

# HAPPY CAMPERS

BY NANCY MORELAND



If you want to enjoy Florida's natural beauty without breaking a sweat, the time to camp is now. Before you can say "s'mores" five times fast, the moment will pass and our steamy summer temperatures will return. So dust off the Coleman, grab your canteen and escape to the great outdoors. Perhaps these four camping destinations will inspire your plans.

If you long for a St. Augustine getaway but are short on cash, camping at **Anastasia State Park** is an economical alternative. Situated in an oak hammock forest, Anastasia's 139 campsites provide privacy and shade. The sites are a short bike ride to four miles of undeveloped beach, but protected from blowing sand and salt spray. Even better, the park is minutes to the Alligator Farm, the Lighthouse, restaurants and downtown St. Augustine. Catamaran, kayak and paddleboat rentals are available onsite, as are hiking and biking trails.

For a peaceful getaway within an hour of downtown Jacksonville, visit **Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park** near Keystone Heights. Developed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the place retains its old Florida feel, with a rustic bath house, spacious picnic pavilion and moss-draped oaks. A limited number of campsites (73 tent, trailer and RV sites) helps keep the peace. Complementing the pleasantly low-key atmosphere are 16 rental cabins overlooking Little Lake Johnson. Campers can rent canoes, fish, swim, bask on a white sand beach and hike four trails, including Ravine Ridge, which offers an enchanting glimpse into Florida's environmental diversity.

If you need a total change of scene without changing time zones or packing a passport, head south to **Big Pine Key Fishing Lodge**. Located just off the Overseas Highway, the campground is wedged on a narrow outcropping of coral rock between the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean. The Lodge's tree-lined campground has 167 campsites of all persuasions, including primitive and full hook-up sites. Sixteen comfortable efficiencies round out the accommodations. The facility also has 83 boat slips, a swimming pool and well-stocked camp store. Just 30 miles from Key West, the campground is close enough for a day trip, but far removed from the Conch Republic's party animal mentality. The campground's family-friendly atmosphere and wholesome activities such as shuffleboard and movie nights harken to its 1950s-era origins. Big Pine Key is also home to the National Key Deer Refuge; the winsome micro-Bambis wander freely about campground, adding to its appeal.

If you miss Florida's brief, comfortable camping window, head for the cool hills of North Georgia's **Moccasin Creek State Park**. Located on the shores of Lake Burton, locals like to call it the place "where spring spends the summer." With an altitude of nearly 2,000 feet, summer temperatures are mild and humidity is low. The 54-site campground accommodates tents, trailers and RVs. Relatively level despite its mountain location, the campground is easily navigated by RVs up to 40 feet. The park has mountain views, hiking trails, fishing and the kind of freshwater swimming experience not easily found in Florida. \*



## Trending Travel

Travel Leaders Group, ranked the #1 corporate travel management company by Business Travel News, recently released the results of its 2014 Travel Trends Survey. Some interesting findings:

\* Las Vegas took the top spot in booked domestic destinations, and Caribbean cruises were #1 for international.

\* Some "up and coming" international destinations to get you out of your comfort zone: Croatia, New Zealand, Myanmar, Turkey and Peru.

\* Survey results reflect what we've been hearing about the strengthening economy, too. A large majority of agents indicate that bookings and spending are on par or greater for 2014 compared to last year, and that the agents are optimistic about the travel business in the coming months. \*

BY JOCELYN TOLBERT

## Landlubbers Welcome

Pirate Jose Gaspar purportedly terrorized the western coast of Florida in the 18th and 19th centuries. His pirating days are over, but a party bearing his name is still thrown every year in Tampa Bay, when Gasparilla turns the city into a swashbuckler's paradise. The famous pirate-themed parade came and went in January, but some festivities will continue until March.

**"Gasparilla: A Tampa Tradition"** at the Henry B. Plant Museum teaches ye swabs about the over-100-year history of the celebration, and is exhibited through February 23. On March

8-9, musical acts including the Flaming Lips will perform at the Gasparilla Music Festival.

[gasparillapiratefest.com](http://gasparillapiratefest.com) \* BY JOCELYN TOLBERT

