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# Resort Retreats

Check in and never leave. At these five destination resorts, you can wake up, play till you drop and do it all again the next day.

PATRICIA LETAKIS



Courtesy Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort

Looking for a one-stop vacation? Florida has some spectacular resorts where everything you need is just steps away. With acreage galore and beaches that skirt either the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico, these properties promise—and deliver—more things to do than you can squeeze into a weekend. You might just have to extend your stay. And if you do, check out orlandomagazine.com for some cool spots to visit in the surrounding areas.

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## Hawks Cay Resort, Duck Key



**Best for:** Those who are in search of the ultimate Florida Keys experience.

About halfway down the Florida Keys, between Marathon and Islamorada, sits little Duck Key. Despite being no more than a spit of land, this island is jam-packed with Key-centric things to do. Once you've checked into Hawks Cay Resort, which sprawls across 60 acres, you'll have absolutely no reason to leave.

**Checking In:** Grab a glass of chilled lemonade from a smiling, sun-tanned attendant and drink in the view from the West Indies-designed lobby. Beyond

the wicker paddle fans, indoor waterfall and towering bird of paradise floral display sits a palm-fringed swimming pool and stone fire pit against a crisp blue sky—the kind you'd only find in an island setting.

The West Indies theme carries into the hotel's 177 rooms, where dark wood poster beds boast embroidered white linens; framed seashell collections adorn the walls; and bathrooms have beadboard, rustic tile and a row of oversized hooks to keep wet swimsuits and beach towels off the floor. Two-story waterfront villas with front porches are available to accommodate families and mariners who need boat dockage.

The Marina: Life in the Keys revolves around the Atlantic Ocean, the Florida Bay and the **Gulf of Mexico**. So it's only natural that the marina is your epicenter for everything watery. Lining the dock are purple and yellow faux shacks where guests sign up for snorkel and dive trips to the reefs. Wannabe divers can take a one-day resort course or opt for snuba, a family-friendly technique using a 20-foot breathing hose that allows you to get face to face with angelfish in the shallow reefs. Stand-up paddleboarding equipment is available for gliding around the harbor; the more adventurous can book a kiteboarding lesson.



**Cast a Line:** At 8 a.m. the boat traffic in the channel passes by the resort's lagoon as deep-sea fishing charters with all the bells and whistles head out to the ocean to snag yellowtail snapper, amberjack and whatever game fish is biting. Smaller light-tackle vessels ply the Gulf's aqua waters en route to reeling in dinner. You'll have your pick of fishing trips that can be booked at the marina. Among the seasoned captains is Jeff Malone, a 16-year-veteran who knows the best spots to snag black grouper and battle a nurse shark or two. Join him on his 17-foot skiff Tarpon Time. Upon returning, just

drop your catch at Tom's Harbor House near the dock, and a cook will happily fry, grill or blacken it for you.

**Swim Time:** One of Hawks Cay's most distinguishing features is its saltwater lagoon, fed by the Atlantic and encircled by a sandy beach dotted with thatched huts and chaises. Kayak, snorkel, jump off the raft or enter a paddleboard race in the pond. The resort has five pools, with families populating the larger main one. But you can also send the kids to the pirate ship pool at the supervised Indies Club, where faux palm trees with water-dumping coconuts get plenty of giggles.

Adults who want to enjoy each other's company can sip tropical drinks, soak in a hot tub or head to the adults-only tranquility pool.

**Eat:** Florida spiny lobster plucked from local waters is served broiled with drawn butter at Alma, a dimly lit hideaway designed for intimate dinners. Casual fare—conch fritters and Key West Sunset Ale—is a favorite at the alfresco Beach Grill. In the morning, a breakfast buffet at the Terrace offers a lovely selection of French cheeses, fluffy Belgian waffles and made-to-order omelets.



**Dolphins:** You'll no doubt be surprised to find a private dolphin lagoon at the resort. Touch and rub these amazing sea mammals, then try your skill with hand signals, all under the guidance of a trainer. Dolphins with names like Lucky, Hastings, Sebastian and Nemo will become your new playmates when you schedule a session at the Dolphin Connection. Hugs and kisses included. [hawkscay.com](http://hawkscay.com)

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## Boca Raton Resort & Club, Boca Raton



**Best for:** Sophisticated travelers with a penchant for the good life. Call it one of the grande dames of Florida. Elegant and historic, the Boca Raton Resort & Club, distinguished by its rosy pink exterior, stretches from South Florida's mainland across the Intracoastal's Lake Boca Raton to a barrier island. Yes, it's huge, some 356 acres, and when booking a room, guests can choose from four buildings: the Yacht Club, the original Cloister, the contemporary Tower and the beachy Boca Bungalows. Then of course, there's a wealth of recreational facilities—a golf course, tennis courts, a marina and beach club—to leave you dizzy.

