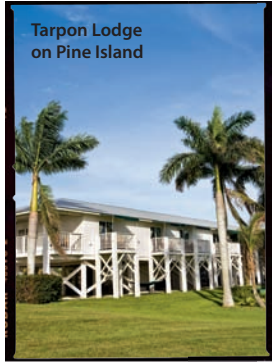


florida's secret islands

For a truly laid-back vibe,
the lesser-known islands off
Florida's Gulf Coast offer
the ultimate easy escape



A sandy stretch
just steps from
Island's End Resort
on Pass-A-Grille



Tarpon Lodge on Pine Island



Coconut postcards



At water's edge in Matlacha



The bright mural at Lovegrove Gallery & Gardens



Lovegrove Gallery & Gardens in Matlacha



Big bites at Bert's Bar & Grill



A friendly face at Bert's Bar & Grill in Matlacha



Waterfront at Bert's Bar & Grill



A dock at Tarpon Lodge on Pine Island

Unwinding on a balmy island couldn't be more alluring, even as winter yields to spring. Sugary beaches, friendly locals, and a "what's your hurry?" attitude seem more typical in the Caribbean, but you can get all that and more right along Florida's Gulf Coast, on a handful of islands that have seen little change during the past 50 years. Bridges link many of them to the mainland, yet they seem worlds away. Instead of crowds, mega-resorts, and glitzy nightlife, they offer breathing room, intimate accommodations, and easy access to water and wildlife.

Matlacha/Pine Island

Just past the Island Time Zone road sign, the tiny town of Matlacha (MAT-luh-shay)—an islet west of Ft. Myers—welcomes visitors with art galleries and shops but retains the charm of a quiet fishing village. Tethered to the mainland by the "fishinest bridge in the U.S.A." over Matlacha Pass, it's surrounded by dozens of mostly empty isles, an ideal habitat for fish (and the

anglers who catch them). Kayakers come here to paddle placid backwaters, but be sure to spend time on dry land, checking out the eclectic collections at galleries such as Lovegrove Gallery & Gardens, where owner and artist Leoma Lovegrove's vibrant paintings cover every surface.

Route 78 from Matlacha continues to peaceful Pine Island. The land on this 17-mile-long slice of Old Florida is largely home to

plantations replete with palm, citrus, avocado, guava, macadamia, and mango trees. (The island's 15th annual Mango Mania festival—with games for the kids, recipe contests, and, of course, a Mango Queen—will be held July 30–31; mangomaniafl.com.)

Pine Island's sparse traffic—and the bike path running from one end to the other—makes it ideal

for cycling. Hikers take the Calusa Heritage Trail, which winds among ancient shell mounds and the remnants of an impressive cross-island canal built by the Calusa Indians, who settled here around A.D. 1. Trail signs illustrate the thriving seaside village that greeted Spanish explorers in the early 1500s.

STAY: Tarpon Lodge offers waterside accommodations in the original 1926 inn and auxiliary buildings, plus

fishing and boating day trips with osprey, egret, and dolphin sightings. Rates start at \$135; 239/283-3999 or tarponlodge.com.

EAT: The Tarpon serves always fresh (never frozen!) fish and outstanding blue crab—and—roasted corn chowder. Bert's Bar & Grill in Matlacha features tasty seafood, live music, and dockside dining; Great Licks Ice Cream Shop satisfies sweet teeth.

PLAY: Pine Island Cycles, Inc., rents beach cruisers (\$15 per day); 239/560-0320.

Gulf Coast Kayak provides opportunities to paddle the area's placid inlets, starting at \$30 for a half day (cash only); 239/283-1125 or gulfcoastkayak.com.

Cabbage Key/Cayo Costa

Most people flock to Cabbage Key, a 100-acre refuge off of Pine Island Sound, to have drinks or lunch at the Cabbage Key Inn, a converted 1928 house set atop an ancient Calusa >

shell mound. Over the years, patrons have plastered the bar and restaurant with thousands of dollar bills, and locals like to claim that longtime regular Jimmy Buffett was inspired to write his song "Cheeseburger in Paradise" here (and not in the Caribbean). Day-trippers stroll a nature trail studded with mangroves and gumbo limbo and buttonwood trees, plus cabbage palms, the source of the island's name.

Those who want to sample the surf can rent a kayak or motorized skiff and check out nearby



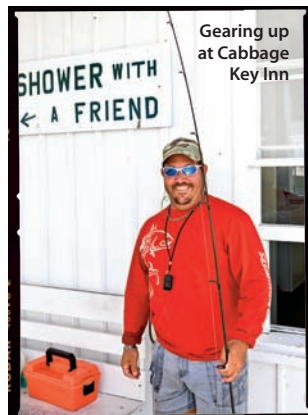
Dropping a line off Cayo Costa State Park

Cayo Costa State Park (also served by ferry from Pine Island). This barrier island features a primeval beach, with more than six miles of white sand, shells, and Gulf-tossed driftwood.

