

It's not your mother's Florida

From mom & me massages and Moorish baths to gourmet restaurants and personal nutritionists, the state is booming with wellness options for visitors young and old

BY ROCHELLE LASH, FREELANCE

Florida doesn't follow tourism trends. It makes them. So, it's no surprise that spa life, one of the fastest growing branches of tourism, is booming.

More than 100 major resort spas have sprung up throughout the state, appealing to a range of tastes, budgets and lifestyles, from clothing-optional to black-tie. One thing is for sure. It's no longer your mother's Florida.

The state boasts 1,770 kilometres of warm, sandy beaches and more golf courses - 1,370 and counting - than any other U.S. state. It's an agora of tourism, welcoming 84 million visitors per year, most of whom are from other parts of the United States but more than 2 million from Canada.

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Family life is paramount at resorts in Florida's Gulf Coast communities like Fort Myers, Sanibel Island, Naples and Tampa. The warm, relatively tranquil Gulf waters are ideal for para-sailing, dolphin watching, charter fishing for shark and red snapper - and spa life.

The Pink Shell Beach Resort and Spa, on an island near Fort Myers, has fine white sand beaches and sweeping views of the Gulf of Mexico. Pink Shell's Aquagene Spa offers Aqua-Teen treatments such as skin care consultations, makeup lessons and Mom & Me dual massages. The resort is a playground for children of all ages. It has a dedicated children's village, and fun features such as Bongo's, a tropical poolside bistro, and the Octopool, an underwater park with sculpted coral reefs and make-believe fish and sea animals.

Orlando is best known for the Disney empire, including the flagship Disney Grand Floridian Resort & Spa in Orlando, which is as much a deluxe getaway for grown-ups as it is a fantasy land for kids. However, another Orlando-area getaway offers spa life with a difference. The Cypress Cove Nudist Resort & Spa has been a nudist camp since 1964 and recently added the Silver Lining Massage Spa. Cypress Cove is a sprawling inland resort surrounded by lush landscaping and groves of palm and cypress trees. About one-half of the guests are families with children.

"We are very conservative and family oriented. Behaviorally, we're the same as Disney," said Cypress co-owner Ted Hadley. "The only difference is that we don't wear clothes."

Cypress has a vast lake, two hot tubs, three swimming pools, a new fitness centre, bike rentals, a nine-hole golf course, and tennis courts. After a game of billiards in the Cheeks Bar & Grill or

shopping at the Fig Leaf boutique, guests can head to a poolside cabana for massages and body wraps.

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Florida's Gold Coast is a shimmering oceanfront strip of sand-and-sun-drenched resorts in the vacation towns of Miami Beach, Palm Beach, Boca Raton and Fort Lauderdale. Some of the Gold Coast's classic, palatial hotels have been temples to the sun for a century or more, attracting golfers and spa-goers from north of the Mason-Dixon line. Miami and Miami Beach likely encompass the highest concentration of luxury resort spas in the world, and at least a dozen splendid new destinations have opened in the past year or will open this year, including Canyon Ranch Living, a branch of the best known wellness centre in the United States.

Miami's South Beach is a world apart, a living architecture museum of nearly 1,000 art deco buildings and more than 100 fashionable design-oriented hotels, most with spas. South Beach is the epicentre of cool that buzzes year-round with the energy of an international set of the young and gorgeous and celebs like Jennifer Lopez, Tom Cruise, Matt Damon and Paris Hilton. The party scene is exhilarating and exhausting. The beauty requirements are demanding. And spas are essential antidotes to the meltdowns on both fronts.

The biggest splash in Florida's tidal wave of spa life is at the Boca Raton Resort and Club, a lavish Gold Coast heirloom that has undergone a \$100-million reconstruction. This resort personifies the charm of old Florida; it still has the toney, black-tie ambience that it had when it opened in 1926. An exclusive village spread over 144 hectares, Boca embraces the outstanding Spa Palazzo and superior sporting facilities, including two golf courses, a private marina on Lake Boca, a stretch of beach on the Atlantic, and a 30-court tennis centre where Chris Evert teaches. Thirteen gourmet restaurants offer a variety of cuisine, including spa meals, wood-fired steak or Italian fare.

Boca encompasses more than 1,000 rooms and suites in five buildings, although the Beach Club is closed for an overhaul until next winter. The main guest house is the historic Cloister, a pink Spanish-style mansion. Other buildings are scattered along golf fairways or at the yacht club, all linked by Spanish-style promenades. Former Montrealer Alexandra Champalimaud, known for her interior decorating at New York's Carlyle Hotel, is designing the new Boca Bungalows, a series of luxurious suites.

