

GULFSCAPES

FINER GULF COAST LIVING

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travel

crystalline water + white sand = america's best beach



paradise found

CALADESI ISLAND STATE PARK SELECTED AS AMERICA'S BEST FOR 2008

Kayaking is just one of the many activities you can enjoy at Caladesi Island State Park, the #1 Beach in America for 2008.

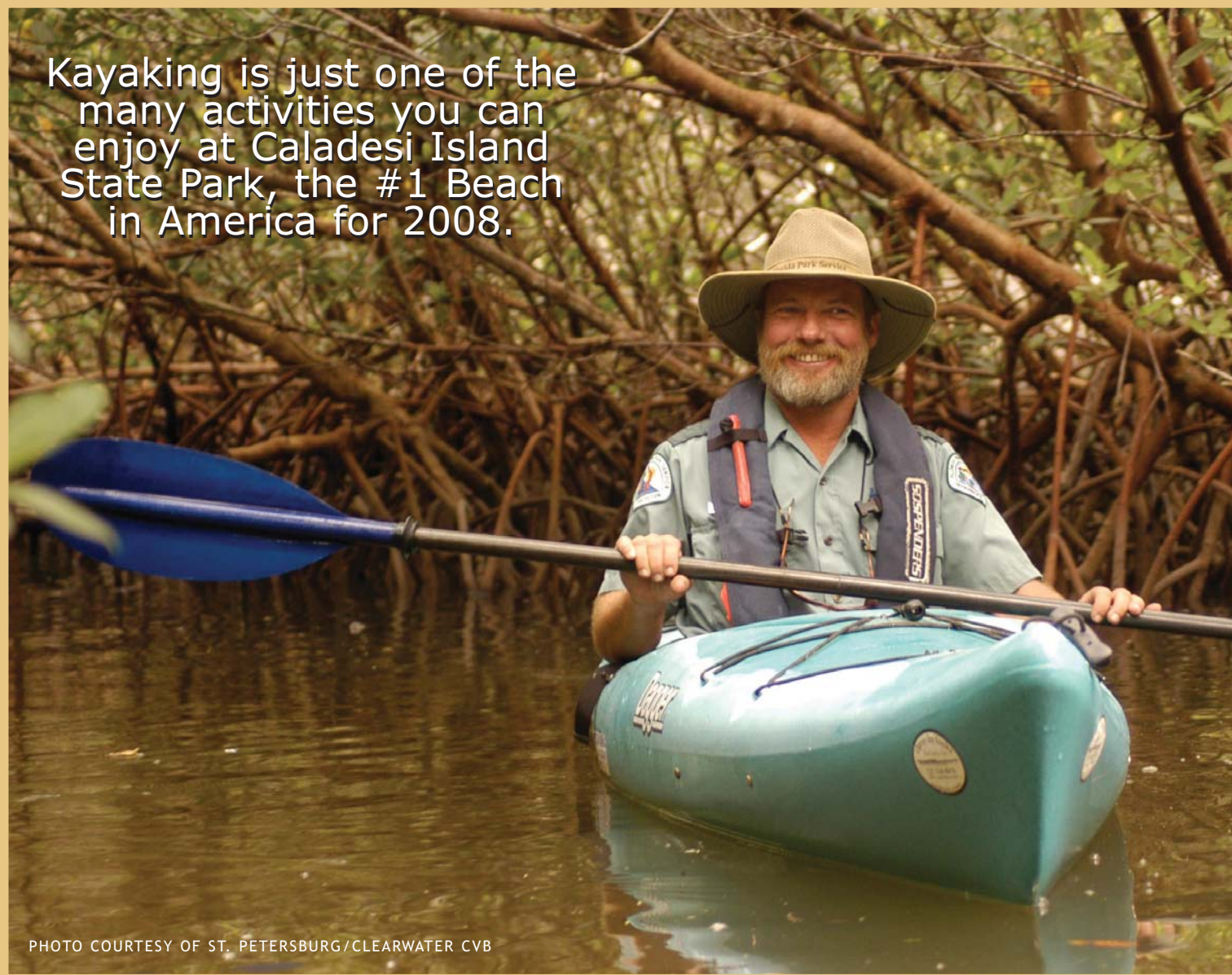


PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. PETERSBURG/CLEARWATER CVB

