

**Adventure Guide
to Tampa Bay
& Florida's
West Coast**

2nd Edition

Chelle Koster Walton

Hunter Publishing Inc.

Adventure Guide to
Tampa Bay
& **Florida's West Coast**
2nd Edition

Chelle Koster Walton



HUNTER

HUNTER PUBLISHING, INC.
130 Campus Drive
Edison, NJ 08818-7816
☎ 732-225-1900 / 800-255-0343 / fax 732-417-1744
Web site: www.hunterpublishing.com
E-mail: hunterp@bellsouth.net

IN CANADA:
Ulysses Travel Publications
4176 Saint-Denis, Montréal, Québec
Canada H2W 2M5
☎ 514-843-9882 ext. 2232 / fax 514-843-9448

IN THE UNITED KINGDOM:
Windsor Books International
The Boundary, Wheatley Road, Garsington
Oxford, OX44 9EJ England
☎ 01865-361122 / fax 01865-361133

ISBN 1-55650-888-3
© 2000 Chelle Koster Walton

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

This guide focuses on recreational activities. As all such activities contain elements of risk, the publisher, author, affiliated individuals and companies disclaim any responsibility for any injury, harm, or illness that may occur to anyone through, or by use of, the information in this book. Every effort was made to insure the accuracy of information in this book, but the publisher and author do not assume, and hereby disclaim, any liability or any loss or damage caused by errors, omissions, misleading information or potential travel problems caused by this guide, even if such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident or any other cause.

Maps by Lissa K. Dailey, © 2000 Hunter Publishing, Inc.
Illustrations by Joe Kohl
Indexing by Kathleen Barber

4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction	1
The History of Adventure	1
The People & Culture	3
Natural Makeup	5
Government-Protected Parks & Refuges	10
How To Use This Book	12
Information	13
Transportation	13
Weather/What to Pack	14
Sights & Attractions	16
Adventures	16
Where To Stay	22
Where To Eat	24
Nightlife	24
Tourist Information	25
Recommended Reading	25
The Nature Coast	29
Overview	29
<i>Transportation</i>	31
<i>Information</i>	32
<i>Festivals & Events</i>	32
Crystal River	33
<i>Getting Here</i>	34
<i>Information</i>	34
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	35
<i>Adventures</i>	36
<i>Shopping</i>	38
<i>Where To Stay</i>	38
<i>Where To Eat</i>	39
Inverness	39
<i>Getting Here</i>	39
<i>Information</i>	39
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	40
<i>Adventures</i>	40
<i>Where To Stay</i>	41
<i>Where To Eat</i>	42
Homosassa Area	43
<i>Getting Here</i>	43
<i>Information</i>	43
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	43
<i>Adventures</i>	45
<i>Where To Stay</i>	46
<i>Where To Eat</i>	47

Withlacoochee State Forest	48
<i>Getting Here</i>	48
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	49
<i>Adventures</i>	49
<i>Where To Stay</i>	52
Brooksville	53
<i>Getting Here</i>	53
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	53
<i>Adventures</i>	54
<i>Shopping</i>	54
<i>Where To Stay</i>	54
<i>Where To Eat</i>	55
Weeki Wachee	55
<i>Getting Here</i>	55
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	56
<i>Adventures</i>	57
<i>Where To Stay</i>	59
<i>Where To Eat</i>	59
St. Petersburg & Clearwater	61
Overview	61
<i>Transportation</i>	62
<i>Information</i>	64
<i>Festivals & Events</i>	64
Tarpon Springs & Dunedin	65
<i>Getting Here</i>	66
<i>Information</i>	67
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	67
<i>Adventures</i>	70
<i>Shopping</i>	72
<i>Where To Stay</i>	73
<i>Where To Eat</i>	74
Clearwater & Clearwater Beach	75
<i>Getting Here</i>	75
<i>Information</i>	76
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	76
<i>Adventures</i>	78
<i>Shopping</i>	81
<i>Where To Stay</i>	82
<i>Where To Eat</i>	83
Nightlife	84
Sand Key Communities	85
<i>Getting Here</i>	85
<i>Information</i>	85
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	86
<i>Adventures</i>	88
<i>Where To Stay</i>	90
<i>Where To Eat</i>	91

Treasure Island	91
<i>Getting Here</i>	92
<i>Information</i>	92
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	92
<i>Adventures</i>	92
<i>Where To Stay</i>	93
<i>Where To Eat</i>	93
<i>Nightlife</i>	94
St. Pete Beach & Lower Islands	94
<i>Getting Here</i>	95
<i>Information</i>	95
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	95
<i>Adventures</i>	96
<i>Where To Stay</i>	99
<i>Where To Eat</i>	100
<i>Nightlife</i>	101
St. Petersburg	102
<i>Getting Here</i>	102
<i>Information</i>	102
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	103
<i>Adventures</i>	106
<i>Shopping</i>	108
<i>Where To Stay</i>	108
<i>Where To Eat</i>	109
<i>Nightlife</i>	110
Tampa	111
Overview	111
<i>Transportation</i>	112
<i>Information</i>	113
<i>Festivals & Events</i>	113
Downtown Tampa	116
<i>Getting Here</i>	116
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	117
<i>Adventures</i>	119
<i>Shopping</i>	120
<i>Where To Stay</i>	121
<i>Where To Eat</i>	122
<i>Nightlife</i>	123
Ybor City	123
<i>Getting Here</i>	124
<i>Information</i>	124
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	124
<i>Adventures</i>	126
<i>Shopping</i>	126
<i>Where To Stay</i>	126
<i>Where To Eat</i>	126
<i>Nightlife</i>	128

Northeast, Northwest & South of Tampa	128
<i>Getting Here</i>	128
<i>Information</i>	128
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	129
<i>Adventures</i>	133
<i>Shopping</i>	136
<i>Where To Stay</i>	137
<i>Where To Eat</i>	138
<i>Nightlife</i>	139

Bradenton & Sarasota	141
---------------------------------	-----

Overview	141
<i>Transportation</i>	142
<i>Information</i>	143
<i>Festivals & Events</i>	144
Bradenton	145
<i>Getting Here</i>	146
<i>Information</i>	146
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	146
<i>Adventures</i>	149
<i>Shopping</i>	152
<i>Where To Stay</i>	152
<i>Where To Eat</i>	153
Anna Maria Island	154
<i>Getting Here</i>	154
<i>Information</i>	154
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	155
<i>Adventures</i>	155
<i>Where To Stay</i>	157
<i>Where To Eat</i>	158
Longboat Key	159
<i>Getting Here</i>	160
<i>Information</i>	160
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	160
<i>Adventures</i>	160
<i>Shopping</i>	161
<i>Where To Stay</i>	161
<i>Where To Eat</i>	163
Lido Key & St. Armands Key	164
<i>Getting Here</i>	164
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	164
<i>Adventures</i>	165
<i>Shopping</i>	166
<i>Where To Stay</i>	167
<i>Where To Eat</i>	167
<i>Nightlife</i>	168
Sarasota	168
<i>Getting Here</i>	168

<i>Information</i>	168
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	169
<i>Adventures</i>	172
<i>Shopping</i>	174
<i>Where To Stay</i>	175
<i>Where To Eat</i>	176
<i>Nightlife</i>	177
Siesta Key	178
<i>Getting Here</i>	178
<i>Information</i>	178
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	179
<i>Adventures</i>	179
<i>Where To Stay</i>	180
<i>Where To Eat</i>	181
<i>Nightlife</i>	182
Nokomis Area	182
<i>Getting Here</i>	183
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	183
<i>Adventures</i>	184
<i>Where To Stay</i>	187
<i>Where To Eat</i>	188
Venice	188
<i>Getting Here</i>	189
<i>Information</i>	189
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	189
<i>Adventures</i>	190
<i>Shopping</i>	192
<i>Where To Stay</i>	192
<i>Where To Eat</i>	193
Charlotte Harbor	195
Overview	195
<i>Transportation</i>	196
<i>Information</i>	197
<i>Festivals & Events</i>	197
Manasota Key/Englewood	199
<i>Getting Here</i>	199
<i>Information</i>	200
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	200
<i>Adventures</i>	202
<i>Where To Stay</i>	204
<i>Where To Eat</i>	205
Gasparilla Island & Out-Islands	205
<i>Getting Here</i>	206
<i>Information</i>	206
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	206
<i>Adventures</i>	208
<i>Shopping</i>	210

<i>Where To Stay</i>	210
<i>Where To Eat</i>	211
Port Charlotte & Environs	212
<i>Getting Here</i>	212
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	212
<i>Adventures</i>	213
<i>Where To Stay</i>	214
<i>Where To Eat</i>	214
<i>Nightlife</i>	215
Punta Gorda	215
<i>Getting Here</i>	215
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	215
<i>Adventures</i>	217
<i>Shopping</i>	219
<i>Where To Stay</i>	220
<i>Where To Eat</i>	221
Lee Island Coast	223
Overview	223
Transportation	223
Information	225
<i>Festivals & Events</i>	225
Cape Coral & North Fort Myers	226
<i>Getting Here</i>	227
Information	228
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	229
<i>Adventures</i>	230
<i>Where To Stay</i>	231
<i>Where To Eat</i>	231
Pine Island & Out-Islands	232
<i>Getting Here</i>	233
Information	233
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	234
<i>Adventures</i>	235
<i>Where To Stay</i>	237
<i>Where To Eat</i>	238
Fort Myers	239
<i>Getting Here</i>	239
Information	242
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	242
<i>Adventures</i>	245
<i>Shopping</i>	247
<i>Where To Stay</i>	247
<i>Where To Eat</i>	248
<i>Nightlife</i>	249
Sanibel & Captiva Islands	249
<i>Getting Here</i>	250
Information	250

<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	250
<i>Adventures</i>	254
<i>Shopping</i>	259
<i>Where To Stay</i>	259
<i>Where To Eat</i>	260
<i>Nightlife</i>	262
Fort Myers Beach	262
<i>Getting Here</i>	262
<i>Information</i>	263
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	263
<i>Adventures</i>	264
<i>Where To Stay</i>	266
<i>Where To Eat</i>	267
<i>Nightlife</i>	267
San Carlos Park & Estero	268
<i>Getting Here</i>	268
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	268
<i>Adventures</i>	269
<i>Where To Stay</i>	269
<i>Where To Eat</i>	270
Bonita Springs & Bonita Beach	270
<i>Getting Here</i>	270
<i>Information</i>	271
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	271
<i>Adventures</i>	272
<i>Shopping</i>	273
<i>Where To Stay</i>	274
<i>Where To Eat</i>	274
Naples & The Everglades	276
Overview	276
<i>Transportation</i>	278
<i>Festivals & Events</i>	279
Naples	280
<i>Getting Here</i>	282
<i>Information</i>	282
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	284
<i>Adventures</i>	288
<i>Shopping</i>	291
<i>Where To Stay</i>	292
<i>Where To Eat</i>	293
<i>Nightlife</i>	295
Marco Island	295
<i>Getting Here</i>	295
<i>Information</i>	297
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	297
<i>Adventures</i>	298
<i>Where To Stay</i>	301

<i>Where To Eat</i>	302
Everglades City & Chokoloskee Island	303
<i>Getting Here</i>	305
<i>Information</i>	306
<i>Sights & Attractions</i>	306
<i>Adventures</i>	308
<i>Where To Stay</i>	311
<i>Where To Eat</i>	313

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to all who assisted me in the adventure of writing a Florida adventure guide, especially to these helpful souls: Alisa Bennett, Kelly Earnest, Joe Faulk, Nancy Hamilton, Beth Preddy, Frances Purvey, and Wit Tuttell. I couldn't have done it without you.

Dedication

To Rob and his fabulous Walton Adventures.

About the Author

Chelle Koster Walton began her greatest life adventure when she moved to Sanibel Island sight unseen in 1981. She's never looked back, except to wonder why she didn't move sooner. From her favorite island, the author travels around Florida and the Caribbean researching guidebooks, of which she has published eight, and writing magazine articles for *Caribbean Travel & Life*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel*, *Endless Vacation*, *New York Post*, and other print and electronic media. Walton is co-founder of www.guidebookwriters.com and a member of the Society of American Travel Writers.

Introduction

For the purposes of this guide, the West Coast of Florida describes a slice of coastline along the Gulf of Mexico beginning in the quiet rural setting of Citrus County, north of the Tampa Bay area, and ending in the south at Naples and the utter wilderness of the Everglades. It encompasses the coastal portions of Citrus, Hernando, Pasco, Pinellas, Hillsborough, Manatee, Sarasota, Charlotte, Lee, and Collier counties. This region is cohesive in its types of vegetation and climate, yet it is infinitely diverse.

The History of Adventure



If you're looking for adventure, you're in the right place. West Coast Florida, as one of the nation's final frontiers, claims a history and heritage of rugged outdoorsmanship.

While the rest of the nation was busily traveling along paved roads and buying their supplies from general stores, in the farthest corners of Florida's Gulf Coast – down Naples way and in the Florida Everglades – folks were still trading with the natives for victuals and dredging enough land out of the swamps to build the **Tamiami Trail**. The West Coast of Florida was considered a wild, exotic place then, a place for safaris and catching giant silver fish; a place where prehistoric turtles, alligators, manatees, and horseshoe crabs thrived, where trees danced, birds dive-bombed, dolphins smiled, flowers bloomed at night, and winter never came.

■ The First Visitors

The first white men traveled to western Florida for adventure. And they found it aplenty: half-naked natives, tricky waterways, impenetrable swamps, and enough fowl and fish to thicken seas, sky, and fire-brewed stews. In search of gold and youth, they chose to grumble, kill the natives, and curse the rest. They brought their own hogs, cows, and citrus to eat, then eventually left, discouraged by the persistent onslaughts from the resident Amerindian tribes – the **Calusa** in the south, the **Timucua** around today's Tampa and Sarasota. Evidence of important Amerindian centers of culture has been found in Marco Island, Mound Key, Pine Island, Useppa Island, Manasota Key, Terra Ceia, Safety Harbor, and Crystal River.

Juan Ponce de León himself was the first recorded European to set foot upon these shores, somewhere in Charlotte Harbor. **Hernando De Soto** landed at today's Fort Myers Beach or Bradenton, depending upon whom you believe. Ensuing parties established forts, missions, and colonies at Fort Myers Beach, Pine Island, and other strategic spots along the coast.

Legends fill the region's early timelines with dastardly pirates who came to prey upon ships sailing between the Caribbean and established towns in northern Florida. Much has been exaggerated, particularly the legend of Gasparilla, upon which a Tampa festival and a coastline attitude of devil-may-care thrive. The mottled backwaters of the West Coast undoubtedly harbor many a refugee from the law, but few as colorful as publicity agents have painted them.

More prevalent in the 17th through the 19th centuries were **Spanish** fishermen and gutsy farmers. Later, in the Charlotte Harbor area, commercial fishing developed into a thriving industry. Fishermen lived in stilt houses built on sand shoals from Placida to the Ten Thousand Islands. A handful of the historic shacks remain.

In many ways, **fishing** settled the West Coast. Farming proved less dependable, what with hurricanes and pests. Sugar plantations around Bradenton and Homosassa came and went with the wind. In later years, a reputation for great sportfishing brought well-heeled adventurers to the coast, which eventually put the region on the map of the socially connected.

■ The 1800s

In the meantime, war introduced others to this balmy, palmy land. Florida, after being passed back and forth between Spain and England, became a **US territory** in the early 1820s. Shortly thereafter, Governor Andrew Jackson, to defend against the Seminole tribes he had angered, built forts on Lake Holathlikaha near today's Inverness, Tampa Bay, and the Caloosahatchee River at today's Fort Myers. Later, Civil and Spanish-American War fortifications were built on Egmont and Mullet keys, at the mouth of Tampa Bay. In the wake of war came ex-soldiers and their families. Then came industry and tourism.

St. Petersburg was built in 1887 as a health resort, and **Tampa**, formerly Fort Brooke, gained a reputation as such. Railroads, cigar factories, and hotels started the twin cities down the path to becoming the region's metropolitan hub. Islands and coastal towns to the south remained the domain of the intrepid. It wasn't until big names such as Ringling and Edison became associated with the region that people sat up and took serious notice.

■ The 1900s to the Present

They came to fish. They came to swim in the warm, gentle Gulf waves. They came to hunt, to escape, to winter. They came to stay. Since the 1940s, the coast's population has built steadily. As more people came to reside permanently, cities developed along typical lines, adding services and culture to their slate of resorts, restaurants, and beachside facilities.

Adventure has always been part of what the coast offers. As eco-tourism came into fashion, emphasis shifted to this aspect of vacationing. To the fishing charters, tour boats, parasailing concessions, and Hobie Cat rentals were added bike trails, sea kayaking, and nature-oriented tours. More than any section of Florida, the West Coast has most firmly put its foot down about wanton development. This makes it especially desirable for adventurers seeking a return to what those first intrepid fishermen, hunters, and sailors found.

Largely gone are the untamed lands and rugged lifestyles that attracted adventurers a half-century ago. Still to be found throughout the region, however, are areas and activities that retain the flavor and fervor of Florida's derring-do days.

The People & Culture

Western Florida has built its population in great part from tourists who came and never left. The result is a rich blend of cultures.

■ The First Settlers



The first tourists arrived before history books, probably first from Asia, later from South America and the Caribbean. The **Calusa** and **Timucua Amerindians** did not survive the next incursion of visitors. The **Spanish** eventually decimated their numbers with bows, arrows, and disease. Spanish influence persisted, and the area's oldest families have names such as Padilla and Menendez, familial survivors from a time when Cuban fishermen set up camps on the islands and Cuban cigar-makers migrated from Key West.

Most of the latter settled in Tampa's **Ybor City**. Germans, Italians, Jews, and other nationalities, followed to work the cigar factories, making Ybor City still today one of the region's most colorful ethnic enclaves. The district is known for its restaurants where a Cuban sandwich or bowl of rice and beans are culinarily symbolic.

Other early arrivals migrated from the north, among them the **Seminole Amerindians**, a branch of the Creek tribe, whose bloodlines reflected an intermingling of African and Spanish blood. The Seminole Wars forced them to Arkansas, except for those who took cover in the Everglades' for-

bidding wild lands. Seminoles and an offshoot tribe known as the **Miccosukee** still live in the Everglades and on tribal lands around Tampa. In the Everglades, most live in chickee huts, pole structures topped with intricately thatched roofs. The Native Americans subsist on fishing, farming, and tourism, selling their colorful weaving, and raking in the proceeds from bingo and gambling. The tribe runs casinos in Tampa, Miami and Immokalee.

The Seminole Wars, and later the Civil War, further stocked the slowly growing population with American soldiers who fell in love with the pleasant climate and lush surroundings.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Settlers from Georgia and Alabama came to be known as “Crackers,” a term associated with the region’s early cattle drivers, who “cracked” their whips to herd wild cows. Crackers contributed Deep South cuisine, folk medicine, and a simple style of architecture known as the Cracker house, which has come back into fashion as “Old Florida” architecture. They settled and farmed mostly in the interior sections of the region, where to this day lifestyles whistle Dixie and folks speak with “South in the mouth.”*

■ Northerners Arrive

Land booms of the pre- and post-Depression eras brought northerners from far reaches. First came the well-to-do in search of adventures in the untamed wilderness. Among them were President Teddy Roosevelt, Zane Grey, Shirley Temple, Hedy Lamarr, Charles Lindbergh, Thomas Edison, John Ringling, and Henry Ford. Giants from the industrial world followed, often buying up land to insure the exclusivity of the region. They left behind a standard for nature appreciation and beautiful architecture. Others, such as Henry Plant and Barron Collier, saw the opportunity to develop the land, and so built railroads, roads, ports, resorts, and hotels.

■ The Population Boom

Once the word got out, another sort of adventurer, known then as the “Tin Can Tourist,” arrived in motor homes. They, and those that followed, led to Florida’s reputation as an RV heaven.

Much of Southwest Florida's population in the past three decades came from the Midwest, bringing along their meat-and-potatoes cuisine and steady work ethics. At the onset of that era, retirees and seasonal residents dominated the population. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the population homogenize somewhat, with folks coming from all parts of the United States, all age groups, and all walks of life.

The Hispanic population is growing, as immigrants who had moved north discover in West Coast Florida the sort of climate they once left behind in their homelands. Cape Coral, one pocket of Hispanic ethnicity, enjoys the celebrated cuisine and festivities indigenous to the culture. The town is also known for its German and Italian populations.

Young families have found an ideal atmosphere for their children in West Coast Florida – a playground open all year 'round.

Today's West Coaster is said to have a calmer attitude than the East Coaster – more like the Gulf than the ocean. Laid-back is the term most commonly applied. The pace is slower, the surroundings more natural. That's where the generalities end. From the sophisticated Tampa metropolite to the Everglades backwoods Miccosukee, the West Coast embraces a range of people as diverse as its terrain.

Natural Makeup



With nearly 200 miles of Gulf coastline, more than 500 miles of freshwater river, thousands of acres of lakes, mangrove estuary, and untamed jungle, and the vast sawgrass plains of the Everglades, Florida's West Coast brims with opportunity for adventure on both land and water.

The diversity of its terrain and biological communities, when combined with the region's exotic, subtropical climate and ambiance, creates a destination that is both classroom and playground for outdoor enthusiasts. Where else can you camp on a warm, sand beach and canoe among roseate spoonbills and manatees?

■ Marine Life

The island beach and marine communities, of course, are the most touted features of Gulf Coast Florida ecology. They introduce most visitors to the local environment with their shells, dolphins, pelicans, shorebirds, sting-rays, tarpon, and loggerhead turtles; but they are only the beginning point.



In summer, stingrays nest along the shoreline in shallow waters. To avoid stepping on them and the excruciating pain that follows, locals do the “Stingray Shuffle.” If you shuffle your feet as you enter the water, the stingrays will gladly avoid you. Punctures occur only when you step directly on the ray’s barb.

■ Mangrove Estuaries

Most intriguing to nature lovers are the undersung estuaries, the nurseries that build islands and nurture aquatic life. Haunting, steamy places, they harbor a species of tree that seems to dance on spindly legs – the mangrove. In its prop roots, dirt, barnacles, and other incrustations collect to build shorelines and islands. Its leaf fall provides rich and fertile muck; its branches, nests for local and migrating birds. Here the food chain begins with the tiniest crabs and ends with the birds, fish, and manatees that come to munch on seaweed or lunch on a half-shell. The cycle is ancient, and one can sense that in the quietly regenerating world of the mangrove estuary.

■ Flora & Fauna

Less brackish and freshwater systems are the domain of another ancient component of Florida wildlife – the **alligator**. Gnarly and tyrannosaurish, the American alligator survives and thrives in coastal rivers and particularly in the Everglades. With it co-exist cypress trees, turtles, bass, river otters, and fabulous birds such as the wood stork and great blue heron.

Salt marshes, scrublands, flatwoods, and high pine lands occupy different elevations between sea level and ridge land. On hammocks, high and dry, hardwood forests harbor the rarest of all Florida creatures, the **panther**, seldom seen in the wild. Its cousin the **bobcat** is less reclusive, its numbers less depleted. **Black bears, white-tailed deer, squirrels, raccoons, opossums, armadillos, and gopher tortoises** roam the woodlands. Get closer and you’ll find **indigo snakes, anole lizards, skinks, tree frogs, ant lions, and love bugs**.



Some locals are less friendly than others. Those you want to avoid include rattlesnakes, pygmy rattlers, jellyfish, fire ants, and sand fleas ("no-see-ums"). There are also noxious plants that can pose danger, particularly the detested pepper plant, an introduced tree whose berries can cause allergic reaction. Poison ivy and oak grow in the wilds. A mystery novel set on Sanibel Island describes murder by a different plant, the oleander, a limb of which the murderer used to roast a marshmallow for his victim.

Most native coastal plants are benign and serve to protect wildlife. Residents are becoming aware of that and there is a trend to plant wildlife-attracting gardens rather than exotic vegetation, which taxes the ecosystem. Cities, resorts, and commercial enterprises are using **sea oats**, **railroad vine**, and other maritime vegetation to keep sands anchored to the beaches. **Native grasses** attract gopher tortoises. Dead tree trunks provide homes for **kestrels** and other nesting birds, as well as food for **pileated woodpeckers**. **Butterflies** flock around certain native plants, to feed and lay their eggs.

On a larger scale, the region's many state and national parks and refuges began preserving habitat in its natural state back when land booms threatened Florida's fragile environment. Private enterprises have since joined the drive to save what is dwindling. Today, these preserves offer not only shelter to the threatened, but also recreation to those who appreciate the region's distinct environment.

■ Endangered/Threatened Species

Florida is home to more than 100 fragile species. Close to 40 of these are listed on the US Fish and Wildlife Service list of endangered and threatened animals. Those found in West Florida include the **Florida panther**, **West Indian manatee**, **wood stork**, **bald eagle**, **red-cockaded woodpecker**, **Florida scrub jay**, **roseate tern**, **American crocodile**, **Atlantic loggerhead turtle**, **Eastern indigo snake**, and the **sand skink**.

■ Guidelines for Wildlife Preservation

While visiting Florida, take care to observe the following regulations and guidelines for the protection of wildlife and habitat.

SHELLING

- Live shelling is prohibited in state and national parks, in refuges, and on all of Sanibel Island. In these areas, do not keep any shell with an animal in it, whether or not you believe the animal is dead. Gently return a live shell to the water; do not fling it.
- Lee and Collier counties limit live shelling to two per species per person per day.
- Live shells must be cleaned properly or they will smell like dead fish in a day or two. If you don't know what you're doing, don't collect the shells only to toss them from the car window down the road.
- A fishing license is required for collecting live shells in Florida.

FEEDING WILDLIFE

- Don't feed wild animals. This includes everything from those harmless seagulls on the beach to that very harmful alligator behind the fence. Feeding alligators is illegal in Florida and noncompliance is punishable by a hefty fine. More importantly, by feeding an alligator, you are teaching it not to fear man. That's when toddlers get grabbed off bank shores or fishermen's feet become 'gator bait.
- Feeding birds on the beach not only causes a nuisance, it again overrides their instincts and the birds forget how to feed themselves.
- Do not throw fish to pelicans, no matter how much they beg and how adorable they are. Large bony fish can cause bill and throat punctures. Be careful when you cast around gathered pelicans. They often swallow bait, hook and all. If this happens, gently reel in the bird, cover its head with a towel or shirt, and carefully clip and extract the hook, trying to back it out rather than running the barb through the bird's skin.
- If you're camping or picnicking, you may find yourself inadvertently feeding raccoons and squirrels. At night, put all of your food, including supposedly sealed coolers and bags of garbage, inside a vehicle or trash bin.

