



Florida's Gulf Coast

By Nicole Pensiero

Paradise

They call Florida the “Sunshine State” for good reason. And let’s face it, for us northerners, that warmth and sunshine hold special appeal when the temperatures drop.

A friend and co-worker had talked up the charms of the Tampa/St. Petersburg/Clearwater region for years: the blue-green water; the powdery, white sugar sands. She always called Clearwater Beach in particular her “happy place.” It was time to find out why.

While Miami Beach had become my go-to spot in the Sunshine State for the past decade, I discovered the unique appeal of Florida’s Gulf Coast during a recent four-day jaunt. It’s a popular place, and for good reason: its pristine beaches have landed in the Top 10 rankings of America’s best, with Clearwater Beach often taking the No. 1 spot.

Known for its gorgeous sunsets and laid-back vibe, we were enthralled with our accommodations at Clearwater Beach’s hip and glamorous Opal Sands Resort. Every guest room in the 15-story hotel has a water view and a balcony, making it easy to savor morning sunrises and evening sunsets. The 200-plus Opal Sands also offers suites and even larger two-bedroom units, complete with a large outdoor patio. Oh, and I should mention there’s a spa, too, for anyone seeking extra pampering.

Situated at the southern tip of Clearwater’s popular, lushly landscaped Beach Walk, -- which winds through the almost three-mile beachfront -- the Opal Sands has a unique multi-level design that adds to its contemporary “open” feel.

Clearwater Beach’s visual centerpiece, the 1,080-foot-long Pier 60 - which I first got a glimpse of from our 11th story room - is the hub of a good deal of activity here. Named for State Road 60, which runs across the state from Vero Beach, Pier 60 is a central spot for beachgoers and landlubbers alike, and has a playground, a snack bar, and a long fishing pier. It’s also the site of a daily event called Sunsets at Pier 60, which includes street performers and musical acts.

Even in its coldest months (January and February), Clearwater still hits daytime highs in the '70s, making pool and beach time possible. It’s a popular place, but never felt overcrowded. Simply put, Clearwater Beach is truly a take-it-down-a-notch kind of destination, in the best possible way. Everywhere I turned, I saw smiling faces.

Some of the highlights of our Gulf Coast visit included:

- A side trip to the famed Dali Museum in nearby St. Petersburg. Housing North America’s largest collection of Salvador Dali’s works - from massive surrealism paintings to smaller, realistic portraits - this is a fun and fantastic collection. (www.thedali.org).
- A glassblowing workshop at the Morean Arts Center’s Hot Shop, along in St. Pete, that offered us hands-on experience and the chance to create a unique work of art to keep. (www.moreanartscenter.org).
- A sunset cruise on the 52-foot Schooner Clearwater. This two-hour trip provided us with amazing views of the entire beachfront, complete with leaping dolphins, and the as-promised breathtaking sunset. (www.schoonerclearwater).
- Luscious meals at the Opal Sands gourmet restaurant, Sea-Guini. We also crossed the street, directly across from the hotel, to check out the popular Salty’s Island Bar & Grille one morning for breakfast. (www.seaguini.com, www.saltysisland.com).

If you’ve only experienced Florida’s East Coast, I recommend trying out the relaxing vibe of the Gulf Coast. You won’t be disappointed.

For more information about Clearwater Beach, Florida, visit www.clearwaterbeach.com; for information about the Opal Sands Resort, visit www.opalsands.com.

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