HOT LIST

Secret island getaways, seamp sanctuaries, sunken gardens, dice bars, oyster shacks, and other haunts that embody a not-quite-bygone Florida

Bonnet House
FORT LAUDERDALE
A block from the seaside strip's bars and tacky T-shirt shops lies a hidden gem that comes with a bittersweet love story. Chicago lawyer Hugh Birch gave his daughter Helen, this thirty-five-acre estate, with its tropical gardens and eclectic design, for her wedding to the artist Frederic Clay Bartlett in 1919. She died just six years later, and Bartlett later married Evelyn Fortune Lilly, herself a talented painter. Their whimsical artwork and decor, much of it honoring the couple's beloved monkeys, remain perfectly preserved.

Cabbage Key Inn and Restaurant
PIKELAND
The burger at the Cabbage Key Inn and Restaurant is, like thirteen other places, rumored to have inspired Jimmy Buffet "Cheeseburger in Paradise." Back in the seventies, Buffett drifted to the quiet key and its eponymous establishment by seaplane. Visitors today arrive by boat and can channel the icon with a cold one at the dollar-bill-covered bar, a stay at the inn or one of its surrounding cottages, and of course, a cheesburg er (though don't expect "French fried potatoes"—the sides on offer are coleslaw and potato salad).

Cap's Place Island Restaurant
LIGHTHOUSE POINT
Opened in 1929 by Eugene Theodore "Cap" Knight, a steamship captain who ran bootleg whiskey in burlap bags from the Bahamas, this seafood dive on the In tracoastal has impeccable Old Florida cred. Behind the bar of the onetime speakeasy and gambling den hangs a wooden figurehead from the bow of a Spanish galleon. The time-warp menu plays the old standards: linguine with clams, crab cakes, hearts of palm salad.

Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art
WINTER PARK
The artist Louis Comfort Tiffany could coax color and texture from glass, and each December, Winter Park displays nine of his towering stained-glass windows in the central garden downtown. Steps away, the Morse Museum collects the world's most complete trove of
his work, including a chapel that surrounds visitors in mosaics and majestic filtered light. Meditative galleries share vignettes of Tiffany's ceaseless creativity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—jewelry, experiments in pottery, and the sketches he drafted before transforming sand into relics.

The Colony Hotel
PALM BEACH
Since 1947, the Colony has set the standard for laid-back Palm Beach cool with its dreamy pastels and über-attentive service. For a day in the sun, take a ride on the hotel's Beach Buggy, a custom-made golf cart with seats decked out in the same fun Seagrape print as its paddleboards. Lounge oceanside on and beneath powder-pink chairs and umbrellas, and if you get hungry, staff will deliver a picnic in a matching cooler.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary
NAPLES
The thirteen thousand acres of undisturbed wilderness in the heart of the Corkscrew watershed provide sanctuary for many of the state's endangered species, including Florida panthers and roseate spoonbills. Take it all in from the park’s boardwalk, a two-mile trail that ends at the largest old-growth bald cypress forest on the continent.

Cummer Museum of Art
JACKSONVILLE
In September 2017, the Cummer Museum's three formal gardens beside the St. Johns River got a visit from an invited guest: Hurricane Irma. The storm swapped the lower tier in four feet of brackish water, uprooted plants, and wiped out electrical, lighting, and irrigation systems. Last June, after a $1.3 million restoration, the revived gardens reopened, their lawns once more green, their reflecting pools once again glassy and pristine: the calm after the storm.

Florida Southern College
LAKELAND
Thirteen-year Frank Lloyd Wright's innovative creations grace the west side of this campus in Lakeland, making it the largest single-site collection of the architect's visionary designs. The impressive structures, some built by Depression-era and postwar students working their way through college, include a chapel that appears to hover above the ground, a first-of-its-kind water dome, a planetarium, and more than a mile of geometric esplanades.

Hole in the Wall Seafood Market and Raw Bar
APALACHICOLA
The shucker wears a ponytail and a camo Ace Hardware ball cap, and if it’s not too busy, he’ll show you a pair of oyster tongs, a miniature replica of the ones they still use in the beds just offshore. Bottles of beer emerge from an ancient green icebox. The waiters are as salty-sweet as the half-shell beauties she delivers by the trayful. (Overheard when the owner lingers to chat up customers instead of giving her a hand: “His jawbone’s got to be sore in the morning.”) Come for the oysters, stay for the unscripted dinner theater.