HARMFUL LITTER
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Discarded fishing filament, plastic shopping bags, and beverage six-pack rings can harm pelicans and marine life. Toss litter into a trash receptacle.■ Be careful not to throw food or food wrappers out the car window. This attracts animals to roadways, where they can be run over.
SEA TURTLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Loggerhead turtles come to nest on our beaches during the summer. Do not disturb their nests, which are marked by turtle night patrols. Turn off lights facing the beach; they disorient nesting and hatching turtles.
MANATEES
<p>Watersports enthusiasts play a major role in the continued endangerment of the Florida manatee. To ensure the survival of these loveable creatures, please abide by these guidelines.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Use snorkel gear when diving with manatees. Scuba gear bubbles can frighten them.■ Never feed a manatee in the wild.■ Never approach or chase a manatee.■ Never separate a cow from her calf.■ Do not touch manatees. Never poke, prod, or stab a manatee with your hands, feet, or any object.■ When boating, wear polarized glasses that permit you to see surfacing manatees better. Stay in the center of marked channels and out of seagrasses. Observe manatee speed zones and drive slowly enough to be able to see and avoid a manatee.■ To report a manatee death, injury, harassment, or radio-tagged manatee, call ☎ 800-342-5367. For more information, see the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission's Web site at www.state.fl.us/fwc/psm/manatee/guide.htm or www.state.fl.us/fwc/psm/manatee/manatee.htm.

BOATING & FISHING

- Observe manatee zone signs by slowing down to no-wake speed. Take the slack time to watch for the fascinating mammals as they surface for air.
- Stay in the marked channels when boating. This not only protects you and your vessel, but also the fragile grass flats that feed our fish.
- Most local guides and fishermen practice catch-and-release, and will urge you to do so as well. Certain fish, such as tarpon, require a special permit to kill.

VEGETATION

- It is illegal to pick sea grass, which keeps our beaches in place. Mangroves are also protected by the law; don't trim or cut them down.

Government-Protected Parks & Refuges



The region's most extensive refuge lands, in Everglades National Park, were saved from disaster as they balanced on the brink, thanks to the efforts of **Marjory Stoneman Douglas**. Her book entitled *The Everglades: River of Grass*, published in 1947, sparked a movement to convince the federal government to preserve the fragile wetlands.

■ **Everglades National Park**

The Florida Everglades and their accompanying Ten Thousand Islands cover 2,100 square miles and have 99 miles of canoe trails, 600 types of fish, 350 species of birds, 60 species of amphibians and reptiles, 45 species of mosquitoes, and 25 species of mammals. This guide covers the portion of the massive park that lies in Collier County and is accessible from the west – the part that includes Ten Thousand Islands.

Sharing the Everglades ecology, **Big Cypress National Preserve**, **Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve**, and **Collier Seminole State Park** offer a score of eco-opportunities in the vicinity.

■ National Wildlife Refuges

Another national preserve in the region takes up half of Sanibel Island. **J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge** is also Everglades-like in its wetlands makeup. **Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge** occupies the entire 398 acres of Egmont Key, which is approachable only by boat. So is the **Pine Island National Wildlife Refuge**, comprising out-islands in Pine Island Sound. In the coast’s northern reaches, the **Chassahowitzka** and **Crystal River National Wildlife Refuges** and the **Withlacoochee State Forest** preserve the pristine waters and forests of Citrus and Hernando counties.

■ Marine Preserves

Much of what attracts adventurers to the region lies off briny shores, in the Gulf of Mexico, the world’s largest gulf, or in the Intracoastal Waterway of bays and harbors between mainland and barrier islands. Within the area we will be covering lie two of Florida’s largest inlets: **Tampa Bay** and **Charlotte Harbor**. The 7,667-acre **Cape Haze Aquatic Preserve** in Charlotte Harbor protects precious marine resources. The long **Caloosahatchee River** provides watery passage between the Gulf and the great Lake Okeechobee. The shoreline north of Tampa Bay is riddled with river mouths and marshlands that front them. Other West Coast sea preserves include the **Pine Island Sound Aquatic Preserve** and **Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve**.

■ State Parks & Historic Sites

Florida maintains an excellent system of state-operated parks, historic sites, and other recreational areas. This book covers several of the finest, from the unbridged island refuge of **Cayo Costa State Park** to the unusual slice of nature and history preserved at **Koreshan State Historic Site** and the 30-foot Indian mound in **Crystal River State Archaeological Site**. Many of the parks provide recreational opportunities that allow visitors to play while immersing themselves in nature and history.

AUTHOR TIP



If you plan on exploring the parks to any extent, consider purchasing an annual pass for \$40 (\$80 for families), available at the entrance booth to most of the parks or by calling ☎ 352-628-7002. Visit the Florida State Parks Web site at www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/.

How To Use This Book

This book divides the West Coast into seven sections. It begins in the north with Citrus and Hernando counties, a region dubbed the **Nature Coast**. It then continues southward with **St. Petersburg & Clearwater**, covering an area known in tourism jargon as the Suncoast. The chapter encompasses Tarpon Springs, Clearwater, St. Petersburg, and the adjacent barrier island chain.

Tampa, as metropolitan core of the West Coast, has its own chapter; then we move south to **Bradenton & Sarasota**, with their islands and the town of Venice.

The little-known **Charlotte Harbor** area has one chapter. Then we cover Lee County, promoted as **Lee Island Coast**, from Fort Myers south to its famous island pair, Sanibel and Captiva.

Collier County, one of Florida's largest, includes its main town and governmental seat, **Naples**, as well as Marco Island, Ten Thousand Islands, Everglades City, the western half of the Florida Everglades, and its surrounding parks and preserves.

Each chapter begins with a brief overall history and information that will make finding your way around easier. Then it is divided by cities or areas within the sub-region, their adventure opportunities, sights, restaurants, hotels, and other attractions. Sprinkled amid the hard facts, you'll find budget tips, author recommendations, family-friendly choices, quirky Florida terms, and weekend adventure itineraries.

Information

Transportation

■ By Air



If you are traveling by air, five international airports and various local runways serve your needs. **Tampa** has the largest international airport; others are located in **St. Petersburg**, **Sarasota-Bradenton**, and **Fort Myers**. **Orlando International Airport** is also convenient to the Nature Coast (Citrus and Hernando counties). Major domestic airlines serve all five. International flights arrive principally from Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Each chapter gives specific airport and airline information.

■ By Car

Motorists make inroads on **Interstate 75**, the coast's zippy north-south artery, and **Interstate 4**, which hits Tampa from the east, connecting it to Orlando. **Highway 41** (Tamiami Trail) and **Highway 98** provide more leisurely ways to explore the coast. **Florida's Turnpike** is the main artery between Orlando and the Nature Coast. In winter's high-season, traffic can get a bit frustrating through towns that seem to grow together at the seams, especially on "The Trail." Yet it, the coast's earliest land route, has a story to tell, if you take the time to stop, look, and listen.



Florida has a seat belt law, so buckle up. If your car or your rental is equipped with a passenger side airbag, make sure you seat young children in the back. Airbag ejection can kill tots. Florida law also requires that children up to age three be restrained in an approved child safety seat. Ages three and older can use the automobile manufacturer's installed restraint system. The state recommends placing infants to three-year-olds in the back seat and positioning them in the car's center.

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA APPROXIMATE DRIVING TIMES (in hours)	CLEARWATER	FORT MYERS	NAPLES	ORLANDO	SARASOTA	ST. PETERSBURG	TAMPA
CLEARWATER		2½	¾	2¼	1	½	½
FORT MYERS	2½		¾	3	1½	2½	2½
NAPLES	3¼	¾		4	2	2¾	3¼
ORLANDO	2¼	3	4		3¾	2½	1¾
SARASOTA	1	1½	2	2¾		¾	1
ST. PETERSBURG	½	2¼	2¾	2½	¾		½
TAMPA	½	2½	¾	1¾	1	½	

Actual driving time may vary based on traffic and road construction.
Source: Visit Florida

■ On The Water

Before folks traveled from town to coastal town on the **Tamiami Trail**, they followed water routes – rivers, bays, and the Gulf. Water transportation is still the preferred mode for adventurous West Coasters. The **Intracoastal Waterway** runs between the mainland and the islands from Pinellas County to the Everglades. These shoal-ridden waters can be tricky. Trickiest of all are the skinny waters around Ten Thousand Islands and in the Everglades; in fact, the natives had to invent new means of transportation to get around. The **swamp buggy** was Naples-born and remains a symbol of frontier adventure. The shallow-draft airboat, described in *Everglades Transportation Trivia*, page 304, is another invention mothered by necessity.

Weather/What to Pack



Weather is one of the region’s top selling points, particularly in winter when you can celebrate the great outdoors free from fear of freezing. Temperatures along the entire subtropical coast are generally balmy throughout the winter months, although snow has been sighted as far south as Fort Myers. The average winter temperature north of Tampa is around 60°; in the southern extremes, the average is 67.5°. From November through February, definitely pack your swimsuit (Gulf temperatures rarely dip below 60°), but don’t forget a warm jacket,

long-sleeved shirts, and slacks. If you'll be traveling by water, mittens, hats, and scarves may prove valuable.

Those who don't know better believe the weather skips right over spring, but residents have learned otherwise. In spring, as in fall, changes are subtle. No spring showers here, generally; a torrent of flower blossoms is more indicative of the season. Fall brings crispness to the normally moist air and a long-awaited reprieve from summer swelter.

AUTHOR TIP



During March, April, October, and November, you won't need heavy clothes, but you should still pack shirts with long sleeves, sweaters, sweat-shirts, jeans, and slacks.

Summer comes early to the Gulf Coast, and is a great time for watersports. Hiking, biking, and other dry activities are best planned for early morning. Work into exercise gradually if you're not used to the heat and humidity. Drink plenty of water before, during, and after. Average summer temperatures range from 80° in the northern reaches covered in this book to around 82° in the south. Gulf temperatures reach 86°.

When planning your summer trip to Florida's West Coast, take into account that **hurricane season** officially begins in June. Hurricanes usually don't track into the Gulf until the fall months, but there are no hard and fast rules with Mother Nature. Warnings come well in advance of a major storm. Afternoon summer storms are the norm, so schedule your activities accordingly.

Pack your coolest duds for the summer months, May through September. Plan on living in a swimsuit or shorts during daylight hours, and in light cotton shorts, shirts, skirts, and dresses at night. If you'll be hiking in wooded areas, or even on the beach at sunset, bring something light to protect your arms and legs against mosquitoes and no-see-ums. A hat with a brim will protect your face and scalp from the sun. In Tampa, St. Petersburg, Sarasota, and Naples, you may have occasion to dress formally for theater or dinner, but in general, restaurants declare a casual dress code. For the adventurer, surf walkers, sneakers, and deck shoes are more essential than high heels or wing tips.



Don't forget to pack some common sense. No matter what time of year you visit, bug repellent and sunscreen are necessities. Keep a level head about potential crime, sunburn, over-exertion, over-exposure, and dehydration, and your vacation to West Coast Florida will be a happy one.

Sights & Attractions



Although this book focuses on adventure and outdoor activities, it gives visitors alternatives for sightseeing and playing indoors. I pay particular attention to those attractions that lean on nature, and note them under a special heading, *Eco-Attractions*. Beaches and parks that offer a wide variety of open-air fun are listed under *Sights & Attractions*, and may also be repeated under specific activities.

West Coast beaches and state parks are centers of regional adventure. Beaches have restrooms unless otherwise noted. Most prohibit alcohol, pets, open fires, and glass containers. State parks also prohibit pets.

AUTHOR TIP



Admission fees and hours change constantly at Florida attractions, often according to seasons. Call ahead to confirm.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Since the days of Teddy Roosevelt and before, fishing has been the lure for adventure-seekers headed to Florida's West Coast. For early residents, fishing was a way of life, and commercial fishing, due to net banning, is just beginning to die out in the last hold-out fishing communities, such as Pine Island (page 232) and Cortez (page 145).

Recreational fishing still thrives; many once-commercial fishermen have turned to guiding. To make sure it continues to thrive, the state enforces licensing, season, number, and size regulations.

FISHING LICENSES

Non-Florida residents age 16 or older must obtain a saltwater fishing license to cast from shore or any pier or vessel not covered by its own license. Most charter boats carry vessel licenses that cover all passengers. Florida residents under age 65 fishing from a non-licensed boat also are required to purchase a license. Inexpensive short-term licenses are available for non-residents as are lifetime licenses and combination fishing and hunting licenses. *Separate licenses are required for freshwater and saltwater fishing.* License fee information is given below.

To purchase licenses over the phone with a credit card (a \$3.95 surcharge is added), call toll-free, ☎ 888-347-4356. You can buy fishing licenses at the county tax collectors' offices or at some local bait shops, Kmart's, and marinas. Surcharges of 50¢ may apply for licenses purchased at locations other than the tax collector's office. For guidelines on species size and season, visit local bait shops (see listings for bait shops in each chapter, under *Fishing*.)

For more information, contact the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, ☎ 850-488-3641; www.state.fl.us/fwc/.

SALTWATER FISHING LICENSE FEES	
Non-residents	three-day \$6.50
	seven-day \$16.50
	one-year \$31.50
Residents	one-year \$13.50
	five-year \$61.50
Separate \$2.50 permits are required for those wanting to catch snook and crawfish, and a \$51.50 tag is needed for tarpon fishing.	
FRESHWATER FISHING LICENSE FEES	
Non-residents	seven-day \$16.50
	one-year \$31.50
Residents	one-year \$13.50

Along the West Coast, you have several types of fishing. In saltwater, where some 300 species of fish live, there is **backwater fishing**, also known as flats fishing. It takes place around bays, estuaries, mangrove areas, oyster bars, and Intracoastal waters near shore. The region's excellent backwater fishing has spawned a recent interest in fly fishing. Most backwater fishing uses light tackle. Backwater catches include tarpon, mangrove snapper, sheepshead, ladyfish, nurse sharks, sea trout, snook, and redfish. You can do this kind of fishing from piers, docks, seawalls, and leeside shores, or by boat. Backwater fishing charters are numerous throughout the coastal region, and are generally cheaper than deep-water excursions, about \$200-\$300 per half-day for six people.

Open water fishing can be intimidating for the first-timer. If you're serious about catching fish, hire a guide. If you set out on your own, look for fast-moving waters in passes and rivers, and for shady spots, mangroves, and bridges, where fish lay up in the heat of the day. Seek advice at the local bait shop concerning tides, type of bait, and prescribed line weight.

Charters and party boats take you **offshore fishing** to catch grouper, red snapper, king mackerel, and other whoppers that lurk in deep seas. Party boats, also called head boats, are the less expensive option, costing \$25-\$30 per person. The fee normally includes bait, tackle, license, and cleaning. It is customary to tip the crew.

Surf fishing is another option and can be done from most beaches – again, with the best success in passes between islands or at the end of islands.

Freshwater fishing yields bass, perch, catfish, and other catches. The West Coast has its share of rivers and small lakes for fishermen, particularly in the northern Nature Coast region.



*To receive a free copy of **Florida Fishing & Boating**, an official publication of the State of Florida, call the Florida Sports Foundation at ☎ 850-488-8347, or visit www.flasports.com and click “Free Guide.”*

Boating

Whether you own or are renting a boat, you should use a chart of local waters. Many rental concessions provide them. West Coast waters are challenging, riddled with shoals, oyster beds, and grass flats. If you're not practiced at boating and chart reading, consider hiring a guide with local knowledge to take you out for the first time or two.

AUTHOR TIP



All motor-powered boats used in Florida must be registered at the local county tax collector's office. If currently registered out-of-state, boats need not be registered in Florida for stays of 90 days or less.

Island-hopping along the coast is one of the region's greatest adventures and pleasures. From Tarpon Springs south, the islands are edged in the sand of recreationists' dreams. To the north, you'll find more mangroves and less sandy shores. Unbridged islands from Anclote (*St. Petersburg & Clearwater* chapter) in the north to the Ten Thousand Islands in the south (*Naples & Everglades* chapter) offer beaches, restaurants, bird watching, shelling, and other activities enhanced by the thrill of being cut loose from mainland bustle and tempos.

Charter Boats

You won't have any problem finding charters along the coast, for everything from island-hopping and fishing to sightseeing, shelling, and dolphin-spotting. Private charters by motor or sail can be easily tailored to your interests, and usually hold four to six people. For a half-day, that will typically run you \$200 to \$300; for a full day, \$300 to \$450.

Tour Boats

Larger tour boats have a set agenda and hold a party of people for sunset, mansion-gazing, island lunching, manatee-spotting, and other special interests. In some places, you'll find huge cruise ships or showboats with dinner, shows, gambling, and dancing. Prices vary greatly. Every chapter offers several options. In the Everglades and other shallow-water areas, airboat tours make it easier to get around. Tours cost about \$10-\$15 per person. Reservations are usually required for charters and tours.

Rentals

Powerboat rentals will cost you anywhere from \$70 to \$250 for a half-day, which amounts to four hours, either morning or afternoon. Daily rates usually cover eight hours. Some places will rent vessels by the hour, some by the week. Rental rates vary according to boat and engine size. The text gives a range of rates as a guideline to renters. Be sure to ask whether quoted rates include gas, oil, and tax. They usually don't, with the exception of pontoons and Jet Skis or WaveRunners.

The most popular type of boat, especially for open water fishermen, has a center console. Freshwater anglers often use flat-bottomed bass boats or small Jon boats. Bowriders are better suited to passenger travel. Pontoon and deck boats are flat boats set aboard floats and are practical for large groups and for use in shallow waters, such as around Ten Thousand Islands.

Sailboats for rent are scarcer. Many resorts and some beach concessions have small Hobie Cats and Sunfish, which run about \$60 for a half-day. Lessons are available in some locales, as part of a rental or part of a cruise.

Canoeing & Kayaking

The best way to get close to nature while on the water is by canoe or kayak. Sea kayaking is enjoying a surge in popularity off Florida shores. Confined water kayaking is usually less strenuous. You're likely to find rentals, lessons, sales, and tours available no matter where you land. You can rent a single or tandem. Rates run around \$20 for two hours.

The Everglades, Peace River, Myakka River, Hillsborough and Alafia rivers, and Homosassa, Chassahowitzka, Withlacoochee, and Crystal rivers provide excellent canoeing and kayaking trails. Many state parks rent canoes for use in their waterways.

BOATING INFORMATION

- To receive a free copy of *Florida Fishing & Boating*, an official publication of the State of Florida, call the Florida Sports Foundation, ☎ 850-488-8347, or visit www.flasports.com and click “Free Guide.”
 - For more information on canoeing and kayaking, contact the **Florida Department of Environmental Protection**, Office of Greenways and Trails, 3900 Commonwealth Ave., Mail Station 795, Tallahassee, FL 32399-2400, ☎ 850-488-3701 or 877-822-5208, www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt. Ask for a free copy of *Florida Recreational Trails System – Canoe Trails* and its *Canoe Liveries and Outfitters Directory*.
 - Another resource in the area is **Florida Professional Paddle-sports Association**, PO Box 1764, Arcadia, FL 34265, ☎ 941-494-1215, www.adventuresports.com/canoe/ppa.
-

Other Watersports

Waverunners and Jet Skis, known under the umbrella of personal watercraft, are usually rented by the hour for about \$50 and charge an extra fee for passengers. Some concessions offer tours.

Sailboarding, parasailing, and water-biking are all part of the resort water scene. The larger resorts and some beaches offer these and other rentals.

Surfing, snorkeling, and scuba diving are found on the West Coast, but are generally better and more popular on Florida’s East Coast. The springs, caves, and rivers of the Nature Coast constitute this book’s most popular diving destinations. Crystal River is the region’s scuba mecca.

■ On Foot

Hiking

Nature trails in state and other parks provide opportunity for short, scenic hiking in the sunshine. The chapters on the Nature Coast and St. Petersburg & Clearwater contain longer, paved **rails-to-trails paths** shared by cyclists and inline skaters.



When hiking here, be sure to take drinking water. Plan for the heat and, if you're hiking on the beach, the soft surface. Hiking parts of the coast can be strenuous.

Hunting

Florida's days as the great hunting ground are gone. But the Everglades, the **Fred C. Babcock-Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area** in the Charlotte Harbor area and the **Withlacoochee State Forest** keep hunters happy still.

■ On Wheels



Bike paths and lanes accommodate casual cyclists; more serious bikers take to quiet back roads throughout the region.

Bike paths are separated from traffic by distance and, ideally, by a vegetation buffer. The best ones leave the roadside altogether to penetrate natural environments unreachable by motor vehicles. **Lanes**, on the other hand, are a part of the roadway designated for bike traffic.



Where neither lanes nor paths exist, bikers must share the road with vehicular traffic. Florida law considers a bicycle a vehicle, so its operator must follow all the rules of the road upon entering the flow of traffic. Florida law requires that bike riders and passengers under age 16 wear helmets.

In resort communities, you can usually rent a bike at your hotel or at bike shops. Some have only basic equipment, others carry a variety of bikes and paraphernalia. Rates are usually offered by the hour, half-day, day, and week.

Where To Stay



The West Coast of Florida is the land of resorts in all shapes, sizes, and price ranges. Some areas are more expensive than others. You'll find the best bargains in the chapters covering the Nature Coast, St. Petersburg & Clearwater, and Charlotte Harbor.

■ **Rates**

Rates throughout the area change seasonally. Some resort rate cards reflect as many as six different seasons: Christmas (high), January (shoulder), February-Easter (high), Easter-May (shoulder), Summer, and Fall (low). Smaller places stick to two or three seasons: high (mid-December-Easter), low (Easter-September or mid-December), and possibly shoulder (summer). Always ask about specials, packages, and about corporate, AAA, or other discounts that may apply.



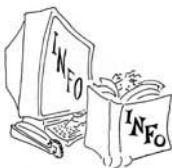
Most counties add a 5%-7% bed tax to rooms, revenue from which goes toward maintaining and improving beaches, parks, and other tourist-impacted areas.

There is usually a charge for extra persons; not always for children, however. Most accommodation rates are based on the European Plan, with no meals, except for B&Bs and certain others noted within their description. Many of the listed accommodations have kitchen facilities, whether basic or full, which can save you on dining bills.

ACCOMMODATIONS PRICE KEY	
Rates are per room, per night, double occupancy. Price ranges described for each property often do not take into account penthouses and other exceptional, high-priced accommodations.	
\$	Up to \$50
\$\$.	\$50 to \$100
\$\$\$	\$101 to \$175
\$\$\$\$.	\$176 and up

■ Camping

The best wilderness camping is found in the coast's state parks. See individual chapters for particulars or contact the **Department of Environmental Protection, Office of Recreation & Parks**, Mail Station 535, 3900 Commonwealth Blvd., Tallahassee, FL 32399-3000, ☎ 850-488-9872, www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/. For more information on camping, ☎ 850-562-7151 to request a *Florida Camping Directory*, or visit www.floridacamping.com.



*The **Florida RV Trade Association** at 401 N. Parsons Ave., Ste. 107, Brandon, FL 33510, ☎ 813-684-7882, www.frvta.org, can help you locate certified campgrounds, resorts, and dealers.*

Where To Eat

■ Cuisine



Seafood is the pride of West Coast Florida cuisine. Influenced by Deep South, Cajun, Caribbean, Latin, Midwestern, Pacific Rim, Mediterranean, and continental styles, restaurants dish up infinite variety and creativity.

In the fish houses you'll find classic Florida cuisine – raw oysters, steamed clams, fried grouper and shrimp, broiled snapper, and chilled stone crab claws. At the other end of the scale, fine restaurants create masterpieces in the art of cultural mix-and-match. Most *au courant* are fusion styles that stew together global foodways, mixing local fresh produce with exotic preparations. Modern bistros and steakhouses keep on the cutting-edge of dining trends, particularly in Naples, Sarasota, and Tampa. Ethnic eateries from northern Italian to East Indian demonstrate the cultural influences that make up the West Coast's melting pot.

■ Dining Choices

The dining sections give a quick overview of that area's restaurant scene, then short descriptions of a few favorites in different categories. Since this is an adventure guide, my preferences reflect adventures in dining, whether that translates into exciting cuisine or a location near the water or the action. In each, I give a price range for the meals served, rounding off prices to the nearest dollar. I leave out dishes that stray too far up or down from the average. Nightly specials and that one expensive surf-and-turf platter, for instance, do not figure into the range.

Nightlife



West Coast Florida pales in comparison to its East Coast counterparts when it comes to culture and nightlife. Don't despair, however, if you're an adventurer who likes to use the night-time hours to test the good-time waters. If nightlife is a priority, plan your destination along the coast's metropolitan sections – in **Tampa**, **St. Petersburg** and vicinity, and **Sarasota**. These, along with **Fort Myers Beach** and **Naples**, are the hot spots, and you'll find plenty of after-dark action.

Sarasota's and Naples brand of nightlife appeals to a high-brow crowd as well as pub-crawlers. Sarasota is known for its theater; Naples for its clubs. Tampa and St. Petersburg have something for everyone. Fort Myers Beach is strictly for bar-hopping, and there's plenty of that.

Tourist Information



For general travel information about Florida, contact **Visit Florida**, 661 E. Jefferson St., Ste. 300, Tallahassee, FL 32301, www.flausa.com, ☎ 888-7FLA-USA. Ask for the official *Florida Vacation Guide*.

Recommended Reading

■ Environment

Campbell, George R. *The Nature of Things on Sanibel*. Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1978. 174 pp, illustrations, index.

Douglas, Marjory Stoneman. *The Everglades: River of Grass*. St. Simons, GA: Mockingbird Books, 1947. 308 pp.

■ Watersports

Fuery, Captain Mike. *South Florida Bay and Coastal Fishing*. Captiva: Sanibel Sandollar Publications, 1987.

Hidden Florida, 6th Edition. Berkeley: Ulysses Press, 1999. 544 pp, maps, index.

Lenfestey, Tom. *A Gunkholer's Cruising Guide To Florida's West Coast*, St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing, 1991. 156 pp, nautical charts, illustrations, index.

O'Keefe, Timothy M., and Larry Larsen. *Fish & Dive Florida and The Keys*, Larsen's Outdoor Publishing, 1992. 191 pp, photos, index.