prescribing paradise meet

It all started with a hurried phone call from a magazine editor in 1989. Dr. Stephen Leatherman, better known to America as Dr. Beach, was on his way to China for a stint as a visiting professor at Peking University. The editor quickly asked for his favorite beaches. Dr. Leatherman rattled off ten, got on his plane, went to China, got caught in the Tiananmen Square massacre aftermath, “borrowed” a Peking University van, evaded tanks and convoys on a harrowing journey to the airport, slept on the floor for a couple of days, and eventually was able to flee to Japan. Needless to say, the brief conversation with the editor was forgotten, until a few weeks later, when he

got a copy of a magazine in the mail. There, in a story, was his list of beaches, ranked one to ten. That’s when the phones started ringing in his office at the University of Maryland.

“I got calls from towns and tourist officials. Some were elated to be on the list. Others were upset they were not and wanted to know what criteria I had used. Criteria? I didn’t have any! They were just my favorites. Then, one person told me they were going to try harder so they could move up the list next year. Next year? I didn’t know the magazine was going to rank the beaches, and I certainly wasn’t thinking of doing it again next year.” But as he pondered the hoopla the rankings had created, he decid-

ed yes, he would do a ranking. “After the demand to see my criteria, I decided I better make some.”

It took him two years. He poured over the results of a nationwide survey he had conducted for a Presidential panel in 1980 that documented the condition of all U.S. beaches. Yes, all of them. Using that information and updating it as needed, Leatherman wrote a 20-page paper evaluating the best beaches in America. He gave the paper to the public relations officer at the University, then went on a trip to Venice. Unknown to Dr. Leatherman, the PR officer discarded the 20-page paper and instead wrote a short press release announcing the top ten

caladesi ranked best

GULF COAST BEACH SELECTED BY DR. BEACH

Caladesi Island State Park takes the number one spot in the 18th Annual Top 10 Beaches ranking produced by Dr. Beach, also known as coastal expert Dr. Stephen Leatherman, Director of Florida International University's Laboratory for Coastal Research. Caladesi is a pristine getaway beach in the Clearwater/St. Petersburg area, only 20 miles west of bustling downtown Tampa. Traveling to this island is an experience itself as it is reached by pedestrian ferry, complete with old salts telling interesting tales, or by private boat. The bayshore is a mangrove forest interlaced with kayak trails and is a bird lover's paradise. The only mode of transportation on this lovely island, dominated by palm trees, is by foot over the super fine white sand. There is a great snack bar and other creature comforts to enhance your island experience, and both the grounds and landscape are well maintained. Lifeguards are on duty during the summer beach season, but the waves are generally only measured in inches so don't bring your surfboard.

Caladesi is a well-kept secret. Surrounded by the beauty of a lush state

park, few people in Tampa seem to know its whereabouts, while everyone is familiar with the popular Pier 60 at nearby Clearwater Beach. Caladesi's real attraction is its powder white sand, warm, crystal clear water and beautiful nature, all making it the number one beach to enjoy.

At Caladesi Island, recreational opportunities are endless! A mangrove-covered kayak trail winds from the marina to the St. Joseph Sound and back. Kayaks are available for rental through the Cafe Caladesi. The nature trail is a great place to find Osprey in old pine snags or cross paths with a gopher tortoise.

Caladesi Island is accessible only by private boat or via the Caladesi Connection ferry service. Cost for the ferry is \$10 for adults and \$6 for children ages 4-12. Trips depart hourly beginning at 10 a.m. Ferry passengers are allotted a four-hour stay on the island. No pets are allowed on the ferry. Contact the ferry office at 727-734-1501 for more information. For further information about about Caladesi Island State Park, call the park office at 727-469-5918.

