

Wave machine

Kelly Ranson discovers Florida's less-visited side on a trip to the laid-back surfing resort of New Smyrna Beach

It's 6am (a perk of jetlag), the air is warm, the sun is slowly rising through varying hues of orangey-pink skies, and the only sound I can hear is the water lapping against the wooden jetty on the banks of the Indian River. As I sit on the dock with my coffee, I patiently wait for a glimpse of the marine life I had been promised would appear.

Within moments, there are ripples in the calm water and a small pod of bottlenose dolphins grace me with their presence, playfully bobbing in the water. I couldn't dream up a more perfect morning, but for residents of the laid-back Floridian town of New Smyrna Beach, this is just a daily occurrence that comes with the joys of life by the water.

As travellers celebrate getting the green light to return stateside, Florida will no doubt be top of the list for many Brits planning a trip after such a long hiatus. Yet while families flock to the theme parks and attractions of Orlando, just over an hour's drive northeast lies this quieter, seaside community.

Perched right on the Indian River lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean, New Smyrna Beach makes for an ideal outdoor getaway or twin-centre stay for clients looking to swap rollercoasters for relaxation and parades for paddleboarding.

ON THE WATER

No matter where you go in New Smyrna Beach – or NSB, as it's dubbed by locals – you're never far away from its 17 miles of sandy coastlines or river.

This is a surf town at its core, and just about every resident has a board or boat. During my stay at the charming 16-room Night Swan Intracoastal Bed and Breakfast (where rooms start at \$145 a night), the owners proudly told stories of how their professional surfer sons had learnt their craft in NSB.

Naturally, the town has an abundance of marine wildlife, with more than 400 species of birds, alongside dolphins, manatees, turtles and more. An ideal excursion for clients to dip their toes into some light adventure is a kayaking tour with the Marine Discovery Center. A two-hour eco-tour with a local naturalist (from \$40 for adults or \$22 for children) explores the lush mangroves and salt marshes of the Indian River lagoon, which are alive with birds – I saw hundreds of white herons nestled on a small island.

The classic Groove Armada song lyrics 'If you're fond of sand dunes and salty air' could have been written for the New Smyrna Dunes Park. The 184-acre park is located right on the shore and has more than two miles of elevated, accessible boardwalks over the dunes, with scenic outlooks across the Atlantic, ➤

New Smyrna Beach

PICTURE: Shutterstock/
Javier Cruz Acosta



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Indian River North; dolphins; New Smyrna Dunes Park; JB's Fish Camp; and Flagler Avenue

PICTURES: Cameron Lancaster; Focal Point Videography



top tip

For clients looking to explore beyond NSB, Daytona Beach and Kennedy Space Center are less than an hour's drive away.

visitsnsbfl.com

the river and the Ponce de Leon Inlet. For fishing enthusiasts there's also a 90m pier from which to cast a line.

Back in town, at the end of Flagler Avenue, sits NSB's main beach, which has a real USP – you can drive a car right onto the beach and spend a day by the water. It's also the place to hire bicycles or golf carts at Salty Rentals, so you can freely cycle or drive along the vast stretch of beach.

CANAL STREET CULTURE

The historic downtown area of Canal Street, with its quintessential small-town charm and mom-and-pop restaurants, could easily be the set of a classic American movie. Indeed, there's barely a chain restaurant in sight.

In recent years, this riverside area has evolved into a thriving arts and cultural district, packed with studios and galleries, including the Hub on Canal. Once a silent cinema, the Hub is now alive with around 70 artists in residence showcasing their works – from abstract sculptures that take inspiration from the sea, to delicate jewellery designs and photographic displays.

Just a couple of streets away is Jane's Art Center, which hosts an eclectic mix of art and classes and is well worth a look.

As Florida's second-oldest city, New Smyrna was once a British colony and has more than 20 historical sites spread across the area. It's all documented at the town's Museum of History, alongside the Museum of East Coast Surfing, which is packed with surf artefacts and memorabilia.

Back on Flagler Avenue, you'll find the larger hotel chains, offering easy access to downtown. The SpringHill Suites by Marriott has a beachside location with direct access onto the sand, with rooms from \$218 per night including breakfast, while the Hampton Inn is located centrally on the avenue.

They are interspersed along brick sidewalks brimming with cute boutiques and upscale eateries serving the freshest seafood, making this sophisticated surf town a must for anyone eager to escape the crowds. **TW**

BOOK IT

America As You Like It offers seven nights in New Smyrna Beach from £1,520, including Virgin Atlantic flights from Heathrow, seven days' car hire, three nights at SpringHill Suites and four nights at Night Swan, both B&B.

americaasyoulikeit.com

WHERE TO EAT

CorkScrew Bar & Grille: Located in the historic downtown, this eatery offers classic American dishes with a southern twist such as shrimp and cheese grits, southern smothered chicken and parmesan-encrusted mahi. corkscrewbarandgrille.com

JB's Fish Camp: Many diners arrive at JB's by boat, and if you're lucky you'll be joined by manatees, dolphins and seabirds by the dock. This lively, no-nonsense venue offers some of the best fish and chip platters around. jbsfishcamp.com

Third Wave Cafe: On Flagler Avenue, Third Wave Cafe offers an alfresco setting for diners to sample flavours of the Mediterranean in Florida, with a focus on sustainable fishing. thirdwavensb.com

New Smyrna Beach Brewing Company: At any one time, the New Smyrna Beach Brewing Company has 14 beers on tap that are produced on-site at its taproom on Canal Street. newsmyrnabeachbrewery.com