Trupp, Phil. *Diver's Almanac: Guide to Florida & the Keys*. Triton Publishing, Inc., 1991. 236 pp, color maps and photos.

Walton, Chelle Koster. *Florida Island Hopping: The West Coast*. Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1995. 324 pp, photos, index.

Young, Claiborne S. *Cruising Guide to Western Florida*, Pelican Publishing, 1992.

■ Land Sports

Oswald, Tom. *Bicycling in Florida*. Sarasota: Pineapple Press. 144 pp, black-and-white photos, maps.

■ Where To Stay & Eat

Selby, Nick, and Corinna Selby. *Florida, 2nd Edition*. Lonely Planet Publications, 2000. 640 pp, color photos, maps, index.

Walton, Chelle Koster. *The Sarasota, Sanibel Island & Naples Book*. Berkshire House Publishers, 1998. 305 pp, black-and-white photos, maps, index.

■ History

Beater, Jack. *Pirates & Buried Treasure*. St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing, 1959. 118 pp, illustrations.

Bickel, Karl A. *The Mangrove Coast: The Story of the West Coast of Florida*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1942. 332 pp, photos, index.

Briggs, Mildred. *Pioneers of Bonita Springs (Facts and Folklore)*. Florida, 1976. 100 pp, photos.

Board, Prudy Taylor, and Esther B. Colcord. *Historic Fort Myers*. Virginia Beach: The Donning Publishers, 1992. 96 pp, photos, index.

Brown, Loren B. "Totch." *Totch: A Life in the Everglades*. University Press of Florida, 1993. 269 pp, photos.

Captiva Civic Association. *True Tales of Old Captiva*. 1984. 353 pp, photos.

Dormer, Elinore M. *The Sea Shell Islands: A History of Sanibel and Captiva*. Tallahassee: Rose Printing Co., 1987. 273 pp, illustrations, index.

Jordan, Elaine Blohm. *Pine Island, the Forgotten Island*. Pine Island: 1982. 186 pp, photos.

Gonzalez, Thomas A. *The Caloosahatchee: History of the Caloosahatchee River and the City of Fort Myers Florida*. Fort Myers Beach: Island Press Publishers, 1932. 134 pp.

Grismer, Karl H. *The Story of Fort Myers*. Fort Myers Beach: Island Press Publishers, 1982. 348 pp, photos, index.

Grismer, Karl H. *The Story of Sarasota*. Tampa: The Florida Grower Press, 1946. 376 pp, photos, index.

Jahoda, Gloria. *River of the Golden Ibis*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973. 408 pp, illustrations.

Marth, Del. *Yesterday's Sarasota*. Miami: E.A. Seemann Publishing, Inc., 1973. 160 pp, photos.

Matthews, Janet Snyder. *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay*. Sarasota: Coastal Press, 1983.

Matthews, Janet Snyder. *Journey to Centennial Sarasota*. Sarasota: Pine Level Press, 1989. 224 pp, photos, index.

Matthews, Janet Snyder. *Journey to Horse and Chaise*. Sarasota: Pine Level Press, 1989. 394 pp, photos, index.

Newton, James. *Uncommon Friends*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987. 368 pp.

Pacheco, Ferdie. *Ybor City Chronicles*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994. 301 pp, illustrated.

Peeples, Vernon. *Punta Gorda and the Charlotte Harbor Area*. Norfolk: The Donning Co., 1986. 208 pp, photos, index.

Pizzo, Anthony P. *Tampa Town 1824-1886*. Miami: Hurricane House, 1968. 89 pp, illustrations.

Schell, Rolfe F. *De Soto Didn't Land at Tampa*. Fort Myers: Island Press, 1966. 96 pp, illustrations.

Schell, Rolfe F. *History of Fort Myers Beach*. Fort Myers Beach: Island Press, 1980. 96 pp, photos, index.

Tebeau, Charlton W. *Florida's Last Frontier: The History of Collier County*. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1966. 278 pp, photos, index.

Weeks, David C. *Ringling: The Florida Years, 1911-1936*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993. 350 pp, photos, annotated, index.

Zeiss, Betsy. *The Other Side of the River: Historical Cape Coral*. Cape Coral, 1986. 206 pp, photos, index.

■ Fiction/Literature

Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. *Gift from the Sea*. New York: Pantheon, 1955, 142 pp, illustrations.

MacDonald, John D. *The Empty Copper Sea*. New York: Fawcett Gold Medal Books, 1978, 245 pp.

Matthiessen, Peter. *Killing Mister Watson*. New York: Random House, 1990, 372 pages.

White, Randy. *Captiva*. New York: Berkley Publishing Company, 1996. 319 pp.

White, Randy. *Heat Islands*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. 307 pp.

White, Randy. *Sanibel Flats*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. 307 pp.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

The Nature Coast

Overview

Florida is fond of assigning pet names to different parcels of its shoreline. This is more true on the East Coast, where you find the Gold Coast, the Treasure Coast, the Space Coast and so on.

Lacking an identity for many years, as the coastal regions to its south stole the tourism spotlight, the land north soon coined Nature Coast for its personality handle. An apt handle it is at that. Because the coastline north of Tarpon Springs lacks the barrier islands and beaches of its southern neighbors, tourism has left it more naturally intact. Instead of sand aprons, marshes line the shores of the Nature Coast, where wild rivers gush into the Gulf of Mexico.

While this spells bad news for beach-loving tourists, it means top conditions for wildlife. Most noted for its wintering manatee herd (there's even an AM radio station you can tune into for the latest manatee information), the Nature Coast is also home to hundreds of bird species, fish that most anglers only dream about, and an environment made for kayaking, hiking, biking, and enjoying nature.

Ironically, the largely undiscovered Nature Coast holds some of Florida's oldest tourist attractions, built long before travelers dared south, back when railroads passed through. These remain within a framework of hometown neighborliness. At one, you can watch mermaids swim in an underwater springs theater. At another you'll find a 30-foot-high ancient Amerindian mound.

The Nature Coast is definitely not for the amusement park crowd (although it does boast one water park). It's a hideaway spot made for those who prefer back yards over curbside appeal. Tourists who come these days are looking for nature, a preserved way of life, and the region's affordability. High tourist season for this region is set by the visiting manatees, who come to winter September through April. (They are most concentrated in warm pockets of water created by natural springs and power

IN THIS CHAPTER
■ Crystal River
■ Inverness
■ Homosassa
■ Withlacoochee State Forest
■ Brooksville
■ Weeki Wachee

company run-off January-March.) Although some predict that urban sprawl from Tampa and Orlando is bound to overtake this preserved nugget of coastline, much of the Nature Coast will always remain wildlife-possessed, thanks to government foresight: one-third of Hernando County and 40% of Citrus County constitute protected land.

This chapter covers **Hernando** and **Citrus** counties entirely, including the adventurer's wild haven of Withlacoochee State Forest, and the towns of Crystal River, Inverness, Homosassa, Brooksville, and Weeki Wachee.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Hernando County was named after that rascal explorer who left his fingerprints all over the West Coast of Florida – Hernando de Soto. His suspected route through this neighborhood is marked along existing highways.

One needn't guess too long to figure out how **Citrus County** was named. Citrus was once the county's mainstay, until Mother Nature put the freeze on the industry in the winter of 1894-95. Now there's little citrus in Citrus County. It's been suggested that Manatee County (see the *Bradenton/Sarasota* chapter), which has fewer manatees than citrus fields, and Citrus County, which is thick with manatees, should swap names.

Transportation

■ Airports



Two major Florida airports lie within an hour’s drive of the Nature Coast. **Tampa International Airport (TPA)**, ☎ 800-767-8882 or 813-870-8700, www.tampaairport.com, lies to the south. **Orlando International Airport (MCO)**, ☎ 800-626-6244 or 407-825-3896, <http://fcv.state.fl.us/goaa>, is also convenient to the Nature Coast. The major domestic and international airlines that service each facility are listed in the chart below.

DOMESTIC & INT’L AIRLINES SERVING TAMPA INT’L AIRPORT (TPA) & ORLANDO INT’L AIRPORT (MCO)	TPA	MCO
American Airlines ☎ 800-433-7300	✓	✓
Continental ☎ 800-525-0280	✓	✓
Delta Air Lines ☎ 800-221-1212	✓	✓
Northwest ☎ 800-225-2525	✓	
Southwest ☎ 800-435-9792	✓	✓
TWA ☎ 800-221-2000	✓	✓
United ☎ 800-241-6522	✓	✓
US Airways ☎ 800-428-4322	✓	✓
Air Aruba ☎ 800-882-7822	✓	
Air Canada ☎ 800-776-3000	✓	✓
Air Jamaica ☎ 800-523-5585		✓
Bahamasair ☎ 800-222-4262		✓
British Airways ☎ 800-247-9297	✓	
Cayman Airways ☎ 800-422-9626	✓	
Kiwi International ☎ 800-538-5494		✓
Martinair Holland ☎ 800-366-4655	✓	✓

The Nature Coast

■ Train Service

Amtrak, ☎ 800-872-7245, offers passenger train service into Tampa and Orlando.

■ Rental Cars

Rental cars are available at the airports, including **Alamo**, ☎ 800-327-9633 or 407-857-8200 (Orlando), **Avis**, ☎ 800-331-1212, 813-396-3500 (Tampa) or 407-328-6000 (Orlando), **Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3131 or 407-589-8400 (Orlando), and **Budget**, ☎ 800-527-0700 or 813-877-6051 (Tampa), 407-850-6700 (Orlando). **Enterprise**, ☎ 800-736-8222, rents cars from locations in Crystal River, 622 NE First Terrace, ☎ 352-563-5511, and Inverness, 3730 E. Gulf to Lake Hwy., ☎ 352-637-6632.

■ Getting Around

Highway 19 (known as Commercial Way in Hernando County and Suncoast Blvd. in Citrus County) is the thread that pulls the Nature Coast together and connects it to northern Pinellas County (see Chapter IV). **Highway 41** (also called Florida Ave. and Broad Ave. in parts) heads out of Tampa (Chapter V) and through the center of the two counties at Brooksville and Inverness. **I-75** swings clear of Hernando and Citrus counties. To cross from the interstate to Hwy. 19, take northernmost Exit 65 (Rte. 44 through Inverness), Exit 64 to the Jumper Creek Tract of the Withlacoochee State Forest, Exit 62 to Withlacoochee's Croom Tract, Exit 61 (Hwy. 98 through Brooksville – a.k.a. Ponce de Leon Blvd.), or Exit 60 (Rte. 52) to the south of Hernando County.

From Orlando, **Florida's Turnpike** delivers you right to I-75, just miles south of Exit 65 to Inverness.

Information



For information on Hernando County, contact the **Hernando County Tourist Development Council**, 16110 Aviation Loop Dr., Brooksville, ☎ 800-601-4580 or 352-754-4405, www.co.hernando.fl.us/tourdev. Hours are 8-5, Monday-Friday.

The **Citrus County Tourist Development Council** disseminates information at 801 SW Highway 19, Crystal River, ☎ 800-587-6667 or 352-527-5239, www.visitcitrus.com.

Festivals & Events

JANUARY - The **Brooksville Raid Festival**, ☎ 352-799-0129, reenacts a Civil War battle during two days of festivities.

FEBRUARY - The **Hernando County Fair**, ☎ 352-796-4552, occurs in February

MARCH - The **Florida Manatee Festival**, ☎ 352-795-3149, takes place in Crystal River, featuring fine arts and entertainment. The **Weeki Wachee Swamp Festival**, ☎ 352-596-4743, features local culture and traditional rural craftsmanship in a two-day celebration.

JUNE - For adventurers, the **Homosassa River Raft Race**, ☎ 352-795-9595, featuring homemade vessels, takes place each year.

AUGUST - The **Ramblin' River Raft Race**, ☎ 352-795-9595, is held in Crystal River.

OCTOBER - The big event this month is the **Hernando County Cattleman's Rodeo**, ☎ 352-796-2290, a seven-day extravaganza. A **Rails to Trails Bike Ride**, ☎ 352-726-2251, takes place on Withlacoochee State Trail, departing from Inverness.

NOVEMBER - Inverness hosts the **Citrus Stampede Rodeo**, ☎ 352-726-2141.

BUDGET TIPS

If you're on a budget and looking for adventure on Florida's West Coast, the Nature Coast is the place to go. Still undiscovered, it offers the region's greatest values in lodging, dining, and water-sports.

- There's no charge to get a charge out of **Power Place**, a free power plant attraction in Crystal River.
 - The **Coastal Heritage Museum** in Crystal Rivers asks only a donation for admission.
 - Roam **Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins State Historic Site** at no charge. Have a picnic beneath the old oaks while you're there.
 - **Fort Cooper State Park** and its sandy beach, near Inverness, is a bargain at \$2 for a car load of up to eight folks.
 - **Citrus Attraction** outside of Brooksville charges only \$1.50 each.
-

Crystal River

To divers and nature-lovers, Crystal River is synonymous with the West Indian manatee. The **Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge** protects the waterway's wintering herd, the largest in the US. During peak manatee season, November 15 through March, certain areas of the refuge's waterways are closed to boat traffic. In the remainder of the manatee management area, slow and idle speeds are enforced September 1 through April.

As the hub of Citrus County's coastal towns, Crystal River is the largest city on Highway 91 north of the Port Richey area in Pasco County (see the *St. Petersburg/Clearwater* chapter), yet it retains a certain hometown charm despite its strip of highway build-up.

Getting Here



Highway 19 is the major thoroughfare through Crystal River. Rte. 44 (Gulf to Lake Highway) connects it to Inverness in the east. Downtown, **Citrus Avenue** is the heart of Crystal River's historic district.

Information



For more information, contact **Crystal River Chamber of Commerce**, 28 NW Hwy. 19, Crystal River, 34428, ☎ 352-795-3149. Hours are 8:30-4:30, Monday-Friday.

WEEKEND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

- **FRIDAY:** Go **snorkeling** or **diving** in Crystal River in the morning. Have lunch at **Café on the Avenue** and tour **Crystal River's historic district** in the afternoon. Visit **Crystal River State Archaeological Site**. Have dinner at **Oysters**. Spend the night in Crystal River.
 - **SATURDAY:** Drive to Homosassa for a half-day **kayak tour** of the river. Have lunch at **KC Crump**. Drive to Inverness and hike or bike the **Withlacoochee State Trail**. Have dinner at **Fox & Hound Pub**. Spend the night in Inverness.
 - **SUNDAY:** Drive through Floral City to **Fort Cooper State Park**. Relax and have a **picnic** on the beach. Visit **Weeki Wachee Springs** in the afternoon. Have dinner at **Peck's Old Port Cove** in Ozello. Watch the sunset from **Hernando Beach Park** or **Bayport Park**. Spend the night in the Weeki Wachee area.
-

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Archaeologists believe that Crystal River and environs served as an important center of Amerindian culture. At **Crystal River State Archaeological Site**, on the north end of town off Hwy. 19 at 3400 N. Museum Point, ☎ 352-795-3817, burial and midden mounds and a museum provide evidence of a series of native cultures dating back to 500 BC. The tallest of six mounds rises 30 feet in the air, overlooking Crystal River. An observation deck is provided visitors who climb the steps to the top of the mound.

Hometown and small, **Coastal Heritage Museum**, 532 Citrus Ave., ☎ 352-795-1755, provides an insightful tour into local history, spiced with tidbits of gossip and legend. Get to know the characters who made this town grow through fishing, turpentine, pencil-making, and Spanish moss-processing eras. It occupies the old city hall, which has an Alamo-style appearance. The museum is open Tuesday-Friday, 11-3. Admission is by donation.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Spanish moss is actually not a moss at all, but an epiphyte related to the orchid and pineapple, drapes its curly tendrils over oaks and other trees. Back when county residents harvested the spongy matter, Henry Ford and others were using it to stuff car seats and furniture. The plant feeds off nutrients in the air and causes no direct damage to its host tree.*

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

One of the best beaches of the Nature Coast lies off the beaten path. **Fort Island Gulf Beach**, 16000 W. Fort Island Trail, ☎ 352-795-1478, is a well-maintained park with volleyball, a boat launch, picnic tables, and sandy beach that's a bit on the muddy side at low tide. In summer, lifeguards supervise.

Fort Island Trail Park, 12073 W. Fort Island Trail, nearby, has a T-dock, boat launch, and picnic ground.

Family Fun

Learn about energy through the propaganda of a local electric company at **Power Place**, on Power Line Rd., ☎ 352-563-4490. Spiffy, high-tech displays introduce kids and adults to the principals, human characters, and operations behind generating light and other forms of power. Admission is free during open-to-the-public hours, Monday-Friday, 9:30-4.

Adventures

■ On Water



Citrus County boasts 52 miles of Gulf shoreline, 106 miles of river, and 19,111 acres of lakes. It's an adventurer's paradise, unspoiled still by wheelers, dealers, and big-time developers.

Fishing

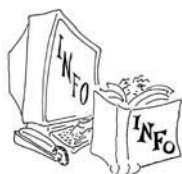
Sports Afield once named the area around Crystal River as one of the “12 Best Fishing Spots in North America.” With its variety of salt and fresh water, the region offers a wealth of species.

Fish into the Gulf from the pier at **Fort Island Trail Park** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), 12073 W. Fort Island Trail.

For live or frozen bait and all your fishing gear needs, stop at **Ed's Tackle Shop** at Airport Plaza on S. Hwy. 19, ☎ 352-795-4179. It's open daily.

Apollo Deep Sea Fishing, 1340 NW 20th Ave., ☎ 352-795-3757 is a party boat that loads up all day excursions at a cost of \$40 per person.

For excursions closer to shore, **Gulf Coast Charters**, 720 NE Hwy. 19, ☎ 352-795-2789, will take up to four people out in a boat for eight hours. Cost for one to two fishermen is \$250, \$275 for three, \$300 for four.



For a complete list of fishing guides, charters, and guidelines, contact the Citrus County Tourist Development Council (see Information, above) for its Fishing Citrus County brochure.

Boat Ramps

For access to the Gulf, you can put in at **Fort Island Gulf Beach**, 16000 W. Fort Island Trail, **Fort Island Trail Park**, 12073 W. Fort Island Trail, or **Pete's Pier**, SW First Place.

Boat Charters & Tours

Dayjammer Cruises, 3940 N. Apalachee Point, ☎ 352-795-0553, conducts one-hour (\$25 per person) and two hour (\$35 per person) tours of local rivers and bay on a daily basis, maximum of 10 to a boat. Specialty tours also available.

Snorkeling & Diving

Crystal River is a scuba hot spot. Not only does it draw the tanked crowd with its clear spring waters and amiable manatee population, but also

with its caves and variety. Tour boat operators and dive instructors and charters put you into the water with ease.



Use snorkel gear when diving with manatees. Scuba gear bubbles can frighten them. See the information on page 9 for more information on protecting these loveable creatures.

Go snorkeling or diving with **American Pro Diving Center**, 821 SE Hwy. 19, <http://gminet.com/ampro>, ☎ 800-291-DIVE or 352-563-0041. Guided tours are offered in the Crystal, Homosassa, or Rainbow rivers. A snorkel trip on the Crystal River costs \$27.50, plus equipment. A snorkel-and-dive excursion costs \$37.50, and dive-only tours range from \$28 to \$50. Two- to four-day vacation packages and instruction are available – including a special Manatee Awareness Course.

Crystal River Manatee Dive & Tour, 267 NW Third St, ☎ 352-795-1333, takes out snorkel-manatee tours twice each morning during manatee season for 2-2½ hours. Cost per person is \$15 plus equipment (\$7 for mask, snorkel, and fins; \$10 for wetsuit). Afternoon diving trips explore the caverns and springs on Crystal River, also for \$15 plus equipment.

■ On Wheels



The new **Fort Island Bicycle Trail** runs for 18 miles adjacent to Fort Island Trail, ending at Fort Island Beach. Situated near the trail, **Suncoast Bicycles Plus**, 42 NE First Terrace, ☎ 800-296-1010 or 352-795-0018, www.suncoastbikes.com, rents high-quality bikes at \$7.50 for the first hour, \$2.50 per each additional hour, and \$15 a day. Discounts apply to groups of three or more. Inline skates are also available, at \$10 for the first hour plus \$2.50 an hour or \$20 a day.

■ In The Air



Crystal Aero Group at the Crystal River Airport on Hwy. 19, 718 N. Lindbergh Dr., ☎ 352-795-6868, supplies bird's-eye views of the area's divinely patterned mesh of water and land. Glider rides cost \$25 per person. Air/photo tours are \$88 an hour with a half-hour minimum. Shorter sightseeing tours of about 20 minutes duration cost \$40 each. Flight instructions and charters are also available.

Shopping



Downtown Crystal River has arranged itself into a cozy little shopping district with historic Cracker charm. Within the **Heritage Village**, you can shop for antiques and gifts. **Manatee Toy Company**, ☎ 352-563-1313, is popular for its plentiful supply of playthings and gifts that represent Crystal River's town icon. It's open Monday-Saturday.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Hotels



Divers like the **Best Western Crystal River**, 614 NW Hwy. 19, ☎ 800-435-4409 or 352-795-3171, www.seawake.com, for its convenience to the river and its manatees. The on-site dive shop is full-service, plus the resort offers manatee tours, boat and canoe rentals, a ramp, and docking. There's also a pool and tiki bar. Rooms and efficiencies are available. \$\$

Newly remodeled and high end in budget-priced Crystal River, **Plantation Inn**, 9301 W. Fort Island Trail just off Hwy. 19, ☎ 800-632-6262 or 352-795-4211, appeals to the golf crowd with 27 holes and a golf school. Accommodations ensconced in colonial revival architecture include rooms, junior suites, and two-story villas. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Camping

East of Crystal River on N. Citrus Ave., **Quail Roost RV Campground**, ☎ 352-563-0404, has tent and RV sites, as well as recreational facilities. RV sites cost \$20-\$22.

Camp among age-old oak trees with easy access to fishing and boating at **Lake Rousseau Campground**, N. Coveview Terrace off Rte. 488, six miles north of Crystal River, ☎ 352-795-6336. RV guests pay \$20 per night

and have access to a pool, shuffleboard, billiards, general store and bait shop.

Where To Eat



In Heritage Village, **Café on the Avenue**, 631 N. Citrus Ave., ☎ 352-795-3656, presents a French provincial setting and casual fare. It's open daily for breakfast and lunch, with extended evening hours on the weekends. Entrée salads and sandwiches range from \$5 to \$8.



To get your fill of home-cooked, old-Florida-style eating, go to **Oysters** on Hwy. 19 northwest of Rte. 44, ☎ 352-795-2633, where breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served daily. Breakfast prices range from \$2 to \$6. Lunch specials come with choice of good-old Southern sides for as low as \$5. At dinner, offerings such as chicken & dumplings, mullet, and steak au poivre range from \$6 to \$15.

Inverness

The rolling hills and lakeside pose of a town named Tompkinsville reminded settlers of Inverness, Scotland, and so it was named in 1889. Lined with old oaks waving lacy Spanish moss hankies, Lake Tsala Apopka, Inverness's sprawling waters, caused its settlement and continues to contribute to its attraction. In its "Historical Sites of Inverness" brochure, the town lists 25 sites dating back to the turn of the century. Many of the commercial buildings are found in the downtown streets that edge Inverness's lovely central park at Courthouse Square.

Getting Here



Inverness lies at the crossroads of **Highway 41** (Florida Ave.) and **Rte. 44** (a.k.a. Gulf to Lake Highway). Take Exit 65 from I-75 and head west on Rte. 44.

Information



Contact the **Citrus County Chamber of Commerce**, 208 W. Main St, Inverness 34450, ☎ 352-726-2801. Office is open Monday-Friday, 8:30-4:30.

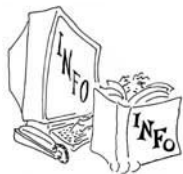
Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Named for a Seminole War camp built in 1836, **Fort Cooper State Park**, 3100 S. Old Floral City Rd., ☎ 352-726-0315, is today headquarters for recreation on beautiful Lake Holathlikaha. The lake's sandy beach invites swimmers, plus nature trails, canoeing, paddleboating, volleyball, and picnicking offer recreation within the park's 710 acres. Wildlife inhabitants include deer, fox, rabbits, owls, and cardinals. In March, the park stages Seminole War re-enactments. Admission to the park is \$2 per vehicle (up to eight passengers). It's open daily, 8-sunset.

On the scenic shores of the Lake Tsala Apopka chain, **Floral City** first bloomed in 1883. By the late 1890s, population had grown to more than 10,000, fueled by rock phosphate mining. Today listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Floral City is a small, quiet wayside town that makes for a pleasant return to yesteryear, just seven miles south of Inverness on Hwy. 41. Along E. Orange Ave. lines up a slew of historic buildings in a quaint country farm town setting.



To learn more about Floral City's surviving past, pick up a copy of Floral City: A Guide to Historic Architecture from the local chamber of commerce.

The **Ted Williams Museum**, 2455 N. Citrus Hills Blvd. in Hernando, north of Inverness on Hwy. 41, ☎ 352-527-6566, www.tedwilliams.com, is as much about the game of baseball as it is about its namesake. The pleasant, modern museum is set up like an outfield, with different exhibits at each base. As you circle the bases, you learn about the career and lifetime of hard-hitting Ted Williams, who, at 80-something, lives nearby. Within the museum, the Hitters Hall of Fame holds memorabilia from the careers of 34 of the sports' mightiest. Hours are Tuesday-Sunday, 10-4. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$1 for children.

Adventures

■ On Water



The extensive **Lake Tsala Apopka** chain provides ample opportunity to cast for freshwater fish. For a complete list of fishing guides, charters, and guidelines, contact the Citrus County Tour-

ist Development Council (see *Information*, page ##) for its *Fishing Citrus County* brochure.

■ On Foot



Five miles of self-guided nature trails traverse **Fort Cooper State Park**, 3100 S. Old Floral City Rd., ☎ 352-726-0315 (see *Sights & Attractions*, above). Strollers and hikers also take to the **Withlacoochee State Trail** (see below).

■ On Wheels



Withlacoochee State Trail, ☎ 352-726-2251, comes straight through town, where it provides a lovely, well-maintained thoroughfare for hikers, bikers, and 'bladers. It runs right through Inverness and Floral City.