STAY: Cabbage Key Inn has six rooms in the main building (numbers 1 and 6 have the best water views) and seven rental cottages,



Kayakers' paradise: Cayo Costa State Park



Gearing up at Cabbage Key Inn

including the petite Doll House, which has its own dock. Rates start at \$119; cabbagekey.com.

EAT: The cheeseburger is a mainstay at the Cabbage Key Inn, but peel-and-eat shrimp, house-smoked salmon, and homemade Key lime pie also star.

PLAY: Guests can rent kayaks and skiffs from the inn, and make their way to Cayo Costa.

Boca Grande/ Gasparilla Island

The town of Boca Grande on Gasparilla Island is like Palm Beach without the bling: pastel cottages, Gulf-front estates, and a nice assortment of upscale but understated shops and restaurants. Duponts, Vanderbilts, and other elite visitors have been vacationing here since the Gasparilla Inn opened in 1913. At this low-key but

stylish retreat, almost everyone dresses smart-casual, favoring colorful Florida looks such as Lilly Pulitzer and Vera Bradley.

People generally get around by bicycle or golf cart to check out the 1890 lighthouse/museum at the island's southern end or the gorgeous length of sand that stretches along its entire Gulf shore. In the sleepy off-season, beachgoers can spend an entire day without seeing anyone else until locals walk their dogs at sunset.

Shoppers stop at Ruhama's Books in the Sand to buy a beach read or some souvenir sand dollar note cards. Anglers will find a flotilla of boats in >



Cayo Costa State Park

THE GULF GETS A GREEN LIGHT

The islands mentioned in this story were unaffected by last spring's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. While concerns remain about oil deposits beneath the sand, and the cleanup does continue across Florida's beaches, these islands are clear and welcoming visitors. For regular updates on water conditions and other issues related to the spill, visit epa.gov/bpspill. For information on beaches in the Gulf and how to volunteer or donate, call the volunteer hotline at 866/647-2338, or visit restorethegulf.gov.

Boca Grande Pass when the tarpon are running; the rest of the year, fly-fishing yields snook and other prized fish.

STAY: The Anchor Inn has four quiet suites and a pool. Rates start at \$195; anchorinnbocagrande.com. The larger Gasparilla Inn

includes 61 rooms and suites, plus an additional 78 bedrooms in surrounding cottages. Rates start at \$375; the-gasparilla-inn.com.

EAT: The Temptation Restaurant & Bar lives up to its name with palate-pleasing dishes including bronzed grouper over sautéed Brussels sprouts in

an orange beurre blanc; temptationbocagrande.com. The garden patio at 3rd Street Cafe is the perfect backdrop for the restaurant's Mediterranean-inspired dishes; 941/964-0155. Hudson's Grocery (look for the flamingo-



A great egret at Cabbage Key Inn

pink gas pump) stocks gourmet picnic fixings, barbecued ribs, and cold beer; 941/964-2621.

PLAY: Boca Grande Outfitters (bocagrandeoutfitters.com) and Gasparilla Outfitters (4tarpon.wordpress.com) can "hook" visitors up with fishing gear and a savvy guide.

Pass-A-Grille

Located on the skinny southern end of an island just off St. Petersburg, Pass-A-Grille is only a block wide—edged on one side by a long, alluring Gulf beach, and on the other by Boca Ciega Bay. Visitors browse quirky 8th Avenue—checking out A Little Room for Art (a tiny gallery with a resident cockatiel), Paradiso (tropical-flavored clothing), and the striking creations of contemporary jewelry designer (and local brewer of Evander Beer) Evander Preston.

There's time for lazing on fine sand and toasting another Gulf sunset on the Hurricane's rooftop deck with a Beach Cruiser, a festive blend of rum and pineapple and cranberry juices, but Pass-A-Grille also makes a good base for exploring the mostly undeveloped islands at the mouth of Tampa Bay. >

The five interlinked islands that make up Ft. De Soto Park—1,000-plus acres of pristine beaches, historic fortifications, nature trails, and wildlife—are a rest stop for more than 300 species of migratory birds. You can kayak or take a ferry to two

island preserves, Shell Key and Egmont Key, and take a kayoga class (a kayaking warm-up followed by yoga on a deserted beach) led by former Egmont Key lighthouse-keeper Tim Ganley. With beach towels on soft sand instead of yoga mats, participants look like comic versions of the elegant egrets watching warily from the dock.

STAY: Located at Pass-A-Grille's southern tip, Island's End has five one-bedroom cottages, plus a three-bedroom home with private pool, dock, and gazebo. Rates start at \$199; islandsend.com. Steps from the beach, the recently renovated

St. Petersburg. Rates start at \$169; postcardinn.com. The vintage pink palace Don CeSar was built in 1928 and has been refurbished. It is now owned by Loews Hotels and Resorts and is the only four-diamond resort in town. Rates start at \$299; loewshotels.com/doncesar.

