



>> TRAVEL

7 ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES IN TAMPA

So what if the nearest beach is a half-hour away? For urbanites or beachgoers seeking a city break, this under-the-radar Florida city is on the cusp of finally realizing its full potential, **Jennifer Bain** discovers.



JENNIFER BAIN/TORONTO STAR

Cigar heritage

Fourth-generation Tampa native Monica Barbie, right, transforms vintage cigar boxes into purses, while her mom, Rose Barbie, sells framed and unframed vintage cigar labels, cigar bands, cigar posters and luggage tags. Look for these Cigar City souvenirs in Long Ash Cigars (1728 E. 7th Ave.) and soon at Tampa International Airport.



JENNIFER BAIN/TORONTO STAR

Ethical candles

Three candle chemists (from left, Jessica Pesano Reinsner, her mom, Phala Fonte Pesano, and Jessica's cousin Erin Fonte Grossman) run Seventh Avenue Apothecary (3810 E. 7th Ave.), and make handcrafted, ecoconscious, dye-free candles from American soy with cotton core wicks. The fragrances — including my fave, tobacco and vanilla bourbon — are inspired by Tampa and Florida's cultural and culinary legacies. The trio is starting to host candle chemist wine-and-cheese parties.

Smoked mullet

Seminole Heights is Tampa's "it" spot for hot restaurants and bars and chef/owner Greg Baker is revered. He and his wife, Michelle, make Florida Cracker (pioneer) cuisine at Fodder & Shine and Florida-grown/ethically sound fare at the Refinery. People go wild for the hardwood smoked mullet spread at the former spot, but I was struck by cheddar cheese sofkee (fermented rice grits) with bacon tomato gravy.



JENNIFER BAIN/TORONTO STAR

Boat tours

Harbour tour? Sunset trip? Famous people homes tour? River eco tour? The Tampa Water Taxi Co. (tampadolphintours.com) has got you covered, with tours that start at \$20 (U.S.). Capt. Larry Salkin will even pick you up at Water Works Park beside Ulele restaurant. He has been dubbed "Tampa's dolphin whisperer" so you might spot dolphins or, in season, manatees. "Tampa," says Salkin, "is the nicest, sweetest, friendliest city."



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ULELE RESTAURANT

Okra fries

Executive chef Eric Lackey's hand-cut okra, flash-fried, tossed with lime and sea salt and served with house ketchup is a must-have at Ulele (1810 N. Highland Ave.)



EPICUREAN HOTEL

Food-themed hotel

The Epicurean Hotel (1207 S. Howard Ave.) in the Hyde Park district of South Tampa worships food, from its wine-inspired lobby desk to its in-room artisan pantries. Élevage restaurant, the Chocolate Pi patisserie, wine shop and food and wine-themed spa are placed to attract locals as well as guests. You might luck into a cooking class in the 40-seat Epicurean Theatre. The boutique hotel boasts an in-house TV channel, restaurant "lettuce wall" and cruiser bikes you can borrow.



VISIT TAMPA BAY

Live music

Skipper's Smokehouse (910 Skipper Rd.) — dubbed "the club that washed ashore" — is an iconic local venue for live music and food. The "Skipperdome" holds almost 800 people and boasts a canopy of oak trees, Key West vibe, mixed seating (benches, chairs and picnic tables), covered tiki deck and even a sandy "beach." The Floribbean restaurant has smoked gator ribs and blackened grouper Reuben that have both gained fame on food TV shows.

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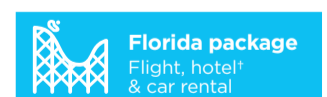
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