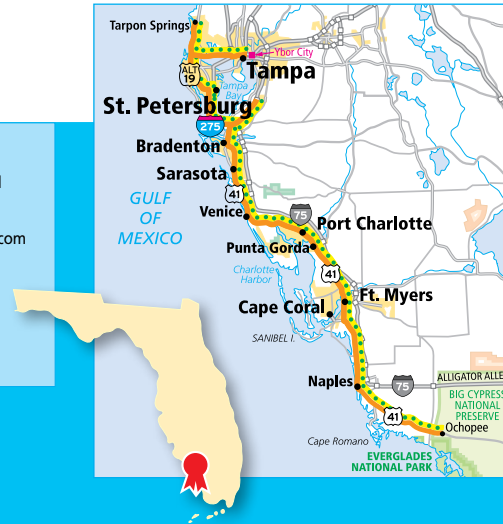


Florida's Cultural West Coast

Tampa to Sarasota to the Everglades

EDITOR'S PICKS

- **Columbia Restaurant**
2117 East 7th Ave.
Tampa, FL
(813) 248-4961
www.columbiarestaurant.com
- **Renaissance Vinoy Resort**
501 5th Ave. NE
St. Petersburg, FL
(727) 894-1000
www.vinoyrennaisancesort.com
- **Big Cypress Gallery**
52388 Tamiami Trail
Ochopee, FL
(239) 695-2428
www.clydebutcher.com
- **Taste of Greece Bakery**
709 Dodecanese Blvd.
Tarpon Springs, FL
(727) 938-0088
- **Ca d'Zan**
5401 Bay Shore Rd.
Sarasota, FL
(941) 358-3180
www.ringling.org



Ybor City State Museum

Florida's squeaky white-sand beaches, the Gulf of Mexico, and abundant sunshine attract vacationers year-round. More than just warm weather entices travelers to the Sunshine State, though. A host of cultural attractions sparkles along the state's west coast.

Tampa's Ybor City once teemed with Cuban immigrants who hand-rolled cigars. The vestiges of this heritage can be explored at Ybor City State Museum, where one of the old hands demonstrates the trade Thursdays through Saturdays. The complex includes a typical worker's "shotgun" house, named for its long, narrow floorplan. **Columbia Restaurant**, just a short walk from the museum, has served hungry diners since 1905. Expanded many times since then, the restaurant now encompasses 18 dining rooms, features flamenco shows Monday-Saturday, and still serves a tasty Spanish bean soup. An insider's tip: Ask for a tour during weekday lunch hours by their ambassador, Joe Roman, who retired in 2002 after 48 years as a waiter here. The tour is free and gives a fascinating background on the restaurant's history. Another Tampa must-see: the Tampa Theater, an opulent former movie palace open for theater, music, and other events throughout the year.

"In Tarpon Springs you can go to Greece without a passport," says George Billirus, the man known as the grandfather of Tarpon Springs and the owner of St. Nicholas Boat Line. "Everything here is real. It's a way of life." Billirus is talking about the sponge docks area of the city, where 125 gift shops, 25 restaurants, and a handful of pastry shops cluster around Dodecanese Boulevard. The large

Taste of Greece Bakery

selection of pastries at range from sweet Greek-style doughnuts called loukoumades to honey-soaked baklava. A smaller shop nearby, National Bakery, has been making koulouraki cookies and other treats since 1925.



Taste of Greece Bakery

St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral, in the town proper, was modeled after St. Sophia's in Istanbul. Warning: the painted domed ceiling causes jaws to drop.

People used to say St. Petersburg was for the newly wed and nearly dead. That poor and fading downtown turned around in recent years, and museums, restaurants, and hotels bring crowds at all hours. One downtown gem, the **Renaissance Vinoy Resort**, was built in the 1920s but nearly fell to the wrecking ball in the 1990s. Squatters had taken over. An infusion of cash revived it. Those in-the-know take the historical tour of this waterfront grand dame to learn about the themes in the original tiles and see an historic enclosed wooden sunbathing solarium, where guests could discreetly enjoy the sun's rays in the nude.



Ca d'Zan

Circus magnate John Ringling and his wife Mable built **Ca d'Zan**, a magnificent Venetian Gothic mansion on Sarasota's bayfront in the 1920s. Donated to the state in 1936, it had fallen into disrepair by the 1990s, with weeds popping up through the marble terrace. A \$15-million restoration from 1996 to 2002 brought back the glory. The best way to see this 32-room, 15-bathroom home aglitter with gilt is via the Private Places tour, when only seven guests at a time tour upstairs. Check out the Sienna marble tub in Mr. Ringling's bathroom, close-up views of the living room's painted pecky cypress ceiling, and circus-themed game room. The Ringling Museum of Art, Circus Museum, Original Asolo Theater, and gardens complete the estate.

Naples has always attracted wealthy retirees and major benefactors. But when Myra Janco Daniels started

cold-calling local residents in the early 1980s, even she was amazed at the money she could raise to start a philharmonic orchestra and art museum. The very doors to the Philharmonic Center Cultural Complex, a magnificent 16-foot-high artistic work of steel and bronze by Albert Paley, reflect the community's opulence. Check out regular, high-quality musical programs in the winter season, the Dale Chihuly three-story chandelier in the art gallery atrium, and the Chihuly glass ceiling in the 15-gallery art museum.

Two driving routes plunge into the "river of grass," the Everglades. One—I-75, also known as Alligator Alley—leads to Fort Lauderdale. The smaller road, US 41, allows for more pullouts to take photos and heads right past the United States' smallest post office in Ochopee.



Ochopee Post Office

You can mail a postcard and snap a picture, then go a little farther west to check out the alligators that warm themselves in the roadside canal at the Oasis Visitor Center in Big Cypress National Preserve. Keep to the road, but don't miss the sign for **Big Cypress Gallery**, a pearl of a place, nestled in an oyster of cypress tress. Clyde Butcher's black-and-white photography of Florida hangs here at his studio and home. Clouds wisp through images as large as 5 feet x 8 feet. Clyde's wife, Nikki, who also is a photographer and artist, explains how Clyde revealed the landscapes of the state, not just birds and alligators. "To live in the middle of a national park, with 11,000 acres of wilderness and have our home and gallery here is a gift from God," she says. A visit may yield Butcher's latest works before the photos go on tour.



Philharmonic Center Cultural Complex