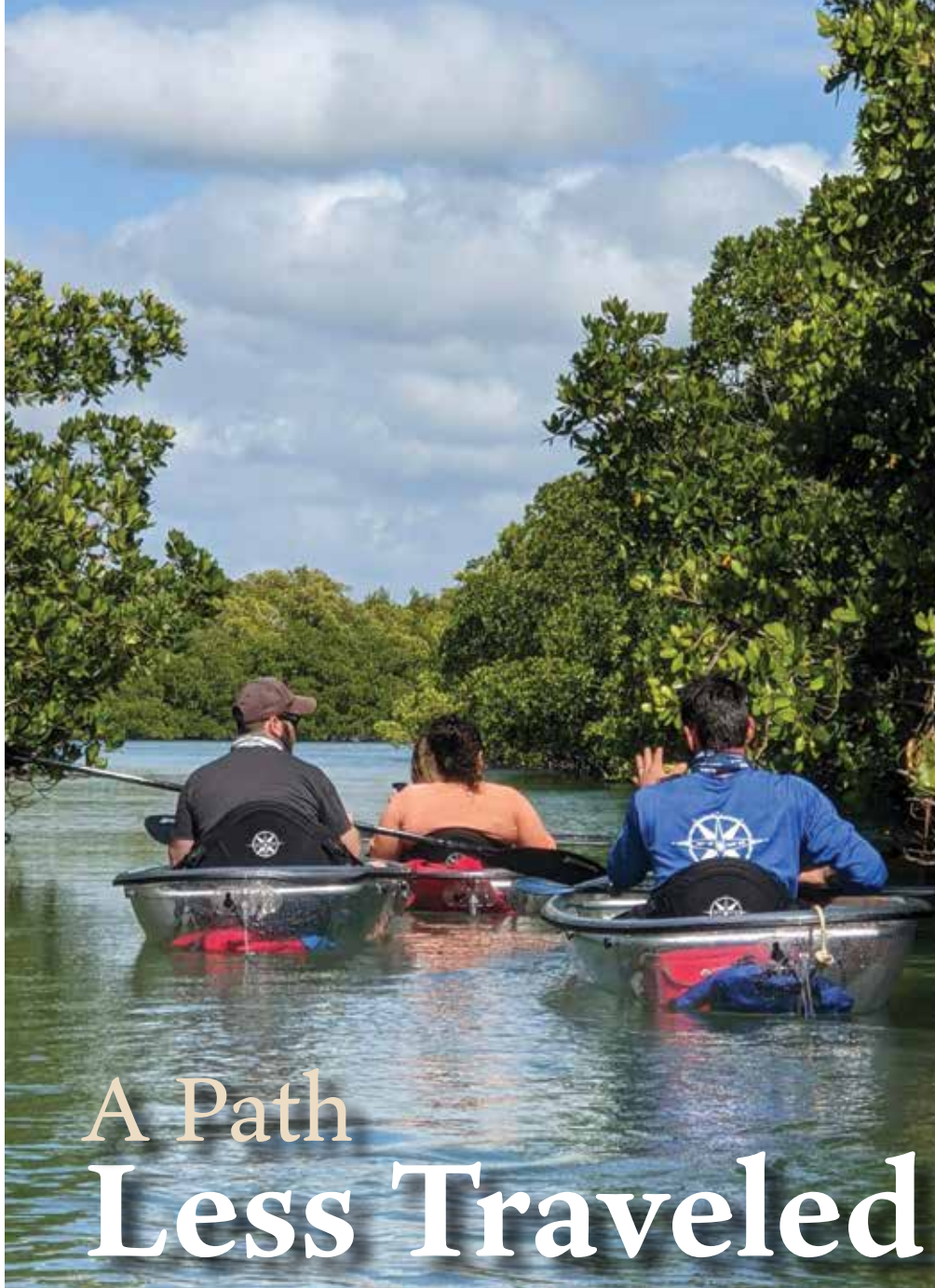




Clockwise from top left: One of the #DeLandWings selfie stops created by artist Erica Group; Daytona Beach dunes at sunrise; designated manatee refuge Blue Spring State Park; the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse near Daytona Beach.



Photos by Laurie Rowe Communications, except #DeLandWings by Vikki Moran, kayaks by Get Up and Go Kayaking-Naples.



