

SEEING BLUE

TAMPA BAY IS KNOWN FOR ITS CLEAR BLUE SKIES, WHITE SANDY BEACHES AND EXCELLENT YEAR-ROUND WEATHER. HERE ARE 10 LOCAL TREASURES WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED.

▮ If you ask any Tampa Bay local what's in the trunk of his or her car, more often than not, you'll hear mention of oversized towels, sunscreen, lounging chairs, a wide-brimmed hat or possibly sandy shovels with matching plastic buckets. The miles of white sand beaches and warm Gulf waters practically beg for our attention, and the sounds of seagulls and gentle waves act as our siren song.

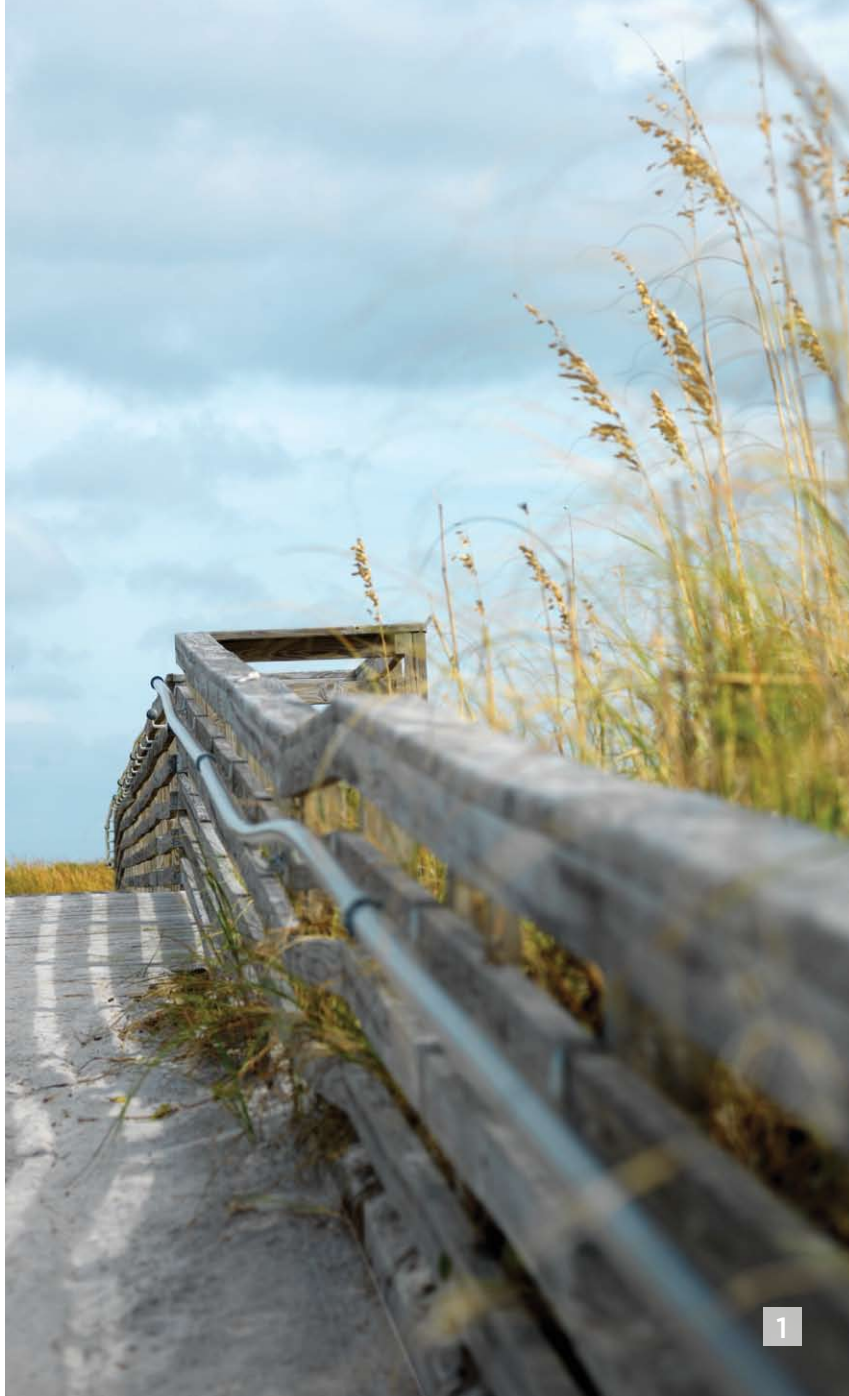
Beach aficionado Stephen P. Leatherman (a.k.a. Dr. Beach) puts together an annual list of the nation's top 10 beaches and is particularly fond of Florida's West Coast. Over the years, he has awarded several Gulf beaches the highest possible honor: No. 1 beach in America.

