

Times of malta

Sunday, May 10, 2015, 00:01 by

Reuters

Artsy vibe gives a lift to Tampa's slow image

Saundra Amrhein finds the Florida bay is now attracting modern crowd.



A view down Seventh Avenue in Ybor City in Tampa, Florida. Photo: Brian Blanco/Reuters

Sunshine and more than 57 kilometres of white-sand beaches have long lured tourists to the Tampa Bay area on Florida's Gulf of Mexico coast, where an infusion of arts and hipster-friendly culture is livening up options once you hang up your bathing trunks.

Beyond the beaches, the region's largest city, Tampa, is outgrowing a reputation for sleepy suburban sprawl, while neighbouring St Petersburg enjoys an urban renaissance that defies its onetime image as the epitome of grey-haired Florida, for which it was good-naturedly dubbed 'God's waiting room'.

Waterfront museums, funky coastal towns with an artsy vibe and an eclectic night life that includes retro shuffleboard (yes, shuffleboard can be trendy) have some calling the region a New Yorker's answer to life in Florida.

Here are tips for getting the most out of the Tampa Bay area.

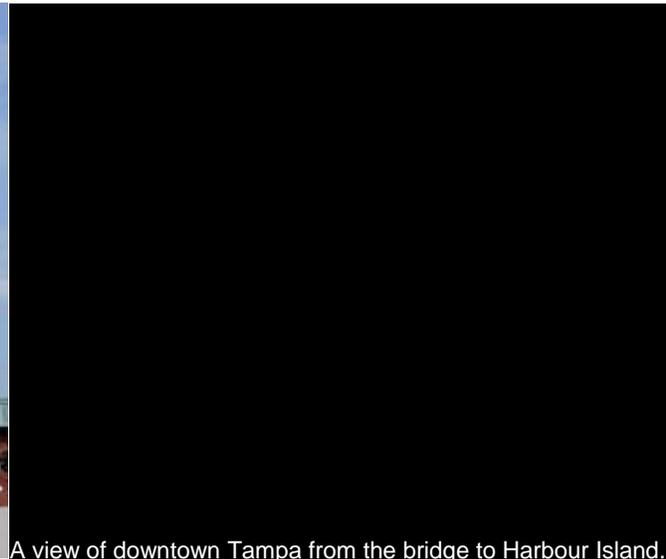
Beyond the beaches, Tampa is outgrowing its reputation for sleepy suburban sprawl

The crown jewel of St Petersburg's mile-long waterfront museum corridor is the Dalí Museum, the largest collection of works by Salvador Dalí outside his native Spain, housed in a recently constructed building featuring a 23-metre geodesic glass bubble known as 'the enigma'.

Another must on the city's waterfront arts tour, a short park stroll past the banyan trees straddling the Museum of Fine Arts, is the building housing the glass-blown masterpieces of Dale Chihuly at the Morean Arts Centre's Chihuly Collection.



Two brown pelicans take a swim after being released at the Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge near St Petersburg, Florida. Photo: US Coast Guard/Nick Ameen/Reuters



A view of downtown Tampa from the bridge to Harbour Island. Photo: Brian Blanco/Reuters

For edgier artisans, St Petersburg's Second Saturday ArtWalk features more than 40 galleries and studios, (stpeteartsalliance.org), all connected by a free trolley.

At the stop for the Grand Central District near downtown (grandcentraldistrict.org), you will find dozens of independently owned galleries, cafes, antique shops and restaurants: places to try your hand at painting, jewellery making and pottery.

Listen to big-name folk artists such as Cheryl Wheeler at the Craftsman House, a restored 1918 bungalow and cafe displaying paintings, sculptures, photography and clay pottery.

On a worthy side trip only an hour's drive to the south, you will find nearly two dozen galleries at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota.

The collection by the founders of the famed circus includes a large trove of Old Masters paintings, including significant works by Rubens.

There is also a museum dedicated to circus memorabilia, live music performances and tours of the Ca' d'Zan, a 56-room palace that was the Ringlings' family home.

St Petersburg's urban renaissance defies its one-time image as the epitome of grey-haired Florida, for which it was good-naturedly dubbed 'God's waiting room'

Just east of downtown Tampa, the historic Latin Quarter of Ybor City remains the region's night life capital, a gritty entertainment corridor that has breathed new life into the former cigar factory district along the city's Seventh Avenue. With restaurants, shops and nightclubs, Ybor pulses long after the stroke of midnight with events catering to same-sex couples, earning the district the nickname of GaYbor.



Visitors walk outside the Dalí Museum. Photo:

Steve Nesius/Reuters

For those preferring drinks with a view, the Canopy Rooftop Lounge atop the Birchwood on Beach Drive in St Petersburg is the new spot to see and be seen, sipping cocktails on couches and private cabanas, all overlooking the water.

Or ditch the high heels to join a hip crowd at the free Friday night Shuffle, hosted at the St Petersburg Shuffleboard Club, the biggest and oldest of its kind, on Mirror Lake Drive.

Its 70-plus shuffleboard courts, once the backdrop for the movie Cocoon, now draw couples on dates, college-age friends and groups of bungalow-dwelling neighbours, often pulling coolers of wine or beer up to their court.

Testimony to the trendiness of a pastime nicknamed 'sending the biscuit', the St Petersburg club inspired the opening of indoor shuffleboard courts in Brooklyn last year.



Visitors stand beneath a geodesic glass structure on the third floor of the Dalí Museum in St Petersburg. Photo: Steve Nesi/Reuters

Many glossy tourist maps have yet to keep up with several trendy neighbourhoods beloved by locals. In the funky enclave of Gulfport, just south of St Petersburg, mom-and-pop restaurants and cafes overflow during twice-monthly art walks. Dress according to the town's unofficial motto: "If you're too weird for Gulfport, you're just too weird!"

The similarly artsy town of Dunedin, located north of St Petersburg, features eclectic restaurants on a downtown strip, where you may also stumble on a movie-in-the-park night.

And do not miss Nitally's Thai-Mex Cuisine in St Petersburg's Grand Central District, where the blending of the two cultures turns up menu items like Thai Peanut Chicken Tortilla Wraps or Panang Mole.

In Tampa's rapidly gentrifying Seminole Heights neighbourhood, a high-brow foodie scene is taking off between the used car lots on Florida Avenue.

Hot spots include the Rooster and the Till, a farm-to-fork concept, and the newly opened Ulele, offering native Florida-inspired dishes such as chili with alligator and guava pie.