**Checking In:** Just arriving at this South Florida resort is an experience. Rows of Royal palms stand tall like sentries guarding the entrance. Inside the gate, the juxtaposition of Mediterranean-inspired architecture dating back to 1926 with the resort's larger-than-life pop art sculpture Doggy John in DayGlo colors, surprises guests. Choose a room in the centrally located Yacht Club. The tower's balconies face the ocean and overlook sleek million-dollar yachts docked in the palm-tree fringed marina below. This is also where boats pick up guests and ferry them to the Beach Club. Venetian influences, from gold-edge mirrors and seashell motifs to king-size beds cocooned by blue fleur-de-lis-patterned draperies, reinforce the resort's elegance.



**Pamper Palace:** Living the good life requires a spa treatment, and the Ritual Bath at Spa Palazzo will give you a new appreciation for H2O. When you book select treatments, like the Swe-Thai Massage, the five-part bath is complimentary. Before entering the water room—designed with columns, arches and geometric mosaics inspired by Spain's Alhambra Palace—guests are invited to spend a few minutes relaxing in the inhalation room with soothing cucumber slices and a cold compress over the eyes. When ready, the attendant escorts you to a soothing bubble bath. Next you enter a shower where multiple water jets stimulate your skin. The fourth step is a soak in an individual Jacuzzi tub. Once you enter, powerful jets massage tired feet as more jets work your back. As you lean forward, a deluge of water from a ceiling shower works the stress out of shoulder muscles. Lastly, you loll around in a traditional Jacuzzi before going off to your treatment room. Does it get any better?



**Art Galore:** For years, the resort has worked at acquiring the major works of art sprinkled throughout the grounds. In the lobby at the Baker Sponder Gallery, you can pick up the Sculpture

Tour guide to self-navigate the \$6 million collection. Start with one of the newer pieces in the lobby: the Jelly Bean Family by Mauro Perucchetti. The subtle eyes and noses molded into the colorful resin sculptures of Mom, Dad and three kids, who resemble oversized Gummy Bears, glow when the light hits just right. Out at the Beach Club you'll do a double take on Survival of Serena. Carole Feuerman's realistic sculpture of a swimmer—hugging an inner tube, bathing cap secure, droplets of water on her face and arms—is so lifelike it's almost spooky. Bronze sculptures, including classic nudes and Fernando Botero's Hombre a Caballo, are other highlights of the collection.

**Eat:** With 15 bars and restaurants, the resort is a foodie's dream. Celeb chef Masaharu Morimoto has a cool sushi bar where a blue faux fish tank serves as art on the wall. The Iron Chef features the best cuts of tuna on his sashimi menu: otoro and chutoro. An evening at Cielo on the 27th floor is reason to dress up. Not only do you get a glowing nighttime view of Florida's coastline, but the Mediterranean-inspired menu includes dishes like lamb tagine; braised lamb shank with couscous and dried fruits; and branzino, a European sea bass served with tomatoes, olives, preserved lemons and chermoula. Plan on a leisurely dinner. [bocaresort.com](http://bocaresort.com)



## WaterColor Inn & Resort, Santa Rosa Beach



**Best for:** Barefoot living in true beach-town style. Rising up along the beach on Scenic Highway 30A in Northwest Florida is WaterColor Inn & Resort. Tucked in with stylish Gulf-front communities where vacation homes and small inns dominate the scene, this all-encompassing 499-acre property is a standout. True to the saying that the farther north you go the more Southern Florida gets, you can expect a good dose of Southern hospitality here, along with sweet tea and Southern draws. And of course, the sand along the Panhandle is the whitest and softest you'll find in the state, so park

your beach chair and stay a while.

**Checking In:** Rooms are definitely beach-chic, with a coastal palette of sea-foam green, sunny yellow and seaside blue. All 60 face the placid shoreline. First-floor accommodations have private patios with Adirondack chairs, situated behind dunes covered with Florida scrub. Upper-level rooms (floors two through four) boast balconies that make prime perches for watching the glorious sunsets. Unexpected is the walk-in shower with windows that allows you to see the Gulf of Mexico as you bathe. But the resort is more than hotel rooms. Guests who need more space or plan a lengthy stay can choose to rent a vacation home. The two- and three-story houses, with multiple bedrooms and fully loaded kitchens, have style and character distinct to this fashionable stretch of Northwest Florida. Expect porches, shutters and rooftop decks on the outside, with well-executed beach, nautical or rustic décor themes inside.



