

The country's best beach is also a secret art haven

By [Alev Aktar](#)

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One of the many murals comprising St. Pete's vibrant art scene. VisitStPeteClearwater.com

Clear blue waters and long stretches of sand have always been the appeal of St. Petersburg, Fla. But these days, visitors are just as likely to dive into the Tampa Bay town's vibrant arts and culture scene.

Over the last decade, the Sunshine City has evolved into a creative hub, with world-class museums, thriving galleries and bold street art that have the once-neglected downtown booming again. And soon there will be much more to admire: Three ambitious new museums will open in St. Pete over the next two years, cementing its reputation as one of Florida's cultural hot spots. Here's how a short trip to the 'Burg should look:



A hot glass demo at the Duncan McClellan Gallery. VisitStPeteClearwater.com

After a blissed-out day at the beach, head into town for a late-afternoon stroll through the dazzling collection of glass sculptures crafted by Dale Chihuly at the [Chihuly Collection](#). Stock up on colorful wares at its gift shop, then hit nearby [Intermezzo Coffee & Cocktails](#) for oysters and craft cocktails.

In the mood for something sweet? Grab a gourmet ice pop at [The Hyppo](#), which boasts a staggering array of flavors from pumpkin cheesecake to pineapple cilantro. After the sun sets, savor a fresh catch at one of St. Pete's fine restaurants; you can't go wrong with the olive oil-seared grouper at [FarmTable Cucina](#) (\$30). After dessert, shuffle on over to the historic [St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club](#)— known as the world's largest club for the sport — for a few late-night matches.

Thanks to St. Pete’s laid-back yet imaginative spirit, there’s more art to check out the next day. More than 80 — and counting — eye-catching outdoor murals wrap buildings, walls and a main downtown intersection. “They create a sense of community,” says Derek Donnelly, a local talent behind a number of works. “I credit the art with helping turn around St. Pete.”

Donnelly helps promote the annual [Shine St. Petersburg Mural Festival](#), which wrapped its third iteration last month and is gearing up the next one in the fall of 2018. Local, national and international street artists from as far away as Australia gather to create large-scale, open-air works over 10 days.

According to Donnelly, the best place to start a mural tour is the alley behind the stores on the 600 North block of downtown’s Central Avenue. The lane is so jammed with trippy wall tattoos — including several of his compositions featuring dinosaur and sea creature — that even the dumpsters are decorated.



The Dalí Museum Dana Hoff

Don't forget a visit to St. Pete's popular [Dali Museum](#), (\$24 for adults), which houses the largest collection of works by the mustachioed genius outside his native Spain. On a smaller scale, more than 75 galleries dot the town's seven arts districts. In the [Warehouse Arts District](#), don't miss the astounding glass works at [Duncan McClellan Gallery](#) — or its romantic sculpture garden, or its hot shop demonstrations by a team of artists.

Best of all, St. Pete has much more creative capital in the pipeline.

The first outpost — the [Imagine Museum](#), which centers on glass art — opens its doors in January. A repurposed school will exhibit pieces from 55 renowned glass artists, including Harvey Littleton and Marlene Rose.

The [James Museum of Western & Wildlife Art](#) will also debut early next year. Occupying most of a city block, it will showcase works in oil, ink, stone and steel — evoking the frontier spirit and celebrating life in the wild. The works were collected over decades by Tom James, CEO of investment company Raymond James, and his wife Mary.

The biggest passion project of all is downtown's \$70 million Museum of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, scheduled to open in spring 2019. The monumental building, designed by Cuban-born local architect Alberto Alfonso, is being purpose-built to display businessman Rudy Ciccarello's extensive decorative arts collection.

With so much art on tap — as well as year-round sunshine and those irresistible white-sand beaches — it's worth adding St. Pete to your vacation short list.

Where to eat and sleep

From landmark hotels to catch-of-the-day restaurants, St. Petersburg has the hospitality waterfront covered. Here's a look at some local favorites:

- **Hotels**



Base yourself at Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach.^{HP}

Active much? Take your pick of four sports at the historic [Vinoy Renaissance St. Petersburg Resort & Golf Club](#), which features 18 holes, tennis courts, a private 74-slip marina and two pools (from \$264).

For a chic sleep, book a reservation at the 18-room [Birchwood Inn](#). You can't beat the elegant rooms with four-poster beds — or the spectacular rooftop lounge (from \$310).

The [Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach](#) is about 40 minutes outside of downtown St. Pete but mere seconds from a spectacular beach. (Clearwater Beach, in fact, was rated the best in the country by TripAdvisor last year.) With a pool and a spa onsite, it's easy to unwind here (from \$174).

- **Food**



The Reading Room's stylish staff. Partho

Cool and creative, the [Reading Room](#) serves delicious garden-inspired and wood-fired fare. Many of the herbs and vegetables are grown in the beds outside.

The seafood-centric menu changes daily at swanky [Sea Salt](#), but the dishes are always fresh and succulent. Don't miss the happy hour.

The author was a guest of Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach.