

# Daytona Beach Rocks ...and Rolls, and Soars, and Dives!

by Melissa Wolcott, photos by Al Martino

Since the “Staycation” is so popular now with gas prices through the roof, what better time to visit Daytona Beach for some outdoor fun? Only three hours from Tampa Bay, this getaway will provide you with some thrills you won’t find on Florida’s east coast.

Daytona Beach has managed to avoid over-development, and retains some of the flavor of old Florida. It can be laid back and quiet, except of course for Spring Break, Speed and Bike Weeks when the population explodes. It’s a good destination for whichever your preference.

My husband, Al, and I picked “quiet time” and a hotel right on the beach — the Best Western Castillo Del Sol. This totally renovated hotel has comfy rooms with great balconies overlooking the ocean. Since it wasn’t hot out, we opened our balcony door and enjoyed the ocean breeze and sound of the waves. A full continental breakfast was included in our very reasonable room charge. Minutes from anything Daytona, it proved to be a great location.

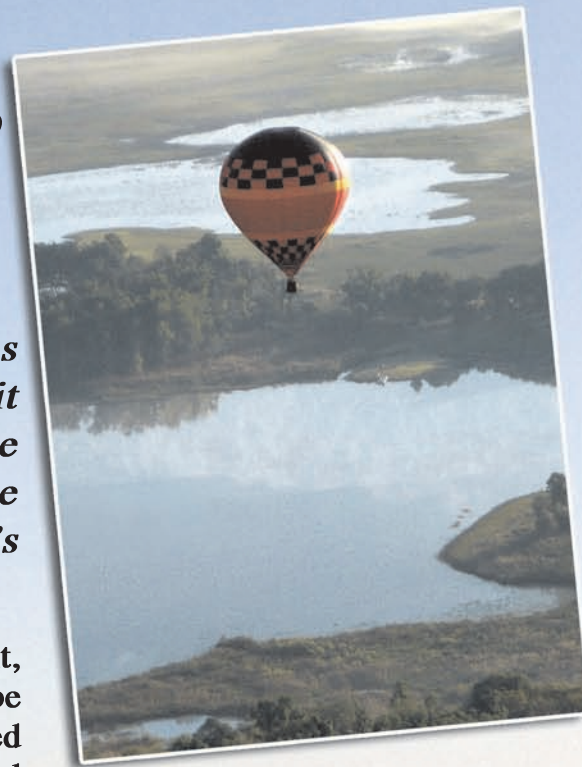


Photo courtesy of Wet Ever Jet Boats

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## The Beginning

Our Daytona Beach adventure began with a visit to the historic Jackie Robinson Ball Park (since 1914, renamed from City Island Ballpark), where the Daytona Cubs were playing the Vero Beach Devil Rays. In keeping with their Tampa Bay namesake's current stats, they won! The ballpark was the first site to host a racially integrated game in 1946, and the park was renamed after Jackie Robinson in 1990.

Moving on to a less sedentary activity, we checked out the Daytona Beach Jet Boats at Aunt Catfish Dock (a popular local restaurant) at nearby Port Orange. After donning our slickers (we were informed we WILL get wet) we rode out four miles into the Halifax River spinning 360° and sliding over our own waves. Lots of fun and laughs.



Several miles down the road is Ponce de Leon Inlet, a place with many points of interest. The 1887 Ponce Inlet Lighthouse and outer buildings are quite fascinating. One of the best preserved — and tallest — in the country, the lighthouse is a challenge to climb at 175 feet. And climb I did — all 202 steps. I am not as much afraid of heights as I am of ladders or open stairs. I never thought I'd do it, but I was determined, and finally made it to the top — white knuckles gripping the handrail all the way, while young kids scampered by me forcing me to let go of the handrail for terrifying brief moments. The view from the top was magnificent, and worth the fear-factor. Getting down was just as bad, but I was proud of myself when I hit the bottom stair. The outer buildings are part of the museum and one of the more interesting ones houses the Fresnel lenses, which were the best lighthouse lenses made. This is one of the finest collections in the world, and includes the lenses from the Cape Canaveral lighthouse and the original Ponce Inlet lighthouse.

The nearby Marine Science Center will fascinate the kids (and we adults too) with interactive marine ecological displays. They

have sea bird and sea turtle rehab labs, where you can watch them working with these wonderful creatures with the intent of returning them to the wild.

Although we had planned to go deep sea fishing, the weather gods weren't cooperating, and made the seas too rough for the outing. Critter Fleet is located right at Ponce Inlet, and takes folks out on half and full day trips, providing rods, reels, bait — whatever you need for the “big catch.” The boats are large, and normally take 50-60 people to fish for Snapper, Grouper, Sea Bass, even Shark. Next time.

