

Sunrise, Sunset

Posted April 1, 2022 | By Susan Smiley-Height | Photography by Tom Clifford



Sunrise in Cocoa Beach

This road trip will take you from Florida's East Coast to West Coast in one day.

The secret to seeing the best sunrise on Florida's East Coast is to begin scanning the skyline an hour beforehand. I find that out by accident during a recent excursion to catch the sunrise over the Atlantic Ocean and the sunset on the Gulf Coast all in one day. My husband is to blame.

Alan and I strike out on February 26th, taking a leisurely route east on State Road 40 out of Ocala then traveling in a southeasterly direction through the quaint cities of DeLand and New Smyrna Beach, then south into the heart of the Space Coast.

From our sixth-floor room at the Doubletree by Hilton Cocoa Beach Oceanfront hotel, the balcony provides a commanding view of the Atlantic Ocean, complete with the roar of the surf and a mist of salty spray on our faces. The boutique hotel, which is rebranding to a Hilton Garden Inn this month, is a terrific place from which to check out the area's attractions, which range from space launch sites to surfing meccas to quirky museums.

After enjoying some delicious seafood (Try the rock shrimp at restaurants that offer them!), we nestle in for an early evening, with our alarms set for 6am for the 6:49am sunrise.

At 5am, the splattering sound of the shower rouses me from sleep.

“Huh? Why are you up so early?” I grouse to my hubby.

“I had a hunch,” he whispers, followed by, “Skip your shower; you have to see this!”

He pulls aside the drapes to reveal a striking ribbon of bright red, orange and yellow, with tinges of green and blue, snaking along the horizon as far as can be seen. And there is a bonus —Venus is sparkling just over the top of the cream-colored crescent moon.

The mesmerizing view pulls us in as we watch the hues fade and brighten in tone and color.

After I have that shower after all, we go down to the hotel’s boardwalk, which extends from the pool area into the rolling sand dunes near the shore. Executive Chef Kati Marosites has prepared an exquisite breakfast table under a covered corner of the wooden expanse. This is an option that is available to guests with an upgrade or for an additional fee.



Breakfast on the boardwalk at the Doubletree by Hilton Cocoa Beach Oceanfront hotel.

Fresh flowers, chilled champagne and orange and cranberry juices accent the plates of Chorizo Eggs Benedict with Cilantro Hollandaise and Brioche French Toast with Caramel Sea Salt Topping and Vanilla Whipped Cream. Oh. My. Taste. Buds!

Pairing such luscious flavors with the view of the cresting yellow-gold sun is an absolutely delicious and fine way to begin a fresh new day.

All too soon, we must bid adieu as we embark for Florida’s west coast.

With a resolve to stay off the superhighways as much as possible, I drive south on A1A through several small beach towns before switching over to US 1. In Fort Pierce, I point the car west on State Road 70. This mostly two-lane ribbon of blacktop takes us on a 150-mile trek past massive cattle ranch operations, low and flat sod farms, dairy farms with black and white cows dotting the pastures and, happily, citrus groves. Lots of rows of small trees indicate the farmers are working to recover from the citrus greening disease that devastated so many groves over the past few years.



As we emerge from this agricultural avenue into the suburbs of Sarasota, traffic thickens to a near gridlock—even on a Sunday afternoon—as we wend our way onto State Road 789. Bird Key, Coon Key and Otter Key fall away in the rearview mirror as I exclaim loudly and at length about the stunning colors of the Gulf Coast waters. The aqua and cerulean hues are breathtaking, and the sand is so much brighter and whiter here.

The chic St. Armands Circle area is abustle with pedestrians and hungry diners-to-be waiting in line at the iconic Columbia Restaurant spill off the sidewalk and nearly onto the street.



Within a few miles and minutes, we reach the Casa del Mar Beach Resort on Longboat Key. The name, which in Spanish translates to “house by the sea,” is most appropriate. All of the two-bedroom, two-bath vacation rental condominiums have full kitchens and comfy living areas, and we immediately feel at home. With just a few steps, our feet are leaving tracks in the wet sand as we hit the beach.

The beach at Casa del Mar.

On this coast as well, timing is the key to catching the “magic.”

With the sun setting at 6:30pm, we embark at 4pm-ish on a journey to find an early dinner. Two large waterfront restaurants are jampacked with long wait times for seating and some other eateries won’t open until 5pm. Well, here’s a dilemma...

A box of crisply fried chicken and a tasty pre-made salad from Publix, which we enjoy at our condo dining table, ensures we won’t miss the very thing that drew us here.



Back on the beach at 6pm, we join others who scatter along the shore. Some guests watch from floats in the swimming pool while others chatter and nosh and sip libations inside the screened porches of their condo units. All eyes lock on the horizon.

“There, it’s starting,” I murmur as the blazing

orange orb slips partially behind a sliver of silver cloud. Ever so slowly, the sinking sun drops below the horizon, taking the day with it and easing us into the velvety softness of night.

The loveliness of Florida is abundant; from the forested hills of the Panhandle to the rolling green knolls of our own Horse Capital of the World to the attraction-rich central region to the tropical and exotic southern areas.

But I venture there is nothing more lovely or soul-soothing than basking in the glow of Old Sol in the wee hours on our East Coast and in the waning minutes on our West Coast. Ahhhh, yes, mission accomplished...

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