



Kayak tour on the St. Sebastian River, home to kingfishers and manatees.

Along Comes Vero Beach

IN SOUTH FLORIDA, VISIBILITY IS LIMITED

BY TERRY WARD

JUST WHEN YOU'RE SURE you've seen all that Florida's sandspun shores have to offer, along comes Vero Beach. This quirky yet sophisticated town, about 140 miles north of Miami (and just over two hours southeast of Orlando), fronts a lush stretch of coastline that gets lost in the Florida fray by those who don't know to look for it. An oceanfront retreat for sea turtles, snowbirds and surfers alike, Vero Beach offers a balance of nature, culture and healthy living—something that's rare in your typical beach town.

From November through April, Vero Beach's population booms with part-time residents who flock here from out-of-state and abroad for the fine winter weather. The young and trendy set from Miami and Fort Lauderdale is discovering the

town, too, for weekend escapes from busy South Florida. But at its heart, Vero Beach remains a kicked-back natural beauty.

The scattering of hotels and condos here rarely rises above a few stories. And mixed in with the waterfront mansions are original Florida bungalows that look like places where Hemingway might have lived. Follow a hand-painted sign to a riverfront fish market or a streetside stall with fresh coconuts for sale—in Vero Beach, you never know what you'll find.

LIFE'S A BEACH

Vero's best-loved public beach is South Beach Park, at the end of the 17th Street Bridge. This pretty stretch of sand is nothing like the building-backed Miami beach with the similar name. The park ng

lot oves flows on warm sunny days, but you'll find plenty of room on the beach once you move beyond the wooden boardwalk lined with sea-grape bushes.

On another day, it's worth the 25-minute drive north to see Sebastian Inlet State Park (9700 S. State Rd. A1A; floridastateparks.org; \$8/vehicle), where anglers crowd a long pier to fish, and board riders find one of the East Coast's finest surfing spots. The wild beach here is backed by dunes thick with native plants.

Between these two parks is the 248-acre Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge (fws.gov/archiecarr), where some 20,000 sea turtles lumber onto the beach each year to nest. (In June and July, rangers take visitors on night-time walks to watch the turtles laying their eggs.)

Argus and Sophie, resident dogs at the Laughing Dog Gallery.

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The Vero Beach Museum of Art.
Above: Golden finds at Mel Fisher's
Treasure Museum.



"X" MARKS THE SPOTS

In 1715, a fleet of Spanish galleons loaded with untold riches was en route from Havana to Spain when the ships were destroyed by a hurricane just off Vero Beach (hence the area's nickname, the Treasure Coast). Salvage divers still ply the waters in search of the mother lode and beachcombers sweep the sands with metal detectors hoping to get lucky.

As it happens, the chance of finding something is temptingly real. The oceanfront McLarty State Treasure Museum (13180 N. Hwy. A1A; 772-589-2147; \$2) sits on the site of the wrecks' survivors' camp, and displays weapons, belt buckles and pieces of eight (Spanish silver coins) from the 1715 fleet. But the most interesting exhibit is a binder at the welcome desk brimming with news of recent finds. "When the Spanish made jewelry, they really packed it in," says docent Myrna Lisevic, pointing to a 2007 newspaper clipping about a local woman who found a 69-carat emerald while combing the beach for sharks' teeth.

That emerald—along with many other treasures recovered from Florida wrecks—is nearby at Mel Fisher's Treasure Museum (1322 U.S. Hwy. 1; 772-589-9875; melfisher.com; \$6.50). Check out the kid-friendly pirate displays and take turns lifting an authentic Spanish gold bar.

Treasures of a different kind are displayed at the Vero Beach Museum of Art (3001 Riverside Park Dr.; 772-231-0707; vbmuseum.org; free). The permanent collection is mostly early-20th-century American works, while visiting exhibits often tie in marine and nautical themes.

LOCAL PRODUCE

"Where's the best place to get sweet potatoes to cook for him?" a customer with a lab pup under her arm asks an organic farmer at the Saturday-morning Farmers' Market OceanSide Vero Beach (2901 Ocean Dr.; 772-532-2455; farmersmarketoceanside.com). It's set across from an oceanfront park, and live music fills the air as people sample everything from Indian River grapefruits and orange-blossom honey to edible organic flowers and smoked fish dip.

