

FLORIDA—SOUTH

Total mileage / average drive time:
70.9 miles – 1 hour, 22 minutes

From its position on the Gulf of Mexico, Southern Florida is the place more tourists, beachcombers, snowbirds and thrill seekers flock to than any other location.

With exceptionally sunny weather and white sandy beaches, Southern Florida is a little slice of paradise you'll be tempted to make your permanent residence..

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1 Port Charlotte

Begin in **Port Charlotte**, a city gaining popularity among those who want to see the beauty of Florida without dealing with the tourist crowds of more popular destinations such as Orlando or Miami. Here is one of the sweetest stretches of beaches, where freshwater rivers converge with the **Gulf of Mexico**, forming a 270-square-mile playground for waterborne enthusiasts. There are several local outfitters eager to take you out for a little **kayak fishing**, and their knowledge of the area and its maze of hidden coves



Photo courtesy of Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands

and mangroves will guarantee a very scenic and satisfying adventure. Or after an exhausting day sunning yourself at the beach, consider taking a cruise, during which we're sure your boat captain will be more than happy to throw in a little history lesson and a few hints on where to find the best fishing spots. With any luck, you'll get to watch porpoises frolicking in the boat's wake, so be sure to bring your camera! Seven sections of the **Great Florida Birding Trail** are to be found in this area, giving birders an exciting and rare opportunity to glimpse a red-cockaded woodpecker or maybe even a Bachman's sparrow or a burrowing owl. If you're a newcomer to birding, you can get your wings, so to speak, during a tour with the Audubon Society or a visit to one of the area's parks. Did someone say golf? **Charlotte Harbor** offers year-round play on several courses that range from executive to championship levels. When it comes to golf, there are few places better than south Florida for fine-tuning your game.

2 Fort Myers

27.9 miles – 31 minutes

Keep your sandals on because you're headed to **Fort Myers**, or as it's affectionately known by the locals, **Alligator Alley**. It's only about 28 miles from Port Charlotte to Fort Myers, but allow time for traffic, which can get quite heavy if you're traveling during peak season. Unlike the beaches on the West Coast, Florida beaches are awash with hundreds of shells. Whether you're collecting to study them, to use them for



crafting, or to bring them back home as souvenirs, you won't be disappointed by the sheer number and variety you'll come across as you stroll along the beach. Fishing is always high on the list of favorite activities for visitors and getting up early and heading out on a charter boat is one of the best ways to take advantage of the teeming fish in the area. In 1885, Thomas Edison visited Florida for the very first time and fell in love with Fort Myers. In 1887 his home was completed and several years later, his good friend, Henry Ford, purchased the adjoining property and



built his own winter retreat. You'll find both estates here in Fort Myers and beautifully preserved. The botanical gardens within **Edison's Estate** contain more than 1,000 plants from around the world, including a 400-foot-tall banyan tree given to Edison as a gift in 1925, African Sausage trees, and a wide array of other specimens. This is a fascinating stop and one you should take advantage of as soon as you can pull yourself away from the beach! Just offshore from Fort Myers you'll find **Sanibel Island**, a barrier island and one of the most popular attractions in the area. Residents take the preservation of the island's natural ecology very seriously, and you'll find that more than half the island is dedicated to wildlife refuges that provide a home for over 220 species of birds native to the island, many of which are threatened or endangered. Visitors to the refuge are free to

walk, bike, drive, or kayak the wildlife drive that takes you through about five miles of beautiful mangrove tree forests and tidal flats; it's the perfect way to observe the island's wildlife.

3 Naples 43 miles – 51 minutes

It's time to reapply your sunblock before heading a little further south to your last destination, **Naples**. If you're looking to tap into your inner desire for the hedonistic lifestyle where little is required of you other than fishing, gathering shells, and sunning yourself while you sip ice tea, Naples is the place for you. With nearly 10 miles of white sandy beaches and a plethora of upscale galleries, boutiques, and restaurants, Naples remains one of the premiere destinations for snowbirds and travelers alike. Of course, you'll want to visit **Caribbean Gardens** during your visit. Part zoo and part botanical gardens, it houses a huge array of rare creatures, including an Asian deer that barks, kangaroos, monkeys, bears, and lions. The tropical setting just adds to the experience, plus there's a paved path that winds nearly a mile through the grounds that gives you ample opportunity for a little exercise and viewing the animals up close. Caribbean Gardens opened in 1919 and you can still find many of the original plantings thriving here. Both the gardens and zoo have a fascinating



Photo courtesy Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens

history and play an important part in conservation. The **Everglades** area is just a hop, skip, and jump south from **Naples** and, as one of the largest subtropical wilderness areas in the U.S., it's a must-see for any visitor. You'll find many rare and endangered species here, including over 350 species of birds. The boundaries of the park protect the southern tip of the historic Everglades ecosystem and cover a whopping 2,500 square miles with plenty of chances to hike, canoe, birdwatch, bike, or take a guided tour through this extraordinary area. As the number one vacation destination in the U.S., Florida is overflowing with great attractions, endless sunny days, and a spot on the beach with your name on it.

