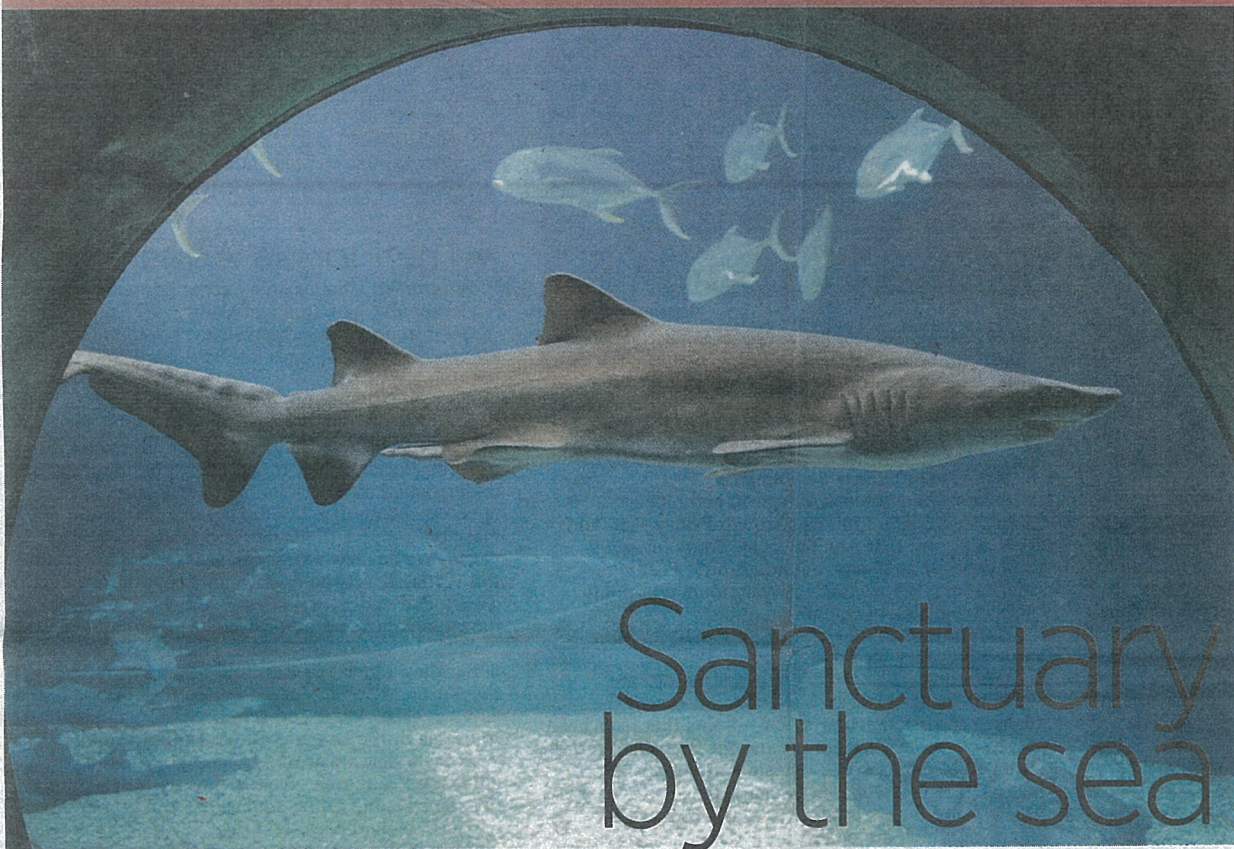


Travel

GET AWAY FROM IT ALL, NOW.



Sanctuary by the sea

Photo provided by the Florida Aquarium

Looking for adventure? Certified scuba divers age 15 and older can dive with the sharks at the Florida Aquarium in Tampa, Fla. More than 20,000 aquatic plants and animals are displayed in seven areas.

Once the "Cigar Capital of the World," Ybor City, northeast of downtown Tampa, is now home to trendy boutiques, bars and restaurants, many of them housed in former cigar factory buildings and stores.



Photo provided by Tampa Bay & Company

Beaches beckon, but Tampa, Fla., visitors also can dive into history and marine life, or explore a big-cat rescue center

By Zach Dunkin

zach.dunkin@indystar.com

TAMPA, Fla. — Lions, tigers and panthers roam the 45 acres of lush, tropical terrain at the Big Cat Rescue, saved and protected from circus trainers and ignorant pet-owners.

A pair of penguins waddles unguardedly through an excited swarm of school kids at the Florida Aquarium, while close by, a half-dozen more adventurous adult divers go eye-to-snout with live sharks.

Tabaqueros roll cigars in the storefront windows of historic Ybor City. And a sign above the registration desk at the hip Hard Rock Hotel & Casino declares "You Can Check Out Anytime You Like But You Can Never Leave."

Welcome to Tampa Bay, where man meets nature on a daily basis and history survives in a blast of growth. The Tampa Bay area, which includes St. Petersburg and Clearwater, has grown nearly 35 percent since 1990 to roughly 4 million residents, according to U.S. census figures. Nearly 17 million tourists visited the area last year, according to the Tampa Visitors and Convention Bureau.

Weather has something to do with it. There are more sunny days here each year than in Hawaii. And, of course, there are miles of dazzling beaches, including Fort De Soto, named this year's best U.S. beach by online travel site TripAdvisor.

Here's a sample of what the Tampa Bay area has to offer, whether you're looking for family fun or the perfect mojito. >>

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» Ybor City

Where: Northeast of downtown Tampa, south of I-4 near the 20th Street exit.

