

FAMILY FUN FOR (almost) FREE

FOR FAMILIES TRAVELING TOGETHER, budgets are undeniably tight. A croissant and coffee within sight of the Arc de Triomphe has broken into double-figure dollars. Hotel room rates in London are beginning to sound like mortgage payments. But here in Florida a family can still have the time of its life for little or no money.

Nobody is too old, too young, or too teenager to get excited about the hot new trend of geocaching — essentially a treasure hunt using a handheld Global Positioning System (GPS), in which the searchers find hidden containers and are rewarded with prizes (visitflorida.com/geocaching). On the North Florida site (www.originalflorida.org) you will find an interactive treasure map that evokes one of America's first treasure hunters, Hernando DeSoto, who explored the region in 1532. The map is marked with a total of 13 geocaches (red Xs) and with strange and wonderful sites to be explored along the way. One example is Troy Springs, whose watery depths contain the remains of the Civil War-era steamboat Madison, scuttled in the spring of 1863.

In South Florida you can even go geocaching by canoe. In Lee County in the **Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel** region (www.FortMyersSanibel.com) there are a dozen caches along the Great Calusa Blueway, the canoe trail that flows gently through 190 miles of aquatic preserves, wildlife refuges, creeks, bayous, rivers and mangrove forests. GPS coordinates are marked along the trail and detailed maps make it easily accessible to visitors seeking anything from weeklong adventures to two-hour excursions. The recently added third phase introduces paddlers to the Caloosahatchee River's creeks and meandering waters.

No family trip to Florida is complete without at least a few hours on the beach and there are few better places to get your feet sandy than right here in this same Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel region. If you want "remote," then head for Cayo Costa, the barrier island that is reachable only by private boat or a public ferry, operated by Tropic Star of Pine Island. Mainly a state park, Cayo Costa has wide, unspoiled white-sand beaches, rustic cabins and tent campsites (www.floridaparks.org/cayocosta). If you want "shell-ing," then the best place to go in the world is

Sanibel Island, with its perfect swathes of white powder scattered with all the shells a treasure-hunter could ask for. To take the experience a step further, enter the whole family in Sanibel's Sea School — a friendly setting to touch, feel and understand the many elements that make up the southwest Florida marine ecosystem.

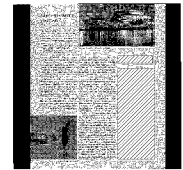
And let's not forget the region's free cultural events. On the first Friday of every month, now through July 2009, you can take the Art Walk in downtown Fort Myers' historic River District. Between 6 and 10 p.m., the walk connects 11 art galleries, many with music and light refreshments. Along the way, look for Friday Night Live, a weekly concert series in the Patio de Leon.

The **Keys** (www.fla-keys.com) have their own distinctive allure and set of affordable attractions. To get up close and personal with the local wildlife, stop in at Robbie's Marina on Islamorada (mile marker 77.5), where huge and hungry tarpon many feet in length line up patiently and often leap into the air to catch herring pieces tossed from the bayside pier. Entry costs \$1 per person and buckets of herring cost \$2. At the Wild Bird Center in Tavernier (at mile marker 93.6) you can meet the dozens of feathered patients at this emergency care center for injured birds.

Down at the end of the road in Key West, the rich natural environment of the Keys is on display at the Eco-Discovery Center (no admission charge) on the Truman Annex waterfront. Highlights include a simulation of the Aquarius underwater research habitat and a high-definition theater screening of a 17-minute video about Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Close by you can hear the interesting and inspiring story of Nancy Forrester who turned a few vacant lots behind her home on Elizabeth Street into a "Secret Garden" filled with orchids, bromeliads, aroids, ferns, palms and bog plants (donation only).

If history appeals more than natural history, roll back the layers of the present on a tour of the Oldest House Museum & Gardens on Duval Street. Bring a picnic and find a place to lay the blanket in the landscaped grounds, followed by a guided tour of the house, built in 1829, filled with the furniture and effects of an early resident, Captain Francis Watlington, who made his living luring ships onto the rocks and then plundering the wreck. Now run by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, the house is open at no charge.

When you're done exploring the town, take a



diversion on your way back to the hotel to enjoy the nightly Sunset Celebration at Mallory Square. Even if you don't see the green flash as the sun dips into the sea, you will be at the right place at the right time, enjoying a cold beer, watching street performers, eating local delicacies and shopping at unique stores.

Hollywood Beach (visithollywoodfl.org), the resort area in central south Florida known for its seven miles of beach, has its own unique attractions for families. The lineup starts with its wonderful 2.5-mile-long oceanfront "Broadwalk," ideal for walking or bicycle riding (rental bicycles range from two-wheelers to surreys built for six). There are accommodations to suit every budget, from luxury resorts to seaside Superior Small Lodging Vacation Apartments (the Web has details and lists deals and packages). The dining options cover the spectrum from casual fine-dining restaurants like Sugar Reef and Argentine-style Las Brisas to simple open-air cafés.

In the evenings, live music at the Hollywood Beach Theater Bandshell takes over where the sun 'n' surf left off. On the first Friday of every month there is the evening Antique Car Show and, every Sunday, the outdoor organic Greenmarket. On the first and third Friday of every month from 5 to 9 PM Anniversary Park in downtown Hollywood hosts Funtastic Friday for Kids with free movies, live music, magicians and balloon artists. And talking of "free," let's not forget the beach itself — long, lovely and well deserving of the "Blue Wave" accolade it has received from the Clean Beaches Council for 10 consecutive years.