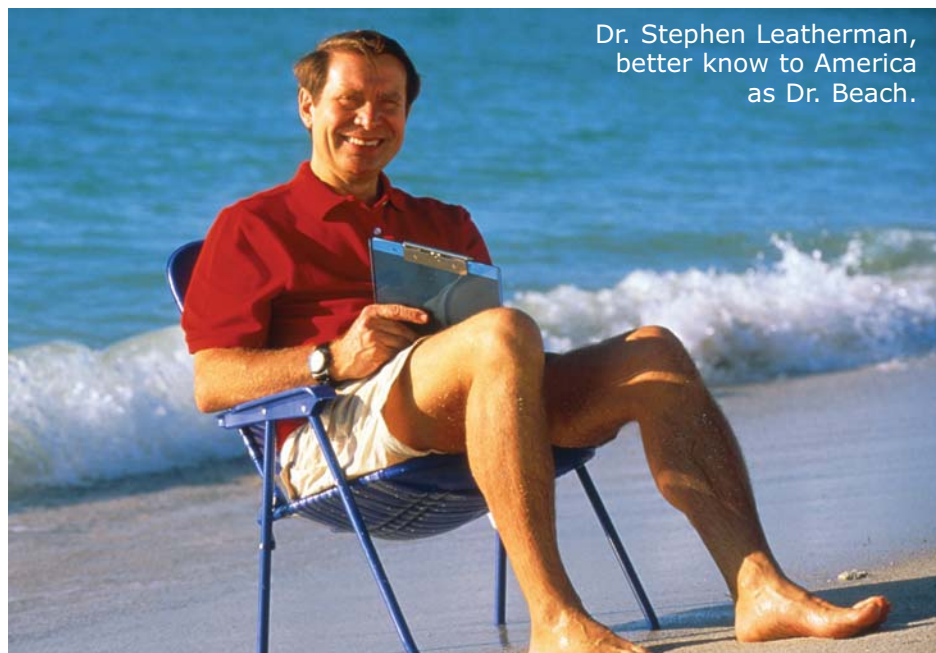


dr. beach

beaches. The list was released just before Memorial Day weekend, the traditional kickoff of the summer beach season. The media pounced on it.

"I got these frantic phone calls from the University saying I had to come back and deal with the media frenzy," said Leatherman. "I wasn't able to get back for three or four more days. When I did, the Today Show, Regis and Cathy Lee, even the British journal 'The Economist' wanted an interview. Here I had spent years doing important scientific research and what grabs the public attention? Beach rankings."

Now in its 18th year, Dr. Leatherman's list



Dr. Stephen Leatherman,
better know to America
as Dr. Beach.

He solved the mystery of the missing Cognac. He even helped find George Washington's missing boats. Dr. Beach, CSI?

of America's Best Beaches is going strong. He has created 50 different criteria on which he evaluates each beach. Which ones are the most important? "You have to begin with clean sand and clean water. There must be some amenities. This is a ranking of swimming beaches so you need some amenities to be able to enjoy a day at the beach. Safety is vitally important also. A beach can't be too cold and can't have dangerous rip currents. And it can't be over-developed."

This year's winner is Caladesi Island State Park, off the coast of Dunedin/ Clearwater, Florida. What vaulted Caladesi to the top spot in 2008? Dr. Beach explained, "The sand is fine white quartz crystal, and the water is crystalline clear. It is an island; you can only get there by a pedestrian ferry or by private boat. It is never overcrowded and has a good restaurant. And ice cream (a personal favorite). It's a great getaway beach, only 30 miles from the Tampa/St. Pete area. It has great birding. There's good fishing and swimming. And they have tunnels through the mangroves. You can rent a kayak and follow the mangrove tunnels. The ferry ride on the way over has some old salts on it who tell great stories."

How seriously do people take his annual beach rankings? "I got a call from a city representative in the upper Florida Gulf coast. The city was considering granting a permit to build a multi-story building along the beach, and they were wondering if that would affect their beach ranking. I told them I would consider that over-development and would have to remove them from my rankings. They didn't approve the permit."

