



Saddlebrook, a haven for sports...and the odd alligator



Florida's Gulf Coast

With over 1,250 golf courses, Florida has more than any US state. Throw in 1,200 miles of beaches, the world's top theme parks and its year-round warm climate and you have vacation nirvana at your disposal

SADDLEBROOK RESORT

For Florida's Gulf Coast read Florida's Gulf Coast. That's how the region which spans from Tampa Bay down to Marco Island on the state's western side now styles itself.

There are more than 100 courses in this area, which is lapped by the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Leading golf course architect Ron Garl, who has 80 Florida courses to his name, is a fan. "We have the beaches, the gulf and most of all the golf," he said.

There are so many good courses you will barely scratch the surface in one visit. And you need time to relax on some of Florida's best beaches, visit its many top attractions, seek out its protected natural areas to experience unspoiled nature, indulge yourself at opulent spa resort hotels or paint the town red at night in its lively towns and cities.

But try not to pack too much in, otherwise you'll need another holiday to get over it.

North of Tampa, World Woods Golf Club has two highly-rated Tom Fazio courses—Rolling Oaks and Pine Barrens. Unusually for Florida, there are some dramatic changes in el-

evation. Rolling Oaks' name reflects its moss-draped oak trees, while Pine Barrens derives from the forest through which it was carved and its vast and striking waste bunkers. Small landing areas, sharp doglegs and tight fairways focus the mind even more. The pick of the holes are the 4th, a long par 5 bordered by a waste area so deep it needs ladders, and the

short par-4 15th which tempts a courageous second over water and sand but allows a safer option. In April 2001, a single foursome made a one, a two, a three, and a par on this hole.

Tampa's courses include two Arnold Palmer designs at Saddlebrook Resort, a sporting haven with 45 tennis courts and both tennis and golf academies just down the road from Busch Gardens theme park. Cypress hammocks—small swamps with Spanish Moss-draped cypress trees—are a feature of its courses, as are the alligators by its lakes. I vividly recall watching a 2am Space Shuttle launch 115 miles away on the other side of Florida light up the night sky after an impromptu midnight putting contest with my golfing partners in one of the suites to pass the time.

TPC of Tampa Bay is another must-play in the area, but with plenty of rough and water you'll need to hit long off the back tees to reach safety.

St Petersburg/Clearwater—actually two cities but more like conjoined twins—is the most popular destination on the Gulf Coast. Apart from its 35 miles of wide, soft-sand beaches





TPC at Tampa Bay: Hit the target or ruin your card

DICK DURANCE/PGA TOUR/WIREIMAGE.COM



Raptor Bay is a Ray Floyd design with no formal bunkers or rough

RAPTOR BAY GOLF CLUB

and numerous hotels it has nearly 50 golf courses.

The Westin Innisbrook Resort, at Palm Harbor, is one of the area's three major golf resorts. Its four 18-hole courses include the magnificent tree-lined Copperhead, host to the Chrysler Championship PGA Tour event with a purse of \$4.8 million. The Island Course has hosted many major amateur championships and also ranks among Florida's best. The resort recently renovated its Troon Golf Institute, adding an indoor teaching facility.

If you want golf in historic settings, both the Renaissance Vinoy and Belleview Biltmore resorts are on America's National Register of Historic Places and have courses attached. The Vinoy course, by Ron Garl, opened in the 1990s while the veteran

Biltmore – which dates back to 1897 – has a Donald Ross course which first welcomed golfers in 1925. It underwent a \$2 million renovation in 2002.

Bardmoor Golf Club, in Largo, hosted Chrysler Championship forerunner, the JC Penney Classic and has a Tom Fazio practice facility.

Bradenton and Sarasota are also rich in golf, the courses including Arnold Palmer's Legacy with elevated multiple tees, water and sand framing most holes but wide fairways. Island resorts include Longboat Key Club, on Longboat Key, with two courses and South Seas Plantation on Captiva Island.

Stoneybrook, between Fort Myers and Naples, is acclaimed as one of the best public courses in South West Florida and winds around large preserve areas and lakes ⇒

WHERE TO PLAY

TPC at Tampa Bay

6,898 yards, par 71

\$79-\$153

Contact: 00-1-813-949-0091

tpc.com

Tough target golf with water on 14 holes.

Saddlebrook Resort

Palmer Course: 6,469 yards, par 71,

\$80-\$180

Saddlebrook Course: 6,564 yards, par

70, \$70-\$180

Contact: 00-1-813-973-1111

saddlebrook.com

Fun but challenging resort golf among the cypress hummocks

The Westin Innisbrook Golf Resort

Copperhead Course: 7,295 yards, par 71,

\$100-\$170

Highland North Course: 6,515 yards, par

70, \$60-\$90

Highland South Course: 6,768 yards, par

71, \$60-\$90

Island Course: 7,063 yards, par 72, \$80-

\$140

Contact: 00-1-727-942-5220

westin-innisbrook.com

Copperhead's snaking 14th is just one of the holes ready to bite you

Longboat Key Club & Resort

Islandside course: 6,792 yards, par 72,

\$78-\$140

Harbourside: 3 nines from 6,709-6,812

yards, par 72, \$78-\$140

Contact: 00-1-941-387-1630

longboatkeyclub.com

Water is never far on these island tracks

Legacy Golf Club

7,067 yards, par 72

\$30-\$109

Contact: 00-1-941-907-7067

legacygolfclub.com

Wide fairways help to ease the sand and water torture

Raptor Bay Golf Club

6,702 yards, par 71

\$60-\$135

Contact: 00-1-239-390-4610

wcigolf.com

Native vegetation and lakes will prey on every shot

Stoneybrook Golf Club

7,353 yards, par 72

From \$34

Contact: 00-1-239-948-3933

stoneybrookgolfm.com

One of the region's longest and most testing courses

Tiburon

Black Course: 7,005 yards, par 72

Gold Course: 7,288 yards, par 72

\$60-\$225

Contact: 00-1-239-593-2000

ritzcarlton.com

Sod's law if you find the bunkers on this Greg Norman duo



with imposing waste bunkers and mounds. It's also one of the region's longest, at 7,353 yards, but tees range down to 3,211 yards for junior beginners.