Why it's special: Latin tradition meets 21st-century chic in Ybor (pronounced "EE-borh") City. In one of only three National Historic Landmark districts in Florida, stores like Urban Outfitters and Victoria's Secret share neighborhood real estate with a handful of cigar stores and Cuban-roast coffee shops. Brick streets cut through Mediterranean-style buildings with wrought-iron balconies.

Tampa's "Latin Corner" has roots in the late 1880s, when cigar manufacturers led by Vicente Martinez Ybor set up shop in an area that became mainly populated by Cuban, Spanish and Italian immigrants. Ybor City was the "Cigar Capital of the World" until the Great Depression turned the area into a near ghost town.

An influx of artists looking for inexpensive studio quarters ignited a comeback, and by the early 1990s, many of the long-empty brick buildings on Seventh Avenue were converted into bars, restaurants and shops.

The entertainment district now has more than 60 bars, nightclubs and restaurants, the latter specializing in Spanish and Cuban cuisine. But you can still buy locally made hand-rolled cigars. One of the city's renovated cigar factories is now home to Ybor Square, a mall filled with dining and retail establishments.

Traveler's tip: Don't miss the Columbia Restaurant, with its Cuban dishes, ornate Spanish tile, mahogany bar and nightly flamenco show. Founded in 1905, it is the oldest restaurant in Florida.



ZACH DUNKIN / The Star

Ybor City founder Vicente Martinez Ybor is memorialized with a statue in one of the restored shopping districts of the neighborhood.



ZACH DUNKIN / The Star

More than 150 big cats live in spacious, fenced-in areas called "cat-ta-tats" at Big Cat Rescue. Guests get a closer look at the cats than they would at most zoos.

» Big Cat Rescue

Where: 12802 Easy St., Tampa.

Hours: Guided tours for age 10 and older at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, 9:30 and 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Saturday. Tours for age 9 and younger at 10 a.m. Saturdays only. Feeding tours, night tours, keeper tours, private tours and photo safaris available by appointment only.

Admission: \$25 for guided tours, \$10 for kids' tour; costs vary for other tours.

Info: (813) 920-4130, www.bigcatrescue.com.

Why it's special: Big Cat Rescue is one of the world's largest sanctuaries for big cats that have been saved from slaughterhouses and fur farms and retired from zoos, circuses and roadside attractions. More than 150 tigers, leopards, cougars, lions, bobcats, lynx, ocelots and others totaling 16 of the 35 species — many of which are endangered or now extinct in the wild — live in spacious, fenced-in "cat-a-tats."

Access to the sanctuary is by guided tour only. Knowledgeable docents from a staff of more than 100 volunteers take groups of 10 to 15 visitors on a 90-minute tour along a winding, level trail of sand through the various cat habitats. As guests learn facts about each cat and their behaviors in the wild, they get a closer look than they would ever get at most zoos. Every cat housed here has a story, and the guides are eager to tell it — like Nikita, the lioness found living on a concrete slab, chained to a wall by her drug-dealing owner. Or Natasha and Willow, a pair of Siberian lynx rescued from a fur farm where they lived in dirty metal sheds. As much as founder Carole Baskin adores her cats, she'd be happier if her service were never needed.

"Our biggest purpose here is to put ourselves out of business," says Baskin, who established the facility 15 years ago. "What we really want to do is reduce the number of cats that suffer the fate of abandonment and abuse and to encourage protection of habitat and wildlife."

Traveler's tip: Before visiting, go to the sanctuary's Web site to read about its origins.

Tampa, Fla.

Getting there: Several airlines serve the Tampa International Airport from Indianapolis, including AirTran and Southwest, which offer nonstop flights starting at around \$200. It's about 900 miles and a 15-hour drive via I-65 south, I-24 east and I-75 south.

Info: www.visittampabay.com or (726) 464-3347.

» The Florida Aquarium

Where: 701 Channelside Drive, Tampa.

Hours: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

General admission: \$17.95 ages 12-59, \$14.95 age 60 and older, \$12.95 ages 3-11, free age 2 and younger. Parking is \$5.

Info: (813) 273-4000, www.flaquarium.org.

Why it's special: Opened in March 1995, the two-level, 250,000-square-foot aquarium illustrates the story of Florida water, from a drop coming from an underground spring to its final destination in the open sea. More than 20,000 aquatic plants and animals, both native to Florida and from around the world, are displayed in seven areas, beginning with the Wetlands and its freshwater fish, otters and alligators, and ending with Sea Hunt, filled with sharks, moray, octopus and other ocean predators. Along the way, visitors see a 200-pound goliath grouper in Bays & Beaches, touch sea stars and other invertebrates in the No Bone Zone, "descend" into the reef walls and caves at Coral Reefs and see the weedy-looking Australia sea in the Dragons Down Under Exhibit.

Twice a day, a pair of African black-footed penguins meet and greet visitors during the Penguin Promenade, one of the aquarium's "no borders, no barriers" experiences.

Outside the aquarium, for an additional fee, visitors can sail on a 49-foot catamaran through Tampa Bay, one of the places in Florida to watch bottlenose dolphins, manatees and numerous species of birds.

Traveler's tip: Check times for the Penguin Promenade, shows and feedings when you get there, and plan your visit around them. If you have time for only a half-day visit, go after lunch when most of the youth groups have already gone through.

★ Contact Star reporter Zach Dunkin at (317) 444-6079.

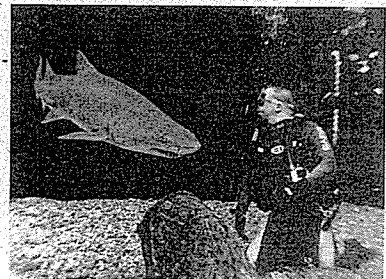


Photo provided by the Florida Aquarium

A sand tiger shark swims past a diver in Shark Bay at the Florida Aquarium.