

Jake Hurfurt uncovers the vibrant, hip and laid-back side of the Sunshine State that's a million miles away from Disney

**THE LITTLE SMOKE:**  
'Cigar City' Ybor has a wealth of history to explore



# Florida is truly Smokin'

**F**LORIDA is more than the land of Mickey Mouse, which despite bringing in millions of visitors every year, gives the state a certain image in holiday brochures. Looking beyond the characters and the 'Happiest Place on Earth' in Orlando, parts of the state have

an edge that wouldn't be out of place in some of New York's hipper districts. At the core of the Tampa Bay area is the city of Tampa itself, small enough to feel familiar after a day or so, even though there's plenty going on. Sitting on the coast at the mouth of the Hillsborough River, which courses through the city,

there's something innately relaxing about Tampa despite the hive of activity around the skyscrapers that make it one of Florida's largest business centres. The city is immaculate, litter is hard to find and every patch of public land is well groomed. This care, along with the year-round sun and the fact that water is never far away, is perhaps why the major

business centre has a certain serenity about it. Tampa shows an alternative side of Florida that isn't the over-the-top energy of Disney and Universal, but it still has its own buzz of a more laid-back sort. Fashionable bars and restaurants are plentiful. Anise, an Asian-inspired gastro bar impressed with its seared tuna

jap chae (a noodle and vegetable mix) and twists on cocktails that gave old favourites an interesting new dimension. A few blocks away was Hotel Bar which had an impressive choice of less-than-mainstream drinks and a cocktail menu that lacked in tradition but offered exciting new flavours, including an absinthe-based drink that ▶



**BLAZE OF COLOUR:** The residential side of Bradenton

▶ you'd still feel the next morning. In the daytime, Tampa offered plenty to keep you on the move, from paddle boarding or kayaking and rowing on the river to a leisurely cycle down the river walk. For people who want to mix beach time with a bit more activity it's a refreshing place to take advantage of the warmth and the water.

**M**any of the city's hotels overlook the river and there are rooms to suit everyone's taste, from household names like Sheraton and Hilton to the boutique Aloft with its exposed beams and live music in the bar.

Just northeast of the city centre is Ybor City, an area steeped in history and home to a blend of decades-old institutions and up-and-coming spots. Known as Cigar City, and once the centre of global cigar production, it was founded in the late 19th century as an industry town for the tobacco business. Ybor was unique as a Southern city, being built on immigration from all over the world.

The immigrant history of Ybor can be seen in the social clubs for



**CHOICE:** US individuality shines through in the varied businesses

each nationality that acted as the community hubs for all the different groups in the area.

Ybor City's proximity to Cuba brought gangs to the area, especially during prohibition where alcohol could be smuggled in from the Caribbean. Diversity and a gangland past are just part of what makes the history of the vibrant area fascinating.

However, automation of cigar production and the Depression hit the city hard in the 1930s and it saw a rapid decline. Crime and

population drain hurt the city until regeneration efforts took hold in the 1990s, with artists attracted to its history and low prices.

These days gentrification has truly taken hold, with some of South Florida's best nightlife occupying parts of 7th Avenue.

A highlight is the Columbia Restaurant, which has been owned and run by the same family since 1905. The eatery has grown from a saloon bar, to a Prohibition speakeasy and is now the largest Spanish restaurant in the world, having

welcomed JFK, Marilyn Monroe and Babe Ruth amongst many others over the years.

Blending a rich history with interesting food and drink, Ybor is one of Florida's hidden gems and it shows an alternative side to the state people don't usually see.

It's impossible to talk about Tampa and not briefly mention Busch Gardens, the safari-theme park that is almost the antithesis of Disney, with huge rollercoasters that will scare even the biggest adrenaline junkie.

Away from the bright lights of Tampa, or indeed Orlando, Florida's miles of golden beaches are peppered with seaside resorts, big and small.

Life here is much more laid back: staying on Anna Maria Island in Bradenton was a world away from the high-energy days in Tampa.

As a two-centre holiday, the Bradenton beach lifestyle was perfect for recharging the batteries: a relaxing atmosphere that comes with being by the sea. That's not to say there's nothing going on, it's

just that everything goes at its own pace.

Lunch at the Oyster Bar on the pier on the island, Key Lime margarita in hand, you could imagine the fish being caught by anglers off the pier and cooked to order.

**A**s expected, an afternoon on the beach after a few of those margaritas was exactly what the doctor ordered, and following that up with a leisurely dinner overlooking the ocean was a reminder of the perks of island life.

The hotel was on the beach too, a brand new resort called Zota which centres around a heated pool, but the biggest attraction is the hotel's own beach on the Gulf Coast, where the water is even warm in November.

Having doughnuts for breakfast sounds terribly indulgent, but the freshly made, custom-topped rings of batter on offer at the Donut Experiment on the island were so good that it was somehow acceptable.

