Sun, sand and a GOP convention

Republicans will find beaches, Cuban culture, Dali and more in Tampa Bay

By Paul Abecrombie
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Tampa, Fla. — It is true that, just as the tourist brochures say, it is possible to surf on the beaches of Tampa Bay during the day and take in an opera at night.

But that high culture is terribly high on my list when the mercury is pushing triple digits here in late summer, let alone during scorching, 70-degrees-and-sunny winter days, for that matter.

Given a choice of "La Boheme" at Tampa's Straz Center, or a Cuban sandwich and a fall on the sugar-sand of St. Pete Beach, I'd reach for the grub and the sunscreen almost every time.

Blessed with mostly fantastic weather and beaches, and busy if not bustling downtown business and cultural scenes, Tampa Bay is a metropolitan area of more than 4 million yet feels oddly small town. This even with three major pro sports teams and the Republican National Convention coming Aug. 23-26 to the Tampa Bay Times Forum.

Neighborhood is the right life department, Tampa Bay still exudes little of the carmel chic you find in much subtropical resort roam like South Florida.

Smoke and sides, since I moved here two decades ago from Washington, D.C., I've come to love my adopted home.

Like many a run-out-of-towners, I admit Tampa Bay geography can be a bit confusing.

Tampa Bay is not one city but several. Its main cities of Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater are scarred by four bridges. Driving from Tampa to St. Petersburg or Clearwater takes about half an hour by one bridge. Close as they are.

Tampa, St. Pete (as it's called) and Clearwater have very different vibes and charms.

Bigger and more businessy, Tampa once was home to the world's biggest cigar empire.

These days, the sleepy city by the bay is experiencing a renaissance. New businesses (many of them bars and restaurants) have flocked to Tampa's long-neglected historic Ybor City district.

Here, you can still find hand-rolled cigaros and iconic Cuban sandwiches.

The popular, if touristy, Columbia Restaurant serves a fine version of the classic Cuban, plus Flamenco dancers perform nightly (except Sundays) at the landmark Spanish restaurant.

One of my favorite examples of a Cuban sandwich can be found at West Tampa Sandwich Shop.

Aamir Khan's "Blast of Silence" movie "Dolphin Tale" I've read seemingly rules of foreign fast-food chains last year's premier movie, "Dolphin Tale," at the choosing of the Tampa Theatre, a historic movie palace in downtown Tampa, Dali and Cleo.

If you go

Bathing

- Benn's Steak House, 2014 S. Howard Ave., Tampa, 813-258-6131, bennpierhouse.com
- Casa Italiana, 1800 N. Howard Ave., Tampa, 813-258-6131, cisanab.com
- Clearwater Beach Brewing, 3272 W. Moody Ave., Clearwater, 813-255-3255, clearwaterbeachbrewing.com
- West Tampa Sandwich Shop, 3601 N. Armenia Ave., Tampa, 813-255-2003, westtampasandwichshop.com

Attractions

- Big Cat Rescue, 12823 Ehy St., Tampa, 813-255-4150, bigcatrescue.org, tours by reservation
- Busch Gardens, 1000 N. McKinley Ave., Tampa, 813-255-4000, buschtigers.com
- Clearwater Aquarium, 1200 Sand Key Rd., Clearwater, 727-444-1700, seeclairewater.com, Prices vary, tours by reservation
- FitLab Aquatics, 701 Channelview Dr., St. Petersburg, 727-525-2766, therkal.org, Adults $21, children under 12 $16.50, kids 2 or younger free
- Salvador Dali Museum, 2300 St. Petersburg, 727-823-3761, salvador-dali-museum.org, Adults $16, children 13-18 and students $15, 6-12 $8, 2 or younger free
- Tampa Theatre, 711 Franklin St., Tampa, 813-229-8686, tampatheatre.org, Movie ticket: Adults $10, children 2-12 $8, kids 2 or younger free, Tours available.

Touring back at the southern tip. Of course, others prefer the hurling blizzards and belfy dudes seashore on Clearwater Beach to the north. Me? I'm happy with either, as long as I have a book. And maybe that Cuban sandwich.