Florida*, Really?*

The Unofficial Guide to

Where Sunshine (and Alligators)

meet… “Wait… What?”

Copyright © 2026 by Steve and Lisa McChesney
All rights reserved.
No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations used in reviews or other legally permitted uses.
This book is part of the "50 States, Really?" series, a collection of observational, cultural, and experiential guides designed to explore how each state actually works beyond expectations.
The views and interpretations expressed in this book are those of the author and are based on personal observation, research, and experience. Individual perspectives may vary depending on timing, location, and context.
References to real places, businesses, and locations are used for descriptive and informational purposes. All trademarks, service marks, and trade names are the property of their respective owners.
Their inclusion does not imply endorsement or affiliation.
Published by:
Saltwater Quill Publishing
621 Beach Bum Blvd.
Daytona Beach, Florida 32124

Series: *50 States, Really?*
Title: Florida, *Really?*
Author: Steve and Lisa McChesney

ISBN: 979-8-9960488-2-3
Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.
Printed in the United States of America.
First Edition
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Steve's brother, Hershey McChesney. He generously shared his time, sharp eye, thoughtful insights, and lifelong Florida experience throughout this project.

Every author hopes for an editor who does more than catch typos. Hershey read every chapter with care, questioned details, and challenged assumptions. He helped make each page stronger and wasn't shy about telling us when something didn't sound quite right.

As a lifelong Florida Man, he brought exactly the kind of local knowledge, perspective, and authenticity this book needed. His guidance made these pages more accurate, more engaging, and unmistakably more Florida.

Any remaining errors belong entirely to us. Any stories that seem too outrageous to be true... well, those probably belong to Florida.

“Florida is a very healing place.”

