



CONVENTIONAL HOT AIR ZONES

TAMPA

Republicans will fire up their fall offensive where sunshine is an affordable fuel

BY PAUL ABERCROMBIE | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Local boosters love to tout that you can lie on the sugar-sand beaches of this city during the day and take in the opera at night. Not that culture is terribly high in most folks' minds when the mercury is pushing triple digits here in late summer.

That's when, on Aug. 27-30, the Republican National Convention will turn this sleepy Gulf Coast area into a scrum of visiting politicians, press, and protesters. Whether you are here as a conventioner or planning a visit during winter's 70-degree days, you are bound to have a great time. This is the Sunshine State, after all.

Four million people call Tampa Bay home. Many of them have settled in what was farmland and orange groves, leaving the original confines of the city largely untouched. That helps give it an oddly small town flavor in spite of its big-city traffic and three professional sports teams.

Even after two decades of living here, I still find the geography confusing. Tampa Bay is not the name of any municipality but a mash-up

of several communities on both sides of the bay. The biggest — Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Clearwater — are connected by four bridges that span the bay. Each area has its charms.

Tampa's history is tied to Cuba, mostly because of its once-booming cigar industry. The long-neglected Cuban District, Ybor City, has been revived, and at night it reverberates with revelers, locals and out-of-towners. The old antiques stores and craft shops have largely been replaced by noisy bars and restaurants, but you can still find hand-rolled stogies and Cuban sandwiches, the fuel that once fed hundreds of cigar factory workers.

The Columbia Restaurant, an Ybor City anchor for more than a century, still occupies its original

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building, and serves up original family recipes.

A few miles from Ybor, I get my favorite Cuban sandwich at West Tampa Sandwich Shop. Besides the traditional Cuban sandwich — made with mustard, pickles, Swiss cheese, roasted pork, ham, salami, and Cuban bread — they do a version with honey that's oddly

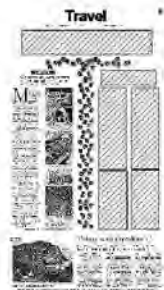
great. Finish your lunch with a sweet café con leche of espresso and steamed milk. If it is an unusually hot day, ask for it on ice.

Ready for some local suds? Head back to Ybor City and Cigar City Brewing, one of Tampa Bay's best breweries.

Getting to and from Ybor City can be half the fun. Tampa's old trolley line has been rebuilt and is slowly being extended. When you've finished your beer, hop on for a short ride to the excellent Florida Aquarium. You'll love not only the sea life exhibits but the air conditioning. My son, 9, is never happier than when he is at the aquarium, petting stingrays and starfish in their special tanks.

A few miles west is downtown Tampa's Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park on the banks of the lazy Hillsborough River. On any given day here you find children (and not a few grown-ups) splashing in fountains, dads and teens booting soccer balls or throwing Frisbees, and families picnicking on the sloping grand lawn.

When you're ready for a break from the sun, duck next door to the boxy-but-beautiful Tampa Museum of Art, which has some nifty Greek and Roman antiquities, along with a revolving cast of visiting exhibits. The neighboring Glazer





Children's Museum is great for the under-8 set. Plus, parents will praise the food at the SONO Cafe.

From the park, admire the University of Tampa's silvery minarets across the water. The heart of the school is a former hotel whose celebrity guests included Colonel Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, who camped out on the lawns. A stroll through the botanical gardens makes you feel like you're in a Merchant Ivory flick.

Speaking of movies, don't let the foreign film subtitles at the Tampa Theatre, a historic movie palace in downtown Tampa, deter you. Dark and gargyle-filled, the theater serves the best movie popcorn I've had.

If you need more kinetic fun, head just north of Tampa to Busch Gardens, an amusement park packed with gut-churning roller coasters, along with zoo exhibits housing everything from alligators to zebras. Animal enthusiasts should visit Tampa's world-class Lowry Park Zoo, or Big Cat Rescue, home to more than 100 wild cats.

For a real critter treat, head to the Clearwater Aquarium, made famous by resident bottlenose dolphin Winter, whose story was chronicled in last year's tearjerker movie "Dolphin Tale." You can't go wrong with any of the animal encounter programs, though their trainer-for-a-day experience, while not cheap, is still something my son raves about.

If you're game to splurge on dinner, head to Bern's Steak House in South Tampa. Even with changes made by the son of the late owner, Bern Laxer, this world-renowned restaurant retains its curiously charming bordello decor and obsessive attention to steaks. Ask your waiter for a tour of the

absurdly big wine cellar and to reserve a booth upstairs in the dessert room.

Or try South Tampa's stylish and intimate Restaurant BT. Proprietor and chef BT Nguyen has built a loyal following for her clever interpretations of French-Vietnamese food.

