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Florida is the ideal place to go for stunning beaches and sunsets (right)



“You really would be hard pushed to find friendlier people anywhere”

Florida, US

Driving across the States on a huge road trip has always been a dream of mine, but with limited time – and funds – my boyfriend Dom and I needed to focus. Sun, sea and relaxation were our priorities, and Florida offers those pretty much all year round.

Choosing to avoid the Disney-mania of Orlando and Miami, we hired a car and made our way up the scenic west coast for a week of sightseeing.

As soon as we landed in Tampa, two things struck us: the humid heat and the sunny nature of the Floridians themselves. You really would be hard pushed to find friendlier people anywhere.

Our first stop was St Petersburg. Driving across wide highways with clear, glistening water on either side, we instantly felt relaxed. We were staying at the Postcard Inn on St Pete Beach, a cool, surf-inspired hotel with lanterns in the trees and surfboards in the rooms, and we spent our evening in the beach-side bar, watching the sun go down on

volleyball players and bodyboarders. As a tropical thunderstorm began to break across the Gulf of Mexico, we felt far away from home.

When you live in London and you're visiting one of the best beaches in the US, you really should be sunbathing. And thankfully, the weather had cleared the following day (Florida is not called the Sunshine State for nothing).

Then we took an easy, three-hour drive north to Cedar Key. A small, close-knit island town in the Florida Keys, it's a faintly surreal place where houses are raised up on stilts and golf carts are the most popular mode of transport. But we were soon charmed by it, hiring a cart and spending the afternoon exploring the town, from the docks to the State Park, where Dom was certain he spotted some alligator tracks. Later we took a guided boat tour out into the open water, spying dolphins, pelicans and horseshoe crabs. But still no alligator.

We didn't know what to expect from our next destination, as we couldn't even pronounce it: Apalachicola. This small fishing town is scattered with galleries and boutiques, and over breakfast at our riverside apartment we could watch the fishermen at work.

But perhaps the highlight of our week was a boat tour with expert fisherman Paul, where we raced dolphins and fished till sunset.

I ate my first oyster, plucked straight from the sea, and caught my first ever fish, a 12-inch crevalle jack.

Each place we visited was completely different from the last, and Panama City Beach, our final destination, was no exception. There's even an hour's time difference in this fun city, which is home to 27 miles of beautiful beaches. We took a walk around St Andrews State Park, with its sand dunes and piers jutting out into the Gulf of Mexico, and we finally saw an alligator – albeit at the Marine Park.

Laura Mulley

For more on Florida, see www.visitflorida.com. For information on the areas that Laura stayed in, see www.visitstpeteclearwater.com, www.visitnaturecoast.com, www.saltyflorida.com and www.visitpanamacitybeach.com. With thanks to Florida Car Hire (www.floridacarhire.com).