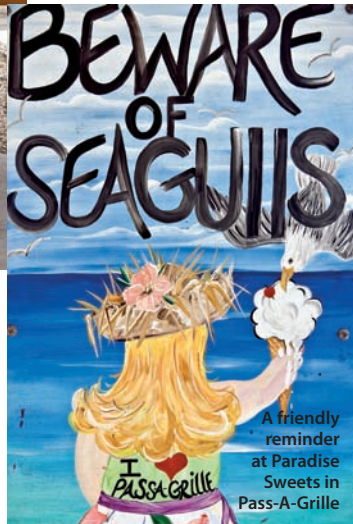
EAT: The Wharf Seafood Restaurant & Bar purveys fresh stone crab and grouper from a weathered waterside building; wharfrestaurant.org. For superb seafood with Floribbean flavors, try the Maritana Grille at the Don CeSar; loewshotels.com/doncesar. Black Palm has a lively patio and a fusion of South American and Caribbean flavors;

blackpalmrestaurant.com. Paradise Sweets serves locally made Working Cow ice cream; 727/360-5830.

PLAY: Tim Ganley's kayoga classes combine the pleasures of kayaking and yoga; 727/466-7994 or yogaenergy.com. >



Enjoying island time in Pass-A-Grille



A friendly reminder at Paradise Sweets in Pass-A-Grille

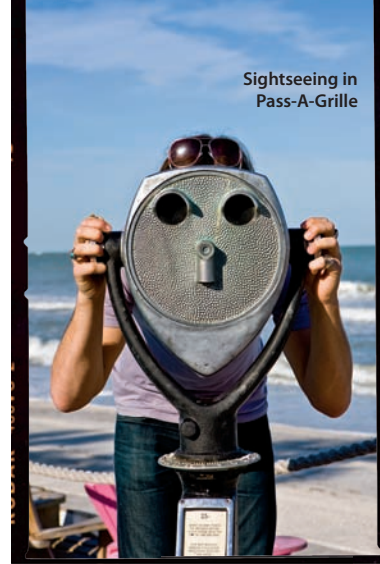
Coconut Inn offers rooms with kitchens, free use of bicycles and beach chairs, and a pool. Rates start at \$145; sabalpalms.com. Or anchor five minutes up the road, in St. Pete Beach. The Postcard

Inn on the Beach offers retro decor and modern amenities minutes from downtown

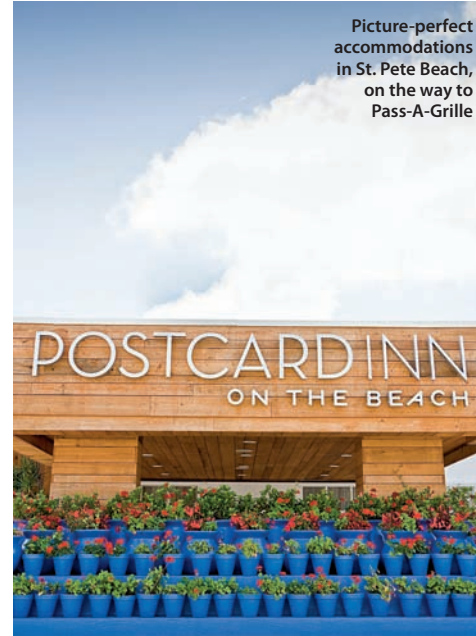


The palm-shaded Coconut Inn in Pass-A-Grille





Sightseeing in Pass-A-Grille



Picture-perfect accommodations in St. Pete Beach, on the way to Pass-A-Grille



Pass-A-Grille Marina and the waterfront Wharf restaurant



Evander Preston's Pass-A-Grille brew

points out bald eagles, herons, pelicans, dolphins, and the 1854 lighthouse on neighboring Seahorse Key. **STAY:** Built in 1880, Cedar Key Bed & Breakfast features rooms with private baths and central air. Rates start at

Cedar Key

Roughly two hours north of Tampa, Cedar Key is a picturesque outpost near the point where the Florida peninsula meets the Panhandle. Free of stoplights and franchises, this remote village counts a population of only 900. Vintage fish sheds fill its backwater inlets, along with old mullet boats now used by clam farmers.

Nature continues to be the area's biggest draw. In 1867, famed naturalist John Muir ended his 1,000-mile trek from Indiana here, enthusing about the "many gems of palmy islets called 'keys' that fringe the shore like huge bouquets." Many are now part of Cedar Key National Wildlife Refuge, which can be enjoyed by renting a kayak from Kayak Cedar Keys. On a Tidewater Tours cruise around the islands, Capt. Doug Maple

\$99; cedarkeybandb.com. The circa-1859 Island Hotel is a historic B&B with wraparound verandas. Rates start at \$80; islandhotel-cedarkey.com.

EAT: In addition to the Island Hotel's excellent restaurant, Cedar Key offers local clam chowders ranging from the creamy version at Tony's Seafood Restaurant (352/543-0022 or tonschowder.com) to the smoky-rich concoction at the waterside Old Fish House Cafe (352/543-9800).

PLAY: To book a Tidewater Tour, call 352/543-9523, or visit tidewatertours.com. Kayak Cedar Keys provides paddling maps and dry bags with rentals; 352/543-9447 or kayakcedarkeys.com. 🌿