**Hit the Beach:** Follow a sandy path to a boardwalk that descends to the beach. Transparent bathtub-temperature water (except during winter) reveals a soft, sandy bottom, sans rock and seaweed. Sunrise-to-sunset, attendants are available to set up umbrellas and chairs, and the resort's layout makes it effortless to move between dips in the azure waters of the Gulf and lounging on your terrace or going poolside for lunch. At dusk when the light is at its best, nature turns this stretch of sand and surf into an explosion of pink, blue and aqua with streaks of yellow.



**Explore:** You can gallivant around the property on foot, by bicycle, in a kayak or on a stand-up paddleboard. Follow a gravel trail lined with blooming lavender to the boathouse on the edge of Western Lake. This coastal dune lake is skirted by towering pine trees that cast long shadows on the dark waters. Launch from the weatherworn pier and

paddle under a bridge into open space ideal for fishing. The curious find it easy to hop on a cruiser and pedal their way through WaterColor's neighborhoods, where they can explore the Cracker-style architecture of the vacation homes. In the surrounding boutiques, shoppers find Lilly Pulitzer floral-print resort wear at the Barefoot Princess and rainbow-colored T-shirts and visors at the WaterColor Store.

**Eat:** At day's end, celebrate the spirit of the South with a Cat on a Hot Tin Roof cocktail, made with Mississippi's own small-batch Cathead Honeysuckle Vodka mixed with lemon, mint and jalapeño. Enjoy it on

the sunset deck at Fish Out of Water, the resort's flagship restaurant. Local hopper shrimp known for their lobster-like flavor make a great appetizer, and red snapper or grouper plucked from nearby waters follows. You can even order Southern sides like cornbread and mustard greens. An elegant private dining room off the main seating holds the restaurant's wine collection—take a peek. Daytime alfresco dining at the Beach Club Grille, near the resort pool, is where you'll find casual fare like fish tacos, burgers and shrimp po' boy sandwiches.

**Swim Time:** Six pools are scattered throughout the property. The resort's upper-level Beach Club Pool is large enough that kids can splash around at one end while parents peacefully dangle their feet at the other. Shade-seekers ramble up to the Beach Club Grille deck, which overlooks the pool and shoreline, for a Frozen Key Lime Colada, refreshingly tart and so thick it's served with a spoon. [watercolorresort.com](http://watercolorresort.com)



## South Seas Island Resort, Captiva Island



**Best for:** Families who like a small-town, island environment.

Far from any urban hustle and bustle, South Seas Island Resort is where families can reconnect. To get to Captiva Island, you pass through Fort Myers, then pay a \$6 toll and drive through 11-mile-long Sanibel Island before crossing over to this small stretch of land. Huge beach houses, which could easily land a spot in *Architectural Digest*, greet visitors. In their seashell-strewn entrances, the homes display plaques that read *Happy Destiny*, *Hakuna Matata*, *Dolphin's Crossing* and other monikers that give these abodes their island flair.

Before you reach the entrance to the resort, you'll drive alongside the Gulf and through Captiva's tiny downtown.

**Checking In:** While registering, you'll receive a map for navigating the 330-acre property and its 2½ miles of beach. A bevy of hotel rooms and vacation rental properties, including condos, villas and private homes, dot this Southwest Florida resort. In fact, South Seas has become a favorite with extended families who can choose to book any of the various accommodations. Grandparents can stay in a harbor-side room, close to the main pool, marina and restaurants, while parents and kids have plenty of space in a three-four- or five-bedroom private home. Once settled in, put the car keys away because open-air trolleys shuttle guests to and from their accommodations and the pool, marina, 9-hole golf course and beach paths. Rental bicycles and golf carts make it easy to explore on your own.

**Playtime:** A trip to the beach always turns up seashells. Since Sanibel Island runs east to west and Captiva turns northwest, both shores are in position to scoop up shells brought in by the Gulf tide. Best time to scour the resort's coastline is at low tide, and a full or new moon indicates that the tide is at its lowest. You might want to take a bag along; depending on the time of day, the bounty of conch, whelk and clam shells can be impressive. Youngsters will beg to spend the entire day at the H2Whoa water park, flying down and navigating the twists and turns of a 16-foot serpentine speed slide. However, if you want to take advantage of the resort's natural island setting, enroll your children in a half-day camp run by the Sanibel Sea School. Interactive programs cover everything from the pelicans soaring above to the crabs and seagrass below. For teens, there's nothing like an early morning family kayak trip. Captiva Kayak Co. leads eco-tours from the resort into the glassy waters of Pine Island Sound, south to Buck Key's mangrove forest and winding trails.