Honeymoon and Caladesi Islands
WEST OF GURNEE
In 1940, lucky newlyweds won a Life magazine contest to honeymoon in thatched bungalow on a secluded Gulf Coast island, the brainchild of a clever real estate developer who then owned the land. Those lodgings are long gone, but you can still dig your toes into the sand at what is now Honeymoon Island State Park. Bring your pup for a frolic on the pet beach, or for a deeper wilderness experience, catch the ferry to Caladesi Island State Park’s sugar-sand beaches to lounge, or rent a kayak to cruise among the mangroves and seagrass.
Key West's Bookish Side
When tickets go live for January’s Key West Literary Seminar, they typically sell out in minutes. That’s partly because the event features best-selling authors, but also because Key West is as alluring to book lovers as it is to party hoppers. That literary draw goes beyond the always-packed Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum: Papa’s in-the-know fans also pop into his apartment building at 214 Simonton Street, where he wrote A Farewell to Arms. (And they’re sure to toast him with a daiquiri at his former haunt Sloppy Joe’s.) Over at Books & Books, visitors who grew up on Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret delight to discover Judy Blume herself ringing up customers. A couple blocks away, at the Chart Room bar, the novelist Thomas McGuane came to hear an up-and-coming musician named Jimmy Buffett play in the 1970s—and met Buffet’s sister Laurie, now McGuane’s wife. Both McGuane and Buffett have been spotted in the Monroe County Public Library, where archivists will retrieve Tennessee Williams’s faded library card—if you know to ask.

Lorelei Restaurant and Cabana Bar
ISLAMORADA
At mile marker 82 in the Keys, by the beckoning roadside mermaid, you’ll find one of the nation’s premier aprés-fish watering holes. Famous guides, including Rick Royoff and Tim Klein, ferry clients directly to the congenial decks of the tiki bar (a former fish market), where, over cold beer, conch chowder, and live music, they ponder tarpon battles won and lost while watching the sun set lazily over the blue-green water of Florida Bay.

Mai-Kai
FORT LAUDERDALE
Tiki torches light paths to man-made waterfalls and lush gardens, but at Mai-Kai, the classic kitsch of hula dancers and fire spinners takes center stage at the nation’s longest-running Polynesian dinner show. Drink in the island vibe—waitresses wearing floral bikinis and sarongs serve up punches in ceramic heads—with a splash of prestige. A celebrity favorite in the sixties and seventies, Mai-Kai now resides on the National Register of Historic Places.

NEAT
ALY'S BEACH
There will always be a place on the panhandle for mule-tosses and two-dollar Budweisers. But even on the Redneck Riviera there comes a time to put on a clean shirt and slpugle on a round or two of “thoughtfully curated,” Instagrammable cocktails. Should the mood strike, NEAT’s sleek tasting room will be ready, amid Aly's Beach's whitewashed villas and art-directed plunge pools. Its rotating menu features cameos by small-batch gins, Japanese whiskies, and such mimo logical novelties as turmeric and activated charcoal.

Ole Florida Fly Shop
BOCA RATON
Tucked into a nondescript shopping center a few blocks from the Atlantic, Ole Florida Fly Shop serves as the brick-and-mortar mother ship to massive onlinesotre. That enables the shop to carry an enormous selection for walk-in customers. Envision forests of fly rods, walls of fly-tying materials, and concierge-level service that frequently turns a quick stop for a fly or two into an hours-long visit.

Renninger’s
MOUNT DORA
Carry small bills to barter, and scout blue and white garden urns and seasoned Wagner and Griswold castron skillets at Renninger’s, the 117-acre flea market and antiques utopia north of Orlando on U.S. 441. Ramble downhill through the outdoor vendors to the air-conditioned heirloom wonderland and find longtime vendor Peggy’s booth for age-softened monogrammed linens and the same tiny orange juice glasses your mom had when you were a kid.

Rod & Gun Club
EVERGLADES CITY
Travel to South Florida’s yesteryear at this venerable inn and restaurant. The sprawling complex sits on five waterfront acres at the gateway to the famed Ten Thousand Islands of the Everglades, and has hosted luminaries that include Hemingway and five former presidents. Guests overnight in updated cottages on the grounds, but the original lobby and dining room, lined with square miles of pecan cypress paneling and a Noah’s ark of mounted fish and game, still charm.

