

# A Good Sign of Things to Come

*Tampa Bay Free Beaches and the pursuit of clothing-optional beaches on Florida's Gulf Coast*

photos by Jack Clark  
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**A**hhhhh, Florida; the Sunshine State, home to more nudist resorts, residences, and recreation than any other state in America. Our favorable climate, active tourism industry, and miles and miles of coastline create the perfect conditions for finding a sunny patch of oceanside sand on which to erase your tan lines.

As recently as the early 1980s, finding a clothing-optional beach in Florida was pretty easy. But circumstances change; community standards recalibrate; political winds shift. Without constant vigilance and use, naturists lose hard-won ground - literally. Presently, only four recognized, clothing-optional beaches are available: Playalinda, Apollo, Blind Creek, and Haulover. All of these are on the Atlantic Ocean side of the Florida peninsula.

Playalinda and Apollo Beaches, both located near the Kennedy Space Center, are unofficial but more or less accepted as clothing-optional. Blind Creek Beach, near Port St. Lucie, is the most recent example of a grassroots naturist organization cooperating with local government to establish a legal, clothing-optional beach. And, of course, the epicenter of nude beaches in Florida is North Miami's Haulover Beach. Recognized as one of the world's renowned nudist beaches, as many as 5,000 people a day crowd onto this less than a half-mile-long strip of sand.

Given all of these favorable conditions, you might

presume a few beaches lining the Gulf of Mexico also provide opportunities for naturists to sun their buns. Not so. There are, of course, secluded enclaves and private islets known to locals. There, nudity might be tolerated depending on the daily whims of the public and peace officers. But even though the state's highest concentration of nudists live near Tampa, there isn't a single west coast beach on which we can legally enjoy sun and sand au naturel - yet.

Enter Tampa Bay Free Beaches.

Taking cues from South Florida Free Beaches, the organization that spearheaded efforts to create Haulover Beach in 1991, Tampa Bay Free Beaches (TBFB) is working to repeat that success. In less than three years, this dedicated not-for-profit group of volunteers has made great strides in educating local and state entities about the economic advantages of providing clothing-optional beaches in our region.

Momentum is building. In 2020, TBFB assisted with the successful effort to have Florida statutes amended to distinguish simple nudity from nudity combined with lewd and lascivious behavior. We also produced and shared an informative video called "*Free Beaches Make Dollars and Sense.*" This video explains the valuable economic impact naturist residents and visitors have on the Florida economy. You can find it on the TBFB website

(tampabayfreebeaches.com) and Vimeo.

Other efforts included letter-writing to legislators and local public officials expressing support of pending legislation during the last legislative session. Local face-to-face meetings with community officials continue, and enthusiastic participation in charitable food drives is ongoing.

Earlier this year, assigned legislative committees held hearings in Tallahassee on a Senate and companion House bill which would have revised the Department of Environmental Protection's state park code (the DEP has jurisdiction over state parks). If approved, a blanket prohibition on simple nudity would be lifted, making it consistent with state statutes. This step is crucial for opening beaches on state property to nude use again.

Unfortunately, progress in those hearings ground to a halt when lingering pandemic-related issues dominated legislative priorities.

At present, TBFB is planning its strategy for the upcoming legislative season in Tallahassee. Funds are being raised to continue underwriting the lobbyists and to make carefully placed and timed campaign contributions. Abhorrent as it is, we all know political success often comes down to money.

Maryanne Rettig, President of Tampa Bay Free Beaches, encourages everyone to get involved. "Even if you don't live in Florida or even visit Florida, helping us secure clothing-optional

beaches on the state's Gulf Coast has a positive impact on the naturist movement as a whole. Each success expands options for all naturists, reinforces the movement's positive presence, and increases momentum toward establishing clothing-optional beaches in other states. Please seriously consider joining TBFB. We have first-quality merchandise available on our website, and memberships are very affordable. At a minimum, join the mailing list on our website. We'll keep you informed about letter-writing campaigns, other ways you can help, and periodic progress reports."

The Board of Directors and membership of Tampa Bay Free Beaches are an optimistic group and with good reason. Having monitored the success of the Treasure Coast Naturists with getting Blind Creek approved as a clothing-optional beach in 2020, a few things are apparent. Careful planning, political tact, grassroots pressure, and goodwill gestures among the community can result in re-framing naturists and clothing-optional beaches as beneficial to the public interest.

Florida has more than enough available coastline to set aside small stretches of Gulf Coast sands for naturists to enjoy the beach as Nature intended. With enough support, Tampa Bay Free Beaches is sure to succeed in securing more signs that read, "ATTENTION-BEYOND THIS POINT YOU MAY ENCOUNTER NUDE BATHERS." And that's a good thing for nudists and textiles alike.



TBFB President, Maryanne Rettig and Treasurer, Jack Clark