To ride the trail, rent from **Suncoast Bicycles Plus**, located right at the trailhead, 322 N. Pine St., ☎ 800-296-1010 or 352-637-5788, www.suncoastbikes.com. Rentals cost \$7.50 for the first hour, \$2.50 per each additional hour, and \$15 a day. Discounts apply to groups of three or more. Inline skates are available at \$10 for the first hour plus \$2.50 an hour or \$20 a day.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Inverness accommodations tend toward the very individual and strikingly unusual.

Hotels & Resorts



The largest presence, **The Crown Hotel**, 109 N. Seminole Ave., ☎ 352-344-5555, is the focus of downtown Inverness and has been for nearly a hundred years. It evolved from a circa 1905 general store to a hostelry with a definite British air. The lobby displays facsimiles of the Crown Jewels – thus its name – along with royal portraits and antique swords. Up the sweeping staircase two floors hold 34 rooms, on the small side but newly and nicely decorated. The hotel's pub (see *Where To Eat*, below) is a popular town's gathering place, and the property also holds a small, open pool. Continental breakfast is provided. \$-\$\$



For the best view for your buck, rent a cabin at **Moonrise Resort**, at 8801 E. Moonrise Ln., off Hwy. 41 on Old Floral City Rd., ☎ 800-665-6701 or 352-726-2553. Also an RV park, it has 10 comfortable, homey cabins (with handmade quilts on the beds) right on Lake Tsala Apopka in a beautiful, sporty setting. Canoe and boat rentals are available on property. \$-\$\$

Inns/Bed & Breakfasts



In Inverness's land of lakes, **The Lake House Bed & Breakfast**, 8604 E. Gospel Island Rd., lakehouse@hitter.net, ☎ 352-344-3586, takes a lovely, plantation-like waterside stance. Five guest rooms lie off the house's magnificent, high-ceilinged great room. Each room has its own homey personality and private bath. The B&B is owned by an amiable British couple whose parents run The Crown Hotel.

Magnolia Glen, 7701 E. Allen Dr., ☎ 800-881-4366 or 800-881-4366, www.magnoliaglen.com, has some quirks, including its slightly eccentric innkeeper, Bonnie Kuntz, a former sailing champion who has a passion for Admiral Nelson. Situated on the lakefront, the English Tudor home offers use of canoes, along with gourmet breakfast. Its three rooms exude personality. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Camping

RV and primitive camp sites comprise **Shawnee Trail Campground**, Boy Scout Rd., ☎ 352-344-3372. You can rent canoes for use on the Withlacoochee River. Sites cost about \$15.

Where To Eat



Visitors and locals alike gather at **Fox & Hound Pub** at The Crown Hotel, 109 N. Seminole Ave., ☎ 352-344-5555, where the atmosphere is purely British, and the food stretches beyond pub-style. Lunch finds the red brick and brass setting milling and usually filled to capacity. The pub serves classic favorites – cottage pie, fish 'n chips, and the likes – along with quiche of the day, blue cheese burger, vegetable pasta, and other café dishes ranging from \$5.25 to \$6.25. At dinner, pan-fried grouper, shrimp scampi, raspberry chicken, steaks, and more provide variety in the \$13-\$15 range.

Ironically, they claim to make the “world's best hamburger” at **Fisherman's Restaurant**, outside of Inverness at 12311 E. Gulf to Lake Hwy. (Rte. 44), ☎ 352-637-5888. They also serve seafood, including all-you-can-eat catfish for \$11, and grouper, shrimp, 'gator, and lobster. The unpretentious country-style but popular spot also specializes in barbecue. The

world's best hamburger costs only \$1.90. Other sandwiches and entrées range from \$2 to \$20. It's open for lunch and dinner, Tuesday-Sunday.

Homosassa Area

Homosassa Springs sprung up around its wildlife park attraction on Highway 19 and is what most people zooming through identify as Homosassa. But the town's roots reach back to frontier days, sugar plantations, and Old Homosassa, which lies west of 19 on Rte. 490. It and Ozello, another out-of-the-way old community on Homosassa backroads, grew up on the waterfront, where pioneers made their living and old fish-camp-style lodging and restaurants survive as souvenirs of an earlier, simpler era. On the other hand, Homosassa Springs shapes up as a modern suburb with Burger King, Ramada Inn, and all the typical chain trademarks of shapeless development.

Getting Here



Hwy. 41 is the main thoroughfare through Homosassa Springs. To get to Old Homosassa, turn west on Rte. 490. Rte. 494 takes you to Ozello.

Information



The **Homosassa Springs Area Chamber of Commerce** is located at 3495 S. Suncoast Blvd., Homosassa Springs 34448 (mailing address: PO Box 709, Homosassa Springs 34447). It's open 9-4, Monday-Friday.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Roam the past and enjoy a picnic at the oak-shaded grounds of **Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins State Historic Site**, W. Yulee Dr. in Old Homosassa, ☎ 352-795-3817. A paved path winds around ancient rock ruins and machinery, with signs that explain the history of sugar processing and the site – the erstwhile plantation of Florida's first US Senator, David Yulee. Admission is free.

Across the street from the Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins is the **Olde Mill House Gallery & Printing Museum**, 10466 W. Yulee Dr. (Hwy. 490), ☎ 888-248-6672 or 352-628-1081, www.chronicle-online.com/printmuseum.htm. It may seem like an odd, narrow-niched type attraction in a town like Old Homosassa, but don't miss an opportunity to meet Jim Anderson, whose tours are lively, entertaining, and hands-on. There's a café on-site. Jim opens his doors Thursday-Saturday, 10-2, for walk-in visitors. Call ahead for tours, available Monday-Saturday. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$1 for visitors ages 12-20.

Natural Areas

South of Homosassa, including a portion of the Homosassa River, **Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge**, ☎ 352-563-2088, covers more than 31,000 acres of mangrove islands, estuaries, saltwater marshland, and hardwood swamp. The refuge is accessible only by boat and has become a popular canoe and kayak destination with a newly established canoe trail. Besides the Homosassa, the Chassahowitzka River – both listed among Florida's designated Outstanding Waters – empties into the refuge's bays. More concerned with wildlife than human life, Chassahowitzka is refuge to white-tailed deer, black bear, bald eagles, manatees, woodstorks, green sea turtles, indigo snakes, and other rare and endangered creatures. A 7,600-acre sanctuary within the refuge closes to boat traffic October 15-February 15. Airboat use within the refuge is by permit only in designated areas. April-August posted speed restrictions protect wintering manatees.



The town's greatest attraction, **Homosassa Springs State Wildlife Park**, 4150 S. Suncoast Blvd., off Highway 19, ☎ 352-628-5343, www.citrusdirectory.com/hsswp, began as private enterprise some 50 years ago. In recent times, the state has taken over and guided it from honky-tonk into a modern, ecologically correct stature. Its centerpiece has always been its manatee population, which is kept in a semi-captive state in spring waters. Visitors can view and hear all nine via an underwater floating observatory or during three daily presentations that are the best I've seen – liberally sprinkled with facts, lore, and humor. (The Manatee Education Center here is run in conjunction with Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge.) Daily educational programs demonstrate also the habits of alligators, crocodiles, and snakes. In the 168-acre park's virgin Florida forest, you'll see local fauna both caged and roaming free: turtles, bobcats, black bears, deer, ospreys, and other birds. A 20-minute boat ride tours visitors around the mix of saltwater and freshwater habitat. The park is open 9-5:30, daily (ticket sales close at 4). If you arrive before 1, you can see all the programs. Admission is \$7.95 plus tax for visitors ages 13 and older, \$4.95 for children ages three-12.

Adventures

■ On Water

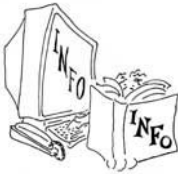
Fishing



River Safaris & Gulf Charters at Riverside Inn, 5297 S. Cherokee Way, ☎ 800-758-FISH or 352-628-5222, can take you flats and river or deepwater fishing for redfish, tarpon, snapper, and other prized catches. Half-day near-shore excursions start at \$200 for up to two people, \$250 for a full day. Eight-hour deepwater trips for up to four people cost \$400.

Captain Z Fishing Guide, 9290 S. Evans Ave., ☎ 352-726-8141, takes light-tackle charters in the Gulf and rivers. He charges \$200-\$300 for a half-day, depending upon number of people; \$250-\$350 for full day.

You can fish into the Gulf from the pier in Ozello on John Brown Rd.



*For a complete list of fishing guides, charters, and guidelines, contact the **Citrus County Tourist Development Council** (see Information, page 32) for its Fishing Citrus County brochure or call the **Homosassa Guide Association** at ☎ 352-628-1162.*

Boat Ramps

To launch into the Chassahowitzka River to the Gulf, you'll find ramps at **Chassahowitzka River Campground**, 8600 W. Miss Maggie Dr. The ramps at **Mason Creek**, 6891 S. Mason Creek Rd., and **Mac Rae's**, 5290 S. Cherokee Way, provide access to the Homosassa River.

Ozello Community Park, 410 N. Pirate Point, has launching into the Gulf.

Boat Rentals

Pontoon and Jon boats are for rent at **River Safaris & Gulf Charters** at Riverside Inn, 5297 S. Cherokee Way, ☎ 800-758-FISH or 352-628-5222. A Jon boat holds four people and costs \$35 for a half-day, \$45 for a full day. Pontoons vary in capacity from five to 16; in cost from \$65-\$150 half-day, \$100-\$200 full day. Tax and fuel are extra.

Marina Bay Inn, 10386 Halls River Rd., ☎ 352-628-2551, www.marina-bayinn.com, rents a small boat with motor for \$35 a half-day, \$45 a day. Pontoon rentals are \$25 an hour, \$90 a half-day, \$130 a day.

Boat Charters & Tours

River Safaris & Gulf Charters at Riverside Inn, 5297 S. Cherokee Way, ☎ 800-758-FISH or 352-628-5222, conducts a variety of tours lasting one to two hours. Choose from a Springs tour, backwater tour, combination tour, lunch tour, sunset cruise, manatee tour or airboat ride (two person minimum). Prices are \$15-\$22 per person.

Swim and snorkel with the manatees (but no touching or pursuing unless they approach you first!) with **Marina Bay Inn**, 10386 Halls River Rd., ☎ 352-628-2551, www.marinabayinn.com, for \$25 per person. River tours costs \$12 each.

Paddling

Chassahowitza National Wildlife Refuge, ☎ 352-563-2088, is an oarsman's dream-come-true. The exploring range is endless, given the number of rivers that flow into Gulf waters here, and the maze of mangroves and estuaries near shore. A variety of tours focus on manatee-watching, snorkeling, picnics on a private island, history lessons, and stargazing.



Excursions with **Homosassa Kayak & Expedition Company** at Riverside Inn, 5297 S. Cherokee Way, ☎ 352-628-3183, include tours down the Homosassa River to private Tigertail Island (which once held the home of David Yulee, Florida's first US Senator), another along the Chassahowitzka, a trip up the Homosassa to the headwaters where manatees congregate, and into the springs at Crystal River. Tours begin at \$50 each for a half-day with meal and guide. The company rents easy-to-manuever single kayaks for \$5 an hour, \$10 a half-day, and \$18 a day; two-person kayaks for \$7, \$15, and \$25. Outfitting for kayak camping trips is available. All tours include historic and natural orientation by well-informed guides.

Riversport Custom Adventures and Kayaks, ☎ 877-660-0929 or 352-621-4972, www.flakayak.com, on the Halls River at 2300 S. Suncoast Blvd., rents single and tandem kayaks for \$20 a half-day, \$35 a full day. Local tours begin at \$25 each.

River Safaris & Gulf Charters at Riverside Inn, 5297 S. Cherokee Way, ☎ 800-758-FISH or 352-628-5222, rents canoes for \$7 a half-day, \$12 a full day.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Like the rest of the county, Homosassa area lodgings are incredibly affordable. They range from chain-name places to no-nonsense fishing lodges, all instilled with plenty of character.

Motels & Hotels

Right in the Homosassa Springs Wildlife Park's backyard (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), you can stay at the **Ramada Inn**, 4076 S. Suncoast Blvd., ☎ 352-628-4311, and take a walkway to the attraction. It's a typical chain with a few flourishes. It has a playground, a pool and a lodge-like restaurant and lounge on the premises. \$\$

Right on the Homosassa River with its own marina, **Howard Johnson Riverside Inn**, 5297 S. Cherokee Way, ☎ 352-628-2474, www.chronicle-online.com/hojoriversideinn.htm, is a happening place to stay. It has tennis courts, shuffleboard, a pool, a restaurant and lounge, newly renovated rooms, and its own marina with canoeing, kayaking, wildlife tours, and fishing charters. If you're a true adventurer, you'll be happy here. \$\$\$-\$\$\$

For a taste of Old Homosassa and a solid fishing fix, drive down to **MacRae's** on S. Cherokee Way, ☎ 352-628-2922. Run by a longtime local family on the Homosassa River, it lies close to a marina and rents cabins and efficiencies by the night and week. \$\$

Camping

RV parks are plentiful in this neck of the woods. Some also offer tent sites.

On the edge of the national wildlife preserve, **Chassahowitzka River Campground and Recreation Area**, W. Miss Maggie Dr, ☎ 352-382-2200, has 31 RV (\$16 per night) and 46 tent sites (\$12-\$14 a night). The location on the river is ideal for canoeists and boaters. Launching facilities are provided.

Where To Eat



For formal and not-so-formal occasions both, **KC Crump on the River**, 11210 W. Halls River Rd., ☎ 352-628-1500, rewards diners with busy water views or cozy family rooms in an 1800s home, and fine continental renditions of steak and seafood. The marina setting is framed in venerable old live oaks and gingerbread, overlooking the monkeys at play on Monkey Island. Dinner entrées range from \$11 to \$19. Open daily for lunch and dinner.

Yanni's Restaurant, 7431 S. Suncoast Blvd., ☎ 352-621-4551, offers the best deal on seafood around, and with a Greek twist. Fish dinners are only \$8, all meat-and-seafood combinations (including filet mignon and lobster tail) are \$10. Greek specialties and other entrées cost \$7. The atmosphere is unadorned, but granted character by live Greek entertainment nightly. It's open daily for dinner, and Sunday for lunch.

Withlacoochee State Forest

Native Americans bestowed upon the region its name, meaning “crooked waters.” The tannic-tinted river that shares its name with today’s 143,348-acre state forest borders the territory to the east, runs into the Gulf of Mexico in the north, and reaches the Green Swamp to the southeast. Thirteen miles of its 70-mile-long river flows through the preserved forestlands.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Many of Florida’s river have a rusty-brown tint to them. In the case of the most pristine of them, such as the Withlacoochee, this comes not from pollution or mud, but from the **tannic acid** produced by cypress trees. These waterways are known as blackwater rivers.*

The forest itself is scattered throughout Hernando and Citrus counties in five sections, or tracts: Forest Headquarters, Citrus, Croom, Richloam, and Jumper Creek. Once the home of turn-of-the-century pioneers and site of boom-time phosphate mining, the tracts have been since developed for outdoor recreational opportunities, from bird watching to all-terrain cycling. Withlacoochee’s vast reaches embrace a number of biological communities – low-lying sand to cypress swamps. The forest hosts creatures of rare and endangered status, including the bald eagle, Eastern indigo snake, black bear, and red-cockaded woodpecker. Alligators, wild boar, bobcats, rabbits, deer, and quail also find shelter.

Getting Here



Different parts of the Withlacoochee are spread out all over Hernando and Citrus counties, on both sides of **I-75**. Exit 61 takes you to the Richloam Tract to the east and the southern entrance of Croom Tract to the west. Exit 62 lies smack dab at the eastern entrance to Croom. Rte. 480 (Croom Rd.) runs east-west through the tract. At Exit 64, take Rte. 470 north, then Rte. 479 west to get to Jumper Creek Tract. Hwy. 41 runs through the Forest Headquarters. Citrus Tract lies west of Hwy. 41 along Rte. 480 or 44. Rte. 581 runs north-south along the tract’s eastern border with access to Mutual Mine and Holder Mine recreation areas.

Sights & Attractions



Recreational opportunities here begin at **Withlacoochee State Forest Headquarters**, ☎ 352-754-6777, a 1,230-acre area on Highway 41, about seven miles north of Brooksville, centered around **McKethan Lake**. The lake is popular with fishermen and a nature trail circles it for hiking enthusiasts (see *On Foot*, below). Facilities also include a fitness course and picnic tables. The forest is divided into separate tracts, each with trails and forest roads.

To the southeast, **Croom Tract** offers the most to recreationists within its 21,359 acres, including **Silver Lake Recreation Area**, a day-use and camping grounds suited to boating, fishing, and picnicking. Overnight campgrounds comprise more than 90 sites and hiking trails keep the on-the-hoof crowd busy. The tract also includes an off-road motorcycling area (see *On Wheels*, below) that makes use of an old mine pit. Three other recreation areas provide camping, fishing, boating, canoe launching, hiking trails, and picnic grounds.

Richloam Tract, 49,200 acres, is named for its fertile soil, responsible for vital cypress growth and resultant controlled timbering. Here, to the southeast of Croom, ponies and cattle thrive as they have for centuries. They run wild, descendants of horses and cows left by early Spanish explorers. Richloam's main activity is nature hiking through pine flatwoods, pine plantations, cypress ponds, and hardwood hammocks. It connects to the **Green Swamp Hiking Trail** for extra mileage. In summer, rainfall makes the trail muddy. It has a canoe launch that marks the beginning of the 83-mile Withlacoochee Canoe Trail (see *Paddling*, below).

Northwest of Forest Headquarters, **Citrus Tract** occupies 42,613 acres of sandhill scrub and pine uplands. It is known for its large deer population and horse trails. Deer-hunting is open to archers. Picnicking and camping are also available.

Jumper Creek Tract lies to the northeast with 10,068 acres and is most lightly developed. Hunting, fishing, birding, horseback riding, and hiking are popular. Only primitive day-use facilities exist.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Within the forest, fishing is best in **Croom Tract**, where the Withlacoochee River squiggles its way through. It is permitted at **Silver Lake Recreation Area**, **River Junction Recreation**

Area, Hog Island Recreation Area, and Iron Bridge Day Use Recreation Area.

Fishing is also popular and fruitful at the **McKethan Lake State Recreation Area** near Forest Headquarters on Hwy. 41.

Boat Ramps

You can launch your boat into the Withlacoochee River from any of the recreation areas in Croom Tract: **Silver Lake Recreation Area, River Junction Recreation Area, Hog Island Recreation Area, and Iron Bridge Day Use Recreation Area.**

Boat Rentals

Nobleton Canoe Rental, off I-75 at Exit 62, 29135 Lake Lindsey Rd. in Nobleton, ☎ 800-783-5284 or 352-796-5284, rents pontoon boats for two to six people for use in the Withlacoochee River. Rates are \$45-\$100 for five hours, \$55-\$135 all day. Fishing boats cost \$45 for four hours, \$55 all day.

Boat Charters & Tours

Catch an airboat ride on the Withlacoochee River with **Nobleton Canoe Rental**, off I-75 at Exit 62, 29135 Lake Lindsey Rd. in Nobleton, ☎ 800-783-5284 or 352-796-5284. Cost is \$20 per person for a half-hour spree.

Paddling

The black waters of the **Withlacoochee River** – a designated Florida Outstanding Water – take you into the quiet of Florida gone by via an 83-mile canoe trail that begins in **Richloam Tract** at Coulter Hammock launch, flows northward through **Croom Tract** and the western boundary of **Jumper Creek Tract**, then continues on to the Gulf of Mexico.

For canoe outfitting and shuttle service on the Withlacoochee River, visit **Nobleton Canoe Rental**, off I-75 at Exit 62, 29135 Lake Lindsey Rd in Nobleton, ☎ 800-783-5284 or 352-796-5284. Canoe trips range from five-13 miles with a float time of two-5½ hours. The 5½-hour trip costs \$35 for two people, \$40 for three. The rest are \$30 and \$35. Overnight trips, kayaks, and trolling motors are available. The dark river runs south to north, and a shuttle takes you to your starting point, after which time you're on your own. Explore the offshoot waterways and bays to discover the richest wildlife. Parks along the way provide pit stops.

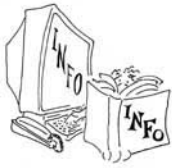
■ **On Foot**



A number of nature trails – 42.3 miles worth total – in and around **Withlacoochee State Forest**, ☎ 352-796-5650, provide rich opportunity to commune with unspoiled nature. Picnic areas are convenient to each of the trails.

There are hiking trails at all of the recreation areas within **Croom** and **Citrus** tracts. Recreation areas in Citrus Tract include **Holder Mine Recreation Area**, **Mutual Mine Campground**, and **Tillis Hill Recreation Area**. In Croom Tract, these include **Silver Lake Recreation Area**, **River Junction Recreation Area**, **Hog Island Recreation Area**, and **Iron Bridge Day Use Recreation Area**.

East of Brooksville and I-75, **Richloam Hiking Trail**, off Rte. 50 on Clay Sink Rd., travels 31½ miles and is open to foot traffic only. Primitive and established camping sites are available. The trail is closed during the first nine days of the general hunting season. In summer's rainy season, trails get muddy.



Hiking, biking, and horse trails are closed at certain times during hunting season. To receive a copy of the schedule, contact the forest recreation center at ☎ 352-754-6898.

To the northeast, the two miles of **McKethan Lake Nature Trail** off Hwy. 41 in Withlacoochee Forest, ☎ 352-796-5650, circle the lake and penetrate hardwood hammock habitat where longleaf pine and turkey oak proliferate. Other flora and fauna include squirrel, rabbit, white-tailed deer, resurrection fern, magnolia, and cabbage palm. Picnic facilities are provided. For all-day use, there's a \$2 per vehicle admission fee into the McKethan Lake Recreation Area.

Three loop trails comprise 2½ miles for exploring Withlacoochee Forest along **Colonel Robins Nature Trail**, off Hwy. 41. Deer, gopher tortoises, gray squirrels, and foxes inhabit the upland habitat along the trails. A self-guiding brochure helps you identify flora along the way.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Cabbage palm*, also known as *sabal palm*, is Florida's state tree and the hardiest of the infinite varieties of palms it hosts. The bud of the tree was eaten by natives and is still enjoyed by Florida Crackers as "swamp cabbage." In trendier circles, it's known as *hearts of palm*.

Withlacoochee State Trail, ☎ 352-394-2280, is the major recreational path for hikers, cyclists, and skaters. Formerly a railroad track, it runs 47 miles from Hwy. 98 east of Brooksville, through parts of the state forest and Citrus County (see more at *Inverness*, page 41). Benches, restrooms, parks, sights, and other conveniences accommodate users along the paved trail. It provides access to the Florida Trail in the Croom Tract of the Withlacoochee Forest (see *Sights & Attractions*, above). Parking for the

trail is provided at Silver Lake Recreation Area and Townsend Lake Regional Park.



HUNTING: *Hunting seasons for hogs, turkey, and small game are listed in Withlacoochee's Wildlife Harvest Guide, ☎ 352-754-6896. Dates for archery, muzzleloading gun, modern gun, and general gun hunting are given.*

■ On Wheels

Bicycling



The 47-mile **Withlacoochee State Trail**, ☎ 352-394-2280, is a rails-to-trails path for hikers, cyclists, and skaters. See above for details.

Motorcycling

An off-road track accommodates motorcyclists at 2,600-acre **Croom Motorcycle Area** in Withlacoochee State Forest, ☎ 904-754-6777. Permits are required. The area includes an inexperienced rider zone, training pit, day-use picnic area, and campground. The entrance is off Rte. 50, just east of I-75, Exit 61.

■ On Horseback



The **Withlacoochee State Trail** and **Withlacoochee State Forest** provide endless opportunities for equestrians with their own ride.

Where To Stay

Camping



Withlacoochee State Forest provides primitive camping for the backpacker as well as established facilities. Camping time limit is 14 days. Charge at established campgrounds is \$9 without electricity, \$12 with. Sites accommodate tents and RVs. ☎ 352-754-6896.

For facilities with a few conveniences – bathrooms, water, and grills – try **Holder Mine Recreation Area**, **Mutual Mine Campground**, and **Tillis Hill Recreation Area** in Citrus Tract. Tillis has the most sites – 37 – 10 with electrical hookups. It's the only one in Citrus Tract with a dump station and is popular with equestrians. Mutual Mine is the only campground without hot showers.

In Croom Tract, **Silver Lake Recreation Area**, **River Junction Recreation Area**, and **Hog Island Recreation Area** all have camping sites. Silver Lake is largest with 91 sites, 22 of them with electrical hookups. All have dump stations and hot showers. River Junction is the most secluded, but open only on weekends.

Brooksville

Brooksville is Hernando's county seat and a bit of a historic show-off. It was established in 1856, but most of its oldest buildings were constructed around 1912. It has its small-town allure despite a tendency to sprawl into chain fast-food and department store syndrome.

Getting Here



Highways 41 (Broad Ave.) and **98** (Ponce de Leon Blvd.) meet in Brooksville. To reach the town from I-75, take Exit 61 and head west.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Downtown Brooksville holds a cache of historic buildings along brick-paved streets, some dating back to the 1880s. The largest concentration lies along Main St., Liberty St., and Brooksville Ave.

One of the town's oldest and proudest Victorian architectural gems was built in 1856 and holds the **Heritage Museum** at 601 Museum Ct, ☎ 352-799-0129. A guided tour through the four-story mansion spills tales of old Brooksville, including legends that the museum's house is haunted. It's open noon-3, Tuesday-Saturday.

Family Fun

An unusual find, **Citrus Attraction** in Boyett's Groves, 4355 Springlake Hwy., ☎ 352-796-2289, offers a small zoo and 14,000-gallon saltwater reef tank in addition to a tour of a working citrus packinghouse. Admission is \$1.50. Children under age three are admitted free. Hours are 9-5, daily.

Adventures

■ On Water



Lake Townsend Regional Park at 28011 Lake Lindsay Rd. (Rte. 476) has a fishing pier and boat ramp into the lake at the edge of Withlacoochee Forest, as well as extensive park facilities.

■ On Foot



A system of nature trails forms the heart of **Chinsegut Nature Center**, off Hwy. 41 on Rte. 476, seven miles north of Brooksville, ☎ 352-754-6722. The trails explore uplands and wetlands habitats that attract a myriad endangered species. The nature center and its trails are open to the public.