"The area is so wonderful with its beautiful powder white sand and clear water," says Dr. Beach. "Every beach I rank is numerically scored—a perfect beach being 250. I have yet to find a perfect beach, but have come pretty close."

With a few of these sandy spots landing on his recent top 10 list, those of you visiting may want to think about changing your itinerary. And for you lucky locals, make sure to take lots of vitamin C so you can use a few sick days to soak up the sun at these area treasures.

PHOTOS: GABRIEL BURGOS
WORDS: JENNIFER STEVENS
DESIGN: JAMES LIKENESS

Indian Rocks Beach (pictured here) made our list of 10 favorite local beaches.



1. CALADESI ISLAND STATE PARK

This secluded state park in Dunedin was named America's No. 1 beach in 2008 by Dr. Beach for its 3.5 miles of soft sand, surrounded by sea grass and hiking trails. Nature enthusiasts can rent kayaks at Café Caladesi and paddle through the mangrove tunnels, or walk through the three miles of pine flatwoods, discovering a variety of birds and rare wildlife. But before taking the 10-minute ferry ride to the island oasis (\$8 round trip), take the time to explore Honeymoon Island Park and its new nature center.

2. FORT DE SOTO'S NORTH BEACH

Another favorite destination for Dr. Beach, North Beach at Fort De Soto Park in Tierra Verde claimed the title "America's No. 1 Beach" in 2005. And it's

not hard to see why. This county park has it all:

Nature and bike trails, fishing piers, camp grounds, a 2.25-mile canoe trail and nearly three miles of wide pristine beaches. There's even a dog park and dog beach for your favorite four-legged friend to enjoy.

3. EGMONT KEY STATE PARK

Do yourself a favor and take the 15-minute ferry ride from Fort De Soto to Egmont Key State Park. There are several private companies offering boat rides to Egmont Key, and all vary in price. Call the park for more information at 727.893.2627. Once home to Fort Dade, the remnants of the old military community still exist, including a working lighthouse built in 1858. The island is also a national wildlife refuge with endangered gopher turtles at every turn.

Just make sure to pack water and snacks, as there are no restaurants or concession stands on the island.

4. SIESTA BEACH

Famous for its soft white sand, the Sarasota beach was said to have the "whitest and finest sand in the world" at the Great International White Sand Beach Challenge in 1987. Made of 99 percent quartz, it is so reflective that it's cool even on the hottest summer day. Siesta Beach on Siesta Key is the perfect place to bring the kids for its shallow water and year-round lifeguard protection. After you've taken in the beach scene, stroll over to historic Siesta Village to explore local restaurants and boutique shops.