The sunset-pink Spa Palazzo is an opulent fountain of youthful looks with manicured gardens, waterfall whirlpools, Moorish baths and an astounding 44 treatment rooms. The signature facial is done with Sevruga caviar, which the spa says is restorative for mature skin. Guests soak away tension in mineral baths with heady, aromatic oils of cranberry or pomegranate. Then they move on to cleansing steam-and-sauna detox sessions and healing therapies like body wraps or deep tissue massages with curative elements such as mud, eucalyptus or citrus. Spa Palazzo also holds Teen Spa Nights with massages, soaking baths, manicures and pedicures.

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Farther south, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary encompasses a stunning, sub-tropical archipelago of 800 islands - an inspiration for artists, writers and scuba divers who can explore the large reef. The approximately three-hour drive from Miami is a leisurely series of island-hops.

Pearl's Rainbow Resort for Women reflects Key West's substantial gay community. It's a comfortable, rambling inn that operates in a series of renovated vintage cottages less than two blocks from the sea. Pearl's has 38 simply furnished B&B-style rooms, some with ocean views, two outdoor heated swimming pools, a poolside bar and grill, and two hot tubs. You don't have to be gay to check in, but you do have to be 18. The pool areas are clothing-optional. A massage therapist performs Swedish rubdowns or therapeutic muscle relaxation in a tranquil outdoor courtyard that's protected by palm trees and scarlet hibiscus.

Everglades National Park, a steamy eco-system of waterways lined with mangrove and cypress jungles, is an absolute natural for wildlife lovers. Exotic birds, panthers and alligators share the sawgrass plains and swampland. It's said that each of the Everglades' 10,000 islands has different seashells. Boating here might mean a swamp buggy ride or nighttime kayaking through the wetlands. Fishermen are in heaven with the abundant snook, grouper and mackerel, and the annual Seafood Festival in February is a great time to sample the catch of the day.

The Everglades Spa and Lodge, the centrepiece of a quiet town of about 500 people, has a languid southern style and B&B-style lodging at rock-bottom prices. Facials and baths using clay are the signature treatments, with different types of clay that the spa owners say draw out body toxins such as lead or copper. The Everglades Spa also offers a range of alternative healing massages and treatments.

IF YOU GO:

Pink Shell Beach Resort & Spa: 888-222-7465, www.pinkshell.com; in Fort Myers Beach. The family resort has 225 studios and condos for two-to-six people. Situated on an island about 14 kilometres from Fort Myers, the resort has a private Gulf Coast beach, marina and sailing school, four heated swimming pools and exceptional children's activities. Aquagene Spa has 12 treatment rooms, a new fitness room, and a eucalyptus steam room.

Boca Raton Resort & Club: 888-491-2622; www.bocaresort.com, in Boca Raton. This huge, luxury Atlantic Ocean beachfront resort has boating, sports and exceptional grounds. Rooms and one-bedroom suites are available as are three- and four-bedroom suites. Spa Palazzo has 44 spa treatment rooms, a private pool, steam bath, eucalyptus room, sauna, boutique, juice bar, health café and beauty salon. Swedish-Thai massage combines muscle relaxation with yoga-style stretching, at a cost of \$215 for 80 minutes.

Cypress Cove Nudist Resort & Spa, 888-683-3140, www.cypresscoveresort.com, in Kissimmee, a 30-minute drive from Orlando. The resort has 84 hotel rooms and apartments in two-storey buildings for two people, without meals. Prices are discounted for members of the Federation of Canadian Naturists. The resort has two outdoor swimming pools, a 20-hectare lake for boating and beach. At

the Silver Lining Massage Spa, 407-461-9738.

Everglades Spa and Lodge: 239-695-1006, www.evergladesspaandlodge.com, in Everglades City. This small-town inn and spa on an island at the heart of The Everglades includes a converted bank building with six guest rooms and three spa treatment rooms. Pets are welcome.

Pearl's Rainbow Resort for Women, 800-749-6696, www.pearlsrainbow.com, in Key West, Fla. This resort bills itself for lesbian or gay-friendly women only. The small hotel in a residential area near the ocean has rooms for two (including full breakfast), a patio bar, two heated outdoor swimming pools, two hot tubs, indoor or outdoor massage services. Pets are accepted in some rooms.

For more on Florida's spas, go to www.visitflorida.com.

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