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Life / Travel

How to have an affordable trip to the Florida Gulf Coast

Driving, RV rental and activities along the coast provide a sunny Florida getaway for little cost



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JOSEPHINE MATYAS PHOTO

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary is home to more than 200 species of birds and many types of amphibians and reptiles.

By: **Josephine Matyas** Freelance Travel writer, Published on Fri Jan 15 2016

FLORIDA-The could-be-better exchange rate between the U.S. and Canadian dollar doesn't have to put the kibosh on a sunny Florida getaway.

Creativity, stepping away from the high-rent districts, and focusing on the state's natural offerings will result in a wallet-friendly holiday. Here are a few tips.

Getting there:

One-way drive programs, such as [Toronto Drive-Away](#), shuttles cars back and forth between the GTA and Florida in the spring and fall. Drivers registered with the service negotiate a date and Florida destination, then take several days to move the car between Toronto and the Sunshine State. Gas costs — which are now less than \$2 (U.S.) per gallon along the Florida Gulf Coast — are reimbursed and the driver is paid for performing the service. The idea is to drive one way and use the cash to fly back.

Bedding down:

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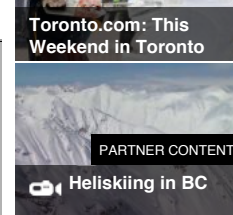
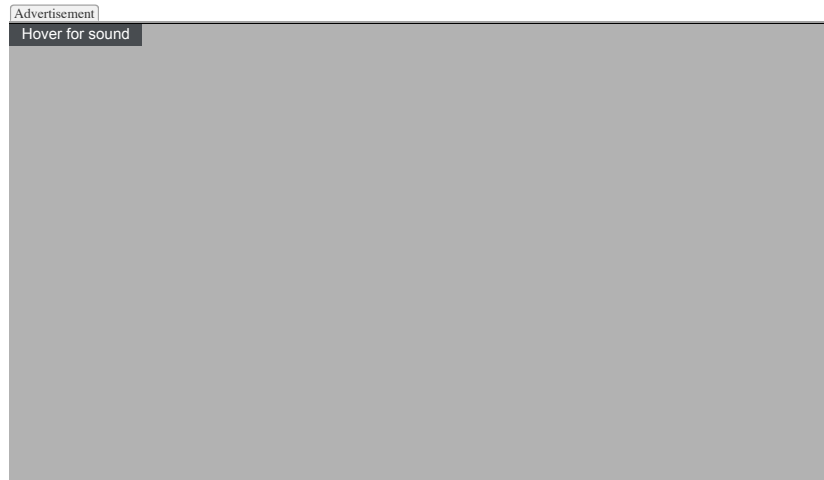


Campuses get creative in battling soaring student stress

Camping helps save a bank balance for when the post-vacation credit-card bill arrives. The middle ground between overnighting on an air mattress in a tent and resort stays is camping in an RV.

Cruise America rents RVs in both Tampa and Fort Myers along the Gulf Coast. Perfect for a family, the standard 25-foot Class C model sleeps five people, lets renters prepare meals, and provides a mode of transportation. The budget trick is to keep kilometres driven to a minimum to avoid mileage charges and high fuel costs. The [Cruise America website](#) also lists seasonal specials, when daily rental rates plummet.

One place to park a rented RV is Koreshan State Historic Site, just outside Fort Myers. It features well-wooded sites, few bells and whistles, and a fascinating historical component of the communal Koreshan, a Utopian society that lived on the land until the mid-1900s. The park rangers give tours of the old communal buildings.



Life's a beach:

Canadians primarily come to the Gulf Coast for the 80 kilometres of white sand beaches. January is still considered shoulder season, when prices are often lower and the crowds are smaller.

The stretch of sand at Lovers Key [State Park](#) is consistently named one of the state's best and an \$8 (U.S.) entry fee yields a full day of activities that include swimming, building sandcastles, watching for manatees and dolphins, strolling the beachfront and catching a sunset. Remember that RV? Park it in the lot to slip back from the beach for lunch or an afternoon nap.

A little further north, in the Bradenton-[Sarasota region](#), there are plenty of parks and public access points to the beaches along the barrier islands of Longboat Key, Siesta Key and Anna Maria Island. The gulf shoreline's famous powdery white quartz sand stays cool underfoot, even in the blazing sunshine. The swimming is great at Coquina Beach and Siesta Beach, and visitors can find free entertainment kibitzing with the fishermen at the end of Anna Maria City Pier.

Wetlands and forest:

The Gulf Coast is home to protected wetlands and untouched landscapes. Not far from Fort Myers, the [Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary](#) protects 14,000 acres prized as a fine stand of subtropical, ancient bald cypress forest. Many of the tall conifers date back to the arrival of Columbus in the New World. The sanctuary is a popular destination for birders and hikers, who walk along a raised boardwalk that twists and turns through swamp, pine flatwoods and stretches of open prairie. Volunteer interpreters stroll the four-kilometre route, explaining the role of the wetlands in filtering pollution and stabilizing soil against erosion.

Barrier islands:

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Wilderness sometimes exists right next to tourist development. Across the bridge from Fort Myers are the subtropical barrier islands of Sanibel and Captiva. On Sanibel Island, half the land has been designated a National Wildlife Refuge, created to protect the pristine habitat, guard endangered wildlife, and provide feeding, nesting and roosting areas for more than 220 species of birds. Paddling along the Commodore Creek Kayak Trail, visitors can spot birds such as the anhinga, pelicans and snowy egrets, and get close to playful dolphins and the occasional manatee.

The Tarpon Bay Explorers' guided tour of the fragile back bay ecosystem finishes at marker No. 11 in the middle of Mullet Lake — but visitors can stretch the afternoon with some exploring of their own, since the kayaks are theirs for the rest of the day. Watch the tide schedules and keep with high tide or risk getting caught on the mud flats.

This trip was partially sponsored by Visit Florida and the Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, who didn't review or approve this story.

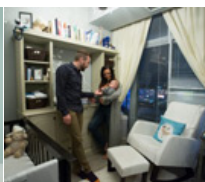
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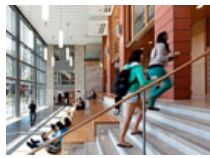
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