

Move Over, Miami: The Best of St. Pete



Posted by [Ceil Miller-Bouchet](#) in [Beyond the Guidebook](#) on June 6, 2014



A man dances at the drum circle on Treasure Island Beach near St. Petersburg, Florida. (Photograph by ZUMA, Alamy)

It's our first evening in [St. Petersburg, Florida](#), and the prospect of homemade French-Vietnamese spring rolls has spurred us off the Gulf Coast's white sands to family-owned [Café Alesia](#). Lofty ceilings, polished concrete floors, wooden tables, Technicolor paintings, and a sympatico waiter who skips—yes, skips—across the room as we head to the back patio set the perfect stage for our vacationing party of three.

My husband, teenage daughter, and I fit right in among the handful of others at the outdoor tables under twinkling fairy lights and bougainvillea: date-night couples, friends, a multi-generational extended family. In fact, after devouring the delicate rolls followed by bowls of steaming pho and barbecued sirloin ribs, we're the last to leave. We're also on a first-name basis with our skipping waiter, Walter. "When you come here, you turn into a regular," he says, as we settle up. "There's something addicting about the food."

It wasn't just the food. After five days in and around St. Pete, I felt something mildly addicting about the whole place. Beyond the dreamy beaches I found a stiletto-free, thinking-person's Florida where

glassblowing is art, shuffleboard is cool, mid-century modern lives, local craft beer trumps \$15 cocktails, and the sun shines an average of 361 days a year.

Here's the lowdown.

> The Art Scene

St. Pete's two main cultural attractions, the [Dali Museum](#) and the [Chihuly Collection](#) at the [Morean Arts Center](#), are about as similar as Bilbao's [Guggenheim](#) and Boston's [Isabella Gardner Museum](#).



A spiral of colors at the Chihuly Collection (Photograph by cityofstpete, Flickr)

We didn't connect with the works of Salvador Dali as we'd hoped we would. Maybe it was the rainy day throngs, or the hulking concrete building's confusing layout.

The Chihuly Collection, on the other hand, inspired us. I'd seen his stunning water lily ceiling installation at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. But here, the master glass sculptor's work unfolds inside a series of perfect rooms: the massive [Ruby Red Icicle Chandelier](#) bristles like a delicate cluster of chili peppers, an ocean floor comes to life in glass, and *ikebana* flower arrangements are frozen perfection. Our docent guide summed it up best. "Chihuly is the Tiffany of our time."

To really understand how glass becomes art, catch one of the 30-minute glass blowing demos at the Center's [Glass Studio and Hot Shop](#). Seated on bleachers in front of the outdoor workshop's two roaring furnaces, we alternately laughed or held our breath as a highly entertaining (not to mention skilled) duo of artists turned a ball of glowing molten glass into a multicolored vase, sharing tips along the way, like: "the bubble's gotta be so soft that it falls into the negative space in the mold." Like my brain on vacation? Seriously, though, I never imagined glass blowing could be suspenseful, even magical.

> Central Avenue Finds

You won't find any "shoppes" in the pedestrian-friendly [Central Avenue district](#), a reviving historic neighborhood west of downtown. But you will find an eclectic selection of locally owned boutiques, bars, bodegas, and attractions.

From the Chihuly Collection, we drove past a few blocks of vaguely touristy bars and restaurants on Central Avenue to the Saturday [St. Pete Indie Market](#) (look for the tepee by the entrance), where we bought yummy handmade strawberry-basil popsicles from mother-daughter entrepreneur team [Pop Bandits](#) and browsed home-canned preserves, dream catchers, and painted skateboards.



Cycle Brewing is based out of Peg's Cantina in nearby Gulfport, Florida. (Photograph courtesy St Petersburg Clearwater Tourist Bureau)

Afterwards, we grabbed a beer at [Cycle Brewing](#), the newest among a growing crop of [craft breweries in the area](#). I tried The Bench, a refreshing "lime pale ale" that, the bartender said, took 50 pounds of limes to make. I also picked up a flier promoting free Friday night shuffleboard, and noticed Cycle Brewing's shuffleboard-inspired brew called Tang & Biscuits.