Shopping



Downtown Brooksville provides a charming ambiance for antique and specialty shopping. Its most famous shop is actually five in one, and something of a tourist attraction. **Rogers' Christmas House & Village**, 103 S. Saxon Ave., ☎ 877-312-5046 or 352-796-2415, spreads a tantalizing array of themed gifts in its Storybook Land, Country Cottage, Magnolia House, Christmas House, and other shops with gardens interspersed. It's open daily, 9:30-5.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Inns/Bed & Breakfasts



In keeping with its heart of history, Brooksville offers one-of-a-kind lodging in addition to chains. The **Mary A. Coogler Cottage**, 114 S. Brooksville Ave., and **Amapola Guest House**, 238 N Lemon Ave., ☎ 352-796-6857, provide a home away from home with less worries and more pampering. The Victorian-style cottage has two bedrooms, the guest house holds two suites. \$\$

The **Verona House Bed & Breakfast**, 201 S. Main St., ☎ 800-355-6717 or 352-796-4001, www.bbhost.com/veronabb/, occupies a circa 1925 Sears & Roebuck mail order home. \$\$

Camping

The countryside around Brooksville holds many campgrounds for RVs and tents alike. **Brentwood Lake Camping**, 11089 Ancient Trail, ☎ 352-796-5760, charges \$8 per night. Nightly rates for **Frontier Campground**, 15549 Cortez Blvd., ☎ 352-796-998 are \$18.

Where To Eat



For a taste of what's inherently charming about Brooksville, have breakfast or lunch at the **Blueberry Patch**, 414 E. Liberty St., ☎ 352-797-0084. Yummy quiches, sandwiches, and salads begin at \$4.95.

Weeki Wachee

Mermaids made Weeki Wachee famous. The mermaids of Weeki Wachee Springs, an attraction that dates back to the 40s, wear silver-tailed costumes and take breaths of piped-in air to perform their classic – if somewhat hokey – underwater extravaganza. Around the transparent springs and its mermaids grew up a touristy little community whose back roads still hold uncontrived Florida fishing camps and towns. The town of Spring Hill, to the south, holds many of the area's natural and recreational attractions.

Getting Here



Arriving from I-75 via Brooksville, follow Rte. 50 (Cortez Blvd.) west to get to Weeki Wachee. From the north, **Highway 19**, here known as Commercial Way, plunges into the heart of Weeki Wachee. Spring Hill lies to the north, east of Highway 19 on Spring Hill Drive. **Shoal Line Blvd.** (Rte. 597) runs north-south to the west of Highway 19 and takes you to the local beaches and other park attractions. **Cortez Blvd.** (Rte. 50/550) to the west goes to the small waterfront communities of Pine Island and Bayport. **Rte. 595** (Aripeka Rd.) takes you into Aripeka.

Sights & Attractions

Performing Arts



In Spring Hill, the musical and non-musical classics come to stage at **Stage West Community Playhouse**, Forest Oaks Blvd., ☎ 352-683-5113, www.stagewest.net. Individual regular season tickets cost \$12-\$14.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Although you don't find beaches along the Nature Coast like you do, say, along the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area, they are here. One of the most popular in these parts, **Alfred McKethan Park**, ☎ 352-754-4031, usually referred to as Pine Island Park, lies on Rte. 595 and works well for families or anyone interested in swimming, playing a little volleyball, swinging, and relaxing on the waterfront. Entry fee is \$2 per vehicle.

Hernando Beach Park, 6400 Shoal Line Blvd. (Rte. 597) also lays down a sand blanket for visitors. An observation tower is provided.

Family Fun

One of the region's prime attractions is **Weeki Wachee Springs Waterpark**, at the intersection of Hwy. 19 and Rte. 50, ☎ 877-GO-WEEKI or 352-596-2062, www.weekiwachee.com. Its underwater mermaid show is a classic, appealing to kids with stories of Pocahontas, the Little Mermaid, and other kid heroes. Spectators watch from an underwater theater as the pretty young mermaids perform in the natural setting of clear spring waters. Other shows around the park involve exotic birds and birds of prey. A river wilderness cruise, a petting zoo, springs beach swimming, bumper boat rides, and flume slides complete the many ways to have fun at Weeki Wachee (just saying the name is fun!). Open 10-5 daily, with extended summer hours. Admission is \$14.95 for adults, \$10.95 for children ages three to 10, plus tax. (Prices subject to change according to season.) The get-wet portion of the park, known as Buccaneer Bay, is open only in summer and on weekends and holidays. For information on scuba diving in the park, see **Neptune Divers**, page 58.

Local Color

The time-stunted little community of **Aripeka** is filled with old fishing buildings and a colony of artists (some of national renown) who have hidden out among them. To get here, follow Rte. 595 (Aripeka Rd) off Highway 19.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Fishing is fertile along the coast and in inland waters. Prize catches are tarpon and shark, which are released. In the Spring Hill area, there are fishing piers at **Hernando Beach Park**, 6400 Shoal Line Blvd. (Rte. 597), **Bayport Park**, 4140 Cortez Blvd. (Rte. 550), and **Jenkins Creek Park**, 6401 Shoal Line Blvd. (Rte. 597).

For \$2.50 (kids, \$1.50) you can shore-fish all day on the Mud River at **Mary's Fish Camp**, 8092 Mary's Fish Camp Rd., four miles west of Weeki Wachee, ☎ 352-596-2359. Pole rental, RV sites, and cabins are available. It's open for fishing daily at 7 am.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Central Florida has its **fish camps**, huddles of fish frenzy that grew up in the early days of tourism and watersports. They're a good place to find a cheap, spartan place to stay close to the water. Most have bait and tackle shops, some have little barebones restaurants where the fish is as fresh as it gets.*

For fishing gear, bait, and licenses, visit **Hernando Beach Bait & Tackle**, 4211 Shoal Line Blvd. in Hernando Beach, ☎ 352-596-3375.

For light tackle sportfishing, contact Capt. Mike Shifleet at **Air Hawk II Charters**, 352-796-0635. He'll take you into the flats and Gulf backwaters on a flats skiff for \$200 a half-day, \$300 all day.

Boat Ramps

You can find ramps into the Gulf in Spring Hill at **Bayport Park**, 4140 Cortez Blvd. (Rte. 550) and **Hernando Beach Park**, 6400 Shoal Line Blvd. (Rte. 597). **Rogers Park**, 7244 Shoal Line Blvd. in Spring Hill provides access to Weeki Wachee River. Rogers Park charges a \$2 per vehicle entrance fee in season.

Boat Rentals

Weeki Wachee Marina, 7154 Shoal Line Blvd. in Spring Hill, ☎ 352-596-2852, rents 14-foot Jon boats with 6-hp motors for use in the river. They hold up to four people and cost \$40 for a half-day and \$55 for a full day.

Paddling

For canoeing and kayaking, you can't beat the Nature Coast. Sea kayakers favor the estuaries around Bayport and Pine Island.

Conveniently located in the parking lot at Weeki Wachee Springs (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), **Weeki Wachee Canoe Rental**, 6131 Commercial Way (Hwy. 19), ☎ 352-597-0360, rents canoes for \$27 a day, single seat kayaks for \$20.

Paddlers can head to **Rogers Park** (see *Boat Ramps*, above) to put into Weeki Wachee River, which leads to a spring six miles upriver.

Weekiwachee Preserve, accessible from Shoal Line Blvd. and Rte. 595, offers terrific kayaking in confined water.

ECO-ADVENTURE

Learn about the unusual aquatic environment along Weeki Wachee River and its estuaries on a biologist-guided tour at **McFarlane's Kayaks/Scuba**, 8381 Northcliff Blvd., Spring Hill, ☎ 352-666-0206, www.atlantic.net/~McFarlan. Two-hour trips cost \$45 or \$99 for all day. An introductory kayaking course is \$35.

Snorkeling & Diving

Hernando County offers freshwater and Gulf diving for divers of all levels. For beginners, 20-foot dives into the Weeki Wachee River and at artificial reefs offshore eight-13 nautical miles supply a variety of underwater scenery. Caves and sinkholes challenge advanced divers at Hospital Hole, Eagle's Nest and other locales. For more information, contact local dive shops.

Weeki Wachee ranks high as a diving destination, where windowpane waters are fed by gurgling, warm springs. Scuba diving is permitted in **Weeki Wachee Springs Water Park** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) daily, 8 am-9 pm. **Neptune Divers**, ☎ 352-597-4300, is located on the premises for diving on-site. For \$39.95, you buy one day's park admission plus three dives. The company also takes divers down into other local springs.

McFarlane's Kayaks/Scuba, 8381 Northcliff Blvd., Spring Hill, ☎ 352-666-0206, www.atlantic.net/~McFarlan, teaches scuba familiarization courses for \$100 and also certification and advanced diving instruction.

■ On Foot



The still-developing **Weekiwachee Preserve**, accessible from Shoal Line Blvd. and Rte. 595, marks 10 miles of biking and hiking trails through the hardwood swamps and hammocks along Weeki Wachee River, home to black bears and other rare critters.

Neighborhood Park at 14755 Coronado Drive in Spring Hill offers a 2/3-mile walking trail through its more than eight acres.

■ On Wheels



Weekiwachee Preserve, accessible from Shoal Line Blvd. and Rte. 595 (see above), provides 5½ miles of paved and limerock biking trails into lowland and upland vegetation.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Motels



Diving and canoeing packages in Weeki Wachee Springs make **Best Western Weeki Wachee Resort** attractive to outdoor adventurers. It's across the street from the water park on Hwy. 19, ☎ 800-490-8268 or 352-596-2007. \$\$

Camping

Cody's Catfish Pond, 8588 Ostrom Way, ☎ 352-596-6010, lies west of Hwy. 19 and offers standard facilities for \$15 a night.

Where To Eat



Head off the main highway to find the best food in backwater restaurants such as **Peck's Old Port Cove**, four miles west of Hwy. 41 on Rte. 550, ☎ 352-795-2806. Soft shell crab, which the owners farm themselves, is a specialty. The rest is simply prepared catfish, shrimp, steak, and sandwiches that will cost you \$3-\$14. Reservations are suggested. Peck's is open daily for lunch and dinner.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

St. Petersburg & Clearwater

Overview

The West Coast's largest and most popular sun-spotlit playground is contained in Pinellas County and has been dubbed the **Pinellas Suncoast**. From Anclote Key in the north to St. Pete Beach in the south, it is one long fling of sand-lined islands where fun-in-the-sun and full speed adventure reign. (The tourism bureau touts 35 miles of Gulf beaches.) The not-a-care-in-the-world beaches give the region a playful, somewhat boisterous reputation but, as you will find in this chapter, there's something for everyone here. Far flung, remote islands offer the flip side to all that action. These are hide-outs for wildlife and for reclusive beachers. In its far north reaches, Pinellas boasts two cultural enclaves: Greek Tarpon Springs and Scottish Dunedin. The Clearwater area holds all sorts of pleasant surprises: a 47-mile bike trail, a natural mineral spa, one of the state's oldest surviving wooden hotels, a marina-full of high sea adventures, and a highly respected marine biology facility.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Tarpon Springs
- Dunedin
- Clearwater
- Clearwater Beach
- Sand Key
- Madeira Beach
- Indian Rocks Beach
- Treasure Island
- St. Pete Beach & Lower Islands
- St. Petersburg

St. Petersburg, the region's metropolitan center, along with its environs, has long been the destination for winter refugees seeking restored health. Downtown became known for its population of retirees, but in more recent years has injected youthful life into its withering reputation. With its Dali and other museums and trendy clubs, it satisfies high-brow vacation requirements. Its sling of islands, conversely, built an early and lasting reputation for frivolity, even back when Scott and Zelda danced at the landmark Don CeSar Hotel. Because the islands have been hosting beachers for so many years, they have a faded-glory feeling. That too is changing as the county pumps more and more dollars into beautifying park and beach areas. Huge centers of water recreation, most notably Clearwater Beach Marina and John's Pass Village at Madeira Beach, make this sunshiny land legendary for its boating, fishing, and beaching. The sum total of Pinellas County covered in this chapter begins in the north at Tarpon Springs and neighboring (to the north) Port Richey, then continues to the fat peninsula separated from mainland and the city of Tampa by deep, wide Tampa Bay. Sandwiched between it and the Gulf of Mexico, the re-

gion is all but surrounded by on-the-water opportunities. Despite its metropolitan and developed beach nature, it has plenty of wild spaces and recreational adventures to offer landlubbers as well.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The name **Pinellas** endures from the era of Spanish conquest. *Punta pinal*, or “point of pines,” described land features for early mapmakers and explorers. The “Suncoast” part of “Pinellas Suncoast” describes its average 361 days of sunshine each year.

Transportation

■ Airlines



Two international airports serve the Tampa Bay area, one in Tampa, the other in Clearwater. **Tampa International Airport**, ☎ 800-767-8882 or 727-461-5294, www.tampaairport.com, receives more flights, especially from international destinations. **St. Petersburg/Clearwater International**, ☎ 727-535-7600, principally serves charters and shuttles.

DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES SERVING TAMPA INT’L AIRPORT (TPA)	
American Airlines	☎ 800-433-7300
Continental	☎ 800-525-0280
Delta Air Lines	☎ 800-221-1212
Northwest	☎ 800-225-2525
Southwest	☎ 800-435-9792
TWA	☎ 800-221-2000
United	☎ 800-241-6522
US Airways	☎ 800-428-4322
Air Aruba	☎ 800-882-7822
Air Canada	☎ 800-776-3000
British Airways	☎ 800-247-9297
Cayman Airways	☎ 800-422-9626
Martinair Holland	☎ 800-366-4655

■ Bus & Taxi Service

Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority, ☎ 530-9911, provides bus service to St. Petersburg and the rest of the county.

Several taxi companies provide transportation to and from the airport, including **Beach Taxi and Airport Service**, ☎ 727-797-2230, **Yellow Cab, St. Petersburg**, ☎ 727-799-2222, **Limo/The Airport Connection**, ☎ 800-282-6817 or 727-572-1111, and **Red Line Limo**, ☎ 800-359-LIMO or 727-535-3391.

■ Rental Cars

Rental cars are available at the airport and other locations throughout the area. Companies include **Avis**, ☎ 800-331-1212 or 727-530-1406; **Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3131, **National**, ☎ 800-227-7386 or 530-5491, **Thrifty**, ☎ 800-367-2277 or 727-321-3175, and **Budget**, ☎ 800-527-0700 or 727-530-0441.

■ Getting Around

I-275, which merges into **I-75** from the north and south and into **I-4** (and Orlando) from the east, is the major thoroughfare of the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area. At its south end lies the dramatic **Sunshine Skyway Bridge**; at its north, **Howard Frankland Bridge** (I-275) crosses to Tampa. In between, the **Gandy Bridge** (Highway 92), connects St. Petersburg to downtown Tampa. **Courtney Campbell Causeway** (Rte. 60/Memorial Highway), north of I-275, connects Clearwater to north Tampa. **Highway 19** runs north-south on the east side of the Pinellas County peninsula. Nearer to the islands, **Alternate Highway 19** takes you along the county's northern shores.



Information



For information on Pinellas County, contact **St. Petersburg/Clearwater Convention & Visitors Bureau**, 14450 46th St. N, Clearwater, 34622; ☎ 877-FL-BEACH (toll free) or 727-464-7200, www.FloridasBeach.com.

Festivals & Events



JANUARY - Tarpon Springs celebrates its Greek heritage most fervently during its **Epiphany** celebration on January 6. For almost 80 years, the festivities have been capped by a tradition known as “diving for the cross,” where boys ages 16-18 dive into chilly waters to retrieve a white wooden cross in hopes of a blessed year. Greek food, dancing, and music follow the event. ☎ 727-937-3540 for information.

MARCH - Downtown St. Petersburg goes all-out to celebrate its annual **Festival of States**, ☎ 727-898-3654, for an entire month beginning in March – everything from fireworks to clown school.

APRIL - April ushers in a tradition more than 30 years old: **Dunedin Highland Games & Festival**, ☎ 727-733-6240. Highlights include kilted bagpipe bands, Scottish storytelling, dancing, and feats of skill such as tossing the caber and throwing the hammer.

MAY - **Taste of Tarpon Springs Food & Art Fest**, ☎ 727-942-6381, features food from the town’s Greek eateries.

SEPTEMBER - **Dolphins to Dragons Sand Castle Creations**, ☎ 800-282-1116 or 727-898-3111, takes place at the Don CeSar Resort, prompting sand sculpture artists’ creativity.

OCTOBER - **Clearwater Jazz Holiday**, ☎ 888-4-CLEARWATER or 727-461-5200, www.jazzholiday.com, the largest free jazz festival in the Southeastern US, brings music-loving crowds to Clearwater. The annual **John’s Pass Seafood Festival** in Madeira Beach, ☎ 727-398-5994, is a huge, fishy affair.

NOVEMBER - Watch 100 some racing yachts from around the world compete in the **Clearwater Cup International Yacht Races**, ☎ 727-447-6000.

DECEMBER - The holiday **Lighted Boat Parade**, ☎ 727-363-9243, is a twinkly event that begins in Pass-A-Grille on St. Pete Beach. Downtown St. Petersburg has its own **Lighted Boat Parade**, ☎ 727-893-7329, at The Pier, along with a month-long **Snowfest and Holiday Fantasy**, ☎ 727-821-6443.

BUDGET VACATION TIPS

- Pick up the red “Welcome” guide-map at local visitors information centers and retail outlets. It contains coupons for many local attractions.
- The region’s small historical sites and museums generally don’t charge admission. Some request a small donation. They include: **West Pasco Historical Museum** and **Baker House** in New Port Richey, **Indian Rocks Area Historical Museum**, and **Gulf Beaches Historical Museum** in Pass-A-Grille.
- In Tarpon Springs, you can tour **Spongeorama** and **St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church** free of charge.
- Enter by donation at one of the Suncoast’s most famous attractions: **Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary**.
- In Largo, you can tour three fine attractions for free: **Pinellas County Historical Museum**, **Pinewood Cultural Park** (including Gulf Coast Museum of Art), and **Kids Firehouse Museum** (donations accepted).
- Downtown St. Petersburg’s **Pier Aquarium** requests a mere \$1 donation.

Tarpon Springs & Dunedin

In its northern extremes, Pinellas County starts off in another world. It’s a world far from the sybaritic beaches below, a world whose character was formed in the Old World lands of Greece and Scotland. Greeks arrived in fledgling, turn-of-the-century Tarpon Springs to harvest its fertile sponge crops, 30 feet below. Their influence remains strong in the town’s sponge market, Greek pastry shops, onion-domed Greek Orthodox Church, and annual Epiphany Day dive for the cross.

Between it and Dunedin lie small, out-of-the-way resort communities. Dunedin brings another culture shock, though not as severe as Tarpon Springs. The town’s Scottish heritage is most evident in its annual Highland Games and Festival, ale brewery, a Scottish import shop, and Scottish dance studio. Today, the quiet little outré-suburban town is known more for its island beaches and downtown antique shops.

DID YOU KNOW?



Named in 1882, **Dunedin** means “castle on the rock” in Scottish. The town is sister city to Stirling, Scotland.

Getting Here



Highway 19 and its offspring that starts between New Port Richey and Tarpon Springs, **Alternate Highway 19**, provide the main routes of transportation through the region in a north-south direction. In Tarpon Springs, **Dodecanese Blvd.** and **Tarpon Ave.** are the main streets that are of interest to visitors. In Dunedin, **Main Street** takes motorists off Alternate Highway 19 and into its downtown heart.

WEEKEND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

■ **FRIDAY:** Arrive at Tarpon Springs in the morning. Visit the **sponge docks**, **Konger Tarpon Springs Aquarium**, **St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church**, and the **historic district**. Have lunch at **Costa's**. In the afternoon, drive south to Dunedin to visit **Honeymoon Island State Recreation Area** and **Caladesi Island State Park**. Drive to Clearwater Beach for dinner at **Bob Heilman's Beachcomber**. Catch sunset at **Pier 60**. Spend the night in Clearwater Beach.

■ **SATURDAY:** Spend the morning on the **beach**. Have lunch at **Seafood & Sunsets at Julie's** or **Frenchy's Rockaway Grill**. Tour **Clearwater Beach Aquarium** in the afternoon and take the **Sea Life Safari**. Drive to Redington Beach for dinner at **The Lobster Pot**. Spend the night in Clearwater Beach or Sand Key.

■ **SUNDAY:** Drive to downtown St. Petersburg. Tour **Salvador Dali Museum** or **Florida International Museum**, and **The Pier**. Have lunch at **The Pier** food court or one of its restaurants. Drive to **Fort de Soto Park** in the afternoon or hop aboard a charter to Egmont Key. Spend time on the beach, fishing, hiking (snorkeling on Egmont Key), and touring the fort. Drive to Pass-A-Grille for dinner at **The Wharf** or **Hurricane Restaurant**. Spend the night camping at **Fort de Soto Park** or in history-tinged luxury at the **Don CeSar Resort**.

Information



For information on the Port Richey area, contact the **Pasco County Visitors & Convention Bureau** at Gulf View Square Mall, 9409 Hwy. 19, Suite 433, Port Richey, FL 34668; ☎ 800-510-3982 or 727-849-3733. Hours are 9-5, Tuesday-Friday, and 10-6, Saturday.

The **Tarpon Springs Chamber of Commerce** distributes information on the area at 11 E. Orange St., Tarpon Springs, FL 34689, ☎ 727-937-6109, www.tarponsprings.com. It's open Monday-Friday, 9-5. There's also an information center on Dodecanese Blvd., next to Pappas' restaurant.

The **Dunedin Chamber of Commerce** is located at 301 Main St, Dunedin, FL 31498. ☎ 727-733-3197, www.dunedinfla.org. It is open 8:30-4:30 on weekdays.

Sights & Attractions

■ North of Tarpon Springs



The thickly suburban towns of Port Richey and New Port Richey run into Tarpon Springs from the north, along Highway 19. Not much of a resort area, their residential neighborhoods do hold a few attractions for visitors, nonetheless.

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

Memorabilia, photographs, antiques, and Amerindian artifacts fill **West Pasco Historical Museum**, 6431 Circle Blvd. in New Port Richey, ☎ 727-846-0680. Admission is free and hours of operation are 1-4 on Friday and Saturday.

The Baker House, 5744 Moog Rd. in the tiny town of Elfers, ☎ 727-849-1627, dates back to 1882 and is a prime example of a Cracker home. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Admission is free, open Saturday only, 11-3.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Cracker refers to Florida pioneers and their lifestyles. Some say the term comes from the way the Cracker cowboys sounded their whips to call cattle. Others attribute it to cracked corn, a pioneer staple. The square, wooden, tin-roofed homes of the Crackers continue to influence architectural style in Florida. Built for the subtropical climate, they have been reinvented into what is termed "Old Florida style."

ECO-ATTRACTION



Learn how cow hunters once dominated central Florida and intriguing details about local flora on a 90-minute open-bus tour of **J.B. Starkey's Flatwoods Adventures**, northeast of Tarpon Springs in Odessa at 12959 Rte. 54, just west of Gunn Hwy., ☎ 877-734-WILD (toll-free), www.flatwoodsadventures.com. On a good day, you'll see wild turkeys and boars. You're guaranteed a 'gator sighting; they've rounded one up in a pen just for your camera. Still a working ranch, Flatwoods Adventures gives eco-tours of its pasturelands, alligator caves, and palmetto flatwoods. The guide does hands-on talks about the medicinal and other uses of local plants and life on a ranch, then and now. Admission is \$14.75 for adults, \$8.25 for children ages three-12, including tax.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Flatwoods* refers to a type of habitat common in Tampa environs. It is dominated by longleaf pines and saw palmetto scrub and is home to rattlesnakes, white-tailed deer, and the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Lightning fires are common occurrences and necessary for the survival of the flatwoods.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

At the twin parks of **Anclote Gulf Park** and **Anclote River Park** on Anclote Blvd., folks gather to swim off a small sand beach, fish on a 24-hour pier, picnic, and explore a Timucua Amerindian midden mound. Admission is free.

■ Tarpon Springs

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

East of town, **Lake Tarpon** is headquarters for watersports. **Anderson Park** on Hwy. 19 provides access for bass fishermen and other water-lovers. There are also picnic grounds and a nature trail. Open daily, 7-sunset.

Fred Howard Park, 1700 Sunset Dr., ☎ 727-937-4938, hides far from the mainstream in Tarpon Springs, but is the best beach in these parts that is accessible from the mainland. The beautifully canopied grounds are a favorite for picnickers. A mile-long causeway delivers you to a sand beach. The park opens daily at sunrise and closes at 9pm.

Newly opened **Brooker Creek**, ☎ 727-943-4000, sets aside 8,000 acres for wildlife and environmental education. Currently, you can see the preserve only on three-mile guided nature hikes held weekends or by horseback

along a six-mile trail. Future plans call for a sophisticated environmental education center with herbarium and IMAX theater.

Family Fun

Konger Tarpon Springs Aquarium, 850 Dodecanese Blvd., ☎ 727-938-5378, is small but intriguing. The centerpiece is a 120,000-gallon reef-shark tank where divers do feeding demonstrations. Other tanks and exhibits deal with moray eels, seahorses, octopuses, and baby sharks, and include a touch tank. Hours are 10-5, Monday-Saturday; noon-5, Sunday. Admission is \$4.75 for adults, \$4 for seniors, \$2.75 for children, and free for toddlers under age three.

The true measure of Greek influence in Tarpon Springs rises above the skyline with onion domes of **St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church**, 36 N. Pinellas Ave., ☎ 727-937-3540. Visitors are allowed in when services are not in session. It's a stunning example of Greek ecclesiastical architecture and baroque excess, styled after St. Sofia's in Istanbul.

Local Color

Soak up some local Greek culture at the **Sponge Docks** on Dodecanese Blvd. Here, along narrow European-style streets, you'll find a somewhat touristy scene of charter boats, souvenir and sponge shops, Greek eateries, and other sights.

The slightly decrepit **Spongeorama**, 510 Dodecanese Blvd., ☎ 727-942-3771, gives an interesting overview of sponging and local Greek heritage. Exhibits explain the different kinds of sponges, the dangers of sponging, and the role of religion in the Greek community. Admission is free.

