



Live awhile in Florida, and you don't just go to the beach. You go to the beach that fits your mood. It's not just the sand and sea. It's the magic of you, the sand and sea. It's the difference between a passing romance and what sparks the urge to "Let me count the ways. . . I love thee."

Beaches are the dessert of our lives, so of course we want the toppings, the sprinkles, too: the dune grass waving in the breeze, the surf or still waters, the quiet or sociability, a sense of what's familiar or new, maybe natural shade, parasails aloft, cavorting dolphins – maybe just knowing that our beaches, at St. Petersburg/Clearwater – Florida's Beach, are among the top-ranked in America with eight of them Blue Wave Award recipients for cleanliness, public safety and environmental quality.

Pass-a-Grille beach recently captured my mood. It was midweek, early morning. Good for joggers, but not yet as a tanning salon. I looked up and saw this curve of beach sweeping north and west into the Gulf. I saw the dance of shore and sea, heard the clock of ages ticking through eons of sandy build-up before the water slowly rose again and Florida formed as we know it today.

I knew of the place discovered by Ponce de Leon, with its great tangles of morning glories that decided the name. *La Florida*, Ponce called it, and I saw how that scripted *ℱ*, which has graced so many love letters sent from the State across so many years, flourishes in that curve of beach and Gulf.

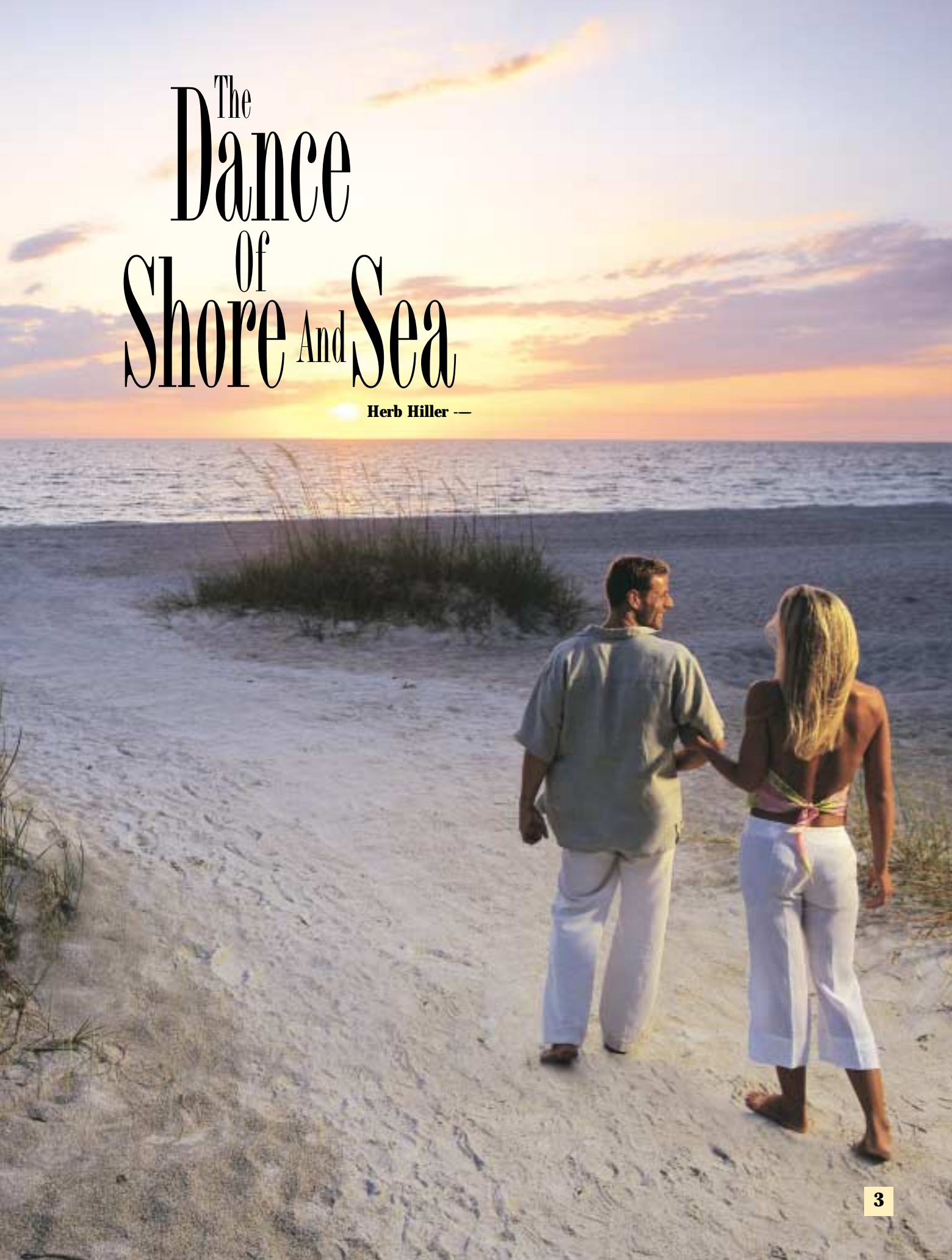
I loved how, in the far distance, the sun bleached the colors and left only shapes, geometry instead of buildings, abstraction instead of clutter I'd rather let go of at the beach. Instead of sand and sea there was sand, sea and dance.

