

life beyond wheels

Quad-Friendly Tampa Bay Travel



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CLEARWATER

As we descend the Skyway Bridge, it looks like we're approaching an island. In reality we're arriving at the southern tip of Pinellas County, the 39-mile peninsula that shelters Tampa Bay from the open Gulf. St. Petersburg, the county's largest and most well-known city, takes up a good deal of the peninsula's southern end. We bypass it, just for now, and head for the beaches first.

Clearwater is the peninsula's second largest city and its county seat. Named by Native Americans for the fresh water springs they found near its shores, it is home to the Philadelphia Phillies' spring training camp, the worldwide headquarters of the Church of Scientology, the world's first Hooters and, thanks to her prosthetic tail, Winter, the world's only performing disabled dolphin.

But Clearwater Beach is the city's star attraction.

Located on a narrow island squeezed between the Gulf and Clearwater Bay, it attracts a diverse following, recently being named one of the East Coast's "Best Family Beaches" and one of the "Top Five Singles Beaches in Florida" — in the same year.

Thanks to the wide range of hotels, motels, restaurants, shops and stores packed on either side of the island's main road, most visitors can find something that fits their taste and budget. We choose the new Hyatt — using the theory that the newest hotel is usually the most wheelchair accessible.

Of course that's just a theory. Check-

ing into the 17-floor, 250-suite, full-service hotel, I'm well aware this is not a budget choice. But our theory proves to be true. We find our room blocked for us, one of the hotel's 13 accessible suites, which contain from 600 square feet to an impressive 1,600 square feet — all with roll-in showers. All of the suites feature kitchens and stunning views of the beach and the newly built 40-foot-wide, half-mile-long Beach Walk that runs along it.

But the bed is what impresses me most.

Rather than the too-high mattresses so popular these days, it is wheelchair transfer height — on an open frame — now standard, I'm told, in all Hyatt ADA rooms.

We're soon off to celebrate sunset at Pier 60.



Author Alan and his wife, Susie.

Just a short push from our hotel, the 1,000-foot-long, beachfront fishing pier provides the gathering point for the daily festival. Just like Key West's celebration, the festivities' arts and crafts booths, street performers and live music attract an enthusiastic crowd.

Our particular favorite is a percussionist who drums on a motley assortment of 5 gallon buckets. His rapidfire quips and drumming tricks keep us, and the rest of the crowd, enthralled. The magnificent sight of the sun setting in the Gulf from a red and copper-streaked sky isn't too shabby either.

For dinner we head to the Beachcomber, within rolling distance of the beach. Founded in 1948, the award-winning res-

taurant is a Clearwater institution, noted for its thick steaks, fresh seafood and fried chicken. Inside it is country-club chic, with soft piano music and some of the best fried shrimp I've ever had.

Just up the block, the Clear Sky Café, another award-winning, but more relaxed and affordable restaurant, packs crowds in with its array of choices, from breakfast to beach food to fine dining, with live music each evening.

For those who'd rather be out on the water for a sunset cruise or daytime dolphin excursion, the Clearwater Beach Marina, directly across the street from Pier 60, houses boats that offer every type of water adventure. Both Island Time Adventures and the Dolphin Encounter have ramps and crew willing to help guests with that one pesky step down from the dock. But Captain Memo's, a 70-foot, very red pirate ship, has no steps.

Everyone — including power chair users — boards across the same wide ramp. Once aboard, all are encouraged to join in the piratical hi-jinks of the crew. Kids love it and there's plenty of free beer and wine to placate the grownups.

