



“Sea” the Beauty of the Gulf Coast



FUN IN THE SUN

WRITTEN BY
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Recognized around the world for the irresistible combination of sun, sand and surf, our area’s beaches invite visitors and residents alike to venture out into the Gulf of Mexico and explore that aquatic environment. When journeying further inland, some people may be pleasantly surprised to discover that the entire state of Florida is, in fact, a water lover’s paradise, something that has long been part of its unique charm. During the 1920s, G.P. Evans penned the acrostic poem “Florida,” extolling several virtues of the Sunshine State, such as its “lakes, profuse and grand,” “islands that are legion,” and “deep expansive bays,” among the notable qualities.

Nearly 100 years later, the same continues to hold true: according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s report, “Geography: State Area Measurements for 2010,” 18.5% of Florida is comprised of inland and coastal waters. The Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico and the Straits of Florida surrounding the state result in a coastline that stretches 1,350 miles, second only to Alaska, as measured by the Congressional Research Service. Additionally, the University of Florida IFAS reports that the state contains over 2.5 million acres of freshwater sources, including nearly 8,000 lakes, about 1,700 rivers and streams, over 600 springs, thousands of miles of canals, and also a number of protected wetland areas. Given the abundance of these natural features, it’s clear to see why there are so many ways to get out and see the Gulf Coast by water!

Few experiences match the exhilaration of picking up a paddle or an oar, and determining your own course through a waterway. By manning a watercraft such as a canoe, kayak, or Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP), you can take an active approach to your exploration. Although people may be familiar with the traditional wood-and-canvas canoe, modern versions are often constructed of aluminum, molded plastic or polycarbonate, with fiberglass being a popular material used to manufacture these vessels. Today, to facilitate storage and towing, foldable canoes, constructed of PVC over an aluminum frame, are available. In our area, the three most common types of recreational kayaks are the sea, sit-on-top and surf varieties. Also known as a touring kayak,



Photo by Eddie McHugh

different sea models are available, accommodating from one to three paddlers. As the name implies, a sit-on-top craft, which comes in 1- to 4-paddler configurations, provides seating that is just above the water level. To take advantage of the waves, some enthusiasts will hit the water in a surf kayak, which move at high speeds while maneuvering dynamically through the Gulf.

In addition to the exercise benefits that canoeing and kayaking offer, these vessels can open the doors for exploring some unique places in our region. Many of the state parks contain protected areas such as estuarine habitats, in which motorized boats are prohibited, but oar- and paddle-powered boats are welcome. To learn more about these fragile environments, consider going on a ranger-led canoe tour, such as the regularly scheduled guided night paddles that are offered at Oscar Scherer State Park.

A trend that has taken off over the last 10 years, the SUP is becoming a popular alternative to canoes, kayaks and even surfboards, one that delivers a nice, low-impact workout. While an SUP is related to the paddleboard, they are used very differently. To paddleboard, participants kneel on a board and move through the water, using their arms in a swimming motion to propel them forward; however, as the name implies, stand-up paddleboarding typically involves getting into an upright position on the craft and using a long oar to move through the water, which can be a wonderful form of exercise. For beginners, instead of standing, instructors recommend that they start out by kneeling on the SUP, as this stance best helps them to learn how to keep the board balanced while they paddle. Novices with knee-related issues can sit during this stage of the process.



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Experience the benefits of exercise without the paddle by using a skimboard or water bike. If you have some calories to burn, consider catching a wave and testing your skill at skimboarding since, on average, it can help to eliminate a whopping 395 calories per hour! This activity has become tremendously popular in Florida, since the wave action tends to be calmer and less conducive to surfing. Go to one of the beaches on the Gulf, and you are sure to see people engaged in this pastime, utilizing a wave-riding skimboard, which is a smaller variation of the surfboard that is made of high-density, light-weight foam. On first glance, it may seem as though skimboarders are coasting across the sand; however, while they may start at the shore, they continue by gliding out into the water, banking off an incoming wave, and riding all the way back to the beach.

Try a fun spin on a familiar activity with the water bike. Not only will you get some great exercise for your lower body, but the bike's high elevation above the surface will also enable you to see the sights from a wonderful perspective with views miles out across the water. Since being active can be more fun when it is a shared endeavor, consider opting for a two-seater paddle boat, also known in some countries as a *pedalo*. By putting the side-by-side foot pedals into motion with your friend, you can embark on an intense workout or a relaxing excursion. If you want to go it alone, however, just look for a paddle boat with three pedals, as this type can be controlled from a centrally seated position.