■ Dunedin

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

Housed in the 1889 town train depot, **Dunedin Historical Society Museum**, 349 Main St, ☎ 727-736-1176, is open 10-4, Tuesday-Saturday. It features railroad and historical displays and rotating Florida exhibits. Admission is \$1 for anyone over age 12.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Dunedin's most popular attractions are its two barrier island state parks. **Honeymoon Island State Recreation Area**, Causeway Blvd., ☎ 727-469-5942, is accessible by car and is well-loved by bird watchers and other nature lovers for its trails and populations of resident and migrant feathered friends. It has a beach where you can swim and fish. Admission is \$4 per car of eight persons or fewer, \$2 for one person in a car, and \$1 for pedestrians, cyclists, and extra person. It's open daily, 8-sunset.



The beach at nearby **Caladesi Island State Park**, ☎ 727-469-5918, is far superior, however, but accessible mainly by boat. Three miles long, it is powdery and sheer white. On the mangroves side of the island, picnic grounds, bathhouses, a food concession, a playground, and docks accommodate visitors, who arrive by private boat, public ferry, or foot from Clearwater Beach, a mile trek. (You must be prepared and in good shape to do this, because it's another couple of miles to park concessions once you get on the island, and the soft sand doubles the distance as far as your legs are concerned.) Between the shores, you can explore barrier island ecology via sand paths and boardwalks. The park is open every day, 8-sunset. A ferry departs hourly from Honeymoon Island (see *On Water*, below). Maximum stay on the island for ferry arrivals is four hours. Admission by private boat is \$3.25; overnight boat fee is \$8.88.

Family Fun

Kids can become actors, cartoonists, and animators at **David L. Mason Children's Arts Museum** in the Dunedin Fine Arts center, 1143 Michigan Blvd., ☎ 727-298-3322. Hours are Monday-Friday, 10-6; Saturday, 10-4; and Sunday, 1-4. Admission is \$4; seniors pay \$3.50; free for children ages two and under.

Dunedin Stadium's **Grant Field** is spring training grounds for the **Toronto Blue Jays** in March. Call ☎ 727-733-9302 for ticket and schedule information.

Adventures

■ On Water



At Tarpon Springs, being out on the water has constituted a way of life for more than a century. Fishing, sponging, and boating remain a means of livelihood as well as a means for recreation.

Fishing

North of Tarpon Springs, you will find fishing piers at **Anclote Gulf Park**, in New Port Richey. South of town, **Crystal Beach's** fishing pier reaches out from an old-fashioned park on Gulf Drive N.

From New Port Richey, **Bounty Hunter Sport Fishing**, ☎ 800-833-0489 or 727-843-0489, takes up to three passengers for \$250 half-day excursions or \$350 full-day excursions inshore and near shore.

Outings aboard the **Lazy Bones**, Tarpon Springs City Marina, ☎ 727-920-4846, cost \$275 for a half-day, \$475 a full day for up to four people. Fifth

and sixth person pay \$25 each. Fishing is geared toward trolling and bottom fishing with some light tackle.

Capt. Dave, Tarpon Springs City Marina, ☎ 727-938-7371, will take you out after snook, tarpon, redfish, trout, and cobia for \$250 for four hours, \$300 for six hours, \$450 eight hours. Prices apply to up to three persons. Fourth passenger pays \$50.

Capt. Joe Reis, in Tarpon Springs, ☎ 727-937-2290, specializes in fly, flats, backwater, freshwater, and sports fishing. His rates for a two-person charter run from \$250 for a half-day to \$350 all day.

For deep-sea fishing, board the deluxe catamaran *Miss Milwaukee II*, west end of the Sponge Docks, ☎ 727-937-5678. Rate for adults is \$35, including tax and bait.

Boat Ramps

Boaters can launch into Lake Tarpon at **Anderson Park** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above).

Boat Rentals

WaveRunner and fishing boat rentals are available at **CNR Watercraft Rentals**, 40081 Hwy. 19 N, ☎ 727-937-3933, conveniently located near Anderson Park. Cost for a 15-foot fishing boat is \$60 per half-day, \$100 per day; for a WaveRunner, \$45 for the first hour.

Boat Charters & Tours

Island Wind Tours, 600 Dodecanese Blvd., Tarpon Springs, ☎ 727-934-0606, whisks you off to unbridged Anclote Key aboard a 40-foot pontoon boat. There you can study nature, stroll the four-mile beach, and see the 1887 lighthouse. The four-hour on-water and on-island adventure costs \$20 for adults, \$15 for children. One-hour sightseeing cruises cost \$5 for adults, \$3 for children.

Learn the history and methods of sponge diving on a half-hour trip with **St. Nicholas Boat Line**, departing from the Tarpon Springs Sponge Docks, 693 Dodecanese Blvd., ☎ 727-942-6425. A diver dons traditional diving suit and helmet to demonstrate sponge harvesting. Rates are \$5 for adults, \$2 for children ages six-12.

The **Honeymoon Island Ferry** to Caladesi Island, ☎ 727-734-1501, costs \$6 for adults and \$3.50 for children ages three-12. The ferry runs every hour (every hour on busy weekends) between 10 and 4. Maximum stay on the island is four hours.

Snorkeling & Diving

Sunny Seas Scuba, 7115 Hwy. 19 S. in New Port Richey, ☎ 727-849-2478, charges \$50 for a two-tank dive in a 38-foot boat holding up to six passengers.

■ On Wheels



The Energy Conservatory, 745 Main St., Dunedin, ☎ 727-736-4432, www.sanctum.com/ec, claims to be Florida's biggest bicycle shop. It's close to the Pinellas Trail and rents bikes for \$15 a day. Hours are 10-6, Monday-Friday; 9-4:30, Saturday; 11-4 on Sunday.

■ On Foot



Learn about what lies beyond the beach at Honeymoon and Caladesi islands on a walking tour with **It's Our Nature**, ☎ 888-535-7448 or 727-441-2599, www.itsournature.com. A two-hour walk costs \$10 per adult, \$6 per child. Park fees and ferry transportation is extra.

J.B. Starkey Wilderness Park, 10500 Wilderness Rd., New Port Richey, ☎ 727-834-3247, is north of Tarpon Springs off Rte. 54, just west of Gunn Hwy. It has a 1.3-mile self-guided nature trail and 13 miles of hiking trails through a wide variety of Florida terrain, from wet to high and dry. Nature programs and guided tours are also available; call for details and schedule. A day use area provides picnic facilities and restrooms; primitive camp sites are also available.

Shopping



Both Tarpon Springs and Dunedin are recognized for their antique-shopping. Tarpon Springs' historic antique district is centered around **Tarpon Ave.**

In Dunedin, the majority of antique shops are found on **Main Street** and side streets. The town holds antique fairs every spring and fall.

The Old Feed Store at 735 Railroad Ave., Dunedin, ☎ 727-734-4705, is something of a museum, with store displays in period settings. Open Tuesday-Saturday, 10-4; Sunday, noon-4.

For a taste of Scotland, visit **Highlands Scottish Imports** at 249 Main St, Dunedin, ☎ 888-734-3606 or 727-734-3606. It carries custom-made kilts, clanware, Celtic jewelry, frozen Scottish foods, and bagpipe supplies. You can mail-order your bagpipes and kilts from **Howard's Highland House**, 1430 Georgia Ave., Dunedin, ☎ 727-733-2851.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

North of Tarpon Springs, you'll find mostly economy chain motels. The town of Tarpon Springs offers more character with its options.

Hotels, Motels & Resorts

Between the state parks and downtown Dunedin, **Inn on the Bay**, 1420 Bayshore Blvd. (Alt. Hwy. 19), Dunedin, ☎ 800-759-5045 or 727-734-7689, provides pleasant, comfortable accommodations with its own restaurant, tiki bar, fishing dock into the bay, and pool. Its 41 rooms all have equipped kitchenettes. \$\$



Tops for golfing and family fun in this area, **The Westin Innisbrook Resort**, 36750 US Hwy. 19 North, Palm Harbor, ☎ 800-456-2000 or 727-942-2000, www.westin-innisbrook.com, opened its own Loch Ness water theme park in 1998. Its rooms and suites look out onto lush links containing 90 holes of top-rated golf. A fitness center, kids' playground and program, and 11 Har-Tru tennis courts round out Innisbrook's athletic skills.

Water adventurers will enjoy the location of **Best Western Yacht Harbor Inn and Suites**, next to the Dunedin's city marina and its coterie of deep-sea fishing charters at 150 Marina Plaza, ☎ 800-447-4728 or 727-733-4121. Also on the property is a fine restaurant and lounge, a casual café, and pool. Rooms have a coffee machines, microwave, and small refrigerator; studios have a kitchenette. \$\$-\$\$\$

Inns/Bed & Breakfasts

Gracious and handsome, the **Spring Bayou Inn**, 32 W. Tarpon Ave., Tarpon Springs, ☎ 727-938-9333, occupies one of Tarpon Springs' first homes, built around the turn of the century. From its wraparound porch you can watch the goings-on in the town's historic district. Five rooms are rentable by the day, week, or month. \$\$-\$\$\$

Overlooking the Gulf, **The J.O. Douglas House B&B** at 209 Scotland St., Dunedin, ☎ 727-735-9006, www.jodouglashouse.com, takes residence in a historic circa 1878 home, Dunedin's oldest, all done up Victorian style. There's a two-night minimum on weekends and in season. \$\$-\$\$\$

Camping

Dunedin Beach Campground, 2920 Alt. Hwy. 19 N, Dunedin, ☎ 800-345-7504 or 727-784-3719, charges \$22-\$20 for a RV site and a full complement of facilities: heated pool, rec room, playground, shuffleboard, horse-shoes, and complete utility hookups.

Where To Eat

Tarpon Springs



Tarpon Springs' most famous restaurant, **Louis Pappas Riverside Restaurant**, 10 W. Dodecanese Blvd., ☎ 727-934-4752, overlooks the Anclote River and serves Greek and seafood specialties such as chicken spanakopita, souvlaki, lamb stew, and shrimp with feta cheese. Lunch prices range \$6-\$10, dinner \$10-\$17. Both meals are served daily.



Somewhat less tourist-ridden than the restaurants on Dodecanese Blvd., **Costa's Restaurant**, 521 Athens St., ☎ 727-938-6890, advertises "Mama's Greek style." In the simple lunchroom setting, it dishes up Hellenic authenticity, along with some American concessions. Pickled octopus, fried smelt, *keftedes* (light meatballs), *dolmades*, and lamb shanks are a few of the oddities and specialties. Try the *tsipoura* – char-broiled snapper served with olive oil, lemon, and garlic. Lunch and dinner is served daily at reasonable prices.

Away from the bustle and hustle of Dodecanese Blvd., **Tarpon Avenue Grill**, 200 E. Tarpon Ave., ☎ 727-942-3011, provides pleasant solace and good fellowship in a pub atmosphere. The sandwiches are standard fare, well-prepared. Dinner entrées demonstrate a flair of inventiveness with dishes such as tomato basil chicken and seafood pasta. Steaks and fresh fish are also specialties. Open daily, it serves lunch and dinner in the \$5-\$13 range.



Between Tarpon Springs and Dunedin, west of Alt. Hwy. 19, (and 1,150 miles from New York City, according to a signpost) lies the tiny, free-spirited town of **Ozona**. **Molly Goodhead Raw Bar & Seafood**, Orange St. at Tampa Rd., ☎ 727-786-6255, puts the town on the map with its idiosyncratic Cracker house décor and great eats. Guests can sit outdoors on the porch or indoors where it's a combination of country home with walls covered in flowered wallpaper and casual bar with walls covered in license plates and photos. Sandwiches, pasta, steak, and seafood platters run \$4-\$14 and are served at lunch and dinner daily. Recommendable: the conch chowder, "Right Off the Boat" grouper sandwich, and Key lime pie (the real thing!).

Dunedin

Near the state parks and overlooking a yacht-filled marina, **Jesse's Dockside**, 345 Causeway Blvd., Dunedin, ☎ 727-736-2611, has built a reputation for fresh seafood. Open daily for lunch and dinner, its sandwiches, pasta, seafood, and steaks run \$5-\$22.

For a sample of Dunedin's Scottish accent, sample **St. Andrew's Steakhouse** at 29000 US Hwy. 19, ☎ 727-771-1515. It's open daily for dinner

with a small menu of fine meats, seafood, and grilled specialties, such as blackberry salmon. Prices range from \$10 to \$19 for entrées.

Clearwater & Clearwater Beach

Often overshadowed by the more household names of St. Petersburg and St. Pete Beach, the Clearwater area is the place to head if you're serious about spending days on and in the water. Its beach facilities are top-notch and its marinas are beehives of sail-away activity.

Clearwater itself is principally big-city. Its main concession to tourism is a 100-year-old grande dame wooden hotel, the Belview Biltmore Resort & Spa (see page 82). On its eastern coast, fronting Tampa Bay, the community of Safety Harbor is the county's birthplace – a quiet spot for boaters, picnickers, and spa-goers.

Clearwater Beach occupies all of Clearwater Beach Island, as well as part of neighboring Sand Key.

Getting Here



Gulf to Bay Blvd. (Rte. 60) is the major road running east-west. It connects to the Courtney Campbell Causeway and Tampa at its eastern extreme, penetrates downtown Clearwater (where its name changes to Cleveland St.) and, at its western extreme, crosses Memorial Causeway to Clearwater Beach. It intersects with **Gulfview Blvd.** (Rte. 699), the island's major road. South of the Clearwater Pass Bridge, the road's name changes to **Gulf Blvd. Mandalay Ave.** is the northern extension to Gulfview Blvd., where you'll find most of the shopping.



The Clearwater area is closely policed. Mind the speed limit signs (25 mph on the beach), and be sure to feed your meter.

Clearwater Yellow Cab, ☎ 727-799-2222, provides transportation to and from the Tampa and St. Petersburg/Clearwater airports.

AUTHOR TIP



The Jolley Trolley, office at 483 Mandalay Ave. #113, ☎ 727-445-1200, travels around Clearwater Beach and downtown Clearwater. Tours begin and end at the trolley office with pickups every 30 minutes daily. Fare is 50¢ (tokens, available at office) each, 25¢ for adults.

Information



For more information on the area, contact the **Greater Clearwater Chamber of Commerce**, 1130 Cleveland St., Clearwater, FL 34617, ☎ 727-461-0011, www.VisitClearwaterFlorida.com, open 8:30-5, Monday-Friday; or visit the **Clearwater/Pinellas Suncoast Welcome Center** at 3350 Courtney Campbell Causeway Blvd., ☎ 727-726-1547, open daily from 9 to 5.

You can reach the **Clearwater Beach Chamber of Commerce** at 100 Coronado Dr., Clearwater Beach, FL 33767, ☎ 888-799-3199 or 727-447-7600, www.beachchamber.com. Hours are 9-2, Monday-Friday.

Sights & Attractions

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



Clearwater Beach has some of the widest, most gorgeous beaches in the area, offering outdoor entertainment in a variety just as broad. **Pier 60 Park**, at the intersection of Causeway and Gulfview boulevards, is most active, with its fishing pier (see *On Water*, below), ☎ 727-462-6466, and continuous volleyball, for which Clearwater Beach has a reputation (national play-offs are held there regularly). You'll also find lifeguards, concessions for food, beach supplies, watersports rentals, and a sheltered playground with very cool equipment. City renovation plans include a playground expansion project with interactive fountains. Each night around sunset, artisans, musicians, clowns, and performers put on a show (☎ 727-449-1036 for updated recorded info about this event). You pay about \$1.50 an hour to park in large lots at each end of the beach.

Across the south-end bridge to Sand Key lies Clearwater Beach's most highly rated recreational area, **Sand Key Park**, 1060 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-595-7677. Its 65 acres contain lots of green spaces with picnic areas and playgrounds. The wide, sugar-sand beach is patrolled by lifeguards and offers watersports rentals. Parking is by meter at 25¢ for 20 minutes.

Family Fun

The **Clearwater Marine Aquarium** at 249 Windward Passage, off Memorial Causeway, ☎ 888-239-9414, Ext. 31 or 727-441-1790, www.CM-Aquarium.com, conducts research and rehabilitates marine mammals, river otters, and sea turtles. A touch tank, aquariums, and other tanks hold local and exotic sealife, including mangroves, seahorses, baby sharks, dolphins, playful otters, Kemp's ridley sea turtles, and a 320-pound loggerhead turtle named Mo. The center offers on-the-water sealife encounters (see *Adventures, On Water*, below). Admission is \$6.75 for adults, \$4.25 for kids ages three-12. Hours are Monday-Friday, 9-5; Saturday, 9-4; and Sunday, 11-4. For information on the aquarium's sea nature cruises, see *On Water*, below.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Loggerhead sea turtles, mammoth sea turtles as prehistoric as the sea itself, bulldoze ashore local beaches from late April to September to paddle-fin holes in the sand where they drop their hundred-or-so eggs. Adult loggerheads weigh in at up to 300 pounds.*

Send the older ones off to race go-carts or bumper boats, take the tots to Playland, and round 'em all up for pizza afterward. **Celebration Station**, 2½ miles north of Rte. 60 on Hwy. 19, ☎ 727-791-1799, also has batting cages, miniature golf, and video games to play. Open Sunday-Thursday, noon-9; Friday, noon-midnight; Saturday, 10am-midnight. Miniature golf, go-carts, and bumper boats each cost \$5. A pre-paid wristband allows all-day entrance for \$15.99 for persons 56 inches high and taller and \$10.99 for others.

Besides putt-putt, **Congo River Mini-Golf**, 20060 Hwy. 19 N, ☎ 727-797-4222, has a live iguana exhibit, a game arcade, and (shamefully – it's a bad idea to teach kids they can feed alligators) a 'gator-feeding attraction. Admission is \$6.50. Open Sunday-Thursday from 10am-11pm, Friday and Saturday from 10am-midnight. Unlimited golf costs \$9 all day.

On Clearwater Beach, **Captain Bligh's Landing Mini-Golf**, 630 S. Gulfview Blvd., ☎ 727-443-6348, has a pirate ship theme and large game room. Open 10am-midnight daily. Cost is \$6.50 for adults, \$5.50 for children.

Adventures

■ On Water

The possibilities for on-the-sea adventure are practically endless on Clearwater Beach.

Fishing

Fishing enthusiasts dangle their bait from **Pier 60** on Gulfview Beach (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), at the intersection of Causeway Blvd. and Gulfview Blvd., ☎ 727-462-6466. It contains all the shops and facilities necessary for a successful day of fishing; you provide the catches. Admission for walking on or fishing from the pier runs \$2.50-\$5.35. You can rent fishing rods for \$6.50.

For half- and full-day fishing charters, check at the **Clearwater Marina**, 25 Causeway Blvd., ☎ 727-462-6954. Guides and party boats line the dock; you can just walk around and “shop” for the one that fits your needs. A bait house, shops, and a restaurant complete the complex.

For fishing charters involving six or fewer persons, count on the third generation guiding skills of the **Gypsy** crew, located at the Clearwater Marina, ☎ 727-461-4882, www.dogtech.com/gypsy. Rate is \$75 per hour.

Clearwater Beach Water Sports Center at Clearwater Marina, slip 23, ☎ 727-443-6685 or 727-446-0375, does half-day, six-hour, and all-day fishing charters, at \$300-\$500. Night shark fishing excursions cost \$260.

Get into deep water with **Queen Fleet**, Clearwater Marina, ☎ 727-446-7666. Three vessels depart daily for half-day (\$28 each) and full-day (\$40) deep-water fishing trips. They are equipped with restrooms, lunch bars, and open and enclosed areas. Rod rentals available.

Ride aboard modern, comfortable catamarans on the **Double Eagle III and II** at Clearwater Marina, ☎ 727-446-1653. Cost is \$28 for adults and \$20 for children (tackle extra) for half-day deep-sea fishing; for all day, \$40 and \$35.

Board the **Mar-Chelle II** at the Clearwater Beach Marina, slip 21, ☎ 727-442-3770, for half-day deep-sea fishing trips costing \$28 for adults, \$15 for children.

Boat Ramps

There's a boat ramp into Clearwater Harbor at **Clearwater Beach Recreation Center** on Bay Esplanade, and into Tampa Bay in Safety Harbor at **Phillippe Park**, 2525 Phillippe Pkwy, ☎ 727-726-2700, which has extensive picnic facilities. Another ramp is at **Marina Park**, with limited picnic facilities and docking.

ECO-ADVENTURES

Clearwater Marine Aquarium (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) offers three opportunities to get close to what's below the surface, guided by marine biologists.

- **Sea Life Safari Cruises**, ☎ 800-444-4814 or 727-462-2628, visits a barrier island and bird sanctuary and puts guests “in touch” with creatures retrieved by trawl net. The two-hour tour costs \$13.95 for adults, \$9 for children ages three-12. There's a discount for passengers who pay to visit the aquarium in conjunction with the cruise. Tour boats depart from the aquarium twice daily, and from Clearwater Marina three times daily.
- **Kayak Adventures**, ☎ 727-441-1790, extension 31, takes three-hour trips to see dolphins, boiling springs, rookeries, and bay islands. Cost is \$35 per person, by reservation only.
- For a more extensive and intensive marine wildlife experience, **Marine Life Adventures**, ☎ 727-441-1790, extension 31, heads out for one (\$68 each) to four days (\$330 each) to study endangered animals and plants and participate in rescue and rehabilitation operations. Custom tours are also available.

Boat Charters & Tours

Many day boating trips launch from Clearwater Beach Marina, headed to Caladesi Island (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), Sarasota, and points beyond. The latest popular thing is cruises offering dolphin encounters. You are not allowed to feed dolphins on these trips, however.

The **Clearwater Ferry Service**, Clearwater Marina, ☎ 727-442-7433, hauls off to Caladesi Island, Tarpon Springs, and the open sea for dolphin encounters. It also operates at water taxi between mainland and the beach. Call for schedules and reservations.

For something much faster, **Sea Screamer** at marina slip 10, ☎ 727-447-7200, www.SeaScreamer.com, charges \$12.50 for adults, \$8 for children ages 12 and under, tax included. The hour-long tour takes in dolphins, the beaches, and open Gulf waters. Rides aboard the 73-foot speedboat depart daily at noon, 2, and 4.

The Show Queen at Clearwater Beach Marina, ☎ 800-772-4479 or 727-461-3113, hosts narrated daily lunch and Sunday brunch trips and dinner sunset cruises aboard a 65-foot three-deck riverboat. Lunch fares are \$13.95 adults, \$7.95 children; brunch, \$19.65 and \$7.95; sunset, \$20.95-\$24.95 and \$10.95-\$13.95. Day and evening sightseeing-only tours cost \$8.95-\$10.95 for adults, \$5.95-\$7.95 for children. Tax and gratuities are extra.

AUTHOR TIP



*If you have kids, your best bet on the high seas is **Captain Memo's Pirate Cruise** at the marina, Dock 3, ☎ 727-446-2587, www.pirateflorida.com. Dressing as pirates, face-painting, water-pistol battles, and cannon-shooting are part of the regime. It sets sail four times daily – at 10, 2, 4:30, and 7 – for two hours of fun. Cruises cost \$27 for adults, \$20 for seniors, and \$17 for children. For evening cruises, adults pay \$30. Prices include complimentary beverages.*

Starlite Majesty at the marina, ☎ 800-444-4814 or 727-462-2628, www.starlitecruises.com, hosts luncheon, sightseeing, entertainment, and dinner and dance cruises aboard a modern, three-deck yacht. Tickets cost \$8.90-\$14 for adults (\$8.20 for children, afternoon cruises only); meal is extra. Tax is not included.

Southern Romance at the marina, ☎ 727-446-5503, does two-hour sailing trips four times daily. Cost is \$20 for adults, \$10 for children.

On **Windjammer Cruises' Tradewinds** at the Clearwater Marina, ☎ 727-581-4662, willing passengers can learn to handle the helm, trim the jibs, and raise the sails of a 60-foot, three-masted racing schooner. The two-hour cruise departs four times daily and costs \$25 per person.

Snorkeling & Scuba

Rock ledges, underwater sinkholes, artificial reefs, and submerged vessels provide variety for divers, and visibility can reach 60 feet. Most sites are well offshore. The **Clearwater Reef** is one of the area's largest and most popular artificial reefs.

Clearwater Beach Water Sports Center at Clearwater Marina, slip 23, ☎ 727-443-6685 or 727-446-0375, runs three-hour snorkeling charters to the shallow waters of St. Joseph's Sound for \$36 per adult, \$1 per child under age 12.

Parasailing

Parasails are a gay and common sight along Clearwater's beaches. You'll find concessions at the Clearwater Marina (see *On Water*, above). They generally charge according to height of ride, something like \$35 for 600

feet, \$45 for 800 feet, and \$65 for 1,000-1,200 feet. Some include an optional free fall, for the ultimate thrill. Try **Joy Ride Parasail** at slip 22, ☎ 727-447-0969, or **Clearwater Beach Parasail**, slip 20, ☎ 727-442-3981.

■ On Foot



Caladesi Island has a three-mile trail through scrub and beach communities. Paved with soft sand, it takes longer than you'd think and can be hard on leg muscles. Wear shoes with support.

■ On Wheels



Joggers, skaters, and cyclists take to the 47-mile **Pinellas Trail**, ☎ 727-464-4751 or 727-393-8909, which begins in downtown St. Petersburg and heads north through Clearwater and beyond along an old railroad route through the historic districts of Dunedin and Tarpon Springs.

On Clearwater Beach, you can rent a ride at **Transportation Station**, 652 Gulfview Blvd., ☎ 727-443-3188 (The store has other locations, too.) It has a full complement of bikes and equipment, from racers to tandems and child trailers; also inline skates. Hourly rates begin at \$5 for bikes and skates, with daily and weekly discounts. Open 9-dusk daily.

Shopping



Clearwater Mall, Hwy. 19 at Rte. 60 (Gulf-to-Bay), ☎ 727-796-2335, is a major shopping venue in these parts, filled with 100 departments stores, shops, restaurants, and movie theaters.

Slightly smaller, **Largo Mall**, Ulmerton Rd. and Seminole Blvd., ☎ 727-587-0100, offers more discount stores than Clearwater Mall.

Countryside Mall is located at the corner of Hwy. 19 and Rte. 580, ☎ 727-796-1079. It has stores, restaurants, and movie theaters.