Since shuffleboard and hipster didn't quite mesh in my mind, I donned my reporter's hat and learned that a multi-generational revival is underway in St. Pete, where Florida's oldest and biggest shuffleboard club was established in 1924. Unfortunately, we weren't able to "send the biscuit" at the [St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club](#), but we heard Friday nights are a ball for all ages, with drinks and live music, and even inspired a new club in Brooklyn. Interesting.

If you only have time for one Central Avenue stop, make it [Haslam's Bookstore](#). The sprawling self-described "temple to the printed word," redolent with the scent of old pages and leather bindings, opened in 1933 and is still owned by the same family. The store had a section for everyone in our party. For our daughter, highlights included Teacup and Beowulf, the two fat kitties draped over the

cash register, and *The Fault In Our Stars*, enthusiastically recommended as a “modern classic” by affable manager, Ray.

> Fish and Ice Cream

The best meal of our trip? A seafood feast at family-owned, self-service **Mid Peninsula Seafood Market** where we inhaled flakey fried slabs of locally fished amberjack, shrimp scampi, and golf ball-sized hushpuppies, all served up in cardboard baskets. We'll long remember the smiling crab logo, thatched tiki umbrellas, fishing nets and lobster traps, and the friendly local patrons who pointed out their favorite items from the menu as we waited in line.

Another fish standout, closer to the beach, is **Ted Peter's Famous Smoked Fish** (a family-owned institution and one of the area's oldest; since 1951), where we pulled up stools at the outside counter bar one day for a late lunch of red oak-smoked mullet fillets, potato salad, and coleslaw.

Somehow, ice cream always tastes better in a bathing suit and T-shirt. Especially in St. Pete, where we learned it's hard to get a bad cone, thanks to local wholesaler **Working Cow Homemade Ice Cream**, the supplier of choice for most regional establishments. So, along the main beach drag, Gulf Boulevard, we shunned places like Beer Belly's Beach Bar in favor of an ice cream smack down.

Our favorite was **Scoops**, a diner-like storefront with scores of Working Cow flavors that “taste so good because they're made with 14 percent milk fat,” according to adorable, gray-braided Micki Goodman who, with her husband, is living her retirement fantasy: ice cream parlor owner. In second place is Florida favorite **Twistee Treat**, a walk-up and drive-in stand shaped like an ice cream cone (needless to say, you can't miss it).

Finally, it wouldn't be a Florida vacation without a soft-serve orange ice cream cone from a citrus stand. The closest one I found, about a half hour drive north of St. Pete Beach, in **Largo**, is called **Yellow Banks Grove** and worth the trip.

> Retro Revival Room and Board

For those who seek a sense of place through lodging, St. Pete offers many options.



The elaborate Don Cesar Hotel (Photograph by fabiomiami, Flickr)

There's the bubblegum pink **Don Cesar Hotel**, an impeccable Gatsby-era resort with deep community roots that rises like a turreted wedding cake from the pearly sand. "The Don" is perfect for families; or anyone, really, looking for vacation-friendly amenities like two pools, spa, kids club, great food, game room, and superb service.

Motels like the stylishly updated boutique motel **Postcard Inn** harken back to the days when folks piled into the station wagon and headed south. With its lively beach bar, palm-shaded pool, vintage rattan vibe, and spare, clean rooms, this is a happening place for those who don't need to get to bed early.

Just north of St. Pete Beach, the midcentury motel atmosphere thickens in **Treasure Island**, anchored by iconic spots like the **Thunderbird Beach Resort** and many other smaller motels from the 1950s and '60s. There's even a benevolent flower child vibe, I heard, along Treasure Island's wide beach during the weekly **Sunday sunset drum circle**.

When I was exploring, I kept thinking that if St. Pete weren't so genuine, it would seem cheesy. But it's the lack of irony, the simple friendliness of those we met, and the cool urban vibe of Central Avenue that will keep us coming back. It's Midwest meets Brooklyn along Florida's Gulf Coast. Who could ask for more?

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