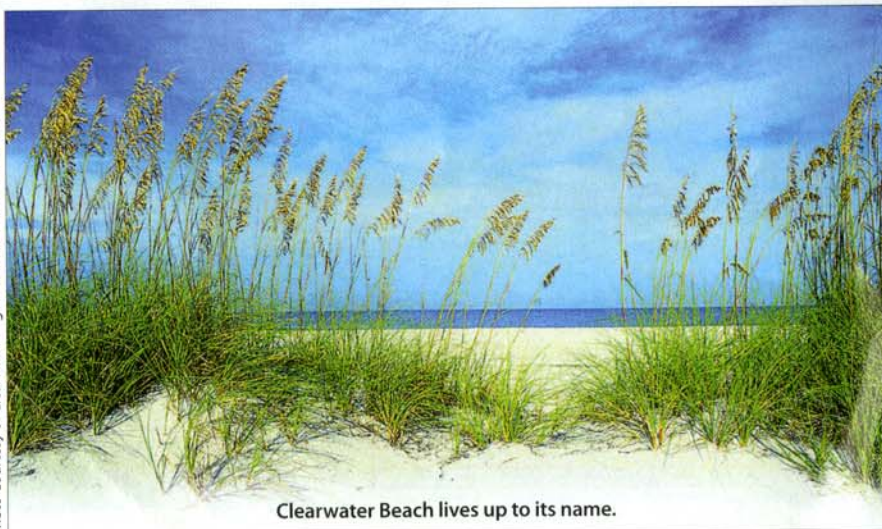
Accessibility seems to be the rule around Clearwater Beach. Curb cuts abound, and at the beach, signs at each handicapped parking spot greet wheelchair visitors with a reminder that sand wheelchairs are available at the lifeguard station. Lift-equipped Jolley Trolleys carry visitors around the island and into downtown Clearwater.

And there are plenty of other beachfront communities to the south.

ST. PETERSBURG

St. Petersburg's downtown sits on the peninsula's bay side, facing Tampa, 18 miles away. The cities share many similarities and a bit of a sibling rivalry. Tampa is the older and larger of the two, already a trading center decades before St. Pete was developed. Today, Tampa's port bustles with cruise ships, freighters and tankers. St. Pete's port hosts a Coast Guard station. St. Petersburg's name was chosen by a coin toss between its co-founders. Had the toss gone the other way, it would be called Detroit. Another interesting factoid about Tampa's name: It's a misspelling of *Tampa* — a Native American word meaning sticks of fire, or campsite.

Both cities were already luring wealthy visitors to their luxury hotels when Miami Beach was still a coconut plantation and



Clearwater Beach lives up to its name.

Barrier-free pirate hi-jinks? Aye.

to the Pier, St. Pete's iconic landmark. Located in the middle of the city's century-old, 7-mile-long bayfront park system, the five-story, upside-down pyramid sits on a pier jutting half a mile into the bay. More than 2 million visitors stroll its mile-long approach each year, shopping and eating at the pyramid's stores and restaurants, fishing off its pier, enjoying the daily events and clicking many, many pictures. Sadly, the Pier, which opened in 1973, is slated for destruction and replacement sometime in the next few years.

The nearby St. Petersburg Museum of History offers a glimpse into the city's past and into aviation history. In 1914, just yards from where the building now stands, Tony Jannus and his Benoist Airboat took off for Tampa on the world's first scheduled airline flight. The museum displays both an operational replica of the airboat and period pictures of the event.

Art fanciers can stroll downtown's many galleries, view the collection at the city's Museum of Fine Art or visit the \$6 million Chilhuly Collection of glass-blown art. Lovers of the surreal can venture a mile south to the Salvador Dali Museum and dally over the world's largest collection of the artist's work outside of Spain.

Diners can choose from a wide assortment of fine restaurants, many of them spread along a restaurant row facing the bayfront park. We try 400 Beach Seafood, which advertises relaxed coastal cuisine — and delivers it.

Music enthusiasts should check out the concerts at Jannus Live, an outdoor concert area nestled in between apartments. Partiers cruise St. Pete's clubs and bars in downtown or on Central Avenue until 3 a.m. — the same closing hour as Tampa.

Those who want to stay close to downtown's action have plenty of lodging options close by. One of the best, the Renaissance Vinoy, a historic hotel on the bay, offers luxurious accessible rooms with roll-in showers as well as its own marina, golf course and spa. There are even more choices across the bay.

TAMPA

At first glance, Tampa looks much more serious than St. Pete. Highrise office buildings crowd its compact downtown. Wide expressways crisscross the city, and traffic clogs its downtown streets. But this is a town that understands that life is about more than commerce. A cluster of nearby hotels, some with rooftop pools like the Marriott Waterside, enable guests to enjoy the downtown's many entertainment and shopping options on foot.

For those who'd rather ride, accessible electric streetcars provide easy transportation along a 2.4-mile loop that covers downtown as well the city's historic Ybor City. Those, like us, who prefer waterborne transportation, can turn to Tampa Water Taxi, which also offers tours.