In addition to his annual beach ranking, Dr. Leatherman, now the director of the International Hurricane Research Center & Laboratory for Coastal Research at Florida International University in Miami, has started the National Healthy Beaches Campaign. This project is dedicated to promoting balance between recreational use of the nation's beaches and maintaining their environmental quality and safety. "The U.S. is blessed with hundreds of great beaches," said Leatherman, "and only a few can appear on the Best Beach list, so this encourages people to take care of and promote

their own beaches." You can nominate your beach online, and Dr. Leatherman and his staff will evaluate it. If it meets the criteria, it will be certified as a National Healthy Beach.

Dr. Beach also does some consulting work. Very interesting consulting work. He was contacted to help solve The Mystery of the Missing Cognac. A cargo ship arrived in Tampa and was supposed to have a container full of French Cognac. Instead, the container was full of sand. Dr. Beach was called in to investigate and quickly determined the sand wasn't from Florida. The ship had left from France, but an analysis of French sand from the port area also didn't match that in the container. It turns out the ship made a stop in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Sands from that area proved to be a match, and law enforcement caught the thieves. Dr. Beach, CSI.

The doctor also has been consulted to help determine the location of the Delaware River. Not the current location, but its location in 1776, when George Washington made his famous crossing on Christmas. The boats used by The Father of Our Country had been intentionally sunk to keep them from British hands and had never been found. Around 15 years ago, when a construction project in Trenton, New Jersey started to excavate the area, Dr. Leatherman was called in to help find the boats so they wouldn't be destroyed by the work. Dr. Leatherman was able to calculate the river's position during that time period and one of the boats was recovered.

"I also get called by people who want to buy property on the beach, to either find a beach to their liking or to help them evaluate their beach. I refer to this as Dr. Beach on Assignment."

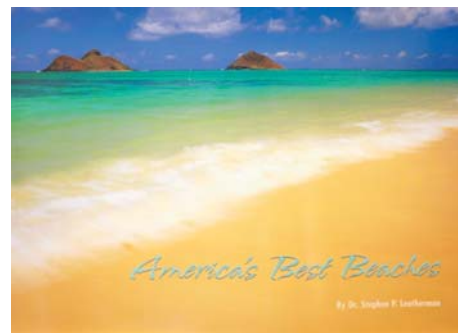
First and foremost, Dr. Leatherman is a scientist. He's studied the aftereffects of the devastating 2004 and 2005 hurricane season, which wrought havoc with the Gulf coast. "In 2004, Hurricane Charlie picked up the beach and moved it into the parking lots in Ft. Myers, Florida. It was a narrow but intense storm. It cut North Captiva Island in half. Hurricane Ivan battered Orange Beach, Alabama and Pensacola. Through beach renourishing projects and natural recovery, those beaches have gotten back to nor-

mal. Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, left damage that is still a problem. The Mississippi Sound was hit by the largest storm surge ever seen in the U.S., and they are still sifting through the sand there to get debris removed. The casinos seem to have recovered, though."

Even Dr. Beach, whose job takes him to the prettiest beaches in the country, needs a vacation every now and then. So where does Dr. Beach go on vacation? "My wife and I go visit our relatives in North Carolina, and we go to the Hamptons (he recommends visiting the beaches there in September). This summer we're going to Europe. We're visiting Romania and the Black Sea area, and we'll go see Dracula's Castle."

Will we soon be seeing Dr. Beach's Best Romanian Beaches? "I am working on an idea about covering the World's Best Beaches. I will have a television special on America's Best Beaches coming out for July 4th weekend, and my producer and I have talked about a series where I would search for a new beach each episode."

Let's see. Dr. Leatherman's job has required him to visit beautiful beaches in the U.S. and rank them. Now, his "job duties" may expand to visiting the most beautiful beaches in the world. As I sit here in consuming envy, I wonder...what would have happened if he hadn't answered that phone call in 1989. I'm glad he did. At least we can live through him vicariously.



Dr. Stephen Leatherman has authored numerous books, including "America's Best Beaches", "Dr. Beach's Survival Guide: What you Need to Know about Sharks, Rip Currents, & More Before Going into the Water" and "AAA's Beach Vacation Travel Journal". You can visit his web site at www.drbeach.org.