— Burt Reynolds

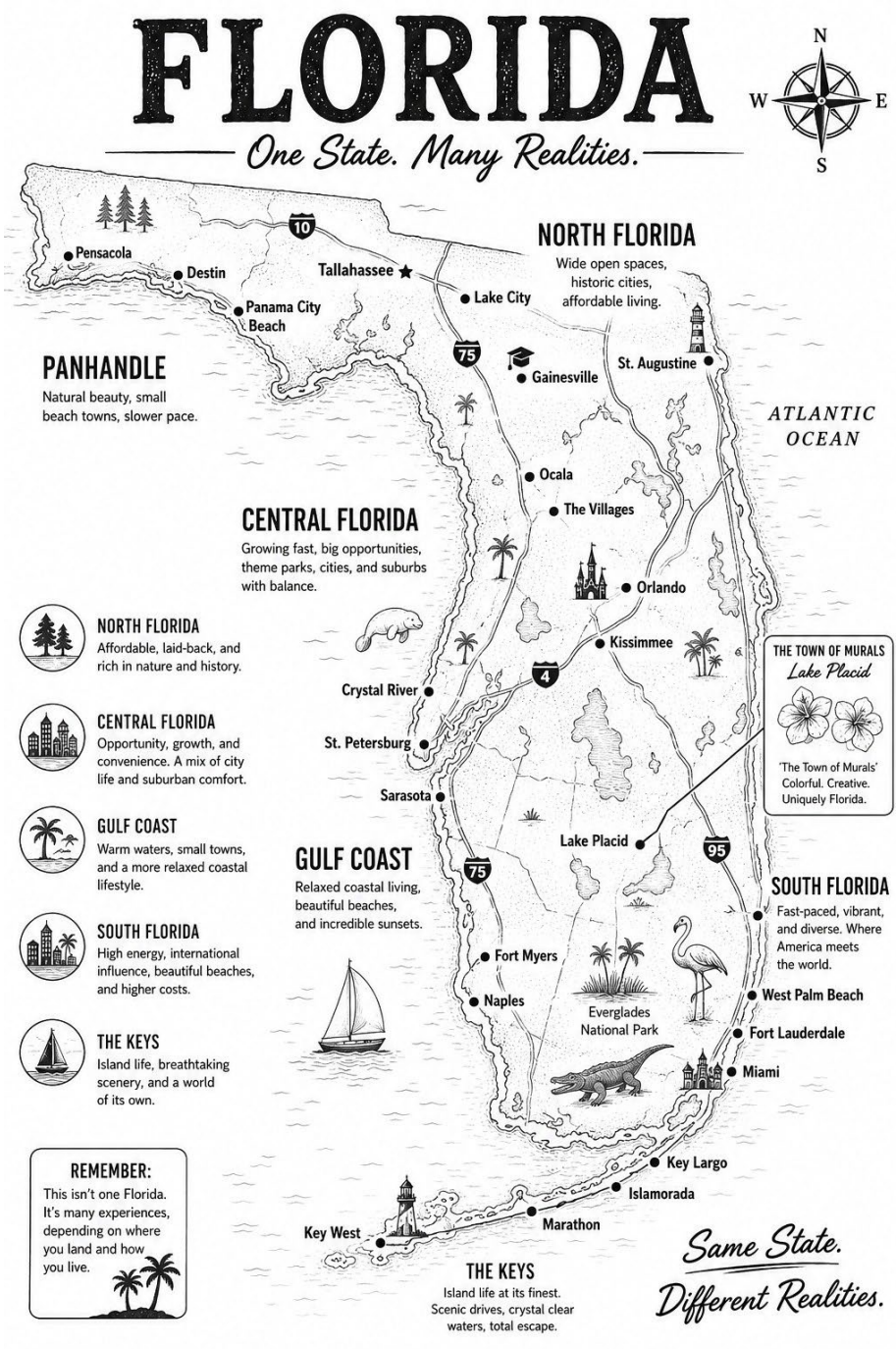
FLORIDA
One State. Many Realities.
N
W
E
S
NORTH FLORIDA
Wide open spaces, historic cities, affordable living.
PANHANDLE
Natural beauty, small beach towns, slower pace.
CENTRAL FLORIDA
Growing fast, big opportunities, theme parks, cities, and suburbs with balance.
GULF COAST
Relaxed coastal living, beautiful beaches, and incredible sunsets.
SOUTH FLORIDA
Fast-paced, vibrant, and diverse. Where America meets the world.
THE KEYS
Island life at its finest. Scenic drives, crystal clear waters, total escape.
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Pensacola
Destin
Panama City Beach
Tallahassee
Lake City
Gainesville
St. Augustine
Ocala
The Villages
Orlando
Kissimmee
Crystal River
St. Petersburg
Sarasota
Lake Placid
Fort Myers
Naples
Everglades National Park
West Palm Beach
Fort Lauderdale
Miami
Key Largo
Islamorada
Marathon
Key West
10
75
4
95
NORTH FLORIDA
Affordable, laid-back, and rich in nature and history.
CENTRAL FLORIDA
Opportunity, growth, and convenience. A mix of city life and suburban comfort.
GULF COAST
Warm waters, small towns, and a more relaxed coastal lifestyle.
SOUTH FLORIDA
High energy, international influence, beautiful beaches, and higher costs.
THE KEYS
Island life, breathtaking scenery, and a world of its own.
THE TOWN OF MURALS
Lake Placid
'The Town of Murals' Colorful. Creative. Uniquely Florida.
REMEMBER:
This isn't one Florida. It's many experiences, depending on where you land and how you live.
Same State.
Different Realities.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Wait… What's Going on Here? 6

First Impressions vs. Reality 12

If Florida Were a Person 20

"Wait… What?" Moments 28

Unexpected Facts That Make You Go "Huh" 38

The People 55

Notable & Notorious People 62

Best & Worst Traits 72

Legends & Local Stories 82

The Food 95

Detours You Didn't Plan 108

Nature Showing Off 128

Things to Do (That Aren't Boring) 139

Film, TV, & Pop Culture Presence 154

The Rhythm of Life 164

Best & Worst Times to Visit 171

Survival Guide for Visitors 178

The Economy & Hustle 200

Cost of Living Snapshot 209

Who This State is For 221

Would You Actually Want to Live Here? 228

Introduction

There's a moment, a kind of initiation really, that happens to almost everyone who sets foot in Florida.

It usually arrives right before they utter the state's unofficial motto: "Only in Florida."

At first, the state seems easy to sum up: beaches, palm trees, theme parks, sunshine, and alligators.

