

SPECIAL FLORIDA SECTION

Disney Dreams continue

Wait Disney World in Orlando is extending The Year of a Million Dreams, including free stays in Cinderella's boudoir. **N6.**

Hopping Gulf of Mexico waves off Perdido Key.

Five isles less traveled but ready to show off

By Jay Clarke
MIAMI HERALD

You may not have given it much thought, but Miami Beach is an island. So are Palm Beach, Key West, Sanibel, Amelia and Marco, to name a few of Florida's popular resorts. But the state has a lot of less-known islands that are also worth

visiting. Some still retain a bit of Old Florida — the laid-back, down-home lifestyle of an earlier age. Some sport high-rises and other trappings of modern tourism. But all possess an individuality that sets them apart from the usual. Here are five less-known islands worth visiting.

See ISLES on N4

Sunshine State Secrets

Conjure up old days in Steinhathee

By Jan Norris
PALM BEACH POST

STEINHATCHEE, Fla. — There's no glitz or urban excitement or crowds here. No white-sands beach. No amusement park. Only a few restaurants.

But there's restorative peace in this sleepy fishing town, a throwback to fast-disappearing Old Florida. And put simply, it's beautiful country here on the south side of the Gulf of Mexico's Big Bend.

Fall through spring are prime seasons — the heat and mosquitoes in summer can be miserably oppressive; now's a good time to go. Though they've been beaten by a few storms, spreading live oaks, tall pines, and

Fly-fishing the flats along the Gulf Coast fits the pace of life in Steinhathee.

Special Florida Section

Far from the tourist track

STEINHATCHEE from N1

cypress stand sentry over sleepy bayous fingering in off the gulf. The sun flames out, leaving a brilliant, Technicolor-hued sky over the water every day. The view is unimpeded by condos — none of those here, either.

The place to stay is Steinhathee Landing, a group of two-story Victorian and Florida Cracker-style cottages built around a mini-village of sorts, tucked under an oak canopy and bordering the Steinhathee River (pronounced STEEN-hatchee), which flows to the gulf.

Goats and other livestock are kept on the property and make for a roaming domestic petting zoo for the kids who fill out the families that have found this spot. Also on the grounds are a large welcome center, where continental breakfasts are served; a thriving vegetable garden; a chapel; fountains; and a boardwalk that meanders over and around the water's edge.

Most of the cottages, named for spices, are separately owned and have their own styles. Most have all the modern accoutrements, including DVDs, full kitchens and laundries. Some allow pets.

Cottages available for up to 10 people make it a great location for a family reunion, especially if fishing — freshwater or salt — boating or paddling figures in your recreation plans. The resort is only three miles off the gulf, and pontoon boat rentals are available nearby for sunset cruises on the river.

At the horse stables next door, guests can arrange a day or so of riding on trails in the surrounding area, which borders on a wildlife management and river preservation area. (Take it easy on local roads at dusk — there are deer and bear in these woods.) Tennis and basketball courts, and a pool and outdoor pavilion provide other activities for guests, plus a fitness center with a sauna and swim-spa attached.

It's a quirky setup — a luxury resort in a backwoods town set away from the gulf — but therein is the charm.

The people are friendly and polite. I was about to get a speeding ticket in a late-night rush to get to the Landing, but a local deputy instead gave me a kind warning — then spent 30 minutes chatting with us about must-see dining and fishing spots.

There are plenty of low-key attractions within a day's drive, including the canoe-friendly Suwannee River, about 40 miles south. Wakulla Springs State Park, popular for the crystal-clear waters, is 70 miles from here.

Within 20 miles of the Landing are Horsehoe Cove, Keaton Beach and Deckle Beach — Keaton and Deckle have parks, piers and boat ramps that draw the local crowds on holiday weekends in warm months.

Other state parks are nearby: Fanning

Steinhatchee Landing

228 Highway 51, Steinhathee, Fla.
352-498-3513
www.steinhatcheelanding.com

■ Two-story and honeymoon cottages with one to four bedrooms; some cottages can sleep 10 people. Pets are allowed in some cottages for a fee. Most units have porches, outdoor grills, full kitchens and laundry machines. Boat ramp on property.

■ Rates from \$142 for a one-bedroom cottage, \$180 on weekends (two-night minimum).

■ Seasonal special: Through Feb. 29, book for four nights or more and get 50 percent off (only by phone).

Getting there

Delta, United and US Airways fly to Gainesville from Philadelphia International Airport with one stop. The lowest recent round-trip fare was about \$304.

— Jan Norris

Springs is 31 miles away, and Ichetucknee Springs, with its cold water and tube-friendly current, is an hour's drive southeast (populated with college crowds in spring-summer).

At Peacock Springs State Park in Lurayville, you can see one of the longest underwater cave systems in the continental United States. Divers have surveyed about 28,000 feet of underwater passages, but you need scuba certification to explore the caves.

Free, seven-day state-park passes are given to the Landing's guests.

Dining choices are limited — most families cook their catches or bring steaks and chicken for the grills. But we can vouch for Roy's, down on the gulf. Fried mullet, cheese grits, and an extensive salad bar with fresh choices are tasty, plus you're overlooking the inlet. Fiddler's Restaurant has a full bar, cooks up seafood, chicken, pork and beef dishes, and caters meals to Steinhathee Landing.

If you go in July through early September, you can get in on the local scalloping. Anyone with a bucket may dig up to two gallons of bay scallops.

Maybe all this seems too laid back, especially in this age of sight and sound at every turn. It's not for everyone. But for those looking for a quiet "time out" this is a perfect spot to paddle along a river, shoot pictures in a butterfly garden, or just sit and rock on a porch.