Another great activity for the kids is the December 12 Full-Moon Kayak Tour that sets off from Holland Park on the Intracoastal Waterway across from Hollywood Beach. Rent a kayak or two (advance registration is required, ages 4 and up) and paddle down the mangrove trails under the moon and stars. Another option is to rent your own kayak for \$7 at the Anne Kolb Nature Center or, on Saturdays, rent a sailing boat for just \$10 at Sailors Point across from the beach at Hollywood's North Lake.

If not boating, then what about some pro football to keep the family entertained? Hollywood Beach is just 10 miles — or 176 football fields — away from Dolphin Stadium, home to the Miami Dolphins Pro NFL team and the new home to the University of Miami Hurricanes. Upcoming dates

include Dolphins vs. New England Patriots (November 23) and Dolphins vs. San Francisco 49ers (December 14). The 2009 FedEx BCS National Championship, hosted by the Orange Bowl Committee, will take to the field on January 8, 2009.

St. Petersburg/Clearwater's (www.floridaseach.com) credentials as a family-friendly destination are solidly built on attractions like Fort De Soto Park, the 1,100-acre county park known as much for its biking and kayaking opportunities as its seven miles of beaches on five islands (voted the best beach in America in 2008 by *Trip Advisor.com*). Its colorful history is now even more accessible, thanks to free guided walking tours of its Spanish-American War-era fort (Saturdays) and wilderness areas (Saturdays and Sundays).

Another way to get out and about in the area is by renting a bike by the hour, day or week and pedaling off along the Pinellas Trail, the 37-mile long, 15-foot-wide path maintained by the county park system. The trail, which is the largest urban greenway in America, runs from the sponge docks at the north end of Tarpon Springs to downtown St. Petersburg in the south end of the county.

If it's St. Pete's clear, warm waters that have caught your attention, families can hop aboard Captain Memo's Pirate Cruise, which plies the Gulf on short sailings further enriched by music and games. Those that want to be in the water should catch the ferry to Egmont Key, departing at 10:00 AM and 11:00 AM from the Bay Pier at Fort De Soto Park. Distinguished by its 1858 lighthouse, the 440-acre island is a wildlife refuge on land and a marvelous snorkeling spot offshore. Where else can you swim through the ruins of a fort dating back to the Spanish-American War of 1898? On another of the area's protected islands, Weedon, you can kayak through mangrove tunnels and 10,000 years by stopping at the interesting Cultural and Natural History Center.

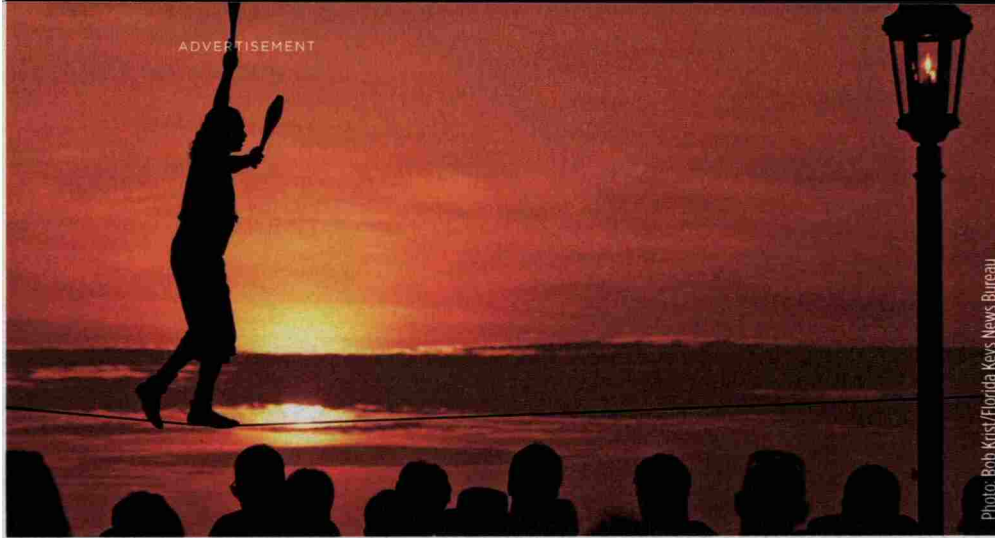
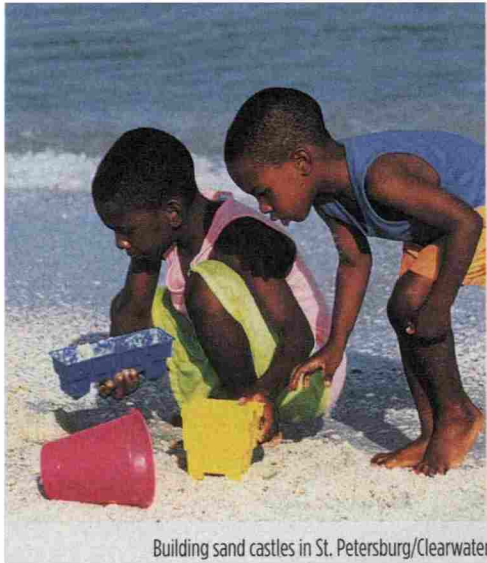


Photo: Bob Krist/Florida Keys News Bureau

Sunset at Key West



Charnow Park in Hollywood Beach



Building sand castles in St. Petersburg/Clearwater