**Eat:** For lunch, stroll over to the Pointe, adjacent to the main swimming pool, for a mahi mahi fish sandwich and views of the sound and the palm-fringed pool area, complete with cabanas. Kids can hang out at nearby Scoops & Slices, which offers pizza and towering hot-fudge sundaes. Red vinyl booths and a black-and-white checkered floor give the restaurant a 1950s diner appeal. For the evening, the newest spot is Doc Ford's Rum Bar & Grille at the resort's entrance. Co-owned by Southwest Florida novelist Randy Wayne White, the casual restaurant is named after the protagonist in

his thrillers, which are set in Sanibel and the surrounding waters. His bestsellers—along with his line of hot sauces named after characters and themes in his novels—are on sale for those who never read White's Florida-centric books. A huge bar and back room with a stage for live music makes this a fun stop for an early dinner with the kids or a late-night stop without them—after all isn't that why you brought the grandparents? [southseas.com](http://southseas.com)

## Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort, Amelia Island



**Best for:** Falling off the grid with Mother Nature. Just before you reach the Florida/Georgia line is an I-95 exit to Amelia Island. On this northernmost barrier island, the Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort occupies 1,350 acres of its southern end. One of the best things about the resort's location is the vista looking north: a far-reaching, elegant Atlantic coastline, with crashing waves and billowy sea oat-studded dunes. On the western side of the property, miles of verdant marshland with ribbons of sapphire water provide a quiet setting. In between these two scenic stretches, granddaddy oaks dripping with Spanish moss and

indigenous plants create soothing green space for a retreat with nature.

**Checking In:** After an \$85 million enhancement unveiled in March 2013, guests arriving at the resort hotel step into a lobby that connects them with their natural surroundings, with floor-to-ceiling windows that open up to the pool, palms and ocean beyond. Book a room in the new Oceanside wing, where interior designers used hues from the beach and the sea to create a fresh, airy décor that blends with the oceanfront scene enjoyed from the balcony. Gaze down to the pool deck with its tiered lounge seating: An eye-popping, contemporary infinity-edge pool for adults is where you want to go to unwind. Besides hotel-style accommodations, the plantation has two- and three-bedroom condos, called villas, located near the resort's three golf courses.

**Rendezvous with Nature:** Exploring the grounds on foot or in an island-hopper golf cart are ways to reunite with nature; the resort also offers Segway tours that are especially fun if you've never driven one of these two-wheeled electronic vehicles. A brief instruction and practice session helps you get comfortable on the Segway. Then, a guide leads the group along forested paths, past homes hidden behind foliage and across a bridge-like overpass, as cars whiz by underneath, to the Intracoastal marsh preserves on the other side of Highway A1A. Ask all the questions you want about the variety of palm trees and long-legged waterfowl you'll spot along the way, as well as the Indian burial mound near the marshes. Navigating your Segway through the western side of the property, you might be inspired to return and cast a line in the brackish lagoons and reel in redfish, trout or flounder. Back at the Nature Center, chat with a naturalist about the other tours available. Birders can set out at dusk to observe diurnal birds retiring and nocturnal birds and bats coming out to feed on the Sunset with the Birds tour. If you're lucky enough to be here during a new moon, join the New Moon Beach Walk tour, which scours the shore for shells, sea turtles, bioluminescence and any nocturnal creature that crosses its path. The sunset and moonlight tours by kayak cast a totally different light on the marshlands.

**Eat and Shop:** The resort has nine restaurants so there are plenty of options to satisfy your appetite. Start with breakfast at the resort's Sunrise Café—whether it's just a cup of Joe or a stack of banana pancakes with





Georgia pecans. The alfresco dining area overlooks the ocean and the 6th hole of the Ocean Links golf course. Once fueled up, walk over to the plantation's hub, composed of shops, restaurants and a spa. At Red Otter Outfitters you can pick up a pair of Patagonia board shorts, made from quick-drying, water-resistant nylon fabric, for your next paddling excursion. Wrap up your day with dinner at the Verandah on the northern end of the property. The chef creates a Florida-inspired menu peppered with Southern surprises. How about fried green tomatoes or a Florida Fish Muddle, with the local Mayport shrimp, clams and the catch of the day?

Sides like sweet corn succotash and Anson Mills grits are too good to resist. [omnihotels.com](http://omnihotels.com)

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