

TourismMarketing Today

The Official Newsletter of Destinations Florida | www.DestinationsFlorida.org | July/August 2026



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New Executive Director Pamela Johnson to Carry Forward Lee County VCB's Mission



Pamela Johnson

Pamela Johnson, CDME, has taken the helm of the Lee County VCB, now serving as executive director after more than a decade as deputy director.

Johnson began her career with the VCB in 2005. A native of Virginia, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in journalism from Howard University in Washington, D.C.

In a memo to the VCB team announcing Johnson's promotion, Assistant County Manager Amanda Condomina wrote, "Pamela's dedication to Lee County and VCB for the last 30-plus years will carry VCB forward. Her talent and leadership are

exemplary, as evidenced by her 12 years as your deputy director."

Over the course of her career, Johnson has built a well-rounded foundation in tourism through roles in sales, marketing, community relations, and destination development. This breadth of experience has shaped her perspective on the industry and the community it supports. Reflecting on her journey, Johnson said, "Tourism is really about people, relationships, and experiences. It's about creating connections to places and moments that visitors remember long after they return home," and added that this human-centered aspect of the industry has sustained her passion for the work.

PAMELA JOHNSON continues on pg. 4

Affordability Matters

by Robert Skrob



Few issues impact Florida's families more today than affordability.

Property taxes are part of that

conversation. So are housing costs, insurance premiums, gas, food, and many of the other expenses affecting household budgets across our state.

That is one reason many county leaders, tourism businesses, and community organizations are paying close attention to the proposed constitutional amendment related to property taxes that the Florida Legislature voted to put on the November ballot.

E.D.'s MESSAGE... continues on pg. 3

Support from our partners makes Destinations Florida's industry & legislative representation possible

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HAPPY Birthday

Tammy Heon
July 2

Loretta Shaffer
August 20

Kerri Post
August 26

Debbie Meihls
August 29

DESTINATIONS
FLORIDA
TourismMarketing
Today

The Official Newsletter of
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Robert Skrob,
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Suzanne Hurst, CAE,
Deputy Executive Director

MaryLu Winchester,
Member Database

On the Cover

A 100-drone light show over Charlotte Harbor lights up the sky on Flag Day, June 14, as Punta Gorda joined the nationwide celebration of America's 250th birthday.

BEST PRACTICES

3

Visit Tampa Bay's Rooster Cup Turns Destination Discovery Into a Global Contest

Visit Tampa Bay reimagined the traditional FAM trip with the inaugural Rooster Cup, a three-day competition that brought 12 international media professionals and travel trade representatives from six countries to Hillsborough County June 8-10. Six two-person teams representing Brazil, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, and the UK competed in scavenger hunts, trivia, and skill-based challenges across Tampa Bay, racing to earn points toward the trophy, named for Ybor City's resident roosters. Team Germany, represented by Tina Wohlgemuth of CRD Touristik and Edon Morina of Travelnews.ch, claimed the win.

Participants praised the format for breaking up the typical FAM routine. Team Mexico's Carlo F. Bond of Price Travel noted the competition "made us engaged and allowed us to really know the destination."

The concept builds on Visit Tampa Bay's broader FAM strategy, which included 49 media FAMs and 255 trade FAM participants from 10 source markets in 2025, contributing to nearly 1,100 articles about the destination.

By turning a familiarization trip into a reality-show-style contest, Visit Tampa Bay created a format that generated deeper engagement, stronger partner participation across more than a dozen



Representatives from Brazil, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, and the UK pose on the steps of The Cuban Club in Ybor City while competing in Visit Tampa Bay's inaugural Rooster Cup challenge.



Contestants in Visit Tampa Bay's inaugural Rooster Cup receive a flamenco lesson from Maria Esparza, dance director of the Tampa Bay Flamenco Dance Company, during a contest challenge at the Columbia Restaurant in Ybor City.

local attractions, and built-in storytelling appeal for media coverage, offering other Florida DMOs a model for differentiating their own trade and media outreach.

E.D.'s MESSAGE... continued from pg. 1

The proposal has generated significant discussion about affordability and the potential impact on essential local services that communities depend upon every day.

Our members are hearing questions from county officials concerned about local services. Tourism businesses are evaluating potential impacts on commercial property owners. Some tourism industry employees are renters who are also focused on the broader

affordability challenges facing Florida's families.

Over the coming months, Destinations Florida will continue listening and learning. Our role is not to tell people what to think, but to help communicate potential impacts and to understand the concerns being expressed across our communities.

Affordability matters. So does maintaining the strong communities that make Florida such a special place to live, work, and visit.



CEO/President Bryan Griffin of VISIT FLORIDA, Lee County VCB's then Deputy Director Pamela Johnson and then Executive Director Tamara Pigott, and Chair Cecil Pendergrass of the Lee Board of County Commissioners and TDC at the Apr. 9 TDC meeting where the transition was announced.

As she steps into her new role, Johnson is focused on continuity, collaboration, and strategic progress. She emphasized the strength of the organization she now leads, sharing that she is “very fortunate to step into a role with a strong team, dedicated industry partners, and a destination that means a great deal to so many people.” In her first year, she plans to build on existing momentum while identifying opportunities for improvement, with a clear priority: “supporting our local tourism industry, delivering value to residents, and keeping Fort Myers competitive in a rapidly changing travel landscape.”

Johnson is particularly energized by the opportunity to broaden the narrative around the destination. While Lee County's beaches remain a defining feature, she believes the area's deeper character deserves equal attention. “While our beaches are an important part of our identity, it's also our neighborhoods, arts, culture, and authentic experiences that make this destination so special,” she said. “I'm excited for the opportunity to serve in this role and collaborate with our community to build a strong and vibrant future for tourism.”

Outside the office, Johnson's appreciation for the destination mirrors her professional philosophy. She enjoys exploring lesser-known corners of the region—whether browsing vintage shops in Bonita Springs, taking scenic drives through Matlacha and Pine Island, or following a local recommendation to an unexpected find. “Working in tourism has taught me that the best experiences usually aren't the ones on a checklist,” she said. “They're the unexpected moments you stumble upon along the way.”

In a detail that may surprise some colleagues, Johnson describes herself as naturally introverted, finding balance through quiet exploration and discovery. She recharges by wandering through small downtown districts, visiting thrift and vintage shops, and uncovering hidden gems that others might overlook. “At its heart, tourism is about curiosity and discovering something meaningful,” she reflected—a mindset that continues to guide both her personal interests and her professional leadership.

