoy it.

>> The 'Big Bend' area of north Florida is one of the few places in the world where you can catch your own scallops. All ages, from kids to grandparents can collect the legal limit - about two gallons of whole scallops per person - in a couple of hours. It helps to have a boat, but the scallops like to hang out in three-four-foot deep water, so a canoe or kayak also works.

>> Florida is sprinkled with more than 7,800 lakes, ranging in size from an acre to the 448,000-acre Lake Okeechobee, the second-largest freshwater lake within the United States.

**we recommend** > > > Eco-Fun &

**Events. . . . .**

Located at the western edge of the Everglades, **ROOKERY BAY NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE** and the Ten Thousand Islands ecosystem is a prime example of a nearly pristine subtropical mangrove forested estuary. Visitors to the reserve can explore the Environmental Learning Center, a two-story exhibit hall that highlights southwest Florida's coastal habitats, unique plant and animal history and a 2,300-gallon aquarium with immersion bubble. The estuary hosts a number of family friendly events including the Southwest Florida Birding Festival, National Estuary Day in September, and weekly guided kayak tours and historical walks.

239-417-6310 | [www.rookerybay.org](http://www.rookerybay.org)

Whether you are looking for something different in an off-the-beaten track destination, educational experiences, special interest subjects, or you just want a relaxing area to visit while touring northeast Florida; **PUTNAM COUNTY** is the ideal destination.

Highlights of Putnam County include the Rodman Recreation Area, located south of Palatka, featuring several ideal observation areas for viewing all types of Florida Birds. Nearby, the Welaka State Forest, provides the nature enthusiast the opportunity to view many of Florida's native birds in marsh and pine habitat.

All of north and central Florida attractions are just a short distance from this pristine part of the state. Putnam County is the destination where you can experience true Floridian culture through the many festivals and events.

386-328-1503 | [www.putnamcountychamber.org](http://www.putnamcountychamber.org)

**INDIAN RIVER COUNTY** is proud of its tradition as a smaller resort town. A destination where visitors come to concentrate on miles of picturesque beaches, golf, play water sports, tennis, fish, and soak up a small town ambiance.

Indian River County provides a host of eco-heritage venues: Pelican Island Wildlife Refuge, the first in the nation; Sebastian Inlet State Park and several popular birding sites.

The serene McKee Botanical Garden is hosting an exciting exhibit of sculptural glass by internationally known artist Hans Godo Frabel "Reflections of Glass on Water". The exhibition will be in place from November, 2008 to April, 2009 in the garden. And while visiting in Indian River County don't miss a kayaking trip on the Indian River Lagoon, or a visit to the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, the first in the nation.

[www.indianriverchamber.com](http://www.indianriverchamber.com) | [www.sebastianchamber.com](http://www.sebastianchamber.com)

Few areas are as close to being "Old Florida" as **GULF COUNTY**, situated in the Northwest corridor of the state - in fact, travel experts are predicting it will soon be one of the leading ecotourism destinations in the country.

A portion of the Gulf County is located in the Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Preserve, the largest reserve in the country. Kayak and canoe enthusiasts embrace the area's waterways. Be it St. Joseph Bay (saltwater), Indian Pass Lagoon (saltwater) or fresh water forways on Apalachicola River tributaries. Another popular pastime is birding. Gulf County is home to bird sanctuaries throughout Cape San Blas, which also proudly boasts a number one ranking in the Continental United States by Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, more commonly known as "Dr. Beach".

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