Bay Area Outlet Mall, Hwy. 19 and Rte. 686 (Roosevelt Blvd.), ☎ 727-535-2337, is the local discount shopping center for factory seconds and other bargains.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

■ Clearwater

Hotels & Resorts



To stay in grand style, revel in the Old-Florida aristocracy of the **Bellevue Biltmore Resort & Spa** at 25 Bellevue Blvd. in Clearwater, ☎ 800-237-8947 or 727-442-6171, www.bellevuebiltmore.com. One of the state's few surviving wooden hotels, it was built in the 1890s with wide verandas, distinctive gables, and Victorian airs. Recent renovations have modernized its 292 rooms, swimming pool with waterfalls, spa, and gracious lobby and dining areas. Packages are available. \$\$\$\$

Across the peninsula on Tampa Bay, **Safety Harbor Resort and Spa** at 104 N. Bayshore Dr., ☎ 888-237-8772 or 727-726-1161, www.safetyharbor-spa.com, is the historic pride of the bay coast. The low-slung, Mediterranean villa-style property boasts one of Florida's best spa and gym facilities. Packages available. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Inns/Bed & Breakfasts

Charming and homey, **Lanning's Green Gables B&B**, 1040 Sunset Point Rd., ☎ 727-443-3675, decorates its three guest rooms in Old Florida style, each with its own bath and TV. In Old Florida tradition, you can rock or swing on the grand front porch and snuggle around a fireplace on cool evenings. \$\$

■ Clearwater Beach

On Clearwater Beach, you have many choices, in all price ranges and sizes, beachside, bayside, or in-between.

Hotels & Motels

Hilton Clearwater Beach Resort, 400 Mandalay Ave., ☎ 800-753-3954 or 727-461-3222, www.hilton.com, purveys all the luxury and service the name implies. Rooms and suites in carnival colors are plush and equipped with coffeemakers (microwaves in suites only). Besides beachfront recreation, its amenities include two pools, restaurants, bars, and an innovative kid's program. It is handily located next to Pier 60, suitable for those who love beach bustle. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Best Western Sea Stone Resort at 445 Hamden Dr., ☎ 800-444-1919 or 727-441-1722, www.seawake.com, is water-oriented, located at the edge of

a harbor with its own marina, watersports rentals, pool, Jacuzzi, restaurant, and lounge. In its rooms, suites, and plush public spaces, you are sheltered from the hustle-bustle in this part of the island. The beach is close by. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

High-rising **Radisson Suites Resort of Sand Key** at 1201 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 800-333-3333 or 727-596-1100, www.radissonsandkey.com, across from Sand Key Park on the bay, caters to families. Two-hour morning programs are free for kids. Short afternoon activities are also available. Waterfalls give its pool an exotic feel. Each suite contains a microwave, coffeemaker, tape player, and mini-bar. Packages available. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Inns/Bed & Breakfasts

For a charmingly different beach lodging experience, rent an efficiency or one- or two-bedroom apartment at **Haddon House Inn**, 14 Idlewild St., ☎ 727-461-2914. Many of the units reside in the property's two 100-year-old homes, located on the quiet, north end of the beach. All have full kitchen facilities and use of a heated pool. A pool-beach deck mimics Caribbean style with a tin roof and gingerbread trim. It's a colorful place with lush vegetation and a white picket fence. \$\$-\$\$\$

Alternatative Accommodations

Hostel members are welcomed at the Sands Motel's **Clearwater Beach International Hostel**, 606 Bay Esplanade Ave., ☎ 727-443-1211. Besides its dorm accommodations, it has some shared apartments with adjoining bathrooms. Communal kitchen, picnic, and laundry facilities are provided, as well as free bike and canoe use, and games. The beach is a 15-minute walk away. There's no curfew. This is the only international hostel on Florida's West Coast. Member fees are \$12, including tax. Non-member rates also available.

Where To Eat



When compared to prices in Tampa and on islands to the south, restaurants in Pinellas are refreshingly reasonable. And the seafood is about as fresh as it gets, short of catching it yourself.



Beachgoers will find **Frenchy's Rockaway Grill**, 7 Rockaway St., ☎ 727-446-4844, convenient, tropical, and lively. Seafood again, and the very freshest, prepared grilled, blackened, and jerk-style. Grouper rules. Seating is outdoors on the beach with a view of waves or a volleyball game, or inside where it's cooler and equally colorful. The attitude is at the same time old-island and fresh. There is live music Tuesday-Sunday nights. It's open daily for lunch and dinner; prices for sandwiches, salads, and dinners run \$5-\$13.

Seafood & Sunsets at Julie's, across the street from Gulfview Beach at 351 S. Gulfview Blvd., ☎ 727-441-2548, is, as its name implies, a great place to catch the sunset and fresh-from-the-fish-market specialties. The atmosphere is fun and funky, à la Key West. It's open daily for lunch (\$2.50-\$7) and dinner (\$8-\$14).



For something more formal, try **Bob Heilman's Beachcomber** at 447 Mandalay Ave., ☎ 727-442-4144. It's a popular choice for American cuisine in both its classic and creative forms. Back-to-the-farm chicken with all the fixings is an all-time favorite. Seafood and prime meat dishes run a gamut from Everglades frog legs to Wisconsin veal piccata. People dress up and the setting is on the elegant side – a refined respite from the beach bustle. Prices are surprisingly affordable. Lunches are \$5-\$7 for sandwiches and salads, \$12-\$15 for “executive lunches.” Dinners are \$14-\$24. Open for lunch and dinner daily. Dinner reservations recommended.

Nightlife



Whether you're on spring break, enjoying retirement, or somewhere in between, Clearwater offers entertainment for your evening hours.

Ruth Eckerd Hall at 1111 McMullen Booth Rd., Clearwater, ☎ 727-791-7400, presents the top traveling entertainment in an acoustically sound environment – from Broadway shows to country singers and weekend family theater. It is home to the Florida Orchestra and often hosts the Florida Opera. Call for schedule and ticket prices.

Several restaurants and bars keep the beach hopping with live music, especially in spring and summer. For night-time action, start at **The Beach Bar** at 454 Mandalay Ave., Clearwater Beach, ☎ 727-446-8866, and follow the crowds.

Known for its rocking good times, **Alley Cats Café**, 2475 McMullen Booth Rd., Clearwater, ☎ 727-797-5555, hosts live music weekends and on some week nights.

Frenchy's Rockaway Grill (see *Where To Eat*, above), 7 Rockaway St., Clearwater Beach, ☎ 727-446-4844, features a beach setting and live music throughout the week.

The best party appears at **Pier 60 Park**, (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) 10 Pier 60 Dr., Clearwater Beach, ☎ 727-449-1036, every evening two hours before and after sunset. In addition to live music, artisans, clowns, and other performers entertain.

Sand Key Communities

Twelve-mile-long Sand Key begins in the north at the bridge to Clearwater Beach, which occupies a few miles at the island's top. South from there, a series of communities in varying degrees of commercial development stretch to John's Pass and Sand Key's most developed and water-adventuresome town, **Madeira Beach**. A few of the towns through which you pass, such as **Belleair Beach**, are blink-of-an-eye residential settlements. Others, such as **Redington Beach**, **Redington Shores**, and **Indian Rocks Beach**, offer visitors beach and old-island character, as well as a slew of fun-time activities, particularly fishing.

This stretch of island isn't among the best beaches of the Pinellas Suncoast. In the more private communities, there are no public accesses. In Madeira Beach, beaches have a distinctly metropolitan feel.

Getting Here



Gulf Blvd. (Rte. 699) runs down the middle of 12-mile-long Sand Key. Four bridges cross from Sand Key to the mainland. They are located (from north to south) in Belleair Shores at West Bay Drive (Rte. 686), in Indian Rocks Beach at Walsingham/Ulmerton Rd. (Rte. 688), in Indian Shores at Park Blvd. (Rte. 694), and in Madeira Beach at 150th Ave., which intersects with Seminole Blvd. (Rte. 595) and Alternate Highway 19 on the mainland.

Information



Stop by or call the **Gulf Beaches Chamber of Commerce**, 200 Second St., Suite B, Indian Rocks Beach, FL 33785, ☎ 800-944-1847 or 727-595-4575, www.gulfbeaches-tampabay.com; or at 501 150th Ave., Madeira Beach, FL 33708, ☎ 800-944-1847 or 727-391-7373. Both offices are open daily, 9-5.

Sights & Attractions

■ Indian Shores

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



A collection of local historical memorabilia is found in a vintage home known as the **Indian Rocks Area Historical Museum** at 1507 Bay Palm Blvd., ☎ 727-593-3861. It is open only on Tuesday from 9:30-11 and on Saturday from 1-4. Admission is free or by donation.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

In **Indian Rocks Beach**, between 15th and 27th avenues and First and Eighth avenues, you'll see **public beach** accesses about every block or so. Parking has been limited in the past, but recently the county built a large lot and facilities at 18th St. This is a good spot for surfers and surf-fishers.

At Indian Shores, **Tiki Gardens Beach Access**, 19601 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-464-3347, provides ample parking spaces in a lot across the street.

Family Fun

The Gulf beaches and mini-golf go together. **Smugglers Cove Adventure Golf**, 15395 Gulf Blvd., Madeira Beach, ☎ 727-398-7008, uses the ever-popular pirate's theme for its 18 holes of putt-putt. Adults pay \$6.49; children ages 12 and under, \$5.49.

ECO-ATTRACTION

Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary at 18328 Gulf Blvd. in Indian Shores, ☎ 727-391-6211, is the largest wild bird hospital in North America. In a zoological setting on the Gulf, it nurses more than 40 species – owls, hawks, sandhill cranes, pileated woodpeckers, wood storks, and lots of pelicans. It is open daily, 9am-dark. One-hour tours are conducted every Tuesday at 2. Look for the big pelican sculpture out front. Admission is free, but donations are appreciated.

■ Mainland Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

From the Indian Rocks Bridge (Walsingham Rd), head east to the town of Largo, where you can explore the history of Pinellas County in a 21-acre historic village known as **Heritage Village** at 11909 125th St. N, ☎ 727-582-2123. The park holds the county's oldest existing structures, including family homes, a one-room schoolhouse, a railroad depot, a blacksmith shop, a log house dating back to 1852, the **Pinellas County Historical Museum**, and more than a dozen other historic places. Tour guides and ar-

tisans dress the part of turn-of-the-century pioneers and demonstrate period crafts. Visit for free Tuesday-Saturday, 10-4, or Sunday, 1-4. Docent tours of some buildings are available.

Next door to Heritage Village, **Pinewood Cultural Park**, ☎ 727-582-2100, is underway. This combination cultural-historical-botanical attraction opened its **Gulf Coast Museum of Art**, ☎ 727-518-6833, in September of 1999. Its galleries feature Florida artists on a permanent basis and other temporary exhibits. They are open Tuesday-Saturday, 10-4 (Thursday until 8), and Sunday, noon-4. When completed in October, 2001, **Florida Botanical Gardens** will encompass 18 gardens growing everything from roses to kitchen vegetables, and a botanical learning center. Admission is free.

Performing Arts

For performance art, try the longstanding **Show Palace Dinner Theatre**, five miles north of Rte. 52 on Hwy. 19, ☎ 888-655-7469, for Broadway hits, or **Largo Cultural Center**, corner of Seminole Blvd. and East Bay Dr., ☎ 727-587-6793, for concerts and shows.

Family Fun

Let the kids live out their fireman fantasies at **Kids Firehouse Museum**, 9510 Kids Firehouse Ave. in Largo, ☎ 727-585-1300, while they learn safety. By tour only, visitors see 11 antique fire trucks – one they can board and sound all the bells and whistles – and other firehouse memorabilia. Hours are Monday-Thursday, 9-4; Friday, 9-1. Admission is free or by donation.

■ Madeira Beach

At Sand Key's south end, Madeira Beach, also known as Mad Beach, is where the action happens, but more so in and around marinas than on the town's claustrophobic beaches. Most of the activity centers around **John's Pass and Village**, where a fishing charter industry has grown into a shopping and restaurant district with a shanty fish house motif.

Family Fun

Two 18-hole courses and free pirate goodies make for family fun at **Pirate's Cove Adventure Golf**, 423 150th Ave., ☎ 727-393-8879. Cost for 18 holes is \$6.42 for adults, \$5.35 for children ages four-12. To play a second course costs \$3.21 each.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Grouper is the password here. **John's Pass** (see *Madeira Beach*, above) claims it is the grouper-catchingest place in the world. Try your luck on a deep-sea fishing charter. Other favored catches include pompano, snapper, snook, redfish, and tarpon.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Grouper is a large deepwater fish with mild meat that lends itself to culinary versatility. Fried grouper sandwiches are a Florida restaurant staple.*

Locals recommend the **Redington Long Pier** at 17490 Gulf Blvd. in Redington Shores, ☎ 727-391-9398, for the best fish action onshore. It extends more than 1,000 feet into the Gulf and offers a snack bar, bait and tackle, shelters, and restrooms. It costs \$6 for adults and \$5 for children to fish off the pier, 50¢ to walk on. There's a two-pole maximum and no shark fishing is allowed.

Across the street, you'll find a more extensive stock of fishing supplies and bait at the **Dogfish Tackle Company**, 17477 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-392-6644.

Head to **Hubbard's Marina** at 150 128th Ave. in John's Pass Village, ☎ 800-755-0677 or 727-393-1947, and embark on a deep-water trip aboard 75-foot vessels. The excursions last anywhere from five hours to three days. Rates begin at \$25 for adults, half-price for kids ages five-11. Trips are offered daily. Rod rental available.

For bait, fuel, fishing licenses, rod rentals or sales, and other fishing accessories, stop by **Don's Dock** at 215 128th Ave. E, John's Pass, ☎ 727-391-3223.

Boat Ramps

Boating access is provided at the **Belleair Boat Ramp**, 3900 W. Bay Drive in Belleair Bluffs.

You can launch your own craft at **Park Blvd. Boat Ramp**, near the Indian Shores Causeway. There's free parking across the street.

Boat Rentals

Bayway Adventures, 17811 Gulf Blvd. in Redington Shores, ☎ 727-397-5171, rents 18-foot bowriders and pontoon boats for \$149 a half-day and \$209 a full day. It is open daily, 8-6.

At **Watersports**, 525 150th Ave. on the Tom Stuart Causeway in Madiera Beach, powerboat rentals begin at \$99 for a half-day, \$149 for a full day. Pontoon rentals start at \$139 half-day and \$199 full-day. Also available are Jet Ski rentals, parasailing, water skis, fishing equipment, and bait and tackle.

Rental rates begin at \$24 an hour for WaveRunners at **Capt. McBoats**, John's Pass Village, Madeira Beach, ☎ 727-393-4855. Go early for the best rates. It also rents powerboats 19-26 feet long for \$130-\$185 a half-day. Hourly and daily rental rates are also available.

In Indian Shores, **Florida Craigcat**, 19631 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-517-7720, rents two-seat Craigcat watercraft with 25 HP engines for as little as \$29 an hour. They're handy for fishing, diving, or just cruising.

Boat Charters & Tours

Like many local cruises, **St. Croix Custom Cruises**, John's Pass Boardwalk, ☎ 727-866-1900, touts dolphin watching. A three-hour day cruise costs \$12.95 for adults and \$7.95 for children ages six-10. For continental breakfast or sandwich bar lunch, add \$5 for adults and \$3 for children. Sunset cruises are \$12.95 for adults, \$7.95 for children. Add pizza dinner and beverages for \$5-\$12 extra. Tax is additional.

Hubbard's Sea Adventures, ☎ 800-755-0677 or 727-398-6577, departs out of Hubbard's Marina (see page 88) at John's Pass Village for five-hour beach and barbecue cruises to unbridged Shell Island. Cost for cruise and lunch is \$31.95 for adults, \$17.90 for children ages two-12. The Egmont Key Snorkel Tour with lunch costs \$36.90 and \$24.90. Snorkel gear rentals are \$5. Two-hour dolphin and nature cruises cost \$11.95 and \$6. The boats have restrooms and covered seating. Reservations are suggested.

Star of the Croix, John's Pass Village, ☎ 727-866-1900, serves food on most of its cruises. The Luncheon Sightseeing cruise (daily at noon) costs \$19.95, Pizza Sunset cruise (Tuesday-Friday at 5) costs \$19.95; the Saturday Prime Rib Sunset cruise (departs at 5) is \$34.95, and Sunday Brunch cruise (noon) is \$24.95. Tax and gratuities are extra.

Snorkeling & Diving

The wreck of a 100-foot-long vessel in 80 feet of water and a 110-foot Coast Guard cutter supply divers with underwater sights. There are also some cave-like ledges to explore, plus various other reefs and wrecks several miles from land at a 45-foot depth.

Indian Rocks Tackle & Dive Center at 1301 N. Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-595-3196 or 727-531-9101, offers PADI instruction and has complete diving services. It's open 9-5:30, Monday-Saturday.

WaveRunners & Parasailing

Try **Gilligan's WaveRunner Rentals** at 209 John's Pass Boardwalk in Madeira Beach, ☎ 727-319-3731, for WaveRunner rentals (\$40-\$50 an hour) and parasailing (\$30-\$65).

■ On Wheels

Bicycles & Scooters



In Madeira Beach, **Surfside Bike & Beach Shop**, 15023 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-397-1414, rents bikes and scooters. Hourly rate for bikes is \$6-\$8 for singles. Discounts apply for rentals over one hour. Children's bikes and inline skates are also available. Open every day, 9:30-6.

Motorcycle Rentals

Get your motor running with **Street Eagle** Harley rentals, 12404 66th St. N. in Largo, ☎ 888-524-7999 or 727-524-7999, www.streeteagle.com. Rides are priced for four hours to seven days or more. Night rides (Monday-Saturday, 6-midnight; Sunday, 5-11) cost \$89.29, dine-and-ride packages are \$99.29. Reservations are highly recommended. Street Eagle is open Monday-Saturday, 9-6; Sunday, noon-5.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



There are numerous places to stay along the stretch of Sand Key, in unlimited variety. Most have their own distinct personality and are not part of any chain. Rates are relatively low.

Hotels & Cottages

Top-end is the **Hilton North Redington Beach Resort** at 17120 Gulf Blvd., North Redington Beach, ☎ 727-391-4000, www.hiltonredington-beach.com. High-rise in style, its 125 rooms are set on the beach, where a pool, restaurant, and tiki bar complete the amenities. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

For condo and apartment rentals, contact **Florida's Best Vacation Rentals**, 20045 Gulf Blvd., #101, Indian Shores, ☎ 800-523-2882 or 727-595-5700, www.floridabest.com; **Florida Lifestyle Vacation Rentals**, 19713 Gulf Blvd., Indian Shores, ☎ 800-487-8953 or 593-2000, www.floridabest.com.

lifestyle.com; or **Travel Resort Services**, 13030 Gulf Blvd., Madeira Beach, ☎ 800-950-2534 or 727-393-2534, www.trsync.com/trs.

Camping

RVers can stay at **Indian Rocks Beach RV Resort**, 601 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-596-7743, for \$25-\$35 a night or \$150-\$220 a week. It has an on-property fishing bayou, swimming pool, and full hookups.

Where To Eat



The Sand Key area has some of the best seafood you'll ever find, and at tasty prices. Check out the fish markets for do-it-yourself seafood feasts.

At **Crabby Bill's**, 401 Gulf Blvd. in Indian Rocks Beach, ☎ 727-595-4825, the fare is simple and fresh: fried oyster sandwiches, crab cakes, catfish, and Key lime pie – served on long picnic tables amid sign-plastered walls. The same menu holds daily through lunch and dinner, priced at \$4-\$13.

For something special, **The Lobster Pot Restaurant** at 17814 Gulf Blvd. in Redington Shores, ☎ 727-391-8592, combines fish-house casual ambiance with finely executed cuisine. Lobster dominates in varieties undreamed-of, followed in eminence by other forms of seafood. It's open daily for dinner, priced at \$13-\$27. Reservations recommended.

Smack on the water, **Salt Rock Grill**, 19235 Gulf Blvd. in Indian Shores, ☎ 727-593-ROCK, is making a splash with its new-age fish motif and cuisine. Sample such inspired oak-grilled specialties as pan-seared tuna drizzled with soy-ginger glaze or crusted seven-bone rack of lamb. It's open daily for dinner, with entrées ranging from \$10 to \$20. Specialty martinis are served in a stylish cigar bar. Reservations are suggested.

Friendly Fisherman Seafood Restaurant at 150 John's Pass Boardwalk on Madeira Beach, ☎ 727-391-6025, should be the Florida fish-house prototype, with its casual attitude, water view, and just-caught fish. You can even bring in your own catch to be cleaned and cooked to your specifications. It's open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Luncheon platters range from \$6-\$8, dinner platters \$9-\$14.

Treasure Island

Treasure Island, despite its rich-sounding name, is the Suncoast's best value. It's low on character, except for its Sunset Beach district, yet offers the same white sand beaches and watersports thrills as its neighbors.

Getting Here



Central Ave. connects Treasure Island to Highway 19 and downtown St. Petersburg. There's a 50¢ toll to cross the **Treasure Island Causeway**, which becomes **107th Ave.** on the island. **Gulf Blvd.** (Rte. 699) runs the length of the island, connecting it to Sand Key in the north. At the south end, **Blind Pass Rd.** leads to Long Key/St. Pete Beach.

Information



An office of the **Gulf Beaches of Tampa Bay Chamber of Commerce** is located at 152 108th Ave., Treasure Island, FL 33706, ☎ 800-944-1847 or 727-367-4529, www.tionline.com, and is open Monday-Friday, 9-5.

Sights & Attractions

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



Treasure Island is perhaps the blandest of the region's beaches – behind the times but not far enough to have a lot of character. The exception is **Sunset Beach** on the island's south end, where you'll find a mish-mash of architectural styles, from historic cottages to funky bars to majestic modern homes. The beach bars are a fun place to visit day or night. Beach parking is metered on Treasure Island.

Family Fun

Swing and shoot at **Gulf Golf & Hoops**, where kids ages 12 and under can play 18 holes for \$3.75 (adults for \$4.75) and sink hoops for \$2.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



You can fish along the seawall at **Treasure Island Golf, Tennis & Recreation Center**, 10315 Paradise Blvd., ☎ 727-360-6062. **John's Pass Bait & Charter**, ☎ 727-360-6907, on the south side of John's Pass at John's Pass Marina, sells bait and fishing supplies.

Far Horizons, ☎ 727-367-7252, holds up to six anglers for trips of various duration. A half-day costs \$450; full-day \$650. The 42-foot boat docks at 9610 Gulf Blvd.

Boat Ramps

Treasure Island has two free boat ramp locations on Gulf Blvd: one at 84th Ave. and one at 100th Ave.

Boat Rentals

Island Marine at 11045 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-367-2132, rents boats and personal watercraft. Half-day boat rental rates range from \$80-\$159; full-day \$160-\$229. Tax and gas is extra. Two- and three-person WaveRunners rent for \$50-\$60 per hour, all-inclusive.

Snorkeling & Diving

The Treasure Island Artificial Reef and a barge wreck provide places of interest for divers offshore.

Call **Treasure Island Divers** at 111 108th Ave., ☎ 727-360-3483, for scuba charters and equipment sales and rentals. It charges \$50 for a two-tank dive 10-20 miles from shore. PADI and PDIC certification courses are also offered.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Like all of the Suncoast beaches, Treasure Island is lined with hotels, motels, cottages, and resorts of all sizes and types. Most are either on the Gulf or the bay. Prices are low.

You can stay at the **Buccaneer Beach Resort Motel** (doesn't that have an adventurous ring?), 10800 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 800-826-2120 or 727-367-1908. Accommodations include motel rooms with refrigerators, and one- and two-bedroom apartments. It has volleyball and shuffleboard, a pool, and a beach, and is located centrally to watersports activities and restaurants. \$\$

Where To Eat



You won't find much in the way of fine dining on Treasure Island. Check out the small beach bars along Sunset Beach for casual, scenic eats.

Sunset Beach Café at 9701 First St. E., ☎ 727-367-3359, serves typically inexpensive casual fare daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Sandwiches, salads, and seafood and steak dinners are \$4-\$13.

Beach Nutts at 9600 W. Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-367-7427, is a swinging place on Sunset Beach, with seafood specials such as a fresh lobster dinner for \$11.95. It features live music nightly and serves seafood and American cuisine daily for lunch and dinner.

For beach casual with style, try **Caddy's Waterfront Beach BBQ**, 9000 W. Gulf Blvd. on Sunset Beach, ☎ 727-360-4993. Open for lunch and dinner daily, it sets umbrella-topped picnic tables out on the open deck and patio tables inside where it's still open, but there's sports TV to entertain instead of waves and shorebirds. Sandwiches and barbecue dinners range from \$2 to \$16.

Nightlife



One thing Treasure Island does have is after-dark activity. The current hot spot is **Cadillac Jack's**, 145 107th Ave., ☎ 727-360-2099, where blues jams and live music rock. Open nightly.

Gators Café & Saloon, 12754 Kingfish Dr., ☎ 727-367-8951, is decorated with alligator and Florida Gator team paraphernalia. It hosts live entertainment on weekends.

Atop stilts, **Beach Nutts** at 9600 W. Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-367-7427, features live music every night, with outdoor seating overlooking the beach.

St. Pete Beach & Lower Islands

St. Pete Beach occupies a 7½-mile island known as **Long Key**. Of all the area's islands, Long Key's intriguing history is the best preserved. Its greatest landmark is the fantasy-pink Don CeSar Resort, playground of 1920s glitterati such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Al Capone. It majestically crowns St. Pete Beach's southern threshold. The island's southernmost community of Pass-A-Grille fills its history pages with adventuresome tales of French fishermen and 20th-century drug smugglers.

South of Long Key, the islands get smaller and more remote. **Tierra Verde** holds a marina community at the doorstep to Fort De Soto County Park, which occupies five small keys, where once war strategies were planned. Unreachable by land, **Egmont Key** was site of Fort De Soto's sister fortifications. Today it is a refuge for wildlife and weekenders alike.

Shell Key has its namesake shells and birds to attract day trippers to its pristine shores.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: A *key* is a small (generally under 10 acres), low-lying island. According to the US Geological Survey, there are 882 keys in Florida. Anything smaller is classified a shoal, reef, or sandbar. The word derives from the Spanish cayo, which has been shortened to cay in the Bahamas and Caribbean, and is pronounced “key.”

Getting Here



From the south, take **I-275** off of I-75 to the **Sunshine Skyway**. Turn east on **Pinellas Bayway** (54th Ave./Rte. 682), toll 50¢, which goes directly to St. Pete Beach. Pinellas Bayway (Rte. 679) splits off at Isla Del Sol to take you to Tierra Verde and Fort De Soto Park. Roadways are well marked. Toll to Fort de Soto Park is 35¢.