Clear-bottom kayaks allow paddlers to see everything in the water below.



A Path Less Traveled

Hidden Florida gems to help you avoid the crowds

BY VIKKI MORAN

Florida is a popular spot for Capital Region families. It's less expensive than the Caribbean Islands and certainly easier to reach. Too often, though, people think of the oft-traveled Keys, amusement parks and major cities like Miami or Tampa as the only places worth visiting in the Sunshine State. Here are some lesser-known hidden gems to consider for a serene and lovely respite from the cold.

Bonita Springs

Located in southwest Florida and along the Gulf Coast, Bonita Springs has been unfairly referred to as Naples' stepsister. Bonita stands well on its own, though. The sea beckons with Gulf Coast beaches and parks, including gems like **Little Hickory Island Beach Park** and **Bonita Beach Park**. Sand dunes dot the beaches and water sports offer a true warm weather escape.

Things to do:

- Explore **Lovers Key State Park** (8700 Estero Blvd., Fort Myers Beach), a popular swimming and kayaking spot. Comprising four barrier islands, the park is home to manatees and dolphins with consistent viewing opportunities not found in other parks.
- **Everglades Wonder Gardens** (27180 Old 41 Road) is a wildlife sanctuary offering three acres of botanical plants. Flora and fauna options include a butterfly garden for butterfly lovers, alligators under a swing bridge for adventure seekers and gorgeous tropical birds and botanicals.
- **Get Up and Go Kayaking** (Estero Boulevard) offers a 2.5-hour clear-bottom kayak tour that enables kayakers to see everything in the water right under them. The tour guides take plenty of pictures and provide unique facts about the area and the mangrove tunnels. The breathtaking coastal beach views are one-of-a-kind.

Places to stay:

- **Latitude 26 Waterfront Boutique Resort**

4701 Bonita Beach Road SW, Bonita Springs

This apartment hotel along a dock with

direct bay access features a hot tub and plunge pool, as well as loaner kayaks, bikes and paddleboards.

- **Hyatt Residence Club Bonita Springs**

Coconut Plantation, 11800 Coconut Plantation Drive, Bonita Springs

This one-stop stay includes a 1,000-foot river pool, several luxurious hot tubs and four pools. Sunset cruises, sailing, fishing excursions, party vessels and boat rentals are also available to guests.

Places to eat and drink:

- **Molino's**

26841 S. Bay Drive, Bonita Springs

(located in Promenade at Bonita Bay mall)

Casual fine Italian dining is the focus at this award-winning restaurant known for excellent seafood and Italian food.

- **Coconut Jacks**

5370 Bonita Beach Road SW, Bonita Springs

Consistently voted one of the top Bonita restaurants each year by the locals, Coconut Jacks has great waterfront views, exotic tropical cocktails and super-fresh seafood.

- **Figs Grille**

25987 S. Tamiami Trail, Bonita Springs

European classics, seafood, and a fabulous wine selection make this a special spot.

Volusia County

Daytona Beach, DeLand and New Smyrna Beach

Volusia County is as varied as Florida itself. While it's close to the Kennedy Space Center and Orlando attractions, it's worlds away from most of the crowds. A day can include a visit to the Daytona International Speedway or a visit to the breathtaking drive-on beaches where you can park and lounge about, a cold beverage close at hand. Volusia County is family and pet friendly.

Things to do:

- **Daytona Beach** is having a bit of a renaissance. Previously known as a spring break haven, the city has worked hard at making this community family friendly. Drive one of the most magical beaches in the world. Wander some outstanding museums like the Smithsonian-affiliated **Museum of Arts & Sciences** (352 S. Nova Road) the **Cici and Hyatt Brown Museum of Art** (same address), the **Southeast Museum of Photography** (1200 W. International Speedway Blvd.) and, of course, experience the "World Center of Racing" at **Daytona International Speedway**. (1801 W. International Speedway Blvd.). Sign up for daily tours online.
- **DeLand** is authentic Florida with the coveted "America's Best Main Street" distinction. **Main Street** strolling includes boutiques, fabulous restaurants, nine museums, candy and ice cream shops, and no shortage of distinct-

ly DeLand-style bars and brewery stops. Take a selfie at **#DeLandWings** stops throughout the city. The unique Wings of the West murals by artist Erica Group each feature a set of wings representing something about the location in which they are found. Be sure to take in a show at the historic **Athens Theatre** (124 N. Florida Ave.). Expect DeLand Broadway-style entertainment in a completely restored gem of a theatre.