Sarasota Art Museum
SARASOTA
For a town with a population of less than sixty thousand, Sarasota is surprisingly fertile ground for the arts, with symphony, opera, and ballet productions and a mother lode of midcentury design. “People make pilgrimages from all over the world to see Sarasota architecture,” says Anne-Marie Russell, executive director of a new institution that promises to further raise the bar.

WHAT DOES YOUR PERFECT DAY IN FLORIDA LOOK LIKE?
"Fried grouper sandwich with slaw on a hot buttered potato roll. Just-harvested grouper tastes like the ocean—crispy fried with just a little flour, on a warm, delicately sweet bun with mayo, lots of lime juice in the slaw, and if you’re lucky, spiced with chili.”

MICHICHEL BERNSTEIN
CHEF
the Gulf Coast’s arts profile: the Sarasota Art Museum at Ringling College of Art and Design, opening in December. Rotating exhibitions occupy a campus of three buildings, two of them historic schoolhouses that are themselves architectural landmarks.

Stan’s Idle Hour

GOODLAND

For one weekend in January, this beach town bursts to life as the dive bar Stan’s Idle Hour hosts the Mullet Festival (this year January 24 to 26). Created in 1985 by the late bar owner and local legend Stan Cober, the event centers on a cary dance contest with elaborate feathered costumes and outlandish choreography, after which one lucky lady is crowned with the coveted title Buzzard Lope Queen. With fresh seafood, live music, and the memory of Cober himself looming large, the festival remains a phenomenon—one that draws as many as five thousand revelers.

Sundy House

DELRAY BEACH

You might think of the Sundy House as a cure for the common hotel: twelve art-filled guest rooms behind a 1902 Queen Anne showpiece with a wraparound porch and an airy dining room that serves brunches of national renown. The showstopper, though, is the Tara Garden, a riot of tropical greenery with thousands of plants—coconut palms, ferns, bananas, elephant ears, ginglers, bamboo, and plumeria—framing a freshwater swimming pond landscaped to suggest a Yucatan cenote, complete with limestone boulders and waterfalls to explore during your afternoon dip.

Sunken Gardens

ST. PETERSBURG

Decades before Mickey Mouse arrived, tourists drove instead to the west coast to visit Sunken Gardens, one of Florida’s first roadside attractions. A century later, the destination has lost none of its vintage charm in the midst of cosmopolitan St. Petersburg—an oasis chock-full of meandering paths, cultivated lawns, spreading canopies, secret pools and waterfalls, rare flowers, and, of course, its famous pink flamingos.

Tarpon Springs

NORTHWEST OF TAMPA

This city where the Anclote River meets the Gulf of Mexico opens a window to old-world Greece. Divers from the old country came to Tarpon Springs in the early 1900s to harvest sea sponges, and today the Sponge Capital of the World is home to the U.S.’s largest Greek American population per capita (and the biggest Epiphany celebration in the Western Hemisphere). At the docks, catch the aroma of smoked, savory octopus drifting from a nearby restaurant, and overhear locals speaking in their native tongue. If you’re lucky, you may even spot a dive boat returning, piled with a sponge haul.

Three Sisters Springs

CRYSTAL RIVER

When temperatures dip in the winter, manatees flock like snowbirds to Three Sisters Springs on the Gulf Coast, where the clear-as-glass water stays about seventy-three degrees year-round. Don a mask and snorkel to swim alongside the gentle giants mid-November through March, or grab a paddle for kayaking, stand-up paddling, or canoeing. A boardwalk surrounds the springs for an overhead perspective.

Vizcaya Museum and Gardens

MIAMI

Like a scene out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, Vizcaya—once the estate of the millionaire James Deering—surprises with its sculpture-lined driveway, lavish plantings, and juxtaposition of century-old infrastructure, ornate gold accents, and sparkling cerulean water. Pause in the glass skylight courtyard, which lends an ethereal feel to a space that might have played host to Gatsby-esque parties bathed in moonlight not so long ago.

—Susan B. Barnes, Monte Burke, Allison Enrekin, Mike Grudowski, Andrea Guthmann, Satie Lewis Longoria, GJ Lotz, T. Edward Nickens, Stephen Post, Allison Ramines, Katherine Rockleigher, Caroline Sanders, and Abigail Tierney

Where do you feel most at home in Florida?

"In my actual home, which I share with my family and roughly 380 lizards."

DAVE BARRY, HUMORIST

What's your favorite thing to eat in Florida?

"Awfully hard to choose between lobster and stone crabs for breakfast. Aw hell, I'll just fry up some snapper and eggs."

FLIP PALLOT, SPORTSMAN