For those looking for night life, head to the elegant Sapphire Room bar in the newly renovated Floridan Hotel, once Tampa's grandest and tallest building, and sip a signature "Between the Sheets" cocktail. Or if you like your fun less buttoned down, there's Skipper's Smokehouse, just north of downtown, where you can dance to live bands on the sandy floor.

If you have wheels, drive across the bay to St. Pete. Hit the Howard Franklin Bridge early enough and you may glimpse ospreys fishing or even dolphins playing in the water nearby.

St. Pete has an arts and restaurant scene that's even more vibrant and hipper than Tampa's. Weekends, and many weekdays, you will find waterfront cafes and bars will be packed. Stroll along Beach Drive until you find a place you like. Cassis American Brasserie is among my favorites.

Less than a mile down the road is the new and fittingly odd-looking Dali Museum, packed with more of the artist's works than anywhere outside of Spain.

A skip across town takes you to the white sands of St. Pete Beach. Some people are partial to Pass-A-Grille, the charming and laidback village at the southern tip. Others prefer the bikini and buff dudes scene on Clearwater Beach to the north. I'm happy with either, as long as I have a book. And maybe a bottle of Cigar City Brewing beer.

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If you go . . .

Where to stay Don Vicente de Ybor Historic Inn

1915 Republica de Cuba
Tampa
813-241-4545
www.donvicenteinn.com
In the heart of historic Ybor City.
Rooms from about \$100.

Floridan Palace
905 North Florida Ave., Tampa
813-225-1700
www.floridanpalace.com
Elegantly restored 1920s landmark hotel downtown. Rooms from about \$190.

**TradeWinds Island Grand
Beach Resort**
5500 Gulf Blvd., St. Pete Beach
727-367-6461
www.justletgo.com
Quintessential family resort.
Rooms from about \$150.

**Where to eat
Columbia Restaurant**
2117 East 7th Ave., Tampa
813-248-4961
www.columbiarestaurant.com
Landmark Spanish restaurant. Flamenco dancers perform nightly (except Sunday). Signature dishes include Snapper Alicante (\$24.95) and the 1905 Salad (\$9.95).

West Tampa Sandwich Shop
3904 North Armenia Ave.
Tampa
813-873-7104
www.westtampasandwichshop.com
Great Cuban grub. Honey Cuban (\$3.69) is worth a trip alone.
Bern's Steak House
1208 South Howard Ave.
Tampa
813-251-2421



www.bernssteakhouse.com
Renowned restaurant with amazing wine list. A 10-ounce filet mignon with French onion soup, salad, baked potato, onion rings, and choice of veggie (\$41.40).

Restaurant BT

2507 South MacDill Ave.
Tampa

813-258-1916

www.restaurantbt.com

Intimate ambience and innovative French-Vietnamese food. Daily specials and standards such as Vietnamese bouillabaisse (\$32) and Peking duck burrito (\$12).

Cigar City Brewing

3924 West Spruce St., Tampa
813-348-6363

www.cigarcitybrewing.com
Among best area breweries.

Tours and tastings.

Cassis American Brasserie

170 Beach Drive Northeast
St. Petersburg
727-827-2927

www.cassisab.com

French-American bistro fare served breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Entrees from \$17.50.

What to do

Florida Aquarium

701 Channelside Drive, Tampa
813-273-4000

www.floridaaquarium.org

Adults \$21.95, under 12 \$16.95, 2 and under free.

Tampa Museum of Art

120 West Gasparilla Plaza
Tampa

813-274-8130

www.tampamuseum.org

Adults \$10, students \$5, 6 and under free.

Glazer Children's Museum

110 West Gasparilla Plaza
813-443-3861

www.glazermuseum.org

Adults \$5, children \$9.50, under 1 free.

Tampa Theatre

711 North Franklin St., Tampa
813-274-8981

www.tampatheatre.org

Movie tickets: adults \$10, 2-12 \$8, under 2 free. Tours of the theater available.

Dalí Museum

1 Dalí Boulevard
St. Petersburg
727-823-3767

www.thedali.org

Adults \$21, 13-18 and students \$15, 6-12 \$7; 5 and under free.



JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES



DANA HOFF/COURTESY OF DALÍ MUSEUM



PHILIPPE DIEDERICH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



SAMMY TODD DYESS

From top: Flamenco dancer in Ybor City neighborhood; Dalí Museum; Gonzalez y Martinez cigar factory; and St. Pete Beach.



JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

The skyline of downtown Tampa, a city hosting its first national party convention and which, like Charlotte, N.C., is in the middle of a so-called battleground state.