

# Make a splash

The wild waterways and wildlife-rich coastline of the US make a perfect playground for adventures across the pond, writes **Katie McGonagle**

**i**t's one of the world's largest countries by land mass, so it's no surprise that classic US cross-country road trips or attraction-packed city breaks still reign supreme. But with more than 95,000 miles of shoreline to play with, including vast lakes, rivers, offshore islands and epic Atlantic and Pacific

coastlines, you can have just as much fun on America's waters as you can on land.

Whether clients are keen to cruise the Eastern Seaboard, surf the waves in Hawaii, go seaplane sightseeing in Seattle or spot migrating whales, there's adventure aplenty for water babies – here are a few of our favourites. ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Panama City Beach, Florida; accessibility champion Cordell Jeter on Siesta Key Beach, Sarasota, Florida; Santa Cruz, California PICTURES: Visit Florida; Visit California/Carol Highsmith

## FLORIDA: THRILL OR CHILL?

With 1,350 miles of coastline and another 1,540 miles of inland waterways, Florida was made to be explored on water. It's home to the 'Venice of America', aka Fort Lauderdale, where getting around by water taxi, sightseeing on gondola tours or even 'water-biking' are par for the course. The new Marina Village by Bahia Mar (opening in May), refurbished Pier Sixty-Six Hotel & Marina (reopening late 2024) and homeporting ships including *Celebrity Beyond*, *Crystal Serenity* and *Disney Magic* add to the appeal for this year.

Fellow Florida port Tampa has much to keep cruise-and-stay guests on the water longer – whether they fancy fast-paced thrills on the new adrenaline-pumping Bay Rocket jet boat or a slower stroll past the restaurants

and attractions lining the 2.6-mile Riverwalk. And for those who want to delve under the surface, Florida's waters are alive with everything from alligators in the Everglades to turtles, stingrays and manatees along the coast. Crystal River is the 'manatee capital', attracting 500 to 1,000 each winter. It's also a key part of the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve, established in 2020 to aid seagrass restoration efforts along the Gulf coastline.

Visitors can get involved with seagrass planting around the bay in Panama City Beach – now featured by operators including Ocean Florida, USAirtours and America As You Like It. Or look out for fish, dolphins and stingrays on an LED-lit night-time kayaking tour, available in Panama City and around the Panhandle in Pensacola. **Book it:** Ocean Florida's 15-night Florida Panhandle to New Orleans

self-drive itinerary goes via Tampa to St Petersburg, Crystal River, Panama City Beach and Pensacola, from £2,619 including flights and car hire. The Night Glow Kayak Paddle in Pensacola and manatee experience in Crystal River cost extra. [ocean-florida.co.uk](http://ocean-florida.co.uk)

## CALIFORNIA: WHALE OF A TIME

It's nicknamed the Golden State for its Gold Rush history, but California's sandy beaches should take some credit too, with a coastline that combines laid-back surf towns, old-school seaside resorts and rugged scenery.

Perhaps the best way to explore is by driving Highway 1, stretching more than 600 miles from San Francisco to San Diego and set to fully reopen by early summer following repairs to a collapsed section of road near Big Sur. The ➤



## ACCESSIBLE WATER ATTRACTIONS IN FLORIDA

### Kayak in wetlands:

Brevard Zoo in Melbourne offers accessible kayaking (\$6) for wheelchair users, plus there's a downloadable sensory guide and quiet zones. [brevardzoo.org](http://brevardzoo.org)

### Surf in New Smyrna

**Beach:** Ride the waves with adaptive surfing and kayaking using specialised equipment and experienced guides. [oceansofhopefoundation.org](http://oceansofhopefoundation.org)

### Dive in the Palm Beaches:

Wheelchair users can delve under the water in Jupiter with accessible boats, transfers and instructors certified in adaptive scuba diving. [thepalmbeaches.com/plan/accessibility-guide-palm-beaches](http://thepalmbeaches.com/plan/accessibility-guide-palm-beaches)

