

welcome to the sunshine state



BY DAVID ROBINSON

Congratulate yourself. You are pulling duty in sunny Florida. Think about it. Where do millions of retirees choose to live after working a lifetime somewhere else? Where do thousands of students from all over the map choose to blow their precious spring break? Where do some 30 million visitors flock in by car or plane every year? And where did Spain choose to plant St. Augustine in 1565, the first permanent European settlement in what's now the continental U.S.?

Now it's your turn to find out why Florida has been pulling people in since Ponce de Leon came looking for gold and the Fountain of Youth in 1513. He found neither. But you'll find the same sun, sand, and endless summer that he found, and a lot that's been added since — the theme parks, the dolphin shows, the baseball training camps, the space shots that you can watch for free, and especially the relaxed lifestyle of people who don't have to endure a winter's icy breath, who pick lemons off a tree in their own yard, who play golf and grow flowers year round, and who can get to the ocean in minutes — or at most, an hour or two — from just about anywhere in the state.

Before you mothball those winter jackets, though, better find your duty station on a map. If it's in the north or out on the western panhandle, you'll need a jacket or two, because you'll see your breath on many a winter morning and even knock a little snow off your windshield now and then. Farther south on the peninsula the citrus growers may have to fire up the smudgepots against a January frost. Miami basks by the sea some 450 miles south of the Georgia line, yet even with an average winter low in the 60s, the city that once called itself "America's sun porch" shivered through its first-ever snow flurry in 1977.

But this is the Sunshine State. Around St. Petersburg on the Gulf Coast, there's sunshine all but four days in an average year. So by midday the winter chill has probably warmed up and you're outside in shirtsleeves again. In summer, south or north, you'll wish some of that chill would return, as you and nearly everyone else heads for the malls and restaurants and recreation rooms where the air conditioners tame the oppressive heat and humidity. On the beaches there's usually a refreshing sea breeze, and on many afternoons a thunderstorm comes barreling through to cool things off in a hurry. Lakeland gets doused and deafened by them about 100 days a year.

Sometimes Florida gets more than a thunderbump. From June to November — though seldom before August — hurricanes hatch off Africa, work up an attitude in the mid-Atlantic, and take it out on the Eastern Seaboard. Florida seems a favorite target. Warships put to sea to weather the storm, and air bases fly their planes far inland — except for Florida-based "Hurricane Hunters" who fly their big USAF C-130s into the storm to track and study it. Winds of 74 mph are enough to qualify as a hurricane, but a major storm can double that.

The peninsula's flat terrain offers little resistance to slow the blow. If the sea rose a mere 10 feet, much of it would be under water. But in areas like Citrus County, in the long bend between panhandle and peninsula, you'll find rolling hills sprinkled with beef cattle reminiscent of the cow country of the West. The state's high point is only 345 feet above sea level, far to the west in the panhandle and barely a mile inside the Alabama line. That panhandle is so long — 400 miles from the Atlantic to Mobile Bay — that it breaks into two time zones, Eastern and Central.



With hardly a hill to slow you down, and an excellent highway system throughout the state, you'll need to watch your speedometer when you drive — and keep a wary eye out for the occasional driver who isn't watching his. But if you like to drive, Florida is a great place to be stationed.

As you explore highways and byways, place names will tell you who was there before you. Mouth-filling Indian names like Chattahoochee, Apalachicola, and Chassahowitzka recall Native Americans whose residency goes back at least 12,000 years. Other names sing of a Spanish past: Islamorada, Tequesta, Boca Raton. Flagler, Yulee, and Plant City honor early entrepreneurs who helped open Florida to waves of tourism that swell to torrents today. Names like Citrus Center, Citrus County, Citrus Springs, and Naranja — the Spanish word for orange — tell you what people do — or don't do; there's also Winter Haven, Holiday, and Leisure City.

Leisure in Florida usually means a beach. The state has more coastline than any other in the lower 48, and more than half of it is beach — and every stretch of sand in Florida is farther south than any beach in California by at least 120 miles. The Gulf beaches of the panhandle are said to be the whitest in the world, with sand that is 99 percent quartz. In these subtropical latitudes the sun blazes down from overhead, and the brilliant sand bounces it back up, so it fries your hide twice. Use plenty of sunscreen and common sense.

With all that shoreline, it's no wonder that Florida's specialty is seafood. From the red snappers of Pensacola to the conch fritters of Key West, this thumb-in-the-ocean has it all: scallops from the bays, shrimp from the Gulf of Mexico, deep-sea denizens from the Atlantic, and even freshwater delicacies from some of the state's 166 rivers and 30,000 lakes. What better R&R than plopping a bass plug into a quiet cove from a johnboat, or hooking into a thrashing tarpon from the cockpit of a sportfishing boat beyond sight of land? Sometimes Florida's wildlife comes to you. Every golfer, it seems, has a tale of the alligator that ate his ball — or the mosquitoes that ate his partner. And sooner or later a two-inch cockroach finds its way into your life. Some call it the palmetto bug, but a megabug by any name is still a megapest. Homemade countermeasures abound: sprinkle a powder of borax and chocolate in the crannies, or drink a soda and leave the near-empty bottle where the bugs can drop in but can't climb out. Don't bother swatting; they have incredible sensors, hair-trigger reflexes, and they're gone before your newspaper hits the counter. Kill all you can; get used to the rest. Welcome to the subtropics.

Visitors from all over the world have found a welcome in Florida, and many have stayed to make the state their home — refugees from Cuban communism, fishermen from Greece, hard-working Japanese, retirees from everywhere northward, even a mouse from Hollywood, California; that is; there's a Hollywood in Florida too. It's at the Atlantic end of Interstate 75, the famed "Alligator Alley" with Naples at the Gulf end and the sprawling, sodden Everglades between. This mysterious, delicate ecosystem is actually a river, miles wide and inches deep, slowly oozing seaward through Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades National Park at the rate of half a mile a day. Don't miss either one, but don't enter the 'Glades without a guide. A few who did reportedly never came out.

Before your tour of duty ends, take the drive to where Florida ends: Key West, last link in the island chain known as the Florida Keys. Here's the Florida you always imagined — artsy, funky, tacky, folksy, touristy, and endlessly fascinating. Here you can watch the sun rise out of the Atlantic and set in the Gulf. You can try conch fritters, made from the "hamburger of the Caribbean," the big sea snail that lives in the pink-lined shell you "listen to." You can sample the real Key lime pie, not green but yellow like the little limes it's made from. And you can pose for snapshots at the southernmost point in the continental U.S.

Key West and Pensacola are 792 miles apart by car and light-years apart in lifestyle. Between the two sprawls a state well worth a tour of duty.