

BEACH HAPPY

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RESERVATIONS



Contributors



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1 LAUREN SAGE REINLIE
is an award-winning freelance journalist currently living in Freeport, Florida. Her work has taken her across the South, where she has covered topics ranging from the wily ways of politicians at the Texas state capitol to the storied land of sunshine and swamp sharks (a.k.a. gators) in Florida.

2 MARTIN LIPTROT
is British but has lived along Scenic Highway 30A since 2004. After a global career in advertising, he made NorthWest Florida his home and runs a local PR and Marketing Agency (98RepublicPR.com). Martin's passions include soccer, cricket, rugby, Formula One and horse racing. He is a fan of craft beers and fine wines and enjoys good company and long, lazy lunches in any of the spectacular restaurants along 30A.



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3 ANDREA STEHLE
is a freelance writer and editor with a passion for storytelling and wellness. Her career has woven the industries of national digital news startups, magazines, and public relations. She is also an essential oil educator. A former lifestyle magazine editor-in-chief and director of PR for a global, luxury hotel brand, Andrea resides in a Pittsburgh suburb with her husband and two children.



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4 CARMEN SCHOBBER
is an author, essayist, and journalist. She lives in Manhattan, Kansas, with her husband and three small children. Enjoy her writing and interviews at CarmenSchober.com or @carmen_schober_writes.

5 SEAN MURPHY
has returned to the panhandle after 30 years shooting celebrities and advertising on the west coast. He has built an inspiring studio in Fort Walton Beach, where he continues to work on national campaigns. When Sean isn't shooting, he can be found fishing from his BOTE Board or spending time with family.



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6 ABBIE LEE WEBSTER
is a journalism graduate with a passion for immersive storytelling. When not writing, Abbie Lee can be found playing with her golden retriever, hitting tennis, or collecting seashells along the coast.

7 GEN HANDLEY
is a music writer living in Vancouver, BC, where he can be found running its wet streets or trying its many restaurants with his wife and son.

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AWAITS

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MANATEE

Magic

Photo courtesy of Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Experience the Best of Crystal River with Tips for Spotting and Swimming

By Andrea Stehle

Imagine a place where crystal-clear waters reflect the morning sun and life abounds in every corner of the landscape. In Crystal River, a hidden gem in Florida, you can come face-to-face with one of nature's most gentle giants: the manatee. Whether you're seeking adventure or simply a serene escape, this destination promises an unforgettable experience.

Visiting Crystal River is more than just an adventure or nature trip—it's a journey into a sanctuary where nature thrives in its most untouched and pristine form. The springs here are a haven for manatees, especially during the cooler months. There's no better way to experience these magnificent creatures than in their natural habitat. For the best chance to see them at their most active, plan your visit for early mornings or midweek, when the crowds are light and the manatees are most playful.

The peak season for observing manatees runs from November through March, with the largest gatherings occurring between December and February. While manatees can be spotted in Crystal River year-round, their numbers are significantly smaller during the summer.

But there's more than just spotting manatees. Crystal River is the only place in the U.S. where you can legally swim with these incredible creatures in their natural environment. In fact, the area boasts the largest concentration of manatees in the world. Fortunately, several companies offer tours that let you swim alongside these gentle giants.

One such company is Hunter Springs Kayaks. Their expert guides have mastered the art of locating these amazing creatures in the consistently warm, 72-degree waters. They offer manatee snorkel tours that last up to three hours. The only question is: Are you ready to meet a manatee?

Another reputable option is the Crystal River Kayak Company, located just a ten-minute paddle from Three Sisters Springs. In addition to manatee tours, they offer kayak, pontoon, and dive tours during the off-season. If you plan to swim, either to enter the springs or to see the manatees underwater, you'll need to wear a wetsuit. Don't worry if you don't have one—they've got you covered with rentals. In fact, they provide everything you need to fully enjoy your encounter with these awe-inspiring animals.



Fun 2 Dive is another excellent choice—a five-star tour company that’s been offering manatee encounter snorkel tours since 1995. With over twenty-five years of experience, they’ve been a leader in bringing visitors face-to-face with these fascinating creatures. Their tours are all-inclusive, providing all the snorkeling gear you’ll need. Plus, there are no extra fees or hidden charges for parking, gear, fuel, or other essentials.

If sustainability is important to you, you’ll be glad to know that Fun 2 Dive Manatee Tours operates with full permits from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), granting access to the National Wildlife Refuge waters for swimming with manatees. Their commitment to sustainable ecotourism ensures that tours are conducted responsibly, respecting the ecosystem and minimizing the impact on manatees and their habitat. As part of their approach, they keep tour groups small to minimize visitor impact and ensure a comfortable, relaxing experience with plenty of room to enjoy your time on the water.

Every tour includes a guide who stays with you from arrival to departure. Throughout your tour, your professional guide will capture the moment with photos, typically leaving you with fifty to a hundred images to choose from by the end of your trip. Once you return, you can view and purchase your photos. The most popular option is the Classic Manatee Swim, priced at \$65.95 per person, with a maximum of twelve participants. For a more intimate experience with your closest friends and family, a private tour is available for \$600. Alternatively, a semi-private tour, limited to

no more than six guests per boat, starts at \$84.95 per person.

The Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge at Kings Bay is another must-see destination. Established in 1983 specifically to protect the West Indian Manatee, the refuge plays a critical role in manatee conservation efforts. This first-magnitude Florida Springs Complex features over seventy springs, pumping out 600 million gallons of freshwater per day from the Florida aquifer. Key springs include King Spring, Tarpon Spring, Three Sisters Springs, and Hunter Spring. The refuge comprises twenty islands scattered around Kings Bay and is maintained by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The USFWS enforces strict guidelines for manatee interactions to ensure their safety and well-being, making it a critical sanctuary during the winter months when up to 1,000 manatees can be found in and around Kings Bay. The warm water springs are essential for their survival, as manatees are susceptible to cold stress.

“When visiting Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service encourages visitors to practice passive observation, which means not initiating contact with manatees and calmly observing them from a distance and at the surface,” said Wildlife Refuge Specialist Alex Arrow. Manatees have high site fidelity, meaning they often return to the same locations, so habitat conservation in areas like the refuge is crucial for their survival. 🐬

Ready to experience the magic of Crystal River? For more information, visit discovercrystalriverfl.com.



WHAT'S 30A?

30A® is the #1 Guide to Florida's Scenic Highway 30A. Every day, 30A shares Beach Happy® stories and eco-conscious products with 30A's 1.7 million followers on Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, and TikTok. 30A has raised \$3.2 million for coastal charities, has given away 4.5 million of its famous blue 30A stickers, and has prevented 6.5 million plastic bottles from going into our oceans and landfills through 30A's line of recycled apparel.

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