

# Travel & Arts

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## Travel: Focus on Florida

# A peaceful place where nature is the main attraction

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

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.

Though beaten by a few storms, spreading live oaks, tall pines and cypress stand sentry over sleepy bayous fingering in off the Gulf. The sun flames out, leaving a brilliant Technicolor-stained sky every day over the water; the view is unimpeded by condos — none of those here, either.

The place to stay is Steinhatchee Landing, a group of two-story Victorian and Cracker-style cottages built around a minivillage of sorts, tucked under an oak canopy and bordering the Steinhatchee River that 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 so have their own styles. Most have all the modern accommodations, including DVDs, full

**If you go . . .**

**What:** Steinhatchee Landing Resort.

**Where:** 228 Highway 51, Steinhatchee.

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

**Directions:** Florida's Turnpike to I-75; take the Gainesville exit west on State Road 26 to Fanning Springs. Go north on U.S. Highway 19 to the traffic light in Tennille; turn left at Highway 51 and go 7.8 miles to Steinhatchee Landing on the left.

**More info:** 352-498-3513; steinhatcheelanding.com

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 figure in the recreation for your group. 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 around trails in the surrounding area, which borders on a wildlife management and river preservation area. (Take local

roads easy at dusk — there are deer and bears in these woods.) Tennis and basketball courts, and a pool and outdoor pavilion provide other activities for guests, along with a fitness center, with a sauna and swim-spa attached.

It's a quirky set-up — a luxury resort in a backwoods town set away from the Gulf — but there-in 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, and then spent 30 minutes chatting with us about dining and fishing spots not to miss.

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 Steinhatchee (pronounced STEEN-hachee).

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

Other state parks are near — Fanning Springs is 31 miles away; Ichetucknee Springs State Park 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 Luraville, you can see the underwater caves unique in the state.

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

Dining is sparse; 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 a lengthy salad bar with fresh choices are tasty, plus you're overlooking the inlet. Fiddler's Restaurant nearby has a full bar, and dishes up seafood, chicken, pork and beef dishes, and caters meals to Steinhatchee Landing.

If you go in the summer, you can get in on the local scallop-

ing; bay scallops can be dug by anyone with a bucket, and you can haul off two gallons of them.

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," to paddle around a river, or shoot pictures in a butterfly garden, or just sit and rock on a porch, you could hardly find a lovelier place for it.

A couple takes in the beauty of nature during a canoe trip on the Steinhatchee River.

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