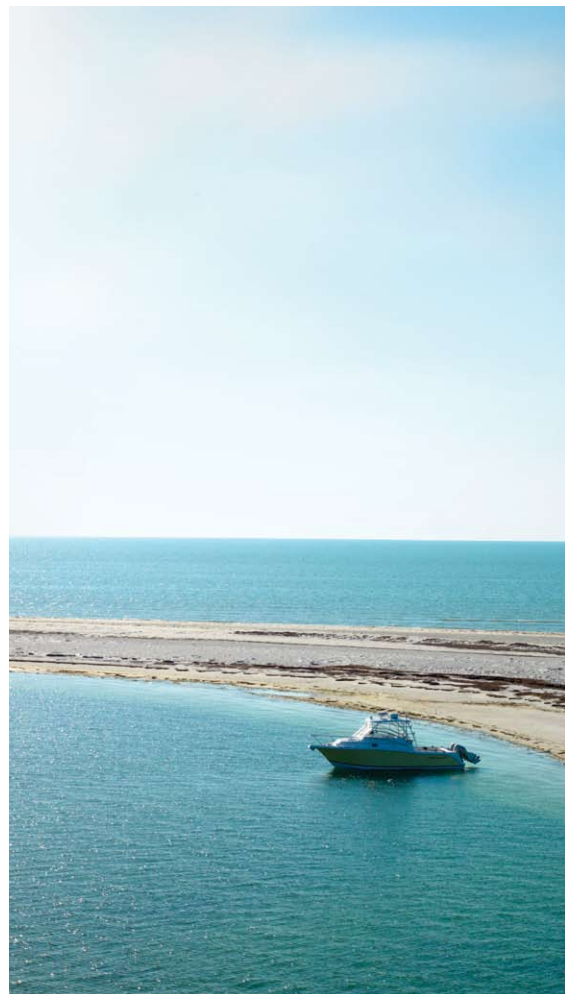
5. PASS-A-GRILLE

If you want to experience "Old Florida," this little fishing community and U.S. Historic District near St. Pete Beach will take you back to a time before the Internet and HD TVs. There are still no high-rise hotels or chain restaurants here, just charming inns, eclectic boutiques and some of the oldest homes in Pinellas County. The beach is also home to the famous restaurant, The Hurricane—a great place to grab a grouper sandwich and a frozen drink served in a coconut while taking in the sunset from the rooftop patio.

6. ST. PETE BEACH

With more than 10,000 residents, St. Pete Beach is the most populated beach town in the Bay area. But while it's more urbanized than most "beach towns," the 4.5 miles of white sand is still somewhat quaint, and offers a lot of history. Since 1937, old-fashioned Corey Avenue has been the heart of St. Pete Beach, with a general store, vintage theater and specialty shops. Another must-see: The famous "Pink Palace," a.k.a. the Don CeSar—a landmark since 1928.

Three Rooker Bar is one of the last natural islands on Florida's Suncoast. Because of its sensitive habitat, large-scale gatherings require permission from neighboring Caladesi Island State Park. ►



7. CLEARWATER BEACH

If you're looking to join a game of beach volleyball, take a spin on a jet ski or enjoy cocktails at a beachfront tiki bar, Clearwater Beach ranks top for social beach scene. The main drag, Gulf Boulevard, is a great place to get some fresh seafood, pick up a new bathing suit and explore the many art deco-inspired hotels. At night, the strip turns into a partygoer's paradise, proving that "cruising" still exists in the 21st century.

8. TREASURE ISLAND

Appropriately labeled "the treasure of the Gulf Coast," this wide, 3-mile stretch of white sand is famous, and so is its town. Treasure Island was home to some of Florida's first residents, and got its name after several property owners buried and then "discovered" wooden chests on the beach in hopes of generating property sales. After claiming

the chests were filled with treasure, news of the discovery traveled, and people started calling the town "Treasure Island." Today, the place has a funky, small-town feel, and reportedly boasts the world's longest waterfront bar, Gator's Café & Saloon.