Perhaps you prefer the romance of feeling the sea breeze blow through your hair and watching the waves roll off your boat as you explore the Gulf. No matter whether you lean toward a vessel that is powered by the wind, motor or a combination of these, finding a boat that fits your needs is easy. While experts say that the most common sailboat in use today is a sloop, which has two sails and one mast, other varieties include the



cutter, ketch and yawl, all styles similar to the sloop; the cat, which typically has a single mast and sail; the multi-masted schooner; and even the small dinghy.

If you are interested in something that sprints across the sea, consider a motorboat. Runabouts are smaller motorized vessels that can be used for recreational activities like fishing, racing, and water skiing or as a ship-to-shore transport for a larger boat. Cabin cruisers offer the comfort of having below-deck accommodations for crew and/or passengers. To enjoy more luxurious space, above and below deck, a yacht has a length longer than 33 feet; a superyacht's length is greater than 79 feet; and a megayacht extends to over 164 feet long.

Prefer a little more zip for your trip? You may want to experience a power or speedboat. Designed with a high power-to-weight ratio, powerboats quickly move through the water, yet retain excellent handling, which explains why they are often associated with sports such as wakeboarding and waterskiing. More popularly known as rumrunners or cigarette boats for their history of use in smuggling operations, go-fast boats can achieve extremely high speeds.

A multi-hulled water vehicle, catamarans can range from small boats that resemble outrigger canoes and double-hulled sailboats

like the popular Hobie Cat, to larger ferry boats and the 100-foot-long yacht style known as the super catamaran. Personal watercrafts (PWCs), such as a jet ski, WaveRunner® or Sea-Doo, can be a fun way to see the watery sights. With motorized vessels such as larger boats and PWCs, be mindful that Sarasota County advises that, "It is recommended that no person operate any watercraft in excess of idle speed within 300 feet of any land fronting the Gulf of Mexico in Sarasota County."

If you are an experienced boater, the options are wide open for you, even if you don't currently own a vessel. You may enjoy renting a boat for the day, loading up your crew and supplies, and heading out to sea. If you prefer being able to coast on the water more frequently, you may want to consider joining a boat club since, through this type of membership, you can choose how, where and when you set sail without responsibilities such as maintenance and hauling. For some enthusiasts, though, nothing matches the pride they feel in taking the wheel of their own ship and setting their own course for adventure.

New to sailing? By chartering a boat, a skilled captain will lead your expedition, leaving you and anyone in your party free to enjoy every aspect of the ride. If you would like to learn the "knots and ropes" of the nautical arts, you will be delighted to find that a number of boating courses are available in our area.



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Whether you are a seasoned boater or are just starting out, you may want to look into the many amenities at Venice Yacht Club. While you're on land, you can choose from a variety of attractive dining options and an array of engaging social activities, since non-boaters are welcome as well and, in fact, account for only about half of the membership. Members who enjoy boating can take advantage not only of docks located just inside Venice Inlet, but also reciprocal privileges at numerous yacht clubs throughout the state, plus two local country clubs.



Want to take your exploration a little deeper? Get your feet wet by taking a boat tour, such as the one offered at Historic Spanish Point. Our area offers several fishing charters, headed by experienced boat captains, making it easy to know where to drop a line and haul in a great catch, such as grouper, king mackerel, redfish, or snook. If you are more adventurous, you may want to check out a scuba excursion so you can slip into some underwater gear and "sea" what's going on beneath the waves. When you parasail over the water, you can soar up into the air for a fun ride that allows you to see the Gulf Coast from a whole new perspective.

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By going on one of our area's sunset cruises, which range from 1-1/2 to 2 hours, you can enjoy the play of the last light of the day on the water and maybe catch a glimpse of a dolphin, manatee or even a stingray. For the majority of these excursions, complimentary beverages and light snacks are provided and many will allow you to bring a cooler with your own alcoholic beverages or food. Group and private tours are available, so whether you want to make some new friends or enjoy a quiet time with your loved ones, finding one suited to your needs is easy!

A ferry ride may be a novel experience for some individuals; however, for a number of Gulf Coast residents and visitors, it can be a more usual occurrence. After a four-minute trip on the South Venice Ferry, passengers embark on a private three-mile stretch of pristine beach along Manasota Key. If you enjoy a more secluded beach environment, this could be just for you: the ferry is the sole means for accessing the beach and, although the ferry schedules its drop-offs for every half hour, it only accommodates 18 beachgoers for each excursion. To get started on your adventure, please note that ferry service is not available on Wednesdays and that you will need to purchase a monthly or yearly family pass, which is good for up to 6 people.

Whether you paddle a canoe, go for an invigorating sail or appreciate the display of light across the sky during a sunset cruise, there's no time like the present to get outdoors and explore the waterways of the Suncoast!

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