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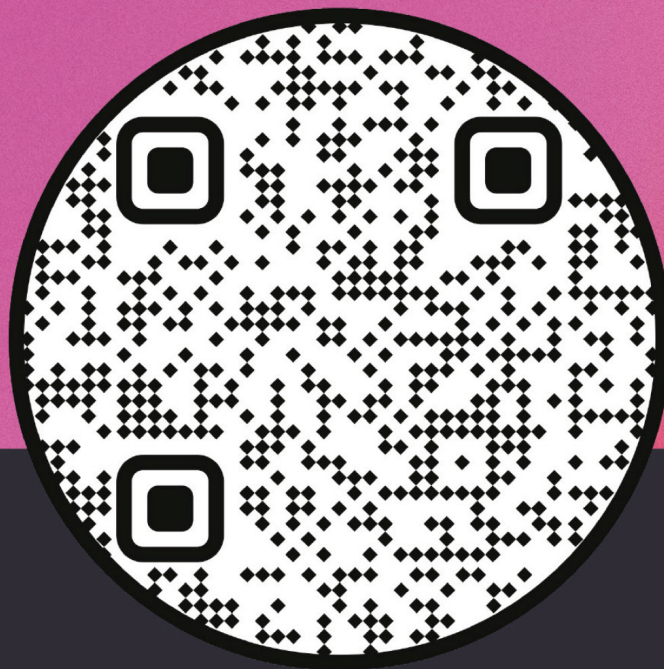


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Public Safety Reimbursements

by Steven M. Hogan

Subsection (5)(c) of the TDT statute allows TDT funds to be used to reimburse expenses incurred by a county for “public safety” services, which is defined to include emergency medical services and law enforcement services, by counties that meet the criteria set forth in the subsection. § 125.0104(5)(c), Fla. Stat.



All of the criteria in § 125.0104(5)(c), Fla. Stat., must be met in order for TDT funds to be accessed for “public safety” expenses.

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This statutory provision is sometimes seen as a door for any county to reach TDT funds for such “public safety” expenses, especially as those kinds of expenses are typically paid for through county general revenues.



Steven M. Hogan

It may be for that reason that we sometimes get inquiries from Destinations Florida members about whether *all* of the criteria in subsection (5)(c) must be met in order for TDT funds to be accessed for “public safety” expenses.

The answer is yes, *all* the criteria in subsection (5)(c) must be met in order for TDT funds to be used for the listed “public safety” services. These criteria include the following:

- The county must be adjacent to the Gulf of America or Atlantic Ocean;
- The county must either:
 - Not receive revenue from tourist impact taxes under section 125.0108, Fla. Stat.;
 - And must generate a minimum of \$10M annually in TDT;
 - And must contain at least three municipalities;
 - And must have an estimated population of less than 275,000;
 - Or must be a fiscally constrained county as defined in section 218.67(1), Fla. Stat.

A county that does not meet all of these criteria cannot use TDT to reimburse public safety expenses under subsection (5)(c).

As always, legal counsel should be sought on specific issues, as particular facts may change the analysis.

Steven M. Hogan is a shareholder with the Ausley McMullen law firm in Tallahassee. Destinations Florida has retained Mr. Hogan to consult with our members on the Tourist Development Tax and related legal issues. You can contact Mr. Hogan at shogan@ausley.com. Nothing in this article constitutes legal advice. Please seek counsel of your own choosing before making decisions that impact yourself or your organization.

Want to See Your DMO's News in Tourism Marketing Today?



We regularly publish brief news items from DMOs in *Tourism Marketing Today*. News about your staff will appear in our “In the News” section. We also publish “Quick Trips,” and they are your opportunity to share your good news! Your story should be about *past* events, awards, or campaigns to serve as “best practices” for your fellow tourism professionals. Our deadlines typically fall on a Thursday around the middle of each month. If you aren’t receiving an email reminder, reach out to Susan Trainor (editor.trainor@gmail.com), and she will add you to the mailing list.

2026 ANNUAL MEETING

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2026

2:00 pm – 5:00 pm	Board of Directors Meeting
4:00 pm – 6:00 pm	Registration Desk Open
5:00 pm – 6:00 pm	Reception

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2026

8:00 am	Registration Desk Open
8:00 am – 9:00 am	Networking Breakfast
9:00 am – 10:30 am	State of the State
10:30 am – 11:30 am	Annual Meeting Program
11:30 am – 1:00 pm	Networking Luncheon
1:00 pm – 4:30 pm	Annual Meeting Program
5:30 pm – 9:30 pm	Miles Evening Extravaganza



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2026

8:00 am – 9:00 am	Networking Breakfast
9:00 am – 11:00 am	Destinations Florida Annual Business Meeting 2027 Legislative Session Outlook
11:00 am – 12:00 pm	How DMOs and VISIT FLORIDA Can Work Together to Bring More Visitors



HUTCHINSON SHORES RESORT & SPA

The Hutchinson Shores Resort & Spa is offering a special rate for Destinations Florida meeting participants at \$209 (pool view) or \$259 (oceanview) per night. Please call (877) 502-4653 and reference the group name Destinations Florida Annual Meeting to make your reservation. Reservations must be made before the cut-off date of **Tuesday, September 22, 2026**. Be sure to make your reservation as soon as possible before the room block sells out.

Hutchinson Shores Resort & Spa
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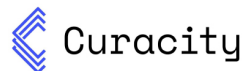
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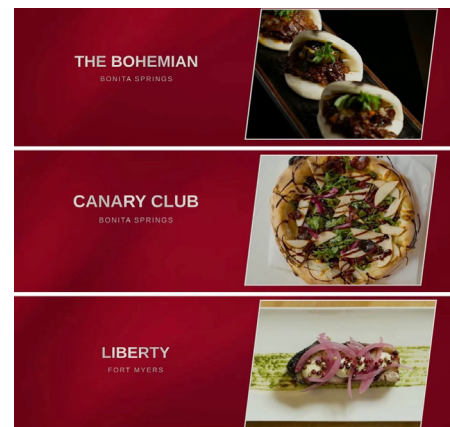
America 250: A Portrait of Florida Showcases Florida's Space Coast

The Space Coast was featured in an episode of VISIT FLORIDA's *America 250: A Portrait of Florida* showcasing Cape Canaveral and Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. *America 250: A Portrait of Florida* is a cinematic mini-episodic documentary journey through Florida's most iconic places, where historians, rangers, and keepers of culture reveal how 250 years of American history began and continue to evolve in the Sunshine State. The episode is available on YouTube. [VisitSpaceCoast.com](https://www.visitflorida.com/visit-space-coast)



Three Lee County Restaurants Earn MICHELIN Guide Florida Honors

The Fort Myers-area culinary scene has earned statewide recognition with three local restaurants included in the 2026 MICHELIN Guide Florida selection: Liberty in Fort Myers, plus The Bohemian and Canary Club in Bonita Springs. Canary Club also received a Bib Gourmand distinction, recognizing good quality and good value cooking. The honor highlights the growing strength of Southwest Florida's culinary scene and enhances the destination's appeal for visitors seeking exceptional dining experiences. [VisitFortMyers.com](https://www.visitfortmyers.com)



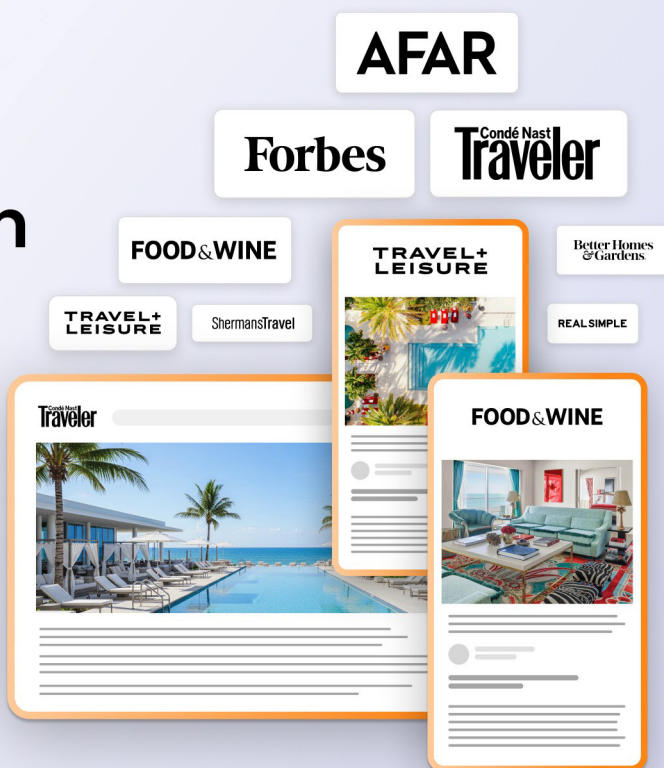
Liberty, The Bohemian, and Canary Club make the new MICHELIN Guide, focused on Florida.



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alastair@curacity.com





Highlands County Tourism Awards & Insights Program Recognizes Tourism Champions & Destination Development Initiatives

On May 12, Highlands County's tourism community gathered to celebrate the individuals, organizations, and businesses that create memorable visitor experiences during the annual Tourism Insights & Awards Breakfast. The program recognized eight local tourism champions while also providing attendees with insights on destination development and a nature-based tourism presentation by Nerissa Okiye, director of Martin County Tourism. The event highlighted the important role hospitality, innovation, volunteerism, and collaboration play in strengthening Highlands County's visitor economy and quality of life. [VisitSebring.com](https://www.visitsebring.com)



Local tourism champions are recognized for their work in creating memorable visitor experiences in Highlands County.

St. Johns County VCB Highlights Tourism Success and Future Growth

The St. Johns County VCB hosted the annual Florida's Historic Coast State of the Industry presentation on May 13 at Embassy Suites by Hilton St. Augustine Beach Resort. Centered on the theme "Honoring 250 Years and Shaping What's Next," the event welcomed 250 tourism leaders and stakeholders. Attendees heard highlights of the destination's marketing achievements, celebrated key milestones, and explored future opportunities to strengthen and grow the local tourism industry. [FloridasHistoricCoast.com](https://www.floridashistoriccoast.com)



President & CEO Susan Phillips of the St. Johns County VCB addresses attendees during the annual State of the Industry presentation, celebrating the past year's accomplishments and future opportunities for the local tourism community.

Orlando North, Seminole County Wins Four Telly Awards for Waterway Travel Series

The 47th annual Telly Awards honored Orlando North, Seminole County Tourism for excellence in storytelling, innovation, and destination-focused content creation through its award-winning *ON BOARD* series. The six-episode production earned one Gold and three Silver Telly Awards while immersing viewers in Seminole County's rivers, lakes, and springs through cinematic adventures and the voices of the local guides, anglers, paddlers, and outdoor enthusiasts who know them best. The recognition underscores the power of compelling destination storytelling to spark curiosity, inspire travel, and elevate a community's distinct sense of place. [DoOrlandoNorth.com](https://www.doOrlandoNorth.com)



Orlando North, Seminole County's award-winning *ON BOARD* series

Amelia Island Hosts Content Creators Targeting a Key Fly-Drive Market

Following a winter media event in Chicago, Amelia Island welcomed five content creators to experience the destination firsthand and share their experiences with followers in a key fly-drive market. Content highlighted the newly renovated Omni Amelia Island Resort & Spa, a sailing excursion, wellness experiences, local dining, and other signature activities. The campaign generated more than 74K impressions and nearly 4K engagements, inspiring future travel and expanding awareness among highly targeted audiences. [Ameliainland.com](https://www.ameliainland.com)



Content creators from Chicago enjoy a sailing excursion at Amelia Island.



Experience Kissimmee Highlights Water Safety in the Wake of Summer Season

Summer temperatures mean more time in and around the pool, making water safety a top priority for Kissimmee's tourism community. Experience Kissimmee, together with local public safety, health, education, and swim partners, developed a water safety campaign to share consistent water safety messaging with residents and visitors, especially in vacation homes with private pools. Focused on prevention and awareness, the initiative encourages simple, lifesaving actions and reinforces a clear goal: zero drownings in vacation homes across the destination year-round. ExperienceKissimmee.com



Experience Kissimmee's first Water Safety Task Force

Ocala/Marion County Hosts 2026 Major League Fishing Heavy Hitters Tournament

Major League Fishing's (MLF) 2026 Heavy Hitters tournament in Ocala/Marion County featured top anglers competing for \$180K, some of whom made event history with record-breaking bass. The event generated over 16.4M minutes viewed, with average watch times 13% higher than the previous Heavy Hitters event. Ahead of its Discovery Channel airing, it secured over \$2.89M in earned media value with a reach of 312M, showcasing Ocala/Marion County's Orange Lake as a world-class fishery to millions of passionate fans. OcalaMarion.com



Dave Lefebvre celebrates MLF Kubota Heavy Hitters win.

Record Performance Continues Into 2026 for Greater Miami and Miami Beach

More than 500 industry leaders gathered for the Greater Miami CVB's annual State of the Travel & Tourism Industry event. In 2025, Greater Miami and Miami Beach welcomed 28.3M visitors who generated \$32.2B in economic impact and supported 216K jobs. Through the first months of 2026, the destination led the nation's top hotel markets in occupancy, ADR, and RevPAR. The event also celebrated Miami's 18 MICHELIN Stars, including Florida's only Two-Star and the world's first kosher eatery to earn a MICHELIN Star. MiamiandMiamiBeach.com



GMCVB President & CEO David Whitaker highlights the diverse portfolio of annual events driving record visitation, economic impact, and global visibility for Greater Miami and Miami Beach.

Walton County Tourism Rebrands Beach Tram Program

Walton County Tourism has rebranded its free Beach Tram program as Walton County Beach Park and Ride, a name that better reflects its purpose: helping beachgoers park, ride the tram, and reach their favorite beach accesses with less stress. The refresh includes website changes and updated pay parking lot names—393 Beach Park and Ride and Grayton Beach Park and Ride—to better reflect the service. Beachgoers can go to beachparkandride.com for schedules, routes and parking info. WCFLTourism.com

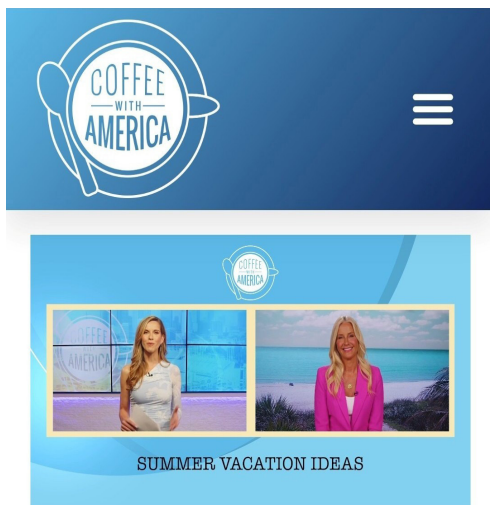


Walton County's Beach Tram offers beachgoers an easy, stress-free way to reach the beach.



Florida's Paradise Coast Selected by VISIT FLORIDA to Help Drive Summer Travel

Florida's Paradise Coast was one of two destinations selected to partner with VISIT FLORIDA for its Kick Off to Summer Travel Satellite Media Tour (SMT) on May 12. The SMT generated 1,288 broadcast, radio, internet, and podcast placements, reaching more than 16.1M potential travelers and delivering a 45:1 advertising value ROI in time for the summer travel season. Floridays' Kendra Thornton highlighted the region's diverse appeal, from the polished coastal charm of Naples and shelling on Marco Island to the wild beauty of the Everglades. ParadiseCoast.com



Florida's Paradise Coast's May 2026 Summer Travel Satellite Media Tour in partnership with VISIT FLORIDA and Kendra Thornton aired on the nationally syndicated *Coffee with America* in 508 markets, enhancing the destination's summer travel marketing campaign.

Punta Gorda Hosts 'Red, White & Blue Days' Waterfront Celebration

On Flag Day, June 14, Punta Gorda hosted its inaugural "Red, White & Blue Days of Punta Gorda"—a spectacular waterfront celebration honoring America's 250th birthday, veterans, and the community spirit that makes Punta Gorda one of the best places in Florida for veterans to call home. The highlight of the evening was a 100-drone light show over Charlotte Harbor, choreographed to live patriotic music by Sky Elements, America's #1 drone show company! PureFlorida.com



"Red, White & Blue Days of Punta Gorda" celebrates America's 250th birthday, veterans, and community spirit.

Explore Natural Martin Earns Environmental Responsibility Award

The Martin County Office of Tourism & Marketing recently earned a 2026 Communitas Award for Leadership in Ethical and Environmental Responsibility, recognizing the Explore Natural Martin ecotourism initiative. Built in partnership with Leave No Trace, the program offers free, year-round programming rooted in responsible outdoor recreation, such as kayak tours, birding excursions, nature hikes, and nighttime sea turtle walks. The program has become a leading example for destination stewardship. DiscoverMartin.com



The annual Communitas Awards are organized by the Association of Marketing and Communication Professionals.

St. Pete-Clearwater Hosts International Group of Tour Operators, Media

Prior to this year's IPW in Fort Lauderdale, St. Pete-Clearwater hosted a group of 20 tour operators and media from across the globe in destination to explore America's Favorite Beaches. The group was hosted by The Vinoy Resort as they celebrate their 100th anniversary and was immersed in all the experiences that make the destination so special—from The Dali Museum to dolphin cruises to picnics on the sugar white sand to hands-on cooking classes—capped with picturesque sunsets. VisitStPeteClearwater.com



Tour operators and media representatives explore St. Pete-Clearwater.

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MICHELIN Guide Offers Statewide Restaurant Selection in Florida



The Emelina team in West Palm Beach: Álvaro Perez Miranda (owner), Camila Salazar (chef owner), Osmel Gonzalez (chef owner)

Photo courtesy of James Jackman and World Red Eye

The MICHELIN Guide has revealed the 2026 restaurant selection for Florida, and for the first time the selection covers the entire state. Emelina in West Palm Beach and Mutra in Miami both joined the selection for the first time with One MICHELIN Star. Additionally, Fat Beet Farm Kitchen and Bakery in Tampa was awarded a Green Star for leading the way in mindful gastronomy. The full selection, including Bib Gourmands and Recommended Restaurants, totals 200 eateries spanning 41 cuisine types.

Bib Gourmand

The MICHELIN Guide Inspectors identified 10 new restaurants to add to the Bib Gourmand distinction, which recognizes eateries for great food at a great value.

A Mano Panino, Pensacola
Bar Citra, St. Augustine
Barra Callao, N. Miami Beach

Canary Club, Bonita Springs
Cotoa, N. Miami
Double Luck, Miami
Lucky 8, Sarasota
Moondog Café & Bakery, Key West
Sunday, St. Augustine
To Be Determined, Miami

Recommended Restaurants

Thirty-eight restaurants were added to the 2026 list of Recommended Restaurants in Florida.

1921 Mount Dora, Mount Dora
Afternoon, Gainesville
Asado Life, St. Augustine
Bar Terroir, Tampa
Bicyclette Cookshop, Naples
Bistro Ocho, Miami
Bitteroot, Destin
Black Radish, Tallahassee
Blue Heaven, Key West
Daytrader Tiki Bar & Restaurant, Seaside
Eggboy, Atlantic Beach
Ela Curry & Cocktails, West Palm Beach
Elliott Aster, St. Petersburg
Elyu Omakase, Coral Gables
Evie Mae's BBQ, Miramar Beach
Fat Beet Farm Kitchen and Bakery, Tampa
Focaccia Sandwich + Bakery, Sarasota
in between days, St. Petersburg
June, Orlando
Kappo Tsan, Orlando
Kinjo, Tampa
Koko, Cocoa Beach
Liberty, Fort Myers
Lotus Noodle Bar, St. Augustine

Mano Libera, Miami
Nineteen61, Lakeland
Osteria Ester, Orlando
Roux 30A, Santa Rosa Beach
Rue Saint Marc, Jacksonville
Salt, Amelia Island
Smoke & Donuts BBQ, Orlando
Sparrow, Orlando
The Bearded Pig, Jacksonville
The Bohemian, Bonita Springs
The Brisket Shoppe, Tampa
The Huntsman, Tallahassee
Tong Yin, Naples
Tralia, Sarasota



Tampa's Fat Beet Farm is a coastal farm dedicated to sustainability, education, and restoring the farm-to-fork connection.



Chef Raz Shabtai of Mutra Miami, whose restaurant became the first kosher eatery to earn a MICHELIN Star for its contemporary Middle Eastern cuisine

MICHELIN Special Awards

In addition to the Bib Gourmands and Stars, the Guide announced four Special Awards:

Michelin Exceptional Cocktails Award
Rhianda Smith
Daytrader Tiki Bar & Restaurant, Seaside

Michelin Sommelier Award
Juan Valencia
Ômo by Jônt, Winter Park

Michelin Outstanding Service Award
Christopher Tegreeny
Salt, Amelia Island

Michelin Young Chef Award
Jada Vidal
Kinjo, Tampa

MICHELIN Guide Restaurants



ONE AND TWO MICHELIN STARS

identify establishments serving exceptional cuisine that's rich in flavor, remarkably executed and infused with the personality of a talented chef.



THE BIB GOURMAND is a designation given to select restaurants that offer good quality food for a good value. Often known as personal favorites among the inspectors when dining on their own time.



THE GREEN STAR honors restaurants that are pioneers in mindful gastronomy.



RECOMMENDED restaurants and professional awards are also highlighted by the Michelin Guide inspectors.

DESTINATIONS FLORIDA

Restaurant Selections for Florida

FLORIDA ISLAND

RECOMMENDED

JACKSONVILLE

RECOMMENDED

Saint Marc The Bearded Pig

ATLANTIC BEACH

RECOMMENDED

Eggboy

ST AUGUSTINE

BIB GOURMAND

Bar Citra
Sunday

RECOMMENDED

Asado Life
Lotus Noodle Bar

LAKELAND

RECOMMENDED

Nineteen61

COCOA BEACH

RECOMMENDED

Koko

FT LAUDERDALE BOYNTON BEACH

BIB GOURMAND

Heritage

RECOMMENDED

Daniel's, A Florida Steakhouse
Evelyn's
Larb Thai-Isan
Nicholson Muir

MICHELIN STAR
Chef's Counter at MAASS

NAPLES

RECOMMENDED

Bicycle Cookshop
Tong Yin

KEY WEST

BIB GOURMAND

Moondog Café & Bakery

RECOMMENDED

Blue Heaven

ORLANDO / LAKE BUENA VISTA / MOUNT DORA WINTER PARK / WINTER GARDEN

BIB GOURMAND

Bánh Mi Boy
Bombay Street Kitchen
Coro
Domu
Isan Zaap
Norigami
Otto's High Dive
Smokemade Meats + Eats
Strand
Sushi Saint
Taste of Chengdu
The Ravenous Pig
UniGirl
Zaru

MICHELIN STAR

Camille
Kadence
Omo by Jönt
Soseki
Sorekara
Victoria & Albert's

RECOMMENDED

1921 Mount Dora
AVA Mediterranean
Bacán
Black Rooster Taqueria
Capa
Chuan Fu
Citricos
Edoboy
Four Flamingos, A Richard Blois Florida Kitchen
Gyukatsu Rose
Juju
June
Kabooki Sushi
Kai Asian Street Fare
Kai Kai BBQ & Dumplings
Kappo Tsan
Kaya
Knife & Spoon
Maxine's on Shine
Morimoto Asia
Nami

Osteria Ester
Papa Llama
Pizza Bruno
Prato
Primo
Ravello
Se7en Bites
Selam
Shin Jung
Smoke & Donuts BBQ (new)
Sparrow (new)
Sticky Rice
Swine & Sons
The Pinery
The Polite Pig
Toledo
Tori Tori
Twenty Pho Hour
Walala Hand-Pulled Noodle House
YH Seafood Clubhouse

WEST PALM BEACH PALM BEACH PALM BEACH GARDENS

BIB GOURMAND

aioli
Palm Beach Meats

MICHELIN STAR

Emelina

RECOMMENDED

buccan
Coolinary and the Parched Pig
Ela Curry & Cocktails
Moody Tongue Sushi
Stage Kitchen & Bar
The Butcher's Club

NORTH MIAMI / MIAMI BEACH / SURFSIDE

BIB GOURMAND

Barra Callao
Cotoa
LucaLi

MICHELIN STAR

Mutra
Tambourine Room by Tristan Brandt
The Surf Club Restaurant

MICHELIN GREEN STAR

Stubborn Seed

RECOMMENDED

Estiatorio Milos
Hakkasan Miami
Joe's Stone Crab
Los Fuegos by Francis Mallmann
Macchialina
Mister O! Extraordinary Pizza
Pao by Paul Qui
Taquizza
The Den at Azabu Miami Beach

MIAMI / CORAL GABLES

BIB GOURMAND

Bachour
Chug's Diner
Double Luck
El Turco
Ghee Indian Kitchen
Hometown
Barbecue Miami
La Natural
Mandolin Aegean Bistro
Michael's Genuine
Phuc Yea
Sanguich De Miami
Tam Tam
Tinta y Cafe
Zitz Sum

MICHELIN GREEN STAR

Los Félix

MICHELIN STAR

Ariete
Boia De
Cote Miami
Elcielo Miami
Hiden
L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon Miami
Le Jardinier Miami
Ogawa
Shingo

RECOMMENDED

Beauty & the Butcher
Bistro Ocho
Cafe La Trova
Elyu Omakase
Hiyakawa Miami

RECOMMENDED

Kaori
Kojin 2.0
Krüs Kitchen
Lung Yai Thai Tapas
Mano Libera
Niu Kitchen
Ossobuco
Palma
Recoveco
Sunny's Steakhouse
Sushi Yasu Tanaka
The Gibson Room
Torno Subito Miami
ViceVersa
Walrus Rodeo
Zak The Baker



Visit Jacksonville Brings Jacksonville Flavor to D.C.

Visit Jacksonville hosted an exclusive culinary mission at the historic Hill Center in Washington, D.C., bringing the best of their food scene straight to capital city media and meeting planners. Culinary experts Chef Natasha Burton of Mixed Fillings Pie Shop and Chef Celestia Mobley of Celestia's Coastal Cuisine led live cooking demos and a delicious deep-dive into Gullah Geechee cuisine and heritage. Needless to say, Visit Jacksonville left the D.C. media and meeting planners hungry for more Jacksonville flavor! VisitJacksonville.com



Chefs Celestia Mobley of Celestia's Coastal Cuisine (in purple) and Natasha Burton of Mixed Fillings Pie Shop (in pink) teach attendees at a recent event hosted by Visit Jacksonville.

Visit Sarasota County's 21st Annual Savor Sarasota

The 21st annual Savor Sarasota Restaurant Week officially came to a close with visitors and locals alike grabbing their forks to delight in lunches, dinners, wine pairings, and signature cocktails all over the county. Over 80% of participating restaurants opted to extend their "Savor deals" through the end of the month, and with each additional reservation the whole culinary community is that much stronger. It truly is the most delicious time of the year in Sarasota County. VisitSarasota.com



The Visit Sarasota County team supports a participating Savor Sarasota restaurant by trying their offerings.

Polk County All Sports Awards and Hall of Fame Honor the County's Best

One of Polk County Tourism and Sports Marketing's signature annual events took place June 16 with the 26th annual Polk County All Sports Awards and Hall of Fame Induction at the RP Funding Center in Lakeland. The event honors outstanding Polk County athletic directors, coaches, student-athletes, and teams. Five individuals were also inducted into the Polk County Sports Hall of Fame, including Lakeland native Fred Ridley, chairperson of Augusta National Golf Club. VisitCentralFlorida.org



The 2026 Polk County Sports Hall of Fame Class: Ken Snell, Pam Lancaster, Robert Adams, Rod Shafer, and Fred Ridley

'Doggone Summer' Campaign Highlights Tampa Bay's Pet-Friendly Destinations

For the second consecutive year, Visit Tampa Bay welcomed a pack of social media's top dog influencers for its "Doggone Summer In'fur'encer" campaign, showcasing the region's pet-friendly hotels, restaurants, and waterfront experiences. Seven creators and their dogs explored the destination across two travel groups in May, generating authentic content positioning Tampa Bay as a premier dog-friendly destination for travelers in key drive markets including Atlanta, Orlando, and Miami. VisitTampaBay.com



Jax, Donut the Golden Retriever, Willy, and Mallow the Frenchie pose with the Visit Tampa Bay icon outside the Unlock Tampa Bay Visitors Center, part of a multi-day itinerary showcasing the destination's pet-friendly accommodations, attractions, and outdoor adventures during this year's "Doggone Summer In'fur'encer" campaign.



Global Spotlight on The Palm Beaches at The District Cup in Washington, D.C.

Discover The Palm Beaches (DTPB) was a sponsor of The District Cup annual polo tournament on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in June, with The Palm Beaches team competing and showcasing the destination's leadership in equestrian sport to a global audience. The event brought together business leaders, media, and the public while a pre-event client lunch hosted by DTPB strengthened key relationships. Participation highlighted The Palm Beaches' position as the "Winter Equestrian Capital of the World." ThePalmBeaches.com



The Palm Beaches team at The District Cup on the National Mall

Orlando Restaurants Shine in 2026 MICHELIN Guide

Orlando is now home to 61 MICHELIN-recognized restaurants, including six MICHELIN-starred venues—one Two-Star and five One-Star—along with 14 Bib Gourmands and 41 MICHELIN-Recommended restaurants. The 2026 MICHELIN Guide Florida selections were announced May 28 during a livestream ceremony on YouTube. In addition, Orlando restaurants earned the MICHELIN Green Star and MICHELIN Sommelier Award. Orlando's continued presence in the MICHELIN Guide showcases the growth of its culinary community and strengthens its position as a destination where cuisine drives travel decisions. VisitOrlando.org



Orlando's Sorekara, by Chef William Shen, retains its Two-Star recognition in the 2026 MICHELIN Guide Florida selections.

Orlando's continued presence in the MICHELIN Guide showcases the growth of its culinary community and strengthens its position as a destination where cuisine drives travel decisions. VisitOrlando.org

Visit Pensacola and Community Partners Launch NW Florida's First Hospitality-Focused Summer Safety Training Series

Visit Pensacola and Ascension Sacred Heart have launched Northwest Florida's first hospitality-focused summer safety training initiative, providing free life-saving education to hundreds of frontline tourism workers. The Summer Safe Pensacola Series offers hands-only CPR, Stop the Bleed, and water safety training designed to help employees respond confidently during emergencies. Through this first-of-its-kind partnership, hospitality workers gain critical skills that enhance guest safety, strengthen community preparedness, and demonstrate the tourism industry's commitment to protecting residents and visitors. VisitPensacola.com



Hospitality professionals participate in hands-only CPR and emergency response training during the inaugural Summer Safe Pensacola Series, a community partnership led by Visit Pensacola and Ascension Sacred Heart to enhance visitor and resident safety.

FOX 13 Takes Morning Show to Hernando Beach

Florida's Adventure Coast recently welcomed Charley Belcher of FOX 13's *Good Day Tampa Bay* to the Silver Dolphin Restaurant & Country Store in Hernando Beach for a live spotlight on the local favorite coastal charm, homemade fudge, country store, and visitor appeal. "Earned media opportunities like this help us showcase the authentic local businesses that give our destination its character," said Tammy Heon, manager of tourism. "It's a wonderful example of partnership-driven promotion." FloridasAdventureCoast.com



The Silver Dolphin Restaurant & Country Store welcomes FOX 13's *Good Day Tampa Bay* to Hernando Beach.



Discover Lake County Brings the Caribbean to Clermont Waterfront Park

On June 6, Discover Lake County sponsored the annual Caribbean Jerk Festival at Clermont Waterfront Park for the fifth consecutive year. The festival brought the sights, sounds, and flavors of the Caribbean to Lake County with authentic jerk cuisine, live music, colorful cultural performances, and family-friendly activities along the waterfront. The vibrant celebration offered visitors a chance to experience Caribbean traditions while exploring all that Lake County has to offer, helping introduce new audiences to the destination. The free event attracted an estimated 16K attendees and generated over \$600K in estimated economic impact. DiscoverLakeCountyFL.com



Discover Lake County sponsors Caribbean Jerk Festival.

Florida's Sports Coast Celebrates People, Partnerships, and Momentum

This past May, Florida's Sports Coast proudly welcomed tourism partners, community leaders, and industry champions to their sixth annual Tourism Banquet, an evening dedicated to celebrating the people, partnerships, and momentum shaping the future of Pasco County. The keynote speaker, Olympic Gold Medalist Connor Fields, delivered an energizing message on resilience and growth, inspiring guests to embrace the question, "Now what?" Together, they celebrated tourism's impact, the strength of their community, and the exciting opportunities ahead for Florida's Sports Coast. FLSportsCoast.com



Florida's Sports Coast team with keynote speaker, Olympic Gold Medalist Connor Fields

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Global Affairs Team Promotes Bradenton Area to International Markets at IPW

The Bradenton Area Global Affairs team joined 5,000-plus travel professionals May 17-21 in Greater Fort Lauderdale at IPW, the U.S.'s premier international inbound marketplace, where the entire travel industry comes together under one roof. Kelly Clark, global affairs director, and Olivia Georgas, global affairs marketing manager, met with current and new trade and PR partners from their international markets, mainly the UK and Central Europe. BradentonGulfIslands.com



The Bradenton Area Global Affairs team at IPW

Visit Florida Keys & Key West Earns Prestigious DMAP Accreditation

Visit Florida Keys & Key West has earned Accreditation with Distinction from Destinations International, the highest recognition awarded through the Destination Marketing Accreditation Program (DMAP). The designation places the organization among fewer than 10% of accredited destinations. "This recognition belongs to our team," said Kara Franker, president and CEO. "They set an exceptionally high bar for themselves, worked in record time, and delivered. The result is a designation only a handful of destinations worldwide can claim." VisitFloridaKeys.com



Visit Florida Keys & Key West has received DMAP Accreditation with Distinction from Destinations International. The destination spans an iconic chain of islands stretching from Key Largo to Key West and Dry Tortugas National Park.

Photo: Laurence Noah

Destin-Fort Walton Beach Hosts Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Tournament

In May, Destin-Fort Walton Beach hosted the annual Emerald Coast Open, the world's largest lionfish tournament, blending marine conservation with community engagement. Divers removed more than 20K invasive lionfish while competing for cash and gear prizes. The event also celebrated Restaurant Week, showcasing lionfish as a sustainable seafood option, and the Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Festival with educational exhibits and family activities. The event generated media interest, emphasizing the destination's leadership in marine conservation. DestinFWB.com



Natural Resources Manager Jessica Valek of Destin-Fort Walton Beach shares her expertise during an educational talk at the Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Festival, highlighting the environmental impact of invasive lionfish and the importance of community-driven removal efforts to protect local marine ecosystems.

Turtles and Tourists Share the Forgotten Coast Beaches

Each summer, female sea turtles worldwide begin their annual migration to coastal beaches to lay their fragile eggs at night near the dune lines. Summer also heralds the season when local volunteer turtlers begin walking the beach to find, mark, and protect turtle nests. Visitors interested in learning about sea turtle nesting can visit the St. George Island Visitor's Center to pick up turtle information produced by the Franklin County TDC in cooperation with the Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve. FloridasForgottenCoast.com



The Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve in Eastpoint hosts local "Turtle Talks" each Tuesday during the summer.

CRISIS NEVER COMES WITH AN INVITATION



To watch the full discussion
that formed the basis of this
report, scan the code or visit
<https://youtu.be/-qLr0GLHrgI>





For most of his career, Dan Rowe was the person people called when things went wrong.

During his 18 years leading the Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) and serving as Executive Director of the Bay County Tourist Development Council (TDC), Rowe helped guide the destination through some of the most challenging moments in its history. There was the BP oil spill, which threatened tourism across the Gulf Coast. Hurricane Michael, which devastated Bay County and left residents rebuilding their homes and lives for years. Then came COVID-19 and the uncertainty that followed.

Through each challenge, Rowe built a reputation as a steady hand. He helped transform the city into one of Florida's most successful tourism destinations and became known for bringing people together when solutions seemed hard to find.

Then came a crisis unlike any he had faced before.

“When I celebrated the Beach Ball Drop on New Year’s Eve, I had no idea within 48 hours my whole life would have been turned upside down,” Rowe said.

The Day Everything Changed

On January 2, 2026, a member of the CVB team noticed that several American Express charges weren't appearing in the organization's expense reporting system. At first, it seemed like a discrepancy, but before long, it became clear that the organization was dealing with something far more serious than a simple accounting error.

Once Rowe was notified, he took action immediately. Access permissions were changed, financial controls were locked down, board leadership was notified, and law enforcement was contacted. Nobody knew the full extent of what investigators would eventually uncover, but it was clear the organization was facing something unlike anything it had experienced before.

As investigators began piecing together what had happened, attention quickly turned to Aaron Lee, the organization's Vice President of Administration. Lee had joined the CVB less than two years earlier and came recommended by the organization's longtime board treasurer, someone Rowe considered one of the most honest and trustworthy people he knew. Lee presented himself as someone who came from wealth and had no apparent need for the money investigators would later allege he stole.

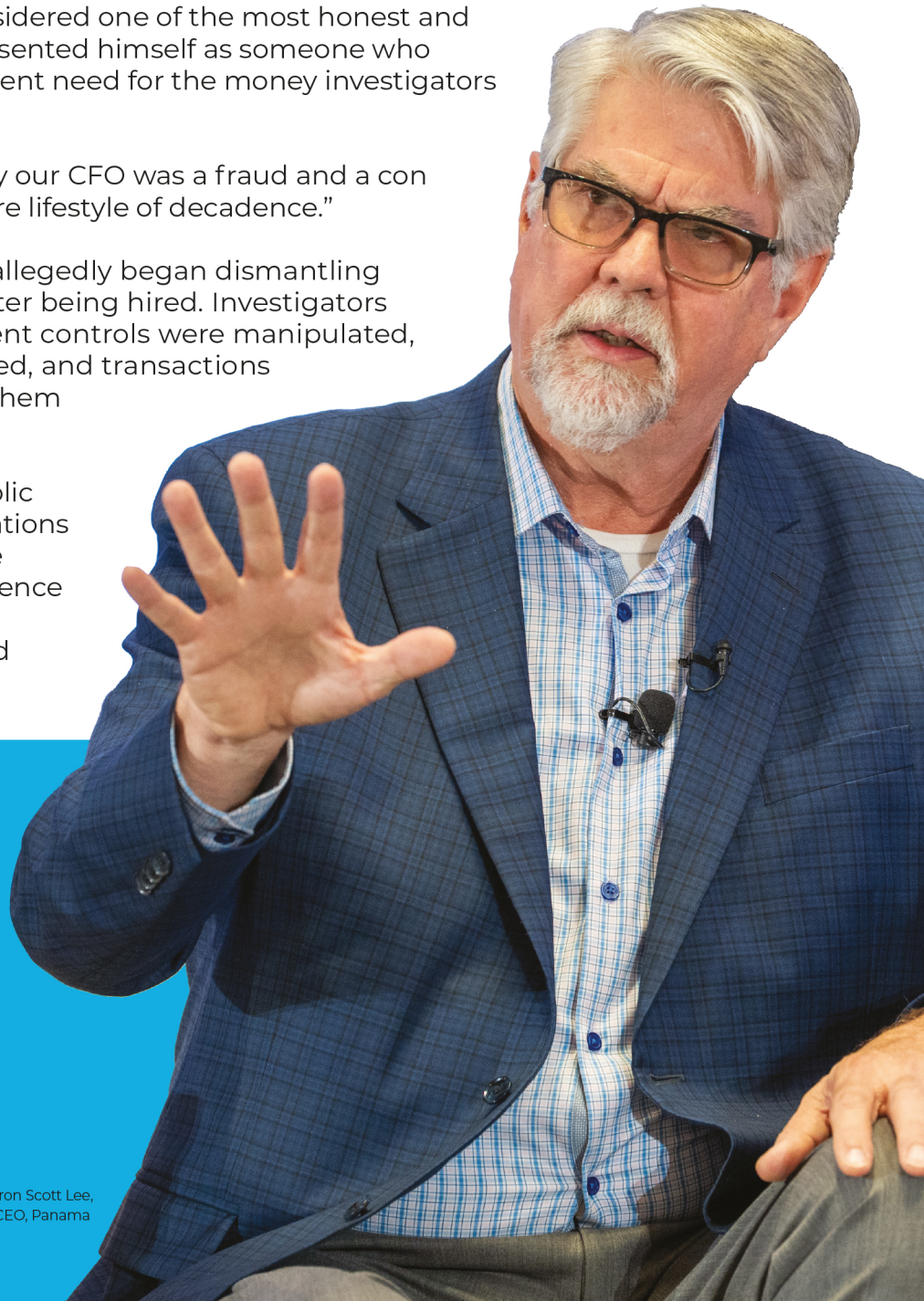
"The person who I hired as essentially our CFO was a fraud and a con artist," Rowe said. "He lived this bizarre lifestyle of decadence."

According to the investigation, Lee allegedly began dismantling financial safeguards only months after being hired. Investigators concluded that expense management controls were manipulated, oversight mechanisms were bypassed, and transactions were concealed in ways that made them difficult to detect.¹

The discovery generated intense public scrutiny and forced difficult conversations throughout the organization and the community. But for Rowe, the experience forced him to reexamine one of the leadership principles that had guided nearly every aspect of his career.

"One of my basic philosophies in life is that everything is built on trust."

¹ Cole Davis, Investigation Summary Memorandum: Investigation of Aaron Scott Lee, memorandum to the Board of Directors and Griff Griffiths, President & CEO, Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau, April 14, 2026, 3-4.



Trust, But Verify

Trust had always been at the center of how Rowe led. It shaped how he worked with employees, collaborated with board members, built partnerships throughout the community, and developed the culture inside the CVB. That philosophy helped establish the organization as a trusted community partner and a respected leader in the tourism industry. But the events of January 2026 exposed that trust alone is not a control system. Looking back, Rowe often returns to a phrase made famous by President Ronald Reagan during negotiations with the Soviet Union: trust, but verify.

“I trusted this guy and then I trusted the system,” he said.

The safeguards existed, the checks and balances were there. The problem was that they were quietly dismantled over time. Because the systems had always worked before, there was little reason to suspect they weren't working now.

“The lesson wasn't don't trust,” Rowe said. “The lesson was that trust requires accountability.”

That doesn't mean micromanaging people or assuming the worst. It's about creating transparency, building redundancy into important processes, and making sure no single person has unchecked authority over critical functions. Ask questions, review information, and make sure the systems designed to protect the organization are actually working as intended. Trust must be paired with accountability. Organizations can't function without trust, but trust alone is not enough. Verification is what helps protect an organization when that trust is broken.

Building an Organization That Can Take a Hit

For many years, the CVB was heavily dependent on summer tourism and spring break. If either one stumbled, the entire community would feel it. Recognizing that vulnerability, the organization began looking for ways to create more demand throughout the year and reduce its dependence on any single season, audience, or source of revenue. In 2009, it invested heavily in festivals, events, sports tourism, and initiatives designed to attract visitors during traditionally slower months, with the goal of creating a destination with more opportunities, more flexibility, and more ways to succeed.

“The best way to predict the future is to create it,” Rowe said.

That philosophy became part of how the organization operated. Keep moving. Keep building. Keep looking for what's next. Rather

than waiting for circumstances to force change, the focus remained on creating new opportunities, developing new experiences, and strengthening the destination year after year. The stronger and more diverse the foundation, the better equipped an organization is to absorb setbacks, adapt to change, and keep moving forward when challenges inevitably come. Waiting for a crisis to force action is rarely a winning strategy. By then, valuable time has already been lost. After all, every organization takes a hit eventually. The ones that recover are usually the ones that started preparing long before they needed to.

“You don't build resiliency during a crisis,” he said. “You build it before the crisis arrives.”

Culture Is Built Every Day

Building a resilient organization starts with culture. Not the kind of culture found in mission statements or hanging on a wall, but the kind that's built when employees are trusted to make decisions, take ownership of their work, and grow into larger roles over time.

“The way you build it is what you do every day,” Rowe said.

Rather than concentrating every decision at the top, leaders should empower others to make decisions on behalf of the organization. The more capable and confident people become, the stronger the organization becomes.

“We all have a limited number of decisions we can make in a day,” he said. “If I hoard all the decisions, we are limited by me.”

Instead, he encouraged employees to think like leaders. When managers are empowered to make decisions, they can empower their teams. Those teams can then respond more quickly to challenges, solve problems closer to the customer, and create an organization that is less dependent on any single person. The goal is to build an organization filled with people capable of making good decisions on their own.

“I look at it like rings of a tree,” he said. Over time, new rings form as the tree grows. Careers develop much the same way.

Every new responsibility, every difficult decision, and every challenge successfully navigated adds another ring. The more someone grows, the more valuable they become to the organization. Leadership is about expanding your ability to contribute.

“It’s the difference between position power and cultivated power,” he said.

People with position power have authority because of the title on their business card. People with cultivated power earn influence through experience, knowledge, relationships, and the trust they’ve built over time.

That means encouraging people to stretch beyond their job descriptions, develop new skills, take ownership of outcomes, and become comfortable making decisions, all with the goal of developing future leaders.

That mindset becomes especially important during moments of uncertainty. When challenges arise, organizations can’t afford to wait for instructions from the top. They need people throughout the organization who are willing to step forward, solve problems, and support one another.



The Community Comes First

Tourism is often measured in visitor numbers, hotel stays, and economic impact. But Rowe believes that if tourism is generating economic opportunity for a community, local residents should be able to see and experience those benefits as well.

Rather than focusing exclusively on visitor promotion, the CVB actively sought opportunities to support projects that addressed community needs while also strengthening the destination. Over the years, that approach helped support the development of the Publix Sports Park, investments in public safety initiatives, recreational amenities, and other projects designed to improve quality of life for both residents and visitors. The goal was simple: create a stronger community that people would want to visit and call home.

That philosophy was put to the test following Hurricane Michael.

As Bay County struggled to recover, the CVB faced a difficult challenge. Tourism remained essential because visitors generated the economic

activity local businesses needed to survive. At the same time, many residents were grieving losses, rebuilding homes, and trying to restore a sense of normalcy. The organization understood that a traditional tourism campaign would miss the moment.

Instead, it began amplifying the voices of local residents who were sharing stories of resilience, gratitude, and recovery. The organization focused on reflecting what the community was already experiencing and communicating to the outside world.

For Rowe, this reinforced a belief that had guided much of his career: when communities come first, tourism benefits naturally follow.

The strongest destinations aren't built solely through advertising. They're built by investing in the people who call those places home.



Taking Responsibility

As the investigation unfolded and public scrutiny intensified, Rowe found himself facing one of the most difficult moments of his career. Although investigators found no evidence that he participated in or benefited from the alleged fraud, he never attempted to distance himself from what had happened.

Instead, he publicly acknowledged the leadership failures that allowed the situation to occur.

"I take ownership responsibility for the lack of leadership that I provided," he said.

It was a difficult statement to make, but Rowe believes accountability is one of the most important responsibilities of leadership. Organizations succeed because of teams, but when something goes wrong, leaders cannot hide behind reporting structures, policies, or organizational charts.

"Regardless of who on the outside of the organization is responsible, as CEO you've got to take that leadership role," he said.

As the weeks passed, he began asking himself a difficult question: What was best for the organization?

The more he reflected on the situation, the more concerned he became that the investigation would continue overshadowing the work of the organization and the people who remained there.

"I felt in my heart of hearts that as long as I stayed there, this cloud would hang over the organization," he said.

The decision to step away wasn't driven by guilt but by stewardship.

Rowe had worked to build an organization that was respected, trusted, and deeply



connected to its community. He had spent years encouraging employees to put the organization's interests ahead of their own. Now he found himself applying the same principle to his own career.

If stepping aside would help Visit Panama City Beach move forward, restore confidence, and begin a new chapter, then he believed it was the right thing to do.

In the end, the decision reflected a lesson he had preached throughout his career: leadership is not about holding on to power. It's about doing what's best for the organization, even when the decision is difficult.

"However, my failings will not be the thing that defines my career," he said.

The Next Chapter

Although the events of 2026 weren't part of the retirement plan he had envisioned, Rowe is writing a new chapter.

That desire to help other organizations navigate challenges led him to create the Destination Advisory Network (DAN), a consulting practice focused on leadership, organizational culture, strategic planning, brand development, and destination management.

“If I have a superpower, it’s to connect dots,” he said.

The goal is to help leaders see opportunities, solve problems, and build stronger organizations. Much like the work he spent nearly two decades doing in Panama City Beach.

You can't predict every crisis or control every outcome. But you can build an organization strong enough to survive them.

And when the unexpected arrives, you can do what Rowe has always encouraged leaders to do. Square your shoulders, stare into the abyss, and say, “Bring it.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Trust is essential, but trust alone is not enough. Strong organizations pair trust with accountability, transparency, and systems that ensure oversight remains intact.



Resilience is built before a crisis arrives. Organizations that invest in new opportunities, diversify their strengths, and continue evolving are better prepared when challenges emerge.



Culture is created through daily actions. Employees become leaders when they are trusted to make decisions, take ownership, and grow beyond their job descriptions.



Communities should benefit from tourism. The strongest destinations are built by investing in residents, supporting local needs, and creating places people are proud to call home.



Leadership requires accountability. When something goes wrong, leaders cannot hide behind organizational charts or processes. Responsibility ultimately rests at the top.

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a publication of



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