Even if one had to be kept for a snack later on the dolphin boat tour, where the playful animals lived up to their reputation, leaping in and out of the water, just feet from the boat.

Bradenton has an arty side too, best shown on a walk through the funky Village of the Arts, an area where artists live and make their homes into cutting-edge galleries for their creative works.

At the end of the walk was a well-deserved beer or two at one of Florida's

## GETTING THERE

**American Holidays** offers eight nights in Tampa and Longboat Key from €1,740 per person, based on two sharing a room and travelling in May 2018. The price is on a room-only basis, including return flights from Dublin to Orlando and a hire car for the duration. Call 01 673 3840 or visit [www.americanholidays.com](http://www.americanholidays.com). For destination information visit [www.visittampabay.com](http://www.visittampabay.com) and [www.bradentongulfislands.com](http://www.bradentongulfislands.com)

largest breweries, Motorworks, which unsurprisingly is based out of an old mechanic's shop.

Sending beer across the country, as well as having a large bar themselves, the brains behind it made a range of craft beers that would satisfy everyone from the connoisseur to someone who sees beer as just bland, fizzy liquid.

This isn't the America of Disney, or of even New York, it's the America of a genuine welcome, it's about doing things your own way.

Though the lifestyle in Bradenton is a different one to Tampa, they're both an alternative side to Florida, where the brilliant individualism of America shines through in cool bars, doughnut restaurants and a rich history that draws on all kinds of culture.

Seeing the real Florida, without the princes and princesses, is a great way to experience new things and get away from it all.



# So much more than a Mickey Mouse trap

**BRIGHT LIGHTS, COOL CITY:** The Tampa skyline at night

## TAKE YOUR KIDS OUT FOR A PIZZA... IN THE MALDIVES

**Sally Chaplin** discovers a tiny island that is huge fun for all the family



**A**S we were waiting for our flight to the Maldives, I started to doubt my sanity. Here I was, heading halfway round the world with three children in tow – two of whom have Asperger's, hate change and cannot sit still for a minute.

What's more, we were flying to a small island where we would be 'trapped' for a week.

We'd heard that Kandima Maldives – on part of the Dhaalu Atoll – was different from the usual five-star luxury honeymoon spots. It is billed as a four-star lifestyle resort and what attracted us was an exhaustive list of activities for adults and children.

Still, this, our first foreign beach holiday in 12 years, was a bit of a gamble. We got off to a good start. Before the flip-flops had even come out of our suitcases, Sarah, 11, discovered that at 4pm they turn on the water at Kandiland, a kids' club, which has a large wet play area. After getting soaked and bouncing on the trampoline, she scanned the Kandiland itinerary and signed up for candy-floss-making, Maldivian drumming, rock painting, an art class and mocktail mixing.

George, 17, who is further along the autistic spectrum than his sister, was itching to go on a jet ski, but when



**FAMILY FRIENDLY:** A pier at Kandima resort and the Kandiland play area, inset. Below right: Alice learns to make a pizza

he declared it was the only activity he would try, my heart sank – my husband Gavin and I were keen on mojitos by the pool.

All was not lost. George discovered Burn, Kandima's fully equipped air-conditioned gym – he's sports-mad and cannot waver from his intense training schedule, so this was a godsend.

He also joined us on a sunset fishing trip, landed a red snapper and ate it for lunch the next day.

I worried about the food on offer before we left, as our children are fussy eaters. We always argue about where to eat and there would be no McDonald's, Starbucks or Burger King at Kandima.

We were on the Select All Inclusive package, which included all meals in the resort's self-serve Flavour

restaurant, and fortunately the choice was immense.

They had everything from a full English breakfast through to curries, freshly griddled fish and a dizzying array of salads. In fact, Sarah and her 'neurotypical' 15-year-old sister Alice were so inspired by the food at Kandima that they signed up for a pizza-making class. We also had high tea in the Deli – known as K Tea.

What I hadn't factored in was the heat. Temperatures in the Maldives hover around the 28 to 30C (82 to 86F) mark and we're all quite fair.

While most guests basked in the rays, we tended to stick to shaded areas until 3pm. Thankfully, our Sky Studio with interconnecting rooms was blissfully air-conditioned. It was also clean, modern and had a vast bathroom. Best of all, it had a balcony, complete with swing seat, overlooking the Indian Ocean.

No parent needs me to tell them that a holiday with kids is never really a break, but our trip was a huge success.

George, Alice and Sarah were happily exhausted at the end of each day and the adults even managed to grab the odd siesta.

Kandima was just the right mix of paradise and practicality for us.

## GETTING THERE

A Sky Studio at **Kandima Maldives** ([kandima.com](http://kandima.com)) costs from €295pp per night full-board. Airport transfers cost from €299pp return. **Qatar Airways** ([qatarairways.com](http://qatarairways.com)) has return flights to the Maldives from Heathrow via Doha from €1,046.





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