Another activity quashed by the rough seas was the Daytona Beach Surfing School. I looked forward to “hanging 10” (do they still say that?) like I did 40 years ago. Actually, I never hung 10, I rarely got up on the surfboard, but it sounds cool. The school offers one to three-hour lessons, private or group. Next time.

Canoeing was also off for the day, due to rough waters, but Cracker Creek Canoeing takes you on Spruce Creek, a natural black water stream — one of only a few left undisturbed in Florida. Next time.

Upping the adventure ante, next came the Richard Petty Driving Experience at Daytona International Speedway. It's pretty heady stuff to find yourself strapped in and riding shotgun with a professional driver in a stock car that's going around 160 mph and taking those 31° banks at the speedway. The 3-lap event was enough for us to get the feel of what it's like, and have tremendous appreciation and respect for the professional drivers that do 400-500 miles.

We took a walk through the Daytona 500 Experience (an attraction dedicated to NASCAR) enjoying the exhibits, and had to try out our skill at “Acceleration Alley”. Guests are pitted against each other in 80% size stockcars, and race with NASCAR simulators. If/when you hit a wall, you get gently bounced and jostled, for a realistic ride.

Still in racing mode, we drove over to Speedpark Motorsports where Al tried his



pro prowess at the drag racing attraction “Nitro Alley”. Four dragsters are lined up against each other and put pedal to metal to see who's the fastest. You start off at 2 G-forces and almost 3 at the brakes. The track is 196 feet and you are stopped in about 35 feet. Al said it was a really fun, adrenaline pumping experience.

## The BIG One

When I was twenty years old, I wanted to go skydiving, but couldn't get anyone to go with me. I didn't want to go alone, so that was that. Fast-forward 40 some years, and I find myself with an opportunity to go skydiving at Skydive Deland. I wrestled with the thought and decided it was now or never. Once I heard it was a tandem jump, it was a no-brainer — I was really just going to be along for the ride.



Melissa's first tandem skydive at SKYDIVE DELAND.

Photo by Marat Leiras

Even though some of my other planned activities had been canceled due to the weather, this one was not. Although it was very windy, a little window of opportunity came when the wind died down just enough to allow for the flight and jump.

I was more excited than frightened while hanging around the airport waiting for the wind to be right. Mostly because my tandem skydiver, Ray Pope, was a seasoned veteran with 24 years worth of jumps and had never even sprained an ankle. I figured he had at least one more good jump in him. When you go tandem, the “guest” is strapped tightly to the front of the skydiver, and he tells you what to do once you leave the plane. Simple instructions, so no worries there. I asked Ray how old the oldest person was he ever tandem jumped with. When the answer came back “94”, I didn't feel so old doing it anymore. You must be at least 18 to jump.

Unlike my terrifying trip up and down the lighthouse stairs, I was inexplicably as calm as can be on the plane ride up to 13,500 feet. The only brief moment of “OMG” was when we were teetering in the doorway of the plane ready to jump. From then on it was “Whoo Hoo” all the way down.

Skydive Deland offers a video package

with your jump, which I highly recommend. You can relive your dive over and over, and regale your friends and family with your incredible bravery. The photographer jumps out ahead of you on his back, and the camera is attached to his helmet, so he maneuvers himself to be close to you. The DVDs are impressive, with music, slow-motion, and interviews. Plus, they amazingly hand it to you within a few minutes of your dive. [This is where I get you to visit our website and view my skydive video by photographer Marat Leiras - [www.accentontampabay.com](http://www.accentontampabay.com), click on TRAVEL & EVENT PHOTO & VIDEO GALLERY, click on FLORIDA TRAVEL, click on DELAND, SKYDIVE DELAND VIDEO]

Skydive Deland is well respected in the Skydiving world, and a lot of parachute testing goes on there. They have the most up-to-date parachute equipment in the world, as the tandem parachute system used everywhere is made right in Deland.

If I have an opportunity to skydive again, I would do a few things differently. I would wear something to cover my ears - the wind is very strong when you're free-falling at 120 mph. I would also take one half of a Dramamine tablet to quell the queasiness I felt during the loops and soars that Ray did on the way down. All-in-all it was a thrilling life-time experience!

**Relax**

After all the exciting adventures in Daytona Beach, one must relax and unwind. And what better way than a nice spa treatment. Near our hotel was the Ocean Waters Spa, a world away from speed and adrenaline. This oasis is a European-style spa, with lovely serene earth tones, located in the Plaza Resort, and overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. You are already unwinding by the time you hit the massage table. Bliss.

**Dining in Daytona Beach**

Dining in Daytona Beach was a treat, with non-chain dining opportunities all over.

