Welcome to the sun-drenched subtropical paradise that the University of South Florida System calls home, from the white sands and emerald waters of St. Petersburg and Sarasota beaches to Tampa. Here’s the first thing you should know about the Tampa Bay area: There’s a lot to do along this stretch of the Gulf of Mexico. We’ll help you figure out where to start.

The primary stomping grounds of the Bulls comprises four counties (Sarasota, Manatee, Pinellas and Hillsborough) and metro areas including Sarasota, Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater. Students come to learn, but these destinations also are ideal for anybody who loves the arts, great food, sports and outdoor adventures. The region’s quirkiness (we have an annual pirate festival) is perfectly suited to the eclectic landscape, everything from barrier islands to mangrove tunnels and Class II river rapids.

Our range of activities is just as diverse. We’ve compiled some of our favorites so you can plan an unforgettable Florida adventure.

GULF COAST VISITOR GUIDE

DIVE INTO NATURE

Kayak through mangrove tunnels at the Weedon Island Preserve in Pinellas County. Sunbathe on the sugar-white sands of Siesta Key or Clearwater Beach (regulars on many best-beaches lists), or get close and personal with a manatee at the MOTE Marine Laboratory & Aquarium. If you’re feeling really adventurous, there are many places to encounter an alligator in the wild. And be sure to say hi to Winter, star of the “Dolphin Tale” movies, at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium. Our beautiful weather is a great attraction, too, a year-round phenomenon that makes us one of the nation’s most desirable vacation destinations.

A TASTE OF THE BAYS

With its fresh-caught seafood and countless craft breweries, the landscape from Sarasota Bay to Tampa Bay is a foodie paradise. Culinary experiences range from the exotic (alligator hush puppies) to the famous (Cuban sandwiches). Our favorite food-oriented destinations include Sparkman Wharf’s waterfront eateries, a Sarasota farmers market experience that includes demonstrations by local chefs, including some from USF Sarasota-Manatee’s cutting-edge Culinary Innovation Laboratory; and an array of “ready-to-eat” and “take-home” food at St. Petersburg’s Saturday Morning Market, the largest in the Southeast.

BRING THE FAMILY

Whether you’re looking for thrills or just want to chill, we’ve got you covered. Our theme park excursions range from the stomach-dropping roller coasters of Busch Gardens to the waterways and waterslides of Adventure Island. You also can step into the prehistoric past by exploring Dinosaur World, a zany theme park (formerly an alligator farm) featuring hundreds of life-size dinosaur statues. Up for a short road trip? Head for LEGOLAND, Walt Disney World or Universal Orlando. With this many attractions so close, your family will never want to leave.

EXPLORE THE ARTS

The Tampa Bay area offers much more than stunning sunsets viewed from beaches. We’re recognized as a top arts destination. Explore the museums and performing arts venues nestled along Tampa’s picturesque Riverwalk; visit nearby St. Petersburg, home to the largest U.S. collection of Salvador Dalí’s works and the Mahaffey Theater, a primary venue of The Florida Orchestra; then check out The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota.