

## The Sensual Sunshine State

By Maureen Hart

Where can you go to find trendy Art Deco architecture and happening nightlife? Or colonial Spanish architecture, complete with a centuries-old fort? Or beaches that vie for the title of “Most Beautiful in the World.” What about driving over turquoise water to a place where watching the sunset is the “in” thing to do? Or collecting seashells on a gorgeous shoreline, or perhaps spotting alligators in a swamp? Or, maybe even finding your own Magic Kingdom with your favorite mouse?



Honeymooners can do all of these things, and much, much more by heading to the crazily eclectic state of Florida, which is just a short flight from the Northeast.

Couples who want to combine beach activity with sightseeing can fly to Daytona Beach, where auto racing fans can enjoy the Daytona 500 Experience, an exhibit dedicated to that popular sporting event. A short drive to the south brings you to the John F. Kennedy Space Center, where you can try the new Shuttle Launch Experience.

Less than an hour to the north is St. Augustine, the oldest city in the United States. It boasts Castillo de San Marcos, an ancient fort and national monument, as well as a picturesque marina, an alligator farm, and lots of quaint shops and restaurants. Couples who opt to make this their home base can choose from a host of lovely bed-and-breakfast establishments.

Farther (much farther) south is Miami Beach, a fun spot equally beloved by movie stars, trendsetters, and typical tourists. The pastel Art Deco hotels which other cities might have pulled down have been renovated and restored instead. The tempo is vibrant and you might run into Leonardo or Cameron or some other celebrity drawn to the sun, surf, and Latin beat of Miami’s nightlife.

Miami and Miami Beach are connected by causeways, but are quite different. It is worth a trip from the beach across to the city to sample the Cuban atmosphere of Calle Ocho and try a meal of ropa vieja or peccadillo, with some plantanos maduras on the side. Don’t forget a pitcher of fruity sangria to celebrate your good fortune in beginning married life in such an exotic place.

Another idea is to fly into Miami International Airport and rent a car to drive the Intercoastal Highway through the Florida Keys. You will pass Kay Largo and

Marathon Key, and finally, after some hours, end up in Key West, the southernmost point of the United States. Beloved by Hemingway (you can visit his home or stop by his favorite watering hole, known as Sloppy Joe's bar), Key West has become more touristy over the decades, but it retains a tropical charm that continues to draw hoards of visitors. The most popular activity in Key West (next to eating conch chowder) is going to the Sunset Celebration held nightly on Mallory Dock. You can view buried treasure from the Atocha, a sunken ship, or enjoy a stroll around a town that drew such diverse fans as Harry Truman and Tennessee Williams. Key West has a way of making everybody welcome.

Honeymooners who choose to drive through the Everglades instead might spot an alligator or two or three, and enjoy seeing vegetation and wildlife that are unique to this spot on the map. Across Alligator Alley, on the west coast of Florida, can be found such glorious beaches as Naples where gathering seashells is the favorite pastime; Sarasota (home of the Ringling Art Museum), Tampa, St. Petersburg, or Clearwater.

Going north and then west, one comes to the Florida Panhandle, where one can drive from Panama City toward Alabama and Mississippi to enjoy a completely different vista with rolling sand dunes.

In the center of all of this, in Orlando, is the happiest place on the planet. Disney World has been entertaining people of all ages for 30 years, but recently the Mouse has started to cater more extensively to weddings and honeymoons with its Destination Disney division.

You can pretend you are Cinderella and Prince Charming in a wedding staged with a fairytale castle in the background, then enjoy a honeymoon that includes the theme parks, water rides, golf, tennis, and any other activity you can imagine. You can indulge your inner child by frolicking with Mickey, Minnie and their pals by day, then head to Pleasure Island, where every night is New Year's Eve and the pulsating dance music continues until the wee hours.

Honeymooners won't need a passport or a money exchange to enjoy the many different cultures and environments which are part of the exciting Sunshine State.

