

Florida



Nicknamed the Sunshine State, Florida is the fourth-most populous state in the USA, and it continues to evolve as large numbers of people, particularly young Americans, choose to settle there. Strong ties with Latin America are evident in Florida's Spanish-speaking enclaves, and these provide a reminder of the state's beginnings in 1513 when a Spaniard, Juan Ponce de León, landed here during the *Pascua Florida* (Festival of Flowers) and named it *La Florida* (Land of Flowers). Over the next three centuries, a bitter struggle ensued for possession of the territory, until Spain officially ceded Florida to the USA in 1819.

Florida gained recognition as a state in 1845 and subsequent efforts to promote the region as a tourist destination attracted an abundance of wealthy residents, including Henry Flagler, who extended his Florida East Coast Railroad south, creating new towns such as Palm Beach and Tampa. The region's temperate climate succeeded in drawing holidaymakers from across America and enabled the cultivation of citrus fruits throughout the year, to the advantage of the local economy. In the 1960s, the Disney Corporation, with the help of the state government, turned a large part of central Florida into Walt Disney World, a move that secured Florida's place on the international tourist map.

The birthplace of Disney World was Orlando, the largest city in central Florida and the fifth-most popular tourist destination in the USA. Although the rollercoasters and fairy-tale palaces of Disney World dominate the world's collective image of the city, Orlando has a number of other attractions including the Kennedy Space Centre on Merritt Island, which is home to a collection of real and scale-model spacecraft, while nearby Cape Canaveral was the site of the first US-launched space rockets.

In southern Florida, the climate becomes increasingly subtropical and nowhere is this more apparent than in the Everglades National Park, one of the world's most complex ecosystems, that is home to

many species of exotic wildlife, from flamingos to alligators. Stretching south from mainland Florida, the Florida Keys is a 100-mile chain of islands that offers access to the Florida Reef, a great swathe of living coral that provides plenty of opportunities for diving. Affluent Key West, at the foot of the Keys, is the last outpost of North America before the land gives way to ocean.

Miami, situated on the southeastern tip of Florida, is a city that interweaves many cultures, heavily influenced by the language, music and politics of Latin America. Half of the city's population speaks Spanish as a first language and many of the local events have a strong Hispanic theme. The *Carnaval Miami* takes place in March and includes jazz concerts, a cooking contest and a Latin drag queen show.

An eclectic nightlife scene is another of Miami's trademarks and many of its clubs - particularly those specialising in salsa and merengue - have received worldwide acclaim. Just north of downtown Miami, Fort Lauderdale is a year-round party town that thrives on the influx of students who descend on the city during Spring Break. For a week in late March or early April, the streets of Fort Lauderdale are overrun with college students keen to let their hair down and indulge in a tradition of beach volleyball and drinking games. On a quieter note, Fort Lauderdale's Museum of Art houses one of the most impressive collections in Florida, including works by Picasso, Matisse, Dali and Warhol.

Another town with a strong Mediterranean influence is St Augustine, the oldest permanent settlement in the USA and the scene of many battles between Britain and Spain. A permanent reminder of the early settlers is the network of narrow streets that threads its way through the town, although nowadays they are lined with fashionable boutiques and pavement cafés.

One of the most energetic and upbeat cities on the west coast is Tampa, one of the main beneficiaries of Florida's lucrative tourism industry. What the city lacks in size it certainly makes up for in cultural attractions, from impressive museums to one of the state's most popular theme parks, Busch Gardens. Home to over 2,700 animals, the park offers an array of fascinating exhibits and exhilarating rides based on the species that inhabit the African continent.

"The state with the prettiest name, the state that floats in brackish water, held together by mangrove roots."

Elizabeth Bishop, 1911-1979,
American Poet

