



Wanderlust

your definitive **travel guide**

Coasting along in America's sunshine state

Beaches, wetlands, wildlife sanctuaries, spas and heavenly tearooms – the Palm Beaches in Southeast Florida have it all, as **Gayle Ritchie** discovers

As we paddle through a freshwater creek lined with cypress trees, John Welsh chirps: "Keep your eyes peeled for alligators." "Humans aren't their favourite food but it's not a great idea to get in their way."

I've come to Riverbend Park in Jupiter for a morning of kayaking with John, a naturalist bursting with fascinating facts and anecdotes.

So far, no alligators, but we do spy dozens of cute turtles resting on the banks of the Loxahatchee River.

There's also a chance of spotting wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, marsh rabbits and raccoons.

We're visiting Florida's Palm Beach County, which boasts destinations such as Jupiter, Boca Raton, the Everglades and Palm Beach itself, where President Trump has a home.

Flying into Miami, it's a 90-minute drive to Jupiter, where we spend a few nights before heading south to Delray Beach.

Waving goodbye to John and thanking him for keeping us free from gators' jaws, we head to Busch Wildlife Sanctuary. Animal care director Amy Knight guides us along nature trails, stopping to see everything from crocodiles and gators to foxes, snakes, bears, birds of prey, skunks and deer.

A highlight is getting to stroke the friendly bobcats, which purr and rub against us.

Lunch is at our hotel, the luscious Jupiter Beach Resort and Spa, and boy, do they lay on a sumptuous feast! After letting our bellies settle, we drink in the sweeping views across the Atlantic.

I'm a massive fan of ocean swimming and, shark fears aside, had been looking forward to floating in Florida's finest.

Locals tell me the sea here is usually

a dreamy, glass-like turquoise blue, but the surf churns a strange brown and green during our stay – the aftermath of Hurricane Irma.

Not to worry because I've booked a spa treatment – the Signature Perfect Massage – at the hotel.

Staff kit me out in a fluffy robe and slippers and invite me to relax with herbal tea in the waiting area. Then I'm taken into a warm, aromatic treatment room for 80 minutes of sheer, unadulterated bliss.

Therapist Kristen Gonda incorporates essentials oils and heated tiger shells into the massage, which soothes my mind and body and leaves me, almost literally, walking on air.

Dinner is a short stroll down to Tommy Bahama Restaurant and Bar, which sits along the Jupiter Riverwalk at Harbourside Place.

It's a vibrant, colourful venue, buzzing with people of all ages – and the food and drinks are sensational!

The excitement in the air is tangible, as this is an area very much on the up.

Across the road, Tiger Woods has a restaurant, The Woods Jupiter, and he also owns a swanky piece of real estate on Jupiter Island.

Actor Burt Reynolds once called Jupiter "the best place in the world" and can still be seen dotting around, while Kid Rock, Michael Jordan and Celine Dion have homes here too.

Back at the hotel, we enjoy a refreshing sleep in the huge bed, the sound of waves crashing outside.

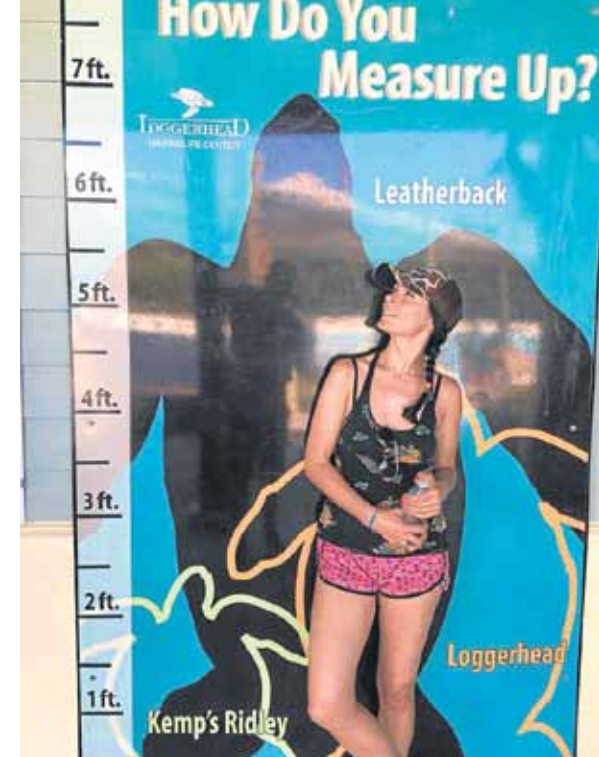
The next morning, after consuming our bodyweight in blueberry pancakes, omelette, and fruit, we waddle our way to BlueLine Surf and Paddle Company for a morning's paddleboarding.

