



There's so much to soak in at Florida's Clearwater Beach

Moira McCarthy Thursday, February 11, 2016



Credit: Unknown

It doesn't take long to get the feeling that you've arrived — and escaped — when you get to [Clearwater Beach, Fla.](#) In fact, the sands of the Gulf Coast's beaches are so white and the water so clear, you can easily spot it from the sky as you swoop in on an easy, 2 1/2-hour flight from Boston.

From the quick car ride out to the Clearwater Beach area that takes you on a bridge over breathtaking Tampa Bay and to the Gulf of Mexico, to the many things to do (for the active and the not so), Clearwater Beach is ready for guests.

They'll even throw a late-day party the day you arrive — promise. That's because the area's popular Sunset at Pier 60 Festival takes place every day beginning two hours before sunset and stretching until two hours after. It's street performers, arts and crafts, food and more. That daily celebration makes every visit start out grand.

It all starts, of course, with the beaches of Clearwater, known for their powdery white sand. In fact, the list of accolades the beaches have won could stretch for miles, just as the beaches do: USA Today's best beach in Florida; Travel Channel's best family beach and top beach for activities. It's been named a top family beach, top singles beach and top fun beach. That's right — a stretch of beautiful beach with something for

everyone.

Top that off with being safe and clean. Unlike many other beaches, Clearwater Beach has an active and visible lifeguard squad. It is also a Blue Wave beach, a nationally respected designation that means the beaches are not only clean and sustainable, but good for the environment and community around them.

While simply reclining and soaking in the scene and dipping in the warm Gulf might be enough, there's plenty along the beach to keep you busy. The main marina there is one of the most varied around, with pirate ship rides, catamaran rides, sailing, dining cruises, fishing charters, jet skiing, parasailing and more. You can hire a captain or

traces, fishing charters, jet skiing, parasailing and more. You can hire a captain or captain your own craft, with plenty to choose from.

On land, there are Segways and fat-tire bikes to rent, and close by there are paddle boards, windsurfing (and lessons of course), snorkeling and even scuba diving.

Staying there

The award-winning Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach is a great example of a larger, inclusive resort. It features 250 guest suites that blend tropical elegance with a carefree experience. Breathtaking Gulf views provide the backdrop for deluxe one- and two-bedroom suites, each one with fully equipped kitchens and balconies or rooftop terraces. Guests can enjoy various upscale amenities, such as the eighth-floor infinity pool deck with 20 air-conditioned poolside cabanas and a children's pool area, a spa pool area on the 16th floor and multiple dining options, including the resort's signature seafood grill Shor. Other amenities include the eco-friendly Sandava Spa and Camp Hyatt Kids Club, along with 12,000 square feet of indoor and 20,000 square feet of outdoor function space for beachside events. The resort serves as the centerpiece of the city's new Beach Walk, providing easy access to a wealth of world-class restaurants, retailers and attractions. (clearwaterbeach.hyatt.com/en/hotel/home.html)

For personalized service and a relaxing feel, guests can choose the DoubleTree Beach Resort by Hilton Hotel Tampa Bay — North Redington. Centrally located on the powdery sands between St. Petersburg and Clearwater beaches, this Gulf-front hotel provides easy access to all the area has to offer. Bask in the sunshine on the beach, try a range of water sports or swim in the heated outdoor pool. Sample fresh seafood at Mangos Restaurant or sip a frozen tropical drink on the beach while enjoying live entertainment at the Tiki Bar. A fabulous wedding spot and also great for business, the DoubleTree Beach Resort has a fully equipped business center, meeting space for up to 150 guests, the latest A/V equipment and free basic WiFi. (doubletreebeachresort.com)

Located on the Gulf of Mexico, the Holiday Inn Harborside in Clearwater provides luxurious Mediterranean-styled accommodations and facilities in a stunning location. The contrast of stucco buildings with terra-cotta-tile roofs, crystal blue pools with lush tropical landscapes, and Gulf waters touching white beaches is breathtaking. Just 500 feet from the water and a short stroll to Pier 60, it's in the center of all the splendor that is Clearwater Beach. (www.clearwaterbeachhi.com)

Owned by the same family since 1977, Shephard's Beach Resort, at the south end of the beach, is carved into a nook looking out on the sand and beautiful Gulf. Four decades of family focus brings this resort a special touch, including a multimillion-dollar upgrade with a new six-story tower that debuted in 2014. With multiple dining choices, a bevy of water sports and plenty of room to spread out, it is a destination within this destination. (www.shephards.com)

For more of a home-away-from-home feel, guests can turn with confidence to Florida Lifestyle Vacation Rentals. These vacation rentals are ideal for families that need more space and offer amenities such as a full kitchen, multiple bedrooms and laundry facilities. Guests return for visits over and over again. These properties have it all; top-rated beaches, culture, adventure, attractions and, most of all, sunshine. (www.ourcondo.com)

And the newest lodging choice along the beach is the Opal Sands. Opening in just a few weeks, the luxurious Opal Sands Resort will be located on the white sand beaches of Clearwater Beach, and close to restaurants, shopping and the popular Clearwater Beach Walk.