But Florida doesn't introduce itself so much as reveal its wonder, weirdness, beauty, chaos, and charm one surprise at a time.

Maybe it's a retiree or two cruising ten miles under the speed limit, their blinker clicking away since sunrise.

That's just Florida warming up.

Sooner or later, the state pulls back the curtain.

A thunderstorm can suddenly appear from a clear blue sky.

An alligator might take over the sidewalk, claiming the space as its own.

You could see a Lamborghini and an airboat on the same stretch of road. A perfect snapshot of Florida's beautiful, baffling contradictions.

A man in flip-flops explains hurricane protocol as casually as if he's just giving tips on how to keep your St. Augustine grass healthy.

Florida is that free spirit who refuses to be summarized, categorized, or politely contained.

The longer you stay, the more you see that Florida isn't just a state. It's a full-time experience, made up of many different worlds sharing the same peninsula, each acting as if everything is completely normal.

And somehow, none of this raises an eyebrow among the people who live here.

What Most Books Miss

Most books about Florida focus on the obvious things:

- The beaches
- The attractions
- The nightlife
- The weather
- The wildlife

And yes, those things are important.

But what they don't explain is:

- Why one side of the state can feel laid back while the other feels like everyone's running on just a little too much coffee.
- How million-dollar waterfront homes can exist fifteen minutes away from a bait shop selling boiled peanuts and live shrimp.
- Why Florida somehow became the retirement capital, vacation capital, boating capital, theme park capital, and 'guy wrestling an alligator behind a gas station' capital all at once.
- How a state built on tourism somehow developed one of the strongest hustle mentalities in the country.

Most books simply show you Florida. This book shows you how Florida *works*—which is a very different beast.

Connecting the Dots

This book is designed to help you understand the real Florida.

Not the postcard version.
Not the spring-break commercial version.
The actual version.
The one where:

- Tourism quietly powers entire local economies.
- Transplants from every corner of the country bring their habits with them and somehow create a giant cultural blender.
- Preparing for a hurricane is part emergency plan and part deciding who's bringing the ribs to the party.
- Small beach towns sit just a short drive from billion-dollar industries.

It's also a place where legends, myths, and strange stories spread so easily that you eventually stop asking, "Wait… did that really happen?"
Because in Florida, there's a pretty good chance it did.

Why You're Hearing This From Us

We've spent years exploring places, but our experience goes far beyond travel. We pay attention to how people behave, connect, and communicate in everyday moments. And along the way, we collected the quirks, stories, and memories that make each place its own.

Steve's background in storytelling, business, sales, and live events provides a practical understanding of how people navigate everyday situations.

Lisa's background as a Language Arts teacher gives her an added depth of insight, allowing her to understand tone, subtext, communication patterns, and the quiet meanings beneath the words themselves.

Together, we don't just look at Florida's attractions.

We pay attention to the people trying to merge onto I-4 with a kayak strapped to the roof and three beach chairs hanging halfway out of the trunk.

We pay attention to grown adults trying to convince a tiny lizard to leave their porch chair so they can sit down.

We pay attention to the reaction to Florida weather dropping below 60 degrees, and suddenly seeing people in boots, scarves, and yes, even earmuffs.

These are just a sampling of where the real stories live, and what we've learned the most.

What You'll Walk Away With

By the time you finish this book, you'll realize Florida actually makes perfect sense… which may be the most unsettling discovery of all.

But let's not get carried away—it won't ever be normal. Just understandable.

You'll begin to recognize:

- Why each region feels like its own small country, with its own rules, rhythms, and idea of what 'traffic' means.
- How weather, tourism, the economy, and migration patterns all shape daily life, sometimes all in a single afternoon.
- Why Floridians have a unique mix of urgency and relaxation, like someone who's late for work but still stops for an iced latte.
- How to move through the state without feeling like you've slipped into an alternate dimension, even when the GPS insists you make a U-turn into a swamp.

You won't just visit Florida. You'll move through it like you finally understand the choreography.