A short stroll away is the Laughing Dog Gallery (2910 Cardinal Dr.; 772-234-6711; thelaughingdoggallery.com), whose exquisite objects (hourglasses, jewelry, chandeliers) are created exclusively by American artisans. Stop by Stephen Bonanno Sandals (946 Beachland Blvd.; 772-234-8377; stephenbonanno.com) for handmade footwear encrusted with shells and beads. Or drive across the bridge to the mainland's revitalized historic district along 14th Avenue, where

you'll find paintings, one-of-a-kind clothing and jewelry by local artists at Tulaa Gallery & Boutique (2036 14th Ave.; 772-778-8830; no website) and vintage teapots at Tea & Chi (2044 14th Ave.; 772-563-0620; teaandchi.com).

INTO THE WILD

"I feel like a nature-show host on a kayak whenever I go out on a trip," says Kristen Beck of Kayaks, Etc. (2628 U.S. Hwy. 1; 772-202-0220; kayaksetc.com; \$35, \$10 for kids). Wearing a leather safari hat jauntily embellished with an osprey feather, she's leading a young couple and a family of five on a 2½-hour paddle around Vero Beach's watery wonders. The Indian River Lagoon, between Vero Beach and the mainland, is North America's most diverse estuary—home to 700 species of fish, more than 300 species of birds and a third of the nation's endangered manatees.

A paddle around the sandy islands will likely bring you to face-to-face with the gentle sea cows, as well as dolphins and ospreys. You can join Beck's tours along the St. Sebastian River, too (a few minutes from the beach), where palms gently curve from banks lined with swamp lilies,

VERO BEACH, FL

kingfishers dive for small fish and manatees slowly bob to the surface around you to breathe. You're practically guaranteed to spot alligators basking in the sun here, too ("They're hunted for barbecues; they don't want anything to do with us," assures Beck). The waterway, dark with tannins, has been on nautical charts since the 1500s, when Spanish sailors filled their casks with drinking water here. Wild descendants of the hogs they brought with them from the Old World can be heard snuffling through the forest at the river's edge. "None of our animals here are animatronic," says Beck. "Welcome to the real Florida."

EAT

The Lemon Tree

Crowds line up on weekend mornings at this cheerful, diner-style restaurant off the beach's main drag. Try the fresh croissants. The hearty chicken potpie is a dinner favorite. *3125 Ocean Dr.; 772-231-0858; breakfast for two, \$22**

Ocean Grill

Tiffany lamps, fishing buoys and a stuffed sailfish are among the eclectic elements at this famous restaurant, hovering atop stilts a mere salt spray from the ocean. Arrive early for a table near the windows and watch sunset streak the sea purple while you dine on chilled stone crab claws, snapper and steaks. *1050 Sexton Plaza; 772-231-5409; dinner for two, \$90*

Cobalt

Chef Bradley Willits' South Carolina training shines in subtle Low Country takes on Florida fare (think rock shrimp andouille Benedict for brunch) at the



The dining room (and view) at Cobalt Restaurant.

Vero Beach Hotel's fine-dining restaurant. You can sit outside under the palms to tuck into dishes like grilled striped bass with artichoke-heart puree or Berkshire pork belly with pickled green tomatoes. *3500 Ocean Dr.; 772-231-5666; dinner for two, \$110*

Kata by Sake

This contemporary pan-Asian restaurant in the historic downtown has huge portions of delicious Vietnamese, Japanese and Thai specialties, along with fresh Florida sashimi. *1306 20th St.; 772-564-8883, dinner for two, \$35*

Capt. Hiram's Restaurant & SandBar

The ultimate hangout, this open-air bar and restaurant (with rooms to rent, too) on the Indian River feels more Caribbean than Floridian. Colorful stools rise from a sandy floor and boat drinks abound. Kids play on the beach and watch swooping pelicans while parents listen to live music and channel Jimmy Buffet at tables inside an old boat. The menu lists charbroiled grouper, grilled mahimahi sandwiches and more. *1580 U.S. Hwy. 1, Sebastian; 772-589-4345; lunch for two, \$25*

**Prices cover a meal for two without drinks, tax or tip.*

STAY

RCI-affiliated resorts in and around Vero Beach include:



DRIFTWOOD INN RESORT

This charming historic resort, constructed out of driftwood and material from sunken ships, is near a quiet beach. It has outdoor heated pools and an open-air restaurant. *3150 Ocean Dr.*

Member Reviews:

"Live music at the pool."