Captain Larry meets us at a floating dock for our harbor tour, helping me up the one step onto his pontoon boat. Once



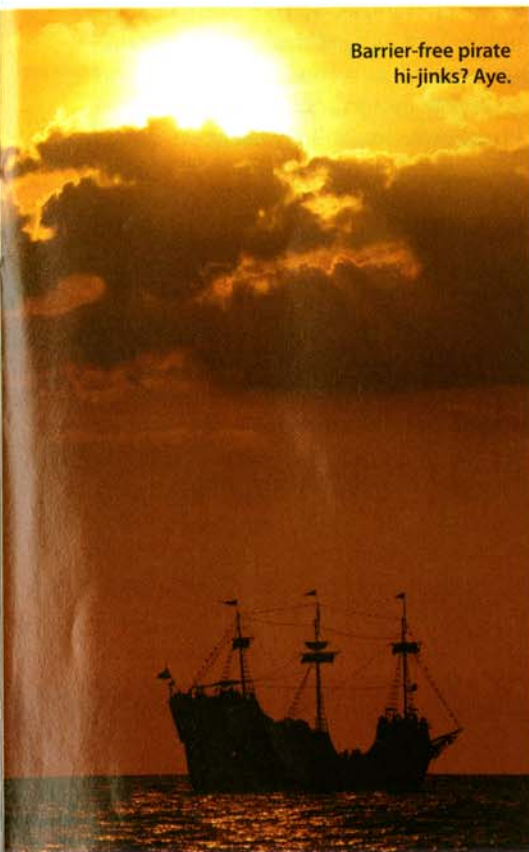
Once a hotel, now the Henry B. Plant Museum.

underway, he narrates a fact-filled, hour-long cruise covering the area's early history — from the Native Americans and Spaniards to Henry Plant, the railroad baron who built Tampa's first hotel. Along the way we motor from harbor channels to waterways, passing behind hotels, attractions and luxury homes.

Venturing up the Hillsborough River, we pause to gaze at Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel. Now a museum, the quarter-mile-long, 511-room Moorish Revival hotel hardly matches the modernity all around it. But its stainless steel minarets, cupolas and domes make for a stunning view.

The Tampa Bay History Center downtown shows and tells more of the story of the area, from the early Native Americans and Spaniards and the Seminole wars, to the cattle drives that once came through the city, and the Spanish-American War. A recreation of a 1920s cigar store gives visitors a look at the area's once thriving industry.

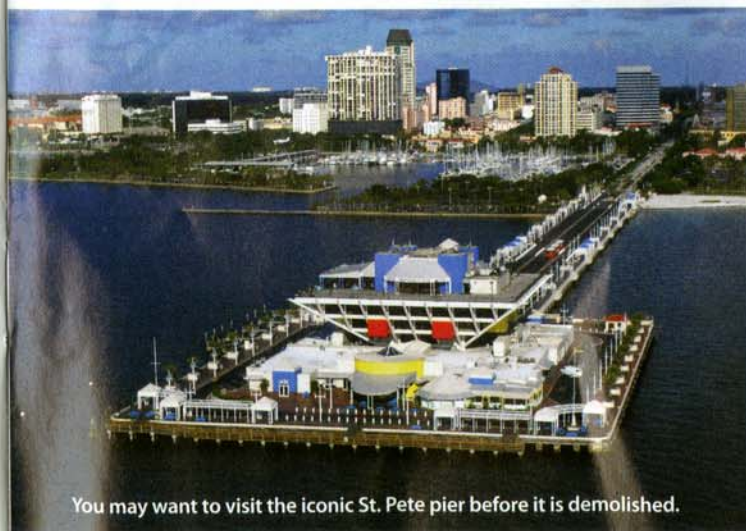
Fish lovers, the viewing kind, can take



Orlando a rural crossroads. And both of their early hotels are still standing — although Tampa's is a museum now and St. Pete's is a condominium.

The two are also the arts and entertainment centers of their respective counties, with St. Pete ranking first in the list of the Top 25 Midsized Arts Destinations. Tampa ranks 11th. Both are sports towns, too, with Tampa bragging on its Buccaneers, Lightning and Storm. St. Pete embraces its Rays and its annual downtown Grand Prix.

But Tampa has nothing that compares



You may want to visit the iconic St. Pete pier before it is demolished.

Photo Courtesy of St. Pete/Clearwater Area CVB