All 230 elegantly appointed guest rooms and suites will boast large, private balconies with magnificent, panoramic floor-to-ceiling views of the Gulf of Mexico.

Guests will be able to enjoy many amenities, such as relaxing in the Jacuzzi, soaking up the sun at the zero-entry outdoor pool, spending a day of pampering at the full-service spa or keeping up with their daily workouts in the large fitness center. From upscale waterfront dining at Sea-Guini to tropical cocktails by the pool, the choices are endless at Opal Sands Resort. (www.opalsands.com)

Out and about

As tempting as it will be to just stick close to your lodging, there's plenty to do and see. Great go-to spots for information include the Clearwater Regional Chamber of Commerce, the St. Petersburg/Clearwater Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the city of Clearwater.

But to get you started, some must go-to spots include:

The Clearwater Aquarium. No average aquarium, this was the spot for the films

"Dolphin's Tale" and "Dolphin's Tale II," based on real-life stories of the saving of Winter the Dolphin and then Hope the Dolphin, now aquatic celebrities. The aquarium is a working center for treating, protecting and saving aquatic wildlife, and even has its own monthly webisode series, called "Rescue, Clearwater," to get you excited about it before you arrive. (www.seewinter.com)

The Dolphin Trail. Artists created about 150 colorful dolphin sculptures for the Republican National Convention in 2012, which are now located along the waterfront and throughout the city. An interactive map is available since the dolphins move around, and it's a fun way to explore the city and area. (www.visitspeterclearwater.com/attractions/clear-water-dolphins-trail/463)

For free fun, every Friday and Saturday night there is a family-friendly outdoor movie along the waterfront. Folks bring beach chairs, blankets and popcorn and take in a film projected on a giant inflatable screen. Under the stars and with the gentle sound of waves in the background, it's a memorable way to see a movie.

The last Friday of each month Clearwater celebrates with "Blast Fridays," an outdoor evening of fun in downtown Clearwater that includes music, food, entertainment and great shopping. It's a lively and fun scene.

Also downtown is the Ruth Eckerd Hall and the Capitol Theatre. The theater was an old-time vaudeville spot that has been revived. Both spots attract great music and entertainment.

A key event is the annual Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival. This fest brings in top sand sculptors and lets them create masterpieces that the public can watch come to life. There are VIP experiences with close-up learning from the artists, lessons on sand sculpting for all, the "world's largest sandbox" for kids to frolic in, special dinners at sand tables, fireworks and more. Visitors even get to vote on their favorite creation, and can get a special hard-cover book of the event that includes a photo of themselves. The event draws thousands and is a festive setting, taking place this year from April 15-24. (www.sugarsandfestival.com)

An interesting addition is what goes on at the University of South Florida. This year, for instance, on April 15 (when the Sugar Sand Festival is happening), the university will celebrate its 50-year anniversary with a combined chocolate tasting and poetry reading. This evening of wine, chocolate and poetry takes place in the University of South Florida St. Petersburg's newly renovated Harbor Hall. Poets include leading voices of the Tampa Bay poetry and spoken word scene, with St. Pete poet laureate Helen Wallace and USF alum Gloria Munoz. Community poets will be joined by USFSP alumni Jeffrey Skatzka and David Durney, and English instructor Liz Prisley.

And then there is the dining, which is all about the seafood. More to the point: the grouper and the stone crab. Both delicacies are so beloved, they have festivals created around them. Dining varies from casual and outside to formal and upscale.

Clearwater is extremely walkable, you can get to most any event, restaurant or site in a snap. And to help you, there is the county trolley and the "Jolly Trolley," easily found throughout.

And you can save some money with the CityPASS. Discover the Tampa Bay area's best attractions with a pass that saves 52 percent off regular combined admission to Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, the area's ultimate family adventure, and four other attractions, including the Clearwater Marine Aquarium. Cost: \$99 for adults (value \$204.80); \$89 for kids 3-9. Purchase online at CityPASS.com or at the participating attractions: Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, the Florida Aquarium, Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, Clearwater Marine Aquarium, Museum of Science & Industry (MOSI) or the Chihuly Collection presented by the Morean Arts Center.

All that action, all that great food and all those choices, and its all centered around that perfect white sandy beach.

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