Our Promise

This book isn't here to sell you a polished fantasy version of Florida. You already have the brochures for that. This is the version with:

- Sunshine so bright it makes you squint even on a cloudy day.
- Alligators sunbathing on the banks of neighborhood ponds.
- Sudden rainstorms that disappear in twenty minutes as if nothing had happened.
- Sandhill cranes hold up traffic with complete confidence.
- Neighborhoods where golf carts somehow count as transportation.

- Conversations that begin with weather and end with someone telling you about a python they swear was “at least fourteen feet long.”

Some stories will sound exaggerated. The wild part is, most are accurate.

Let’s Get Into It

As you read this, pay attention to the contrasts.

The calm and the chaos.

The luxury and the weirdness.

The vacation glow mixed with full-throttle hustle.

Because once you see how these things exist together, you start to understand Florida itself.

That’s when the state stops acting like a vacation brochure and starts showing you the wonderfully odd logic holding it all together.

Pull up a beach chair.

The tide’s rolling in, and Florida’s just getting started.

Chapter One

Wait… What's Going on Here?

Imagine Florida as America's adventure buffet, with theme parks, sunshine, coral reefs, freshwater springs, and endless beaches**,** all packed into one of the country's most popular playgrounds.

That's Florida at its best behavior. However, once you've had your fill of the sunshine sampler, Florida has a whole other menu waiting.

Beyond the playground, there's a curious, chaotic, and wonderfully weird Florida that locals know well.

Only in Florida can you watch a giant lifted pickup truck rumble past, then watch an alligator cross a parking lot, and then overhear a man in flip-flops argue with a parrot… all before lunch.

And truly, that's just the opening act of Florida weird.

Sometimes the weirdness doesn't even spread itself out. It just comes at you one thing after another, with no break or warning.

You might be at a stoplight, noticing the car next to you has a dog sitting upright in the driver's seat, paws on the wheel as if it's driving, while across the street, someone snaps a photo of a bird that looks straight out of a prehistoric documentary.

And the wild part isn't what you're seeing.

It's that everyone else sees it too, and somehow, nobody reacts with the slightest concern.

No double takes.

No "uh…did that just happen?"

A local might just nod politely and shrug, as if to say, "Yep. Checks out."

That's your first clue.

Get Ready

Florida doesn't ease you in. It throws you right into the action and seems to say, "Alright… you're here now. Keep up."

There's no warm-up. Florida just gives you something odd and waits to see how you deal with it.

You catch on fast. There's no real 'normal' here—not the kind you can count on, anyway**.**

Whatever 'normal' you bring—your rules, habits, and expectations—gets tested as soon as you arrive.

In Florida, no matter how odd something is, it's just part of the day**.**

You'll see things that would make headlines anywhere else, the kind of moments people would stop, record, and send to friends.

Here? It barely earns a side-eye and a "huh."

Florida locals are a unique bunch: unbothered, sun-seasoned, and chaos-resistant, with instincts shaped by the weather, wildlife, and wild stories that sound unbelievable at first.

Walk into a convenience store at daybreak and you'll see a mix of people who shouldn't logically exist in the same place at the same time, and yet somehow, they do.

A retiree in golf attire, head to toe pastels, grabbing an iced coffee and a breakfast sandwich, like it's the standard pre-round ritual.

A charter-boat regular dressed for a day of deep-sea fishing, bait pail in one hand and a dripping bag of ice in the other.

A sun-soaked local carefully picks out a tube of aloe gel, a buy-one-get-one deal, some lottery tickets, and a huge fountain drink, focused on building their morning routine one item at a time.

Then a barefoot wanderer drifts in, not hurried or embarrassed, but with the easy confidence of someone who genuinely begins their day this way, completely unbothered by being the only one without shoes.

And somehow, it all works. There's no friction or confusion. Just a steady stream of moments that shouldn't fit together, but they do.

Because in Florida, the weird mix isn't rare, it's routine.

Florida Isn't One Personality

Florida is more like a rotating cast of characters, all sharing the same stage but never really rehearsing together.

There's:

- Beach life and city energy.
- Retirement mode and spring-break chaos.
- Theme-park optimism sitting right next to late-night unpredictability.

On paper, it's a mismatch: too many extremes, too many paces, too many lifestyles packed into one place.

It shouldn't work, but it does.