- **New Smyrna Beach** has a vibrant arts community on Canal Street. **The Hub on Canal** (132 Canal Street) is just one of the many galleries featuring local and very talented artists. **Canal Street** is also popular for its weekly events and vintage car shows. The town's water is notorious for being the "Shark Bite Capital of the World" (small nibbles), but instead of avoiding this nickname, the town celebrates it. Grab lunch or cocktails on Flagler Street and watch the NSB world pass by.

Places to Stay:

- **Night Swan Intracoastal Bed and Breakfast**

512 Riverside Drive, New Smyrna Beach

Recently featured on the Travel Channel's *Hotel Showdown Impossible*, this B&B sits in one of the most beautiful locations in New Smyrna Beach. The breathtaking views and cozy atmosphere offer a welcome sanctuary after a fun-filled day.

- **Hard Rock Hotel Daytona Beach**

918 N. Atlantic Ave., Daytona Beach

Panoramic ocean views, legendary Hard Rock amenities, and modern luxury are the calling here. You will have a front row to one of America's most famous beaches. This Hard Rock even has a VIP Pet Program where your pet can enjoy treats such as custom pet playlists, special amenities and designated places just for them.

- **The Artisan Downtown Hotel**

215 S. Woodland Blvd., DeLand

The Artisan is situated near gourmet restaurants, trend-setting bars and a nightlife that includes monthly festivals and live music. The Lounge Martini and Tapas restaurant at this boutique property is perfect for sipping a craft cocktail and people watching.

Places to eat and drink:

- **The Breakers Ocean Front Restaurant & Bar**

518 Flagler Ave., New Smyrna Beach

I defy you not to eat a burger here! Awesome creations are on tap until evening but escaping the beach sun and skipping in to grab a bite and drink is part of the fun of this beachy bar that offers iconic and great views.

- **Chica's Cuban Cafe**

215 S Woodland Blvd., DeLand

The best Cuban cuisine I have had outside of Ybor City!

Wash down all the fab food with a true Cuban coffee.

- **The Cellar Restaurant**

220 Magnolia Ave., Daytona Beach

This well-known restaurant is located in the historic home of President Warren G. Harding and widely recognized for excellent upscale Italian food and wines.

Gulf County

Port St. Joe

No matter where you stand at any point on land in Gulf County, a body of water is less than five minutes away. The Gulf of Mexico draws many people for its waves, but the rivers, lakes, lagoons and creeks offer variety for all who can't get enough of the waters. With 44 miles of shoreline throughout the county, paddling or fishing, shelling or scalloping, snorkeling or diving are the amusements of choice.

Things to do:

- Visit Port St. Joe to get the local flavor of the Gulf Coast of Florida. Known by its residents as a "small town with a big heart," Port St. Joe has postcard-perfect surroundings that invite lounging on a soft, white-sand dune beach, snorkeling in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as fishing or dining at a rustic fish shake. The walkable downtown has gift and antique shops, bistros, vest-pocket parks, wide greenways and an inviting waterfront marina. Rent a boat or charter a fishing trip at the **Port St. Joe Marina** (340 Marina Drive) to net this perfect tranquility.

Places to stay:

- **The Port Inn and Cottages**

501 Monument Ave., Port St. Joe

Recently renovated, this charming spot is across the street from the waterfront while within walking distance from the lighthouse, cute shops and wonderful dining in town.

- **The Turtle Beach Inn**

140 Painted Pony Road, Port St. Joe

This Gulf front bed and breakfast with cottages is located on the panhandle of Florida on Indian Pass Beach. To stay at The Turtle is to experience the charm and beauty of the "Forgotten Coast."

Where to Eat and Drink:

- **Sand Dollar Café**

301 Monument Ave., Port St. Joe

Perfect for a southern style breakfast and lunch. The Charleston Shrimp & Grits is killer.

- **Sisters' Restaurant**

236 Reid Ave., Port St. Joe

Known for delicious American Southern favorites, home-cooked desserts and daily specials with great family prices. ■

Relaxing on New Smyrna Beach.

Photo by Vikki Moran