"You can barbecue right near the beach at the resort."

"It was nice to have free wireless Internet access in each unit."

"We loved being right on the beach and within walking distance of shops, restaurants and pastries."



DISNEY'S VERO BEACH RESORT

Mickey is a familiar face at this Disney-themed beachside resort. Bring the kids and take your choice of splashing around in the pool or nearby waves. It's a doable day trip to Walt Disney World's Resort in

Orlando. 9250 Island Grove Terrace

Member Reviews:

“They even have a Disney character breakfast.”
 “Very secluded area of Vero Beach.”
 “This area is known for surfing.”
 “Drive into downtown Vero Beach for nice little bistros.”

THE REEF OCEAN RESORT

Walk to Vero Beach restaurants, theaters, and boutiques or simply hang out on the 2½ acres of prime oceanfront property, picnicking, playing basketball and sunning on the sand. 3450 Ocean Dr.

Member Reviews:

“Ample and well-maintained golf courses, open to the public.”
 “A very quiet resort that is popular with the 45+ crowd.”
 “The area is simply beautiful.”
 “Loved the McLa ty Museum.”



OYSTER POINT

Just 20 minutes up the coast from Vero Beach, this is an ideal spot to explore the Indian River and nearby islands by boat or kayak. Return to the resort to relax in the Jacuzzi and fire up the barbecue. 1570 US Hwy. 1, Sebastian

Member Reviews:

“If you like to fish this would be your paradise; 15-foot boats rent for \$50/week.”
 “Patios and balconies are large and inviting.”
 “Visit the Environmental Learning Center—about 15 minutes south.”
 “The highlight of the trip was a kayak tour of Thousand Islands.”

For more information, including complete member reviews, visit RCI.com or call
Weeks: 800-338-7777
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Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.

NON-RCI-AFFILIATED RESORTS:

Vero Beach Hotel & Spa

This 113-room oceanfront Kimpton property, Vero Beach’s most sophisticated hotel, is family-friendly and an



elegant option for couples, too (check out the oceanfront fire pit). Rooms with balconies overlooking the ocean are particularly appealing. There’s a palm-fringed pool and a beautiful beach right out front. Until the spa is completed, in-room treatments are available. 3500 Ocean Dr.; 866-602-8376; verobeachhotelandspa.com; doubles from \$139 per night

Islander Inn

This refurbished motel is a throwback to Old Florida, with tropical Key West decor and classic charm. Sixteen bright, simple rooms surround a courtyard with a pool, umbrella-shaded tables and barbecue grills. Stop by the takeout window attached to the hotel for good smoothies and coffee for breakfast, then head to the beach across the street or the nearby shops on Ocean Drive. 3101 Ocean Dr.; 772-231-4431; islanderinnvero.com; doubles from \$79



Costa d’Este Beach Resort

Gloria and Emilio Estefan’s hotel conjures up circa-1960s Miami Beach, with retro design elements inspired by sea turtle eggs and bubbles of water. The 94 guest rooms (all with balconies or patios) have

teak accents and tumbled-stone walls, and mother-of-pearl inlays in the bathrooms. Oriente restaurant does delicious Cuban-fusion fare in sexy, lights-low surrounds (the e’s even a cocktail called “The Rhythm is Gonna Get You”). 3244 Ocean Dr.; 772-410-0080; costadeste.com; oceanfront doubles from \$135 per night

Caribbean Court Boutique Hotel

The 18 studio suites at this lovely property across from the beach are furnished with antiques and brightened with tiles and Caribbean artwork. All rooms have mini-kitchens with fridge and microwave, making it easy to settle in. It’s a short drive north from here to the Ocean Drive retail and restaurant strip. 1601 Ocean Dr.; 772-231-7211; thecaribbeancourt.com; doubles from \$109 per night