Ritzzy Naples and Marco Island, in the far south-west, boast over 50 courses in an area larger than the states of Delaware and Rhode Island combined. Alongside the stylish Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, the 36-hole Tiburon complex covers 800 acres of a one-time tomato farm.

The Gold Course is the sterner test of two similar courses which emulate European links with some interesting variations on the theme. There is no rough anywhere on the course. Fairways are bordered instead by pine straw,

wetland areas and waste bunkers filled with crushed coquina shell. Greenside bunkers are faced with sheer, sod-stacked walls and aprons are hard and fast to encourage bump-and-run approach shots. Nature is also a key element. There are no homes around the courses and it wildlife credentials make it a Certified Audubon Co-operative Sanctuary.

The new 18-hole Raptor Bay course near Naples is another course with strong eco-friendly credentials. Part of the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort and Spa, this Raymond Floyd layout has no formal bunkers or roughs. Instead it uses natural elevation changes, native flora and mature trees to create a set-up requiring control and placement.

Gulf Coast Facts

WHERE IS IT

Florida's Gulf Coast lies on the state's western side, edged by the warm Gulf of Mexico waters. Tampa has direct non-stop flights from London by **British Airways** (ba.com; 0870-850-9-850) and services via Amsterdam from the Northwest/KLM airline partnership (nwa.com; 08705-074074) as well as flights from other US gateways. Fort Myers' Southwest Florida International Airport has opened a new \$438 million terminal and has flights to and from 30 US cities.

Information:

floridasgolfcoast.com, 00-1-866-244-1698; fortmyers-sanibel.com, 01737 644722; floridasbeach.com, 020 8651 4742

KEY ATTRACTIONS

- **Tarpon Springs**, originally settled by Greek sponge divers, has a Mediterranean feel with Greek restaurants, sponge docks and ethnic festivals.
- Tampa's historic Latin Quarter, **Ybor City**, was once known as the "cigar capital of the world" and features Spanish and Cuban-flavoured architecture, atmosphere and nightlife.
- Culture vultures can visit the **Salvador Dali Museum** in St Petersburg, the Baroque art collection at Sarasota's Ringling Art Museum and Naples Museum of Art. Tampa's Museum of Science and Industry and Florida Aquarium are other top regional facilities.
- The winter homes of inventor **Thomas Edison** and auto pioneer **Henry Ford** near Fort Myers are open for tours by the public.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

- Busch Gardens theme park in Tampa Bay offers lots of thrills, splashes and wildlife.
- **The beaches** of Clearwater, St Pete Beach and Fort Myers have lots of family activities while Captiva and Sanibel islands are among the best places in the US for shell-collecting.
- **Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge**, set up to protect manatees, is the only place in the US where swimming, snorkelling and diving is allowed with the endangered mammals.
- Natural attractions the whole family will enjoy include **Homosassa Springs Wildlife** state park, also for its manatees, Sanibel Island's JN Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, and the Everglades and Big Cypress National Preserve near Naples and Marco Island.

FLORIDA'S GULF COAST FACTS

- The world's first **scheduled passenger airline** flew from St Petersburg to Tampa in 1914.
- **Fort De Soto Park** was named America's best beach in 2005 in the annual survey by marine expert Stephen Leatherman, otherwise known as Dr Beach. The region's Caladesi Island also made the top 10 list.
- **St Petersburg/Clearwater** once featured in the Guinness Book of Records for having the most consecutive days of sunshine, with a stretch lasting 768 days.
- **Two forts** built during the Spanish-American War guard the entrance to Tampa Bay, but neither ever fired a shot in anger.



Innisbrook, one of the very best courses in Florida

WESTIN INNISBROOK GOLF RESORT

North West Florida

Florida's Panhandle – the north-western strip which stretches along the top of the Gulf of Mexico to Alabama – is known for the beauty of its white-sand beaches. The region is less developed for tourism than other parts of Florida, but it has many first-rate golf courses. **Regatta Bay**, set among nature preserves in Destin, is ranked among Florida's best.

Bluewater Bay, near Niceville, has two courses by Tom Fazio and Jerry Pate on a 2,500-acre tract of land.

The first 18 holes were designed together in 1981, Fazio adding another nine of his own in 1986 and Pate producing the final nine in 1993.

Scottish links-style golf in a Florida coast setting is offered at **Moors Golf and Lodging at Milton**, near Pensacola. The theme is taken further in its lodge, where each room is styled after a course and winner from Britain's Open Championship. Moors hosts the annual Blue Angels Classic Champions Tour event, the

US Navy's world-famous Blue Angels aerobatic team being based at Pensacola.

The Beaches of South Walton offers 207 holes of golf, among them the area's newest course and Florida's longest – 7,600-yard **Windswept Dunes Golf Club** in Freeport. Others in the area include Tom Fazio's **Camp Creek** near Watercolor and **Raven and Burnt Pine** clubs by Robert Trent Jones Jr and brother Rees Jones respectively, in Sandestin. Golf is never far away.