

Retreat to Vintage Florida

A few miles off the interstate lies a detour to another era, one with a more relaxed pace and state of mind. Here, scenic, less-traveled country roads lead to small town Main Streets, crystal clear springs and wild, dreamy rivers. Pulling into Madison, Florida it first appears you've reached a place that time has left alone. A celebrated courthouse surrounded by palms and moss-draped, oak-lined streets creates a picture-perfect image harkening back to those collectible postcards of 70 years ago.

Unsurprisingly, you find yourself reminiscing about carefree vacations when piling into the family station wagon meant heading to a place with ample time to relax, play and connect. This was the age before theme parks, when road trips were adventures in themselves filled with natural roadside attractions, local diners and campgrounds featuring all sorts of laidback fun. Recreational pursuits included swimming, fishing, canoeing, biking, hiking, boating, water skiing and exploring unique historic sites along the way. Simple pleasures ruled and time wasn't measured by how long you had to stand in line for the latest ride, but how long you stayed up on water skis or how many fish you caught in an afternoon. Those with an appreciation for this nostalgic time, and longing to recapture the charm, culture, memories and essence of a bygone era will find a lot to love in Madison County.

Though it may not be the typical Florida vacation destination, Madison County's unspoiled beauty, attractions and distinctive personality make it special in its own way. Its natural assets, historic significance and rural charm offer visitors a different glimpse and side of Florida that can't be found in popular beach towns along the coast and conjures images of a time and place rarely found today. From its ancient cypress trees and quiet parks to its abundance of freshwater fun, Madison County represents a stark, authentically charming contrast with Florida's more bustling urban areas. This truly is vintage Florida at its best.

Madison's historic downtown and neighborhood districts filled with Greek Revival, Federal-style and Victorian homes and buildings appear virtually untouched for more than a hundred years. Main Street's sophisticated antique stores, trendy boutiques, quaint shops and local cafés belie its small-town size. Nearby Four Freedoms Park is filled with compelling stories as an important player in our nation's history. And Lake Francis offers an inviting respite for kicking back a few blocks off the main square.

A few miles down the road in Greenville you'll find the childhood home of soul music pioneer and icon, Ray Charles. Venturing north will bring you to Cherry Lake, a destination for water sports ranging from fishing and boating to tubing and water skiing. Three campgrounds offering outdoor recreational activities from swimming and golfing to family campfires mean there's something to keep everyone entertained.

Follow rural backroads to a genuine, old-fashioned swimming hole, rated America's best, at Madison Blue Spring State Park, a first magnitude crystal-clear spring worthy of a trip itself. The Four Freedoms Trail, a rails-to-trails corridor lined with ancient oaks and pine, as well as the county's 100-Mile Loop Trail, offer cyclists some of the best scenic backdrops and views in the state. And the county's rolling fields and lush forests are a hunter's paradise.

This is truly the kind of place where you don't need a vacation to recover from your vacation. A visit to this unpretentious, unchanged part of Florida where the Withlacoochee and Suwannee Rivers meet genuinely recaptures the nostalgia of vintage Florida, a Florida many still long to experience. Fortunately, they can in Madison County.

