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The Dalí Museum has more of artist Salvador Dalí's works than any place outside of Spain. The museum is at 1 Dalí Blvd., St. Petersburg, Fla.

Sun, sand and a GOP convention

Republicans will find beaches, Cuban culture, Dalí and more in Tampa Bay

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TAMPA, Fla. — It is true that, just as the tourism brochures say, it is possible to loaf on the beaches of Tampa Bay during the day and take in an opera at night.

Not that high culture is terribly high on my list when the mercury is pushing triple digits here in late summer. Or even during idyllic, 70-degree-and-sunny winter days, for that matter.

Given a choice of "La Bohème" at Tampa's Straz Center, or a Cuban sandwich and a loll on the sugar-sand of St. Pete Beach, I'd reach for the grub and the sun-screen almost every time.

Blessed with (mostly) fantastic weather and beaches, and busy if not bustling downtown business and cultural climates, Tampa Bay is a metropolitan area of more than 4 million yet feels oddly small town. This even with three major pro sports teams and the Republican National Convention coming Aug. 27-30 to the Tampa Bay Times Forum.

No slacker in the night life department, Tampa Bay still exudes little of the carnal chic you find in such subtropical resort towns as Miami.

Slower pace aside, since I moved here two decades ago from Washington, D.C., I've come to love my adopted home.

Like many once-out-of-towners, I admit Tampa Bay geography can be a bit confusing.

Tampa Bay is not one city but several. Its main cities of Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater are



The Florida Aquarium, left, and the Tampa Theatre are among the area's highlights. The aquarium features stingray and starfish touch tanks, while the theater is known for its dark and gargoyle-filled interior.

separated by four bridges. Driving from Tampa to St. Petersburg or Clearwater takes about half an hour by one bridge. Close as they are, Tampa, St. Pete (as it's called) and Clearwater have very different vibes and charms.

Bigger and more businesslike, Tampa once was home to the world's biggest cigar empire. These days, the sleepy city by the bay is experiencing a renaissance. New businesses (many of them bars and restaurants) have flocked to Tampa's long-neglected historic Cuban district, Ybor City. Here you can still find hand-rolled stogies and iconic Cuban sandwiches.

The popular, if touristy, Columbia Restaurant serves a fine version of the classic Cuban, plus Flamenco dancers perform nightly (except Sunday) at the landmark Spanish restaurant. (See story below.)

One of my favorite examples of a Cuban sandwich can be found at West Tampa Sandwich Shop. Besides the traditional Cuban sandwich, made with mustard, pickles, Swiss cheese, roasted pork, ham, salami and Cuban bread, they do a nifty riff with

honey. Or if you prefer a drink, Ybor's indie brew darling Cigar City Brewing, ever tinkering with new recipes, is among the area's best breweries.

A trolley line that once served as the main link between Ybor City and downtown is (slowly) being rebuilt. Take it from Ybor to the excellent Florida Aquarium. My son, now 9, has spent countless hours up to his elbows in the stingray and starfish touch tanks.

Critter-crazy Tampa also boasts Busch Gardens, whose zoo exhibits include everything from alligators to zebras, along with an amusement park packed with gut-churning roller coasters.

Animal enthusiasts should head to Tampa's world-class Lowry Park Zoo or, to my favorite, Big Cat Rescue, home to more than 100 wild cats. And Clearwater has a fine aquarium made famous by resident bottlenose dolphin Winter, whose story was chronicled in last year's tear-jerker movie "Dolphin Tale."

I've read seemingly miles of foreign flick subtitles just for the excuse of visiting the Tampa Theatre, a historic movie palace in downtown Tampa. Dark and



If you go

Eating

- Bern's Steak House, 1208 S. Howard Ave., Tampa; 813-251-2421; bernssteakhouse.com.
- Cassis American Brasserie, 170 Beach Drive Northeast, St. Petersburg; 727-827-2927; cassisab.com.
- Cigar City Brewing, 3924 W. Spruce St., Tampa; 813-348-6363; www.cigarcitybrewing.com.
- West Tampa Sandwich Shop, 3904 N. Armenia Ave., Tampa; 813-873-7104; westtampasandwichshop.com.

Attractions

- Big Cat Rescue, 12802 Easy St., Tampa; 813-920-4130; bigcatrescue.org. Tours by reservation.
- Busch Gardens, 10165 N. McKinley Drive, Tampa; 888-800-5447; buschgardens.com.
- Clearwater Aquarium, 249 Windward Passage, Clearwater; 727-441-1790; seewinter.com. Prices vary. Tours by reservation.
- Florida Aquarium, 701 Channelside Drive, Tampa; 813-273-4000; floridaaquarium.com. Adults \$21.95; children under 12 \$16.95; kids 2 or younger free.
- Salvador Dalí Museum, 1 Dalí Blvd., St. Petersburg; 727-823-3767; thedali.org. Adults \$21; children 13-18 and students \$15; 6-12 \$7; 5 or younger free.
- Tampa Theatre, 711 N. Franklin St., Tampa; 813-274-8981; tampatheatre.org. Movie ticket: Adults \$10; children 2-12 \$8; kids 2 or younger free. Tours available.

gargoyle-filled, the theater's interior looks as if it were designed by a vampiric Spanish architect.

If you're game to splurge on dinner, head to Bern's Steak House in South Tampa. This renowned restaurant retains its curiously charming bordello decor and obsessive attention to steaks. Ask your waiter for a tour of the absurdly big wine cellar.

For those looking for friskier night life, I prefer heading across the bay to St. Pete.

Once derided as God's Waiting Room because of its population of retirees, St. Pete has an arts and restaurant scene that's (I think) more vibrant and hipper than Tampa's. You'll find packed waterfront cafes and bars. Stroll along Beach Drive until you find a place you like. Cassis American Brasserie is among my faves.

Less than a mile down the road is the new and fittingly odd-looking Dalí Museum, packed with more of the mustachioed artist's works than anywhere outside of Spain.

A surreal skip across town takes you to the white sands of St. Pete Beach. I'm partial to Pass-A-Grille, the charming and laid-

back village at the southern tip. Of course, others prefer the busier bikini and buff-dudes scene on Clearwater Beach to the north. Me? I'm happy with either, so long as I have a book. And maybe that Cuban sandwich.

Next Sunday in Travel: Charlotte, N.C., site of the Democratic National Convention.