I felt wholly Floridian at Florida's Beach.

For days I had been looking at beaches from hotel windows and dune walkovers, from arriving and departing boats, from the ends of fishing piers and, deliciously cool and wet on a hot afternoon, standing on a sandbar with my feet in the water. I had hiked hinterlands of dune scrub to emerge at beaches as you might at

Many hotels and cottages along the barrier islands offer access to our famous beaches and Gulf of Mexico sunsets.

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A man and a woman are walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. The man is on the left, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and white trousers. The woman is on the right, wearing a white wrap-style top and white trousers. They are holding hands and looking out at the ocean. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with some clouds. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow. The beach is sandy with some sparse vegetation.

The Dance Of Shore And Sea

Herb Hiller —



Honeymoon Island State Park, clambered up sandy cliffs as you might at Egmont Key State Park and waded between beaches as you might at Fort De Soto Park where, in the North Beach section, a tidal channel divides the broad beach in two.

I liked how at Fort De Soto, the back beach stays shady beneath casuarinas. People read and kibbitz in German or whatever their language. Families lay out their picnics on plank tables, keeping an eye on tots with Barney-colored pails at their age-old pastime, here digging beside a shallow channel.

Meanwhile, the forward beach is more sunny and splashed by wavelets, where beach society passes in its bare-skinned variety, from solo fast walkers to hand-holding couples, bent-over shellers, animated business discussants, contemplative walkers, kids with them or not but always present.

Where else but by the beach do kids so easily mingle in a world of adults – except, of course, it's a world of kids where adults so easily mingle. It's adults who give up their business suits.

We do crave this un-buttoning, this Spidey thing that lets us leap from in front of the TV to land, if not exactly suction-cup smoothly, then responsibly encumbered with the webbed chairs, coolers and such paraphernalia as comforts our beach families. Locals know, when the urge strikes, that beach options range from Tarpon Springs in the north to Fort De Soto south, and offshore too, at Anclote Key, Shell Key and at Egmont. Of course for most visitors, the beach is a walk out the door or across the beach road, typically with rental cabanas, chaises, umbrellas and playthings available close by.

This mix of locals and visitors nicely adds to the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area's beach character.

It's what makes Clearwater Beach the active, sybaritic scene where, one minute, you can throw yourself into the surf; the next, towel dry, slip into shorts and cross the shore road to Frenchy's South Beach Café or, north of the thousand-foot pier, chill at the Palm Pavilion directly on the beach. The Sunsets at Pier 60 revs up the social scene with daily festivals, art and



The 35 miles of beach in the area offer kid-friendly playgrounds, thanks to the Gulf's gentle waves, gradual slope and soft sand.

free live music nightly. In April each year, the scene transforms into Beach Fest for three days of great music, fantastic entertainment and arts & crafts.

It's the mix of locals and visitors that has kept the Dixieland Jazz Band playing beachfront at the Bilmar Hotel in Treasure Island for 40 years. Locals come from around town. Guests from nearby hotels show up. Others, relaxing in late afternoon surf, hear the music and move closer on up.

The mix shapes up a little differently at Caladesi Island State Park. A canopy-topped ferry carries you across Hurricane Pass. Locals like it because the ride makes getting there special. They like to show the place off to family visitors. It's so remote. You can rent kayaks here and

paddle mangrove trails.

From Sand Key to Pass-a-Grille, narrow walkways or crossovers from metered parking lots lead to the beach. For the most quiet spots, such as Belleair Beach and Redington Beach, (where parking isn't available), if you're not staying in local beachfront rooms you can ride the Suncoast Beach Trolley, pick your stop and walk onto your chosen beach.