9. INDIAN ROCKS BEACH

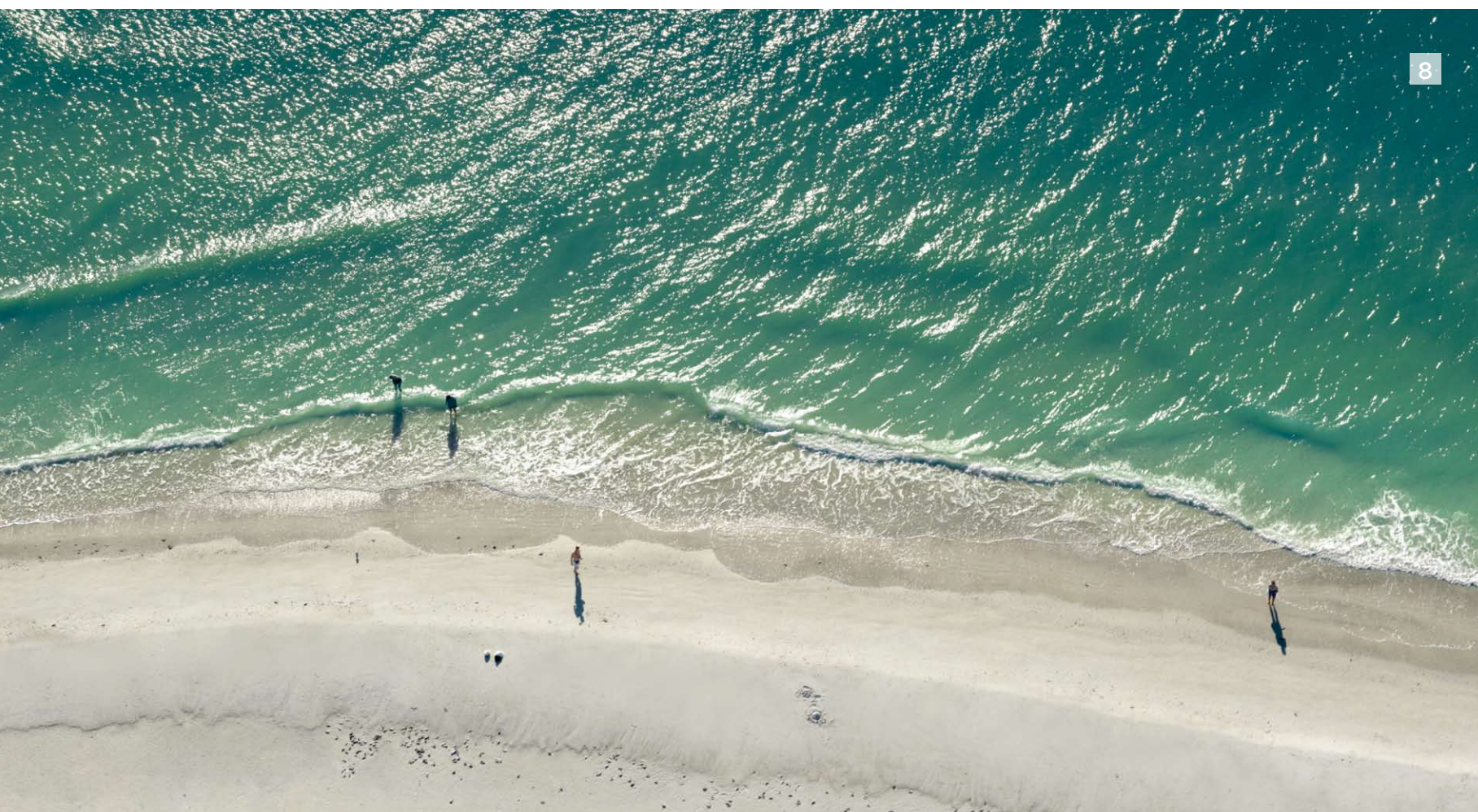
Although it's between bustling St. Pete and Clearwater beaches, this small, laid back coastal town is another tribute to Old Florida, lined with beautiful sand dunes and some of the best seafood restaurants in Tampa Bay. Just down the street (Gulf Boulevard) in Indian Shores is the largest wild bird hospital in the world—treating up to 10,000 birds a year. Admission is free and definitely worth checking out. Just make sure to get there before the sun sets.

10. ANNA MARIA ISLAND

Pastel-colored cottages and quaint waterfront restaurants line the 7-mile stretch of white sand on the barrier island between the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay. The perfect place to get away for a weekend, consider renting a (or bringing your own) bicycle and cruising the many beaches. If exercise isn't exactly your idea of vacation, there is a free trolley system that travels up and down the island. Be sure to make a pit stop at Joe's Eats & Sweets on Bradenton Beach for homemade ice cream or an old-fashioned sundae. ■

AT A GLANCE

For maps and directions to each of the beaches we've listed, log onto blutampabay.com/beaches



▲ Photographed during mid-afternoon hours from a helicopter; beachgoers appear as specs along the shore.