The Heat

Florida's heat quickly reminds you who's really in charge. Not the 'nice summer day' kind. This is something else.

It's the kind of heat that hits you as soon as you step outside and makes you wonder why anyone settled here.

Then you start doing math you haven't used since high school:

- **Distance math**: "How far do I have to walk to my car?"
- Shade math: "Is there shade along the way?"

- **Clothing-regret math**: "Could I have gotten away with wearing shorts?"
- **Errand math**: "Do I really need groceries, or can I make do with what's in the fridge?"

Your sunglasses fog up. Your shirt sticks to you. You become very aware of how far you are from the nearest air conditioning, as if it's now part of your survival strategy.

And yet…

Folks here don't resist the heat; they accept it.

People move differently here because of it: quick dashes between air-conditioned spaces, doors shutting fast, conversations pausing until everyone gets inside.

Cold drinks aren't optional; they're a necessity.

Folks adjust without thinking, timing their whole day around the heat, working with it instead of against it.

What feels overwhelming at first becomes background over time. Not because it changes. Because you do.

You realize you're parking based on shade without thinking about it.

You're checking the pavement before stepping out.

You've started to understand the rhythm without being told.

You've slipped into Florida mode without even noticing.

Florida Has Attitude

Florida doesn't look for approval. It doesn't try to impress or explain itself. It just exists: loud, bright, humid, unapologetic, without worrying if it makes sense to outsiders.

You can be dragging your beach chair back to the car, sunburned and sandy, when someone you've never met starts giving you a detailed review of three sunscreen brands and a restaurant you "absolutely have to try."

You can be loading groceries into your trunk, minding your business, and suddenly you're in a full conversation about someone's cousin's boat engine and the best place to get key lime pie.

You'll meet people who are laid-back and others who are high-energy.

Some are incredibly friendly, while others are unpredictable. Yet somehow, all these different personalities fit together here.

It's just familiar enough that you think, "Yeah, sure, why not."

Different Florida, Same Highway

Just when you think you've started to understand Florida, it does something else.

Florida doesn't stick to one landscape. It swaps them out like it's bored, because Florida thrives on variety.

Drive thirty minutes, maybe less, and everything changes. The scenery can switch from beach to swamp to suburb as if you're fast-forwarding through different scenes.

Even the energy resets. The way people carry themselves seems slightly different.

Suddenly, you're in a whole new version of Florida.

Each version has its own rhythm and logic yet still fits within the bigger picture.

That's when Florida seems to lean in and say,

"Oh… you thought you had me figured out!"

The First Realization

Florida isn't trying to be consistent. It doesn't need to be. Consistency isn't part of the appeal.

It's not trying to be logical. And it's definitely not trying to explain itself.

What it is… is alive.

Unfiltered.

And it's completely comfortable being exactly what it is—no changes, no apologies, and no need for you to fully understand.

Some might laugh, but Florida will keep right on being Florida.

So… What's Really Going On Here

Florida is a little chaotic.

Full of personality.

And just unpredictable enough to keep you paying attention.

It grabs you by the arm, hands you a drink, points at something unusual, and says:

"Watch this."

And whether you're ready or not… you will.

Because Florida always has one more surprise: an alligator sunbathing exactly where you needed to walk, a storm that wasn't on the radar, an iguana falling from a tree, or a person doing something you can't explain but can't stop watching.

In Florida, the only thing predictable… is that something unpredictable is about to happen. And when it does, laugh if you want.

Florida will laugh with you, a sun-soaked, salt-air laugh that says, "Stick around. You haven't seen anything yet."

Florida loves an audience.

FLORIDA, REALLY?

Enjoyed Your Taste of Florida?

The adventure is just getting started!

Discover the rest of Florida's fascinating stories, bizarre facts, unforgettable characters, hidden gems and wonderfully unpredictable personality.

Get Your Complete Copy

Kindle eBook • Available on Amazon

Get the complete book on Amazon

Thinking About Moving to Florida?

FREE FLORIDA MOVING GUIDE

Discover what you should know before making the move to the Sunshine State.

Get your free guide

Saltwater Quill Publishing

Great Books. Fresh Ideas. Endless Possibilities.

ReallyStates.com