Our guide, Alex Cotleur, takes us on a tour of Jupiter's Intracoastal Waterway, past decaying shipwrecks and through mangroves.

Inigorated, we browse BlueLine's



Clockwise from far left: Gayle and her partner at BlueLine Surf and Paddle Company; kayaking in Riverbend Park; at Loggerhead Marinelife Center; a stretch of the beautiful Florida coastline; paddleboarding; Silverball Museum and Arcade; Delray Beach; a trader's message to Hurricane Irma.



epically cool shop and buy a couple of baseball caps and T-shirts.

Lunch is at Guanabanas, just across the road.

Opened by surfers in 2004, the colourful outdoor venue has become an institution thanks to its lush, tropical setting, great cuisine and cocktails, and live music.

Woven tiki huts and banyan trees tower overhead, and hand-chiseled coquina stone pathways are underfoot.

In the afternoon, we head to the Loggerhead Marinelife Center at Juno Beach – one of the most densely-nested loggerhead turtle nesting beaches in the world.

We check out injured and endangered turtles in spacious aquariums and discover that many became entangled in fishing lines, were struck by boats, or ingested plastic.

The rest of the afternoon is spent at Manatee Lagoon, hoping to spy one of the strange, aquatic marine mammals, sometimes known as sea cows.

Apparently you can find them year-round in Florida but, alas, we see none and pledge to return another day.

The following morning we head to the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse, a landmark 1860 building which towers high above the Loxahatchee River, with a series of spiralling stairs that take you to the top.

It's pretty vertigo-inducing stuff and a sign at the bottom warns those with heart conditions to think twice before attempting the climb.

Then it's time to head for Delray Beach – 40 minutes down the east coast – where we book into luxury Seagate

Hotel and Spa. Our room is a stunner, with fresh orchids by the bath and chocolates on the pillow, and we're treated to a bottle of fizz and cake on arrival.

After dinner at Ocean One Grille, we aim for the newly-opened Silverball Museum and Arcade.

With more than 150 video games and pinball machines buzzing, whirring, flashing and bleeping, it's a bit of a sensory overload.

It's nostalgic central, with classics such as Ms. Pac-Man and Qbert and original skee ball alleys from Coney Island's Eldorado Arcade.

It's a brilliant place to hang out, and there's a real party atmosphere, with drinks flowing and music pumping.

The following morning, after a dip in the hotel's outdoor pool, I book in for a hot shell massage with therapist Liliana Marsh.

Explaining I have a painful shoulder, Liliana squeezes muscles in my neck and shoulder tightly, warning that it might hurt, but promising that it will help relieve the pain and tension. And you know what, it worked wonders!

I'm also treated to a vitamin sea radiance facial, which refreshes my tired skin and leaves me with a brighter appearance.

Lunch is at the magical Yaxche Tearoom, a hidden gem offering more than 100 artisanal teas, soups, sandwiches, salads, desserts and more.

Knowing little about tea, I'm grateful when owner Alexandra Wayne opens up a few containers for me to sniff and choose the one that most appeals.

The menu is mouthwatering and I opt for a chicken salad, which is humongous and utterly delicious.

The tearoom is crammed with students, yoga-lovers and regulars – it's a fantastic place to hang out and, in fact, is less like a tearoom and more like a cute, colourful cottage, with healing crystals, artwork and inspirational signs everywhere.

The rest of our stay is spent walking up and down Delray's streets, which are peppered with amazing boutiques, sunning ourselves on the beach, and going for a swim.

It's calmer here than it was at Jupiter and it's a refreshing experience, aside from the odd wave crashing over my head.

Certainly, Delray is a place for beach lovers, and there are plenty of bronzed, ripped bodies on show, whether people are sunbathing, jogging, kitesurfing, playing volleyball or simply strutting.

We also fit in a trip to Sandoway Nature Center where we watch a shark feeding session and dip our hands into a salt water tank to stroke stingrays!

Another highlight is a stroll round Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, which boasts sprawling historic gardens and a world-class bonsai display.

For anyone who thinks of Florida as simply Disney World and the Keys, a trip to the Palm Beaches will prove there's way more to it than that.

And with winter blasting Scotland, now's the perfect time to book a trip to this warm, sunny slice of American paradise.

i Gayle flew from Heathrow to Miami with Virgin Atlantic, www.virginatlantic.com. She stayed at Jupiter Beach Resort and Spa, www.jupiterbeachresort.com, and The Seagate Hotel and Spa, www.theseagatehotel.com, in Delray Beach. She travelled round the Palm Beaches using Uber. For more information see www.thepalmbeaches.com