



## AN ISLAND STATE OF MIND **GULF COAST**

If **secluded and rustic** are your idea of a beach outing, then Egmont Key State Park, a sliver of an island one mile from Fort De Soto Beach at the mouth of Tampa Bay, is the ultimate pick. You may want to hurry, though, because this spit of land, only 1.5 miles long and several hundred feet wide, is slowly shrinking. Egmont Key was five times as large just 100 years ago.

**Dolphins guide the way to Egmont Key State Park, accessible only by boat.**

A 20-minute ferry ride from Fort De Soto Park catapults you into the I-love-nature mood as the cooling breezes tickle your skin. You'll disembark on the beach near the lighthouse, where you're then free

to explore. Egmont Key was home to Fort Dade, built prior to the Spanish-American War to protect Tampa Bay, and its ghosts still reside. The shells of several gunnery and mining stations lie about: crumbled concrete and metal turned to rust from the Gulf's steady breath, and walls that stand lopsided in the sand. The island's interior is lined with red brick roads that lead nowhere. Here is where the 300-odd soldiers and administrators lived and worked during the Fort's glory days. Picture displays show historic buildings that stood before the Fort was deactivated in 1923. But it's not all gone: The guardhouse built in 1911 is currently being restored.

PHOTOGRAPHY JOE PATRONITE



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**Clockwise from top left: The ferry anchors offshore, so a little wading is necessary; Fort Dade; cocktails and sunset at the Hurricane.**

Four short trails weave through the island. All around you nature is at work: sabal palms and saw palmettos cast artful shadows on the sugary white sand. It's quiet here — deserted island quiet. It's easy to wander off a sandy path carved by some ancient storm and imagine you've traveled back to the days of the Spanish-American War. Of course, you're not always alone. About

18,000 gopher tortoises call Egmont Key home, so there's a good chance you'll stumble across a few.

The best fishing spots are on the east side with a wonderful view of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. You'll need to bring your own rod, reel and bait. For strolling, shell hunting and swimming, visit the west side, with its firmly packed sand and water the color of Key lime pie. Save time for lolling on the small, intimate beaches. The southern point of the island is a private bird sanctuary, and there

are snorkeling trips offered by Hubbard's Marina (727.398.6577, hubbardsmarina.com) that explore coastline where parts of Fort Dade attract sponge and tropical fish.

Be sure to bring a cooler with lunch, snacks and water — the closest sandwich shop is on the mainland. The return ferry ride may take longer than expected. If you're lucky, the captain will zigzag after dorsal fins on a spontaneous dolphin watch. Boats depart at 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. daily and return at 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. Roundtrip is \$15 per person, first-come, first-serve. — MATTHEW SOLAN

### LUNCH SPOT

**A 15-minute drive to St. Petersburg Beach takes you to the three-story Hurricane restaurant, with its distinct Cape Cod look and Old Florida vigor. Many Florida eateries pride themselves in serving delicious stone crab claws, but the Hurricane blows everyone away with those fresh from their own boats (available through May 15). Enjoy the scene outside next to coconut palms, but at sunset, head upstairs to the Hurricane Watch for a view that rivals Key West's famed Mallory Square. 727.360.9558, thehurricane.com**

#### EGMONT KEY STATE PARK

727.893.2627, florida stateparks.org/egmontkey

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