### Enjoy attractions in Tampa:

The Accessible Tampa Riverwalk Pass offers entry to accessible experiences including museums, attractions and the Pirate Water Taxi. [visittampabay.com/accessible-travel/tampa-riverwalk-pass](http://visittampabay.com/accessible-travel/tampa-riverwalk-pass)

### Soak up sun on the beach:

Many of Florida's beaches are wheelchair-accessible, with beach wheelchair rentals, electric buggies such as those at Clearwater Beach and non-slip Mobi-mats in Pensacola and Miami. Ocean Florida has a useful guide: [ocean-florida.co.uk/blog/top-accessible-beaches-in-florida](http://ocean-florida.co.uk/blog/top-accessible-beaches-in-florida)

# DESTINATIONS

## THE US | ON THE WATER



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Highway 1, California; Belle Isle, Detroit; Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, Michigan; Chicago Riverwalk PICTURES: Visit California/Mason Trinca; Pure Michigan/Alanna St Laurent Photography; Viking; Enjoy Illinois/Bob Stefko



total driving time is just 10-12 hours, but spread it over at least a week to allow ample time to stop at the Piedras Blancas elephant seal rookery at San Simeon (which now offers educational guided tours priced at \$13), spot sea otters in Morro Bay, hike to Point San Luis Lighthouse for sweeping sea views or stop for the night to sample the wineries of San Luis Obispo.

The route takes in swanky Santa Barbara, start of the newly designated Santa Barbara Channel Whale Heritage Area, which became only the second US region to be granted protected status in October 2023, supporting conservation, research and responsible ecotourism. In winter, visitors can spot Pacific gray whales migrating south to warmer waters in Baja California, returning in spring with newborn calves on the way to Alaska. Spot them swimming alongside humpbacks, minke, fin and blue whales, plus porpoises, coastal bottlenose and Risso's dolphins, from the many sightseeing boats departing Santa Barbara or from coastal hiking trails overlooking the ocean.

Learn more about marine life at the Monterey Bay Aquarium on Cannery Row, which marks its 40th anniversary this year. Or, stop off at

Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, where there's nostalgia in the 100-year-old Giant Dipper or new thrills with a 20m-high Ferris wheel – the perfect vantage point for the Pacific.

**Book it:** American Affair's 19-day Coast Californian Roads & Cruise Holiday combines a Highway 1 road trip and Holland America Line cruise, from £2,384 including flights, accommodation, car hire and cruise. [americanaffair.com](http://americanaffair.com)

### GREAT LAKES: CRUISE AND PLAY

There's more to aquatic adventure than the coast. The Great Lakes region – the world's largest group of freshwater lakes, spanning Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin – brings together mighty Midwest cities with smaller towns that sprang up around the area's historic forts and fishing villages.

Several projects have transformed the region's former industrial hubs into thriving tourist hotspots. They include Detroit Riverwalk – recently voted America's best riverwalk by *USA Today* – completed late last year, and, in Chicago, a new Flyover attraction that opened in March on Navy Pier, offering a unique perspective of the city.

Clients can take their pick of self-drive packages from the likes of North America Travel Service, Complete North America, Audley Travel and First Class Holidays, or an escorted tour that lets someone else do the driving. If clients like that hassle-free approach, Great Lakes cruises have also multiplied in recent years, with wide-ranging itineraries from Ponant, Hapag-Lloyd Cruises and Viking.

Viking *Octantis* and *Viking Polaris* sail these waters from April-October, and standout shore excursions include joining an expert guide to dig for fossils in Alpena, Michigan; hiking the limestone cliffs of the Door Peninsula in Wisconsin; and enjoying afternoon tea at Mackinac Island's Grand Hotel, where an on-site historian showcases the lavish art and antiques dotted around this grande dame before settling down to tea on the front porch with views over the Straits of Mackinac.

**Book it:** Viking's 15-day Great Lakes Collection starts from £10,095 in July 2024, with flights, a Nordic Balcony room, in-destination transfers, meals with beer and wine, included excursions and gratuities. [viking.com](http://viking.com) 