Just north of St. Pete Beach, where Central Avenue reaches Gulf Boulevard from downtown St. Petersburg, is the Sunset Beach Neighborhood of Treasure Island. Not many folks find their way here because it's easy to miss the one way in. The access road drops away at a point where, southbound, the main road sweeps east.

Special Event

APRIL/MAY

Fun 'n Sun Festival...Clearwater

Since 1953, the event has attracted more than 100,000 fans annually. Events include concerts, sports competitions, food and arts & crafts. The main event is the illuminated Fun 'n Sun Night Parade the first Saturday in May at 7:30 p.m. 727-562-4804

www.visitclearwaterflorida.com

Dates and times subject to change. For more information, contact the individual event organizer or visit the area's Web site at www.FloridasBeach.com and go to the Events Calendar.

Sunset Beach is a community of quiet lanes in front of shingle and board houses, where even if locals work day jobs in mainland corporate towers, end of day they're out screen doors in flip flops a block or two to the beach.

From the foot of the island, a boardwalk extends half a mile between Gulf and Bay partly through mangrove

moments. Nearby shaping a turtle was a fellow who says he watches the Discovery Channel, so he knows the shape. He was in an all-in-the-family contest with his wife and six-year-old daughter who explained they had just been to the Clearwater Marine Aquarium that morning and had the more current notion. I had to say that



shore. From the beach at Pavilion Park, you can look south a hundred blocks to where the shore curves back inland to the Don CeSar Resort, wedding-cake pink up close but from Sunset Beach, shorn of color, more like the most glorious sand castle.

You might easily have sand castles on the mind. Treasure Island is the officially designated Sand Sculpture Capital of Florida. Each year during Florida's dry spring season, an international competition takes place, with winning entries displayed as long as the rains hold off. A half-dozen entries stood for weeks, drawing round-the-clock crowds. Award-winners included a Mercury-like figure atop a pile of fire almost flickering-real and beneath a winged helmet with zappy bolts out of its head. There was a Mark Twain-like fantasy of a couple of boys on an adventure of the mind, and an enigmatic piece that showed a Janus-like figure staring into a pyramidal form with a keyhole.

Unfazed by world-class sculptures, folks everywhere build their forts and figures on the beach.

On Madeira Beach I found a mom and tyke daughter inside a fort that seemed futilely close to the rising surf. But they were content to occupy its last

dad's flippers looked powerfully good but maybe that mom and daughter had the overall physiognomy better.

I got my own close-up of marine life with a marine biology class from St. Petersburg College at Fred Howard Park in Tarpon Springs, a glorious recreation area that connects a mainland mangrove-edged forest with a causeway that ends at a big arc of sand in the blue gulf. The class had been snorkeling and looking at "producers": blue-green algae, a sea grass called "shaving brush," some turtle grass ("the wide one," I learned) and another that has crunchy calcium carbonate insides.

These beaches get used in so many more ways.

They're playgrounds, of course. Wildlife watchers love the madcap laughing gulls and terns, the plunging pelicans, the quick-stepping sandpipers pecking the sand for lunch in every receding wave, the varied egrets along quiet backwater beaches. Shellers come for the bay scallops, the conchs, whelks, calico clams and kitten paws. Some fish the many piers. Others come for the Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary in Indian Shores, where a second generation of caregivers for injured birds welcome visitors to view their rehab work.

At Fort De Soto and Egmont Key, visitors prowl ancient fortifications. At Egmont and Anclote Key, they circle historic lighthouses, Egmont's, at 87 feet, still signaling the entrance to Tampa Bay. From Egmont you can watch freighters and tankers passing beneath the awesome span of the Sunshine Skyway. More colorfully at Sand Key Park, you might catch Captain Memo's pirate-styled tour boat sailing out Clearwater Pass.

For me, there was a second defining moment along these beaches. That was at Fort De Soto Park. Not 200 feet from where I walked, a couple of dolphins barged into a school of food fish. You could see the predators' submarine gray just below the surface, darting this way, that way. They tore up a frenzy, coming in close after their prey, flashing, churning. They were 30 feet off shore, then 20, whipping their tails, chopping away, rising up supremely! Then they were done. The water turned calm again. The wild had been only a glimpse. Now there was only all else.

Herb Hiller has been enjoying the beach since men wore swimsuit tops, women occasionally still wore suits to their knees and kids dug sand with metal pails and shovels.

Opposite: With miles and miles of white sand beaches, it's easy to find your perfect spot.



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