There are several musts for breakfast in Daytona Beach — The Dancing Avocado Kitchen, and the Daytona Diner. The Dancing Avocado is a very quirky/funky little place which concentrates on healthy food, and is

ecologically-friendly. The restaurant, located on historic Beach Street, is open for breakfast and lunch. The Daytona Diner's decor reflects Daytona speed, with the 50s nostalgia feel and icons all over the place, and it's located right next to the big Harley Davidson store. But the biggest draw are their delicious big dinner plate size pancakes. Even though they have a varied menu, this is the "gotta" order at the diner. Plain, Blueberry Hill, Pecan, or Banana — you can't go wrong.

We had lunch one day at the 1940 Inlet Harbor Marina and Restaurant, a Caribbean-flavored spot overlooking the intercoastal. The Barbados Bacon-Wrapped Shrimp was very tasty, and the atmosphere was fun.

Dinner at The Cellar was memorable, with Italian cuisine served amidst a Tuscan-style decor. We really enjoyed our choice of Ravioli Sauteed with Mixed Olives, Light Tomato Sauce and Goat Cheese. The restaurant is located in the 1907 winter residence of President Warren G. Harding, and is on the National Historic Registry. Current owners/hosts, Sam and Lina Moggio are a warm and welcoming couple.

The Stonewood Grill & Tavern is an area favorite, and is packed most of the time. Although there are 16 Stonewood Grills in



*Delicious chops at the Stonewood Grill.*

Florida and one in North Carolina, the Daytona one is the original eatery. Delicious hand-cut steaks cooked over an oak burning grill may be the secret to their great success.

Set in a wooded area, is Martini's Chophouse, which is created in highstyle and rich woods. An outdoor garden area with waterfall is also a dining option. Truly fine contemporary American cuisine is served, along with absolutely fabulous desserts.

**The Grand Finale**

What could be left for us to do on this

great adventure? A 5:00 AM drive to a field, where we climbed into a hot air balloon and watched the sunrise while floating above the earth. The trees below were shrouded in a mist,



*Bob Wilamoski of Bob's Balloons*

with just their heads peeking through. Eventually, the mist wore off and we could see the Florida landscape for miles. It was so quiet, we could hear dogs barking below, cows mooing as we passed over farms. We were in very capable hands with our pilot Bob Wilamoski, who's been flying since 1981. Bob's Balloons operates 7 days a week, all year.

At the end of the lovely journey, when we landed in a field, we were treated by Bob and his crew to cheese, fruit and a champagne toast for another successful flight, and for us, the end of a very memorable 4-day Daytona Beach adventure.

**If You Go...**

- Best Western Castillo Del Sol**  
[www.bwcastillodelsolhotel.com](http://www.bwcastillodelsolhotel.com)
- Bob's Balloons**  
[www.bobsballoons.com](http://www.bobsballoons.com)
- The Cellar Restaurant**  
[www.thecellarrestaurant.com](http://www.thecellarrestaurant.com)
- Cracker Creek Canoeing**  
[www.oldfloridapioneer.com](http://www.oldfloridapioneer.com)
- Critter Fleet**  
[www.critterfleet.com](http://www.critterfleet.com)
- The Dancing Avocado Kitchen**  
[www.avocadokitchen.net](http://www.avocadokitchen.net)
- Daytona Beach Jet Boats**  
[www.daytonabeachjetboats.com](http://www.daytonabeachjetboats.com)
- Daytona Beach Surfing School**  
[www.daytonasurfingschool.com](http://www.daytonasurfingschool.com)
- Daytona International Speedway**  
[www.daytonainternationalspeedway.com](http://www.daytonainternationalspeedway.com)
- Marine Science Center**  
[www.marinesciencecenter.com](http://www.marinesciencecenter.com)
- Martini's Chophouse**  
[www.martinischophouse.com](http://www.martinischophouse.com)
- Ocean Waters Spa**  
[www.oceanwatersspa.com](http://www.oceanwatersspa.com)
- The Ponce Inlet Lighthouse**  
[www.ponceinlet.org](http://www.ponceinlet.org)
- Richard Petty Driving Experience**  
[www.1800bepetty.com](http://www.1800bepetty.com)
- Jackie Robinson Ballpark**  
[www.daytonacubs.com](http://www.daytonacubs.com)
- Skydive Deland**  
[www.skydivedeland.com](http://www.skydivedeland.com)
- Speedpark Motorsports**  
[www.speedparkdaytona.com](http://www.speedparkdaytona.com)
- Stonewood Grill & Tavern**  
[www.stonewoodgrill.com](http://www.stonewoodgrill.com)

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