From downtown St. Petersburg, take **Central Ave.** west about nine miles, turn south on **Pasadena Ave.** and proceed to the **St. Pete Beach Causeway/75th Ave.** Follow **Rte. 699** down from the islands to the north. **Blind Pass Rd.** crosses from Treasure Island to St. Pete Beach, and connects to **Gulf Blvd.**, which runs the island’s length as the major thoroughfare. In Pass-A-Grille, **Gulf Blvd.** splits into Gulf Way and Pass-A-Grille Way, the bayfront route. **Eighth Street** is the historic section’s main drag.

You can reach Egmont and Shell keys via shuttles, charters, and boat rentals (see *On Water*, below).

Information



For more information, contact the local **Gulf Beaches of Tampa Bay Chamber of Commerce**, 6990 Gulf Blvd., St. Petersburg Beach, FL 33706, ☎ 727-360-6957 or 800-944-1847, www.gulf-beaches-tampabay.com. Open Monday-Friday, 9-5.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



South of the majestic Don CeSar Resort, you’ll discover historic **Pass-A-Grille**. Browse between Eighth and 10th avenues, where old-island homes, and galleries and shops occupying historic

buildings take you back to yesteryear. Of special interest, **Evander Preston Contemporary Jewelry** at 106 Eighth Ave., ☎ 727-367-7894, is the studio and gallery of a local character. Besides his own artistic jewelry, you can see his private eclectic collection of art, which ranges from a John Lennon work to a 1986 Harley Davidson. The store is open daily.

Nearby, **Gulf Beaches Historical Museum** at 115 10th Ave., ☎ 727-360-2491, resides in a historic church near the beach. Through pictures and artifacts, it tells the story of settlement in these parts. Admission is free or by donation. The hours are Thursday and Saturday, 10-4; Sunday, 1-4.



Fort De Soto, ☎ 727-866-2484, is the centerpiece of Fort De Soto County Park, located in the Lower Islands. Part of the fortifications are preserved: gun and ammunition rooms, 12-inch mortar cannons, and other features. Forty-five steps take you up to the fort's battery embankment, where the view of the now peaceful waterfront scene is the best part.

Parks & Natural Areas



Egmont Key, also in the Lower Islands area, is less than two miles long and covers 398 acres. It is a national wildlife preserve where visitors can explore history and nature. The ruins of Fort Dade occupy the northwest end of the island. Parts of the ruins have eroded into the water to provide sea life and snorkelers with an artificial reef. Nature trails lead to gopher tortoise nests and a historic lighthouse.

AUTHOR TIP



The beach at Pass-A-Grille, and along St. Pete Beach, is quite lovely – a wide apron of clean sand with enticingly gentle seas. Parking is metered and closely monitored.

Shell Key is a narrow strip of island with mostly sand, shells, and birds to see.

Adventures

■ On Water



You won't lack for water-oriented activities in St. Pete Beach. Fishing and boating are a way of life here, and have been since human history was first recorded in these parts.

Fishing

A small sea-walled patch of park on Blind Pass at Sunset Way and Corey Ave. is designated **Fisherman's Park**. Restaurants are conveniently located at both ends.

Two exits off the Skyway Bridge take you to the north and south adjuncts of the **Skyway Fishing Pier**, ☎ 727-865-0668 for North Pier, 941-729-0017 for South Pier. There are picnic and rest areas at the same exits. The piers were created from the remains of an old bridge and are the state's only drive-on piers. Admission fees for each pier are \$3 per car or \$10 per RV, plus \$2 per person ages 13 and older, \$1.50 for seniors, \$1 for children ages six-12. Both piers have bait and tackle concessions and are open 24 hours daily.

In Pass-A-Grille, **Merry Pier** at Eighth Ave. and Pass-A-Grille Way, ☎ 727-360-6606, is the focus of south-end water adventures. You can fish free from the pier, which also has restrooms, bait and tackle, and rod and reel rentals. It's also a good place to catch a fishing charter. The 51-foot **Miss Pass-A-Grille**, ☎ 727-360-6606, goes deep-sea fishing. Half-day trips cost \$28 for adults, \$25 for seniors, and \$20 for children. On Wednesdays, a full-day trip costs \$40, \$37, and \$33.

Boat Ramps

St. Pete Beach's free boat ramps are located at E. 33rd Ave. and at Egan Park, 9101 Blind Pass Rd.

Across from the Don CeSar Resort, there's a boat ramp with limited metered parking at West Maritana & Casa Blanca. Launching facilities are also available at **Blind Pass Marina**, 9555 Blind Pass Rd., ☎ 727-360-4281.

In Tierra Verde, you can launch your boat and do your other boat-related business at **Tierra Verde Marine Center**, 100 Pinellas Bayway, ☎ 727-866-0255.

Fort de Soto Park (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), has a free boat ramp.

Boat Rentals

Tierra Verde Boat Rentals, located at the marina, ☎ 727-867-0077, rents bowriders, center and duel consoles, deck boats, and WaveRunners by the hour, half-day and full day. Hourly rate on all machines is \$50-\$55; half-day rates, \$179-\$195; full day, \$239-\$255. Gas is included with WaveRunner rentals, but is extra for boats.

Boat Charters & Tours

The **Shell Key Shuttle**, ☎ 727-360-1348, departs from Merry Pier (see *Fishing*, above) three times daily for \$12 adult fare, \$6 for children ages 12 and under, plus tax. Sunset cruises are the same price.

Mid-island, **Dolphin Landings**, 4737 Gulf Blvd., behind Dolphin Village Shopping Center, ☎ 727-360-7411 or 727-367-4488, is a good place to look for charters, especially for trips to Shell Island and dolphin watching (see *Sights & Attractions*, above). Sailboat cruises are priced \$25-\$25 for adults, \$14-\$25 for children. Excursions last two to four hours.

Destiny Yacht Charters, ☎ 727-319-BOAT. Sailing cruises depart from Tierra Verde Marina (see above) to Shell Key (\$25 for adults, \$20 for children under age 12) and for sunset (\$20 and \$15). A motor vessel makes snorkeling trips to Egmont Key for \$30 and \$25, including snorkeling gear. Tax is included in prices.

The **Starlite Princess** riverboat shoves off from the Corey Causeway at St. Pete Beach, ☎ 727-462-2628, www.starlitecruises.com. Prices begin at \$8.90 for adults, \$6.05 for children for a sightseeing cruise. Adults pay \$11.70 for a three-hour dinner cruise, luncheon dance & sightseeing cruise, or 2½-hour Sunday Dixieland Jazz. (Meals are extra on all aforementioned cruises.) The five-hour Sunshine Skyway Tour includes lunch for \$35 and is offered only Thursdays, October-May.

Watersports

On St. Pete Beach, before the bridge to Treasure Island, **Florida International Jet School**, 9555 Blind Pass Rd. at Blind Pass Marina, ☎ 727-360-8669, rents WaveRunners (\$39-\$54 per hour), four-person jet boats (\$58-\$88 an hour), and offers championship racing lessons for \$69 an hour. Prices include fuel and oil; tax is extra. It's open daily, 10-sunset.

Snorkeling & Diving

The **St. Petersburg Beach Artificial Reef** and a **wreck** are popular dive destinations in less than 30 feet of water.

Many charter boats to **Egmont Key** provide snorkeling equipment so you can explore the fort ruins and their coral formations. Visibility is about 30 feet.

■ On Foot



The hike around **Fort De Soto** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), and up and down its steps, provides solid exercise with your history lesson. A one-mile interpretative nature trail takes you through scrub and mangrove terrain at the Arrowhead Picnic Area near North Beach at Fort De Soto Park.

Paths, some of them still brick-paved from when the island was a thriving military settlement, cross **Egmont Key** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above). One leads from the fort to the lighthouse; others meander.

■ On Wheels



Biking is popular in **Fort De Soto Park** (see *On Foot*, above), which has 10 miles of wide paths, and in the campground there.

Totally Active Sports at 7116 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 367-7059, rents mountain bikes and beach cruisers for \$10 a day, inline skates for \$12 a day. Hours are 9-7, Monday-Saturday; 10-5 on Sunday.

Beach Cyclist Sports Center, 7517 Blind Pass Rd., ☎ 727-367-5001, rents bikes and inline skates. Rental bike rates are \$15 for a day, \$20 for 24 hours, and \$49 for a week. Inline skates are \$15 for 24 hours.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



In St. Pete Beach, there are as many different kinds of lodging as there are different kinds of visitors. A lot of these places are beach-front and geared to activity in the waves.

Hotels & Motels



Families will love **TradeWinds** at 5500 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 800-237-0707 or 727-367-6461, where there are free paddleboats to navigate the property's canals, a pizza parlor, a putting course, free tennis clinics, a kids' program, pools of all sizes, and a game room named Videoville. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$



The 70+-year-old **Don CeSar Beach Resort & Spa** at 3400 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 800-282-1116 or 727-360-1881, www.doncesar.com, is the doyenne of local beach resorts. Palatial, yet playful, it houses amenities from dual swim pools and kids' program, to watersports rentals and a spa. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Inn on the Beach at 1401 Gulf Way in Pass-A-Grille, ☎ 360-8844, has 12 cozy, clean, comfortable, and nicely appointed rooms with a view of the beach. \$-\$\$\$

Tierra Verde Yacht & Tennis Resort at 200 Madonna Blvd. in Tierra Verde, ☎ 727-867-8611 or 800-934-0549, is a seaworthy community gathered around a yacht basin. Its 66 apartments come in three sizes for two to six people, all with kitchenettes and private balconies. Other amenities include tennis, a huge swimming pool, a jacuzzi, restaurants, bars, and entertainment. \$\$-\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

To rent a condo by the week or month, contact **Isla Del Sol Realty**, 6025 Sun Blvd., 800-237-0722 or 727-867-1191.

Camping



The region's best campground occupies St. Christopher Key in **Fort De Soto County Park**, ☎ 727-582-2267. The 235-site campground is spotless, surrounded by water, and perfect for fishermen, hikers, and bike riders. Rates are \$20.90 per night, including tax, minimum two-night stay.



Where To Eat

St. Pete Beach is perfect for the hungry adventurer with a limited pocketbook. Seafood restaurants up and down the strip serve fresh seafood, often in old fish-house style, meaning breaded and fried, or simply broiled or steamed.

The Pelican Diner at 7501 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-360-3974, however, caters to the needs of comfort food-seekers. You can't miss its classic chrome-sided, vintage diner-car architecture. Inside, you can order homemade specialties from the counter or booths. It's open daily for breakfast and lunch (\$2-\$5), Monday-Saturday for dinner (\$5-\$11).



For something off the beaten path, casual, waterfront, and locally loved, head to **Woody's Waterfront Café & Beach Bar** at Corey Ave. and Sunset Way, ☎ 727-360-9165. You sit in the open air, beneath a ceiling of hanging surfboards, or under umbrellas on the patio overlooking the pass between Treasure Island and Sand Key. The fare is burgers and seafood baskets for around \$4-\$8. By the way, the “beach” part of the name is misleading; the beach is long gone. Open daily.



When you do get ready to spend a lot of cash for a culinary splurge, head to **The Maritana Grille** at the Don CeSar Resort, 3400 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 727-360-1881. Dishes such as pepper-seared yellowfin tuna with warm fennel, baby spinach and gingered carrot broth are executed in fine new Florida style and are priced à la carte in the \$23-\$29 range. Booths and tables sit in an atmosphere of aquariums and refined tropicalia. Reservations recommended.

On the bayfront with docking, **Wharf Seafood Restaurant**, at 2001 Pass-A-Grille Way, ☎ 727-367-9469, is a local's kind of place serving unpretentiously prepared fish, shrimp, crab cakes, and crab claws. Open for lunch and dinner daily. Prices run \$4-\$11.

Hurricane Seafood Restaurant, Ninth Ave. and Gulf Way in Pass-A-Grille, ☎ 727-360-9558, is the island's best-known and most imposing restaurant. The three-story Victorian building overlooks the beach and historic district. I find the food and service somewhat overrated, but it's worth at least one visit. Grouper is the specialty on the comprehensive menu. It's open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Prices are \$2-\$14.

Buried in Shoppers Village mall, **Native Seafood & Trading Co.**, 5901 Sun Blvd. in Isla del Sol at Pinellas Bayway, ☎ 727-866-8772, has nabbed its reputation for tropical goodies cooked over an Aztec wood-burning stove, whatever that may be. Daily dinner specials, from \$10-\$16, include tropical shrimp salad, oak-planked salmon, and Caribbean crab cakes.

Nightlife



Party-down day and night at St. Pete Beach. You'll be in good company. Many party places are located within resorts. Watch local papers for what band is playing where and at what time.

Stormy's at the Hurricane at Ninth Ave. and Gulf Way in Pass-A-Grille, ☎ 727-360-9558, creates a Caribbean atmosphere where you can enjoy live jazz and other styles nightly.

At **Harp and Thistle Pub**, 650 Corey Ave., ☎ 727-360-4104, you can listen to Celtic folk music while you sip an Irish beer.

St. Petersburg

Downtown St. Petersburg is an old city previously known for its aging population. Since the 1880s, when Peter Demens gave the city a railroad and the name of his Russian hometown, St. Petersburg has been associated with healthful climes and restorative waters. In its early days, retirees and convalescents flooded the peninsular town looking for rest and rejuvenation. This took its toll on St. Petersburg. For many years it looked like a worn-out rest home waiting room.

But new blood has been transfused into the city in recent years, making its waterfront district a happening place for lovers of the outdoors and for other visitors. The rejuvenation is ongoing, turning St. Petersburg into a thriving metropolis with its own college, major-league baseball arena, world-class museums, and fashionable shopping districts. Sophisticated and savvy, it presents the flip side of the barrier islands' swimsuit-and-suntan-oil attitude.

Getting Here



From I-275, take **I-175** or **375** to get downtown. Numbered streets run north-south, numbered avenues run east-west. **Second Street** is closest to the waterfront. **Beach Drive** is where First Street logically would be, at bay's edge. **Fourth Street North** is Highway 92, which takes you to Tampa Bay bridges. **Central Ave.** is the dividing point between avenues north and avenues south. It also connects downtown to the beaches.

AUTHOR TIP



*Tour downtown on the **Looper** trolley, 11-5 every day. The tour begins at The Pier (see Sights & Attractions, below), 800 Second Ave. NE, ☎ 727-571-3440, and costs 50¢. The trolley also provides \$1 round-trip shuttle service from The Pier to Tropicana Field for Devil Rays games.*

Information



St. Petersburg Area of Commerce is at 100 Second Ave. N., Ste. 150, ☎ 727-821-4715, www.stpete.com, open Monday-Friday, 8-5. Or visit **The Pier Visitor Information Center** at 800 Second Ave. NE, ☎ 727-821-6164, open 10-8, Monday-Saturday; 11-6 on

Sunday. The **Suncoast Welcome Center** at 2001 Ulmerton Rd., ☎ 727-573-1449, is open daily, 8-6.

Sights & Attractions

■ Downtown

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



St. Petersburg has moved to the forefront of Florida's art scene. A district downtown known as **The QuARter** encompasses numerous galleries, theaters, and music clubs.

Explore art through the ages at the **Museum of Fine Arts**, 255 Beach Dr. NE, ☎ 727-896-2667, www.fine-arts.org. Gallery rooms and gardens display the works of major artists, including Georgia O'Keeffe, Edgar Degas, and Paul Gauguin. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors, \$2 for students older than six. Sunday admission is free. Hours are 10-5, Tuesday-Saturday; 1-5 on Sunday.

St. Petersburg Museum of History at 335 Second Ave. NE, ☎ 727-894-1052, is not your normal, stuffy historical museum. Light and airy, it features a circa-1910 Benoist airboat hanging from the ceiling – the first recorded airplane to fly a commercial route by crossing from Tampa to St. Petersburg – and costumes you can “try on” by standing behind glass pull-out displays and looking in the mirror. Other vignettes realistically depict life throughout the history of St. Petersburg. Adult admission is \$5, \$4 for seniors, and \$2 for children under age seven. Hours are Monday-Saturday, 10-5; Sunday, 1-5.

Since its opening in 1995, **Florida International Museum**, 100 2nd St. N, ☎ 800-777-9882 or 727-822-3693, www.floridamuseum.org, has hosted such prestigious exhibits as “*Titanic: The Exhibition*” and “*Treasures of the Czars*.” In November 1999, “*John F. Kennedy: The Exhibition*” opened and will become the museum's first permanent exhibit. The museum is open 9-5 daily when exhibiting. Tickets are \$13.95 for adults, \$12.95 for seniors, \$7.95 for college students, and \$5.95 for children.

The world's fourth-largest of its kind, **Tampa Bay Holocaust Museum**, 55 Fifth St. S., www.tampabayholocaust.org, ☎ 727-820-0100, displays Holocaust art and other related permanent and rotating exhibits. Continuous exhibits include a film and original boxcar used for transporting prisoners in Poland. Hours are Monday-Friday, 10-5; Saturday-Sunday, noon-5; last admission is at 4. Adult admission is \$6; seniors and college students \$5; students ages 18 and under \$2.

One of downtown's most impressive treasures, the **Salvador Dali Museum** at 1000 Third St. S., ☎ 727-823-3767, www.daliweb.com, houses the

world's largest collection of original works by the renowned surrealist, with melting clocks, men hatching from eggs, and more. Some of his works reach floor to ceiling, others are small preliminary pencil sketches. Special exhibits complement permanent ones. Browse the museum store for something unusual. The museum is open Monday-Saturday, 9:30-5:30 (until 8 on Thursday), and on Sunday, noon-5:30. Cost for adults is \$8; for seniors, \$7; for students, \$4; for children age 10 and under, free.

Performing Arts

In April, **American Stage**, 211 Third St. S., ☎ 727-823-7529, performs Shakespeare outdoors Wednesday-Sunday. At other times, St. Petersburg's oldest theater hosts live productions in an intimate 130-seat setting.

Bayfront Center & Mahaffey Theater, 400 First St. S., ☎ 727-892-5767, hosts the Florida Orchestra, Bay Area Civic Opera, Tampa Bay Symphony, celebrity entertainment, athletic events, and other performances. Call for schedule and ticket prices.

Family Fun

The Pier, 800 Second Ave. NE, ☎ 727-821-6164, www.stpete-pier.com, a futuristic structure in the shape of an upside-down pyramid at the end of a long wharf, is the core of downtown action. It's the place to shop, dine, party, fish, or take a simulated movie ride. It's open 10-9, Monday-Thursday; 10-10 on Friday and Saturday; 11-7 on Sunday. Parking is \$3, which includes trolley transportation from the lots to The Pier.

On the second floor of The Pier, you'll find the **Pier Aquarium**, filled with fish exhibits and huge tanks. Donations of \$1 are requested. Hours are 10-8, Friday-Saturday; 12-6, Sunday.

Adults enjoy **Great Explorations, The Hands On Museum** at The Pier on Second Ave. NE, Third Floor, ☎ 727-821-8992, as much as children do. It is divided into six arenas, one devoted to pre-schoolers, another to music, and others named Touch Tunnel, Body Shop, The Power Plant, and Experimental Gallery. It is open Monday-Saturday, 10-8; Sunday, 11-6. Admission is \$4 for anyone age three and over, \$2 for seniors.

Spectator Sports

Major league baseball has hit Tampa Bay hard. St. Petersburg's amazing **Tropicana Field** at 16th St. and First Ave. S., ☎ 888-FAN-RAYS or 727-825-3250, hosts the young Tampa Bay Devil Rays team. And the fans have gone wild. This is the only way to enjoy summer baseball in Florida – in air-conditioned comfort. More like a small city than a stadium, Tropicana holds a sit-down restaurant, lots and lots of food stands, video games and a play area for kids, a cigar bar, and even a hot-tub somewhere up there in the stands. General, reserved and box admission runs \$7-\$25, plus you'll pay about \$7 for parking. Field and home plate seating is also available.

The concessions aren't cheap, either – the price of air-conditioned comfort. Tours of the stadium are offered Monday-Friday from April 12-Dec. 27 on days when the team isn't playing. Tours are \$3 for children ages 12 and under, \$3 for seniors, and \$5 for teens and adults. The “D Rays” spring-train right in town at **Al Lang Stadium**, 822 Second Ave., ☎ 822-3384, where you can see them play for \$3-\$12.

TAMPA BAY BASEBALL TRIVIA

Although Tampa-St. Petersburg didn't get its first major league baseball team until 1998, the region has scored a few claims to baseball fame in its past.

- On April 4, 1919, **Babe Ruth** hit his longest home run at Tampa's Plant Field. His 587-foot hit set a record in a pre-season game.
 - Ybor City native **Al Lopez**, known as “El Señor,” was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1977. Lopez spent 18 years as a catcher with the Pittsburgh Pirates, Brooklyn Dodgers, and Boston Braves and 17 years as manager of the Chicago White Sox and Cleveland Indians.
 - Two well-known men of baseball call the Bay area home: LA Dodgers' **Gary Sheffield** and New York Yankees' owner **George Steinbrenner**.
 - The **New York Yankees** hold their spring training in Tampa. Their facility is named **Legends Field**, after their stadium in New York (see page 130).
 - The Philadelphia Phillies hold spring training at **Jack Russell Stadium** in Clearwater, ☎ 727-441-8638.
 - In the summer of 1999, The **International Softball Federation** relocated its Hall of Fame, training and competition center, and international headquarters to Plant City in eastern Hillsborough County. It will occupy the stadium once used for spring training by the Cincinnati Reds.
-

■ Outlying Areas

Spectator Sports

Derby Lane, 10490 Gandy Blvd., ☎ 727-576-1361, races greyhound dogs January-June. Matinee races are held at 12:30, Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. Evening races are offered Monday-Saturday at 7:30. General admission is \$1.

Natural Areas

Just south of the Gandy Bridge that takes you to Tampa lies an oasis of green known as **Weedon Island Preserve**, 1500 Weedon Dr. NE, ☎ 727-579-8360. The developing 1,500-acre bayside plot now offers nine miles of hiking trails along two small lakes jumping with mullet, a 45-foot observation tower, a four-mile canoe trail, and a fishing pier. Future plans include a Native American Cultural Center, which, in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution, will focus on the Amerindian communities that inhabited the site from 10,000 BC to 1200 AD. Open 7-sunset.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Since 1889, **The Pier** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at 800 Second Ave. NE, ☎ 727-821-6164, in its various incarnations, has lured fishermen. A bait house on the south side takes care of tackle and bait needs. Two catwalks accommodate fishermen.

There's another modern, free fishing pier at **Weedon Island Preserve** (see above).

Friendship Trail Bridge, (see *On Foot*, below) is a 2.6-mile trail on the old Gandy Bridge designated for fishing as well as bike and foot traffic.

Across from Veterans Memorial Park, **Ultimate Fishing Center**, 9385 Bay Pines Blvd., ☎ 727-320-9032, offers bait and equipment rental and repair.

Boat Ramps

St. Petersburg has several free boat access points throughout the city. They include **Coffee Pot Park**, First St at 31st Ave. NE; **Demens Landing South**, Bayshore Drive at First Ave. S.; and **War Veterans Memorial Park**, 9600 Bay Pines Blvd.

Boat Rentals

To rent boats, WaveRunners, paddleboats, jet boats, and kayaks from The Pier, call **Teddy's Rentals**, ☎ 727-822-8697. WaveRunners range \$35-\$50 for a half-hour; paddleboats are \$15, kayaks \$10, and six-foot fishing tenders with trolling motor are \$15.

Boat Charters & Tours

The Caribbean Queen, ☎ 727-895-BOAT, departs for three to four dolphin-sightseeing tours daily. Prices for the one-hour excursions are \$12.84 plus tax for adults; \$10.70 for seniors and juniors ages 12-17; \$6.42 for children ages three-11.

Paddling

Near the entrance to Weedon Island Preserve (see *Outlying Sights & Attractions*, above), **Canoe & Kayak Rental**, ☎ 727-570-9296, rents canoes for use in the preserve. Rates are \$20 for a half-day, \$30 for all day.

■ On Foot



Completed in December, 1999, the **Friendship TrailBridge** is the longest over-the-water recreation trail (2.6 miles) in the US. It transforms the Old Gandy Bridge over Tampa Bay into a trail for biking, walking, running, inline skating, and fishing.

For a peaceful brush with nature and six hiking and biking trails, head to **Boyd Hill Nature Center** at 1101 Country Club Way S., ☎ 727-893-7326. Beneath oak canopies you can picnic, play on the playground, see caged birds, spot butterflies, visit the nature center, and stroll in quietude. Admission to the center is free; use of the trails costs \$1 for adults, 50¢ for children ages three-17. Hours are 9-5, daily; 9-8 on Tuesday and Thursday during summer.

■ On Wheels

Bicycling & Inline Skating



The 47-mile **Pinellas Trail**, ☎ 727-464-4751 or 727-393-8909, begins near downtown St. Petersburg at 34th St. and Eighth Ave. S., then heads north through city, town, and country following an old railroad route to Tarpon Springs. You can hike, bike, jog, or skate it. The only designated parking for the trail is at Leach Park, 7111 Old Oakhurst Rd., in Seminole.

The **Friendship TrailBridge** (see *On Foot*, above) is also used for biking and skating.

You can rent bikes and inline skates at the Pier. Call **Teddy's Rentals**, ☎ 727-822-8697.

Go-Kart Racing

For a racier on-wheels adventure, don your courage and head out to **MoKart** indoor racing arena at 4301 34th St. S., ☎ 727-866-3757. MoKart

provides the headgear, coveralls, 5.5-hp carts (top speed: 35 mph), and two separate tracks for different levels of skill. Drivers must be over 12 years old. Cost is \$13 for an eight-minute session, \$22 for two sessions, and \$39 for all day, plus there's a \$3 one-time ID card charge. The tracks are open Monday-Thursday, 2-10; Friday, 2-11; Saturday, noon-11; and Sunday, noon-9. Call ahead to confirm track availability.

■ In The Air



At **Biplane Rides**, Albert Whitted Airport off I-275 at Exit 9, ☎ 727-895-6266, your air taxi is a 1933 WACO UIC originally owned by William Randolph Hearst. Three passengers pay \$55 per flight and up for short to extensive tours.

Shopping



In “**The QuARter**,” as locals call downtown’s pier/waterfront area, you’ll find great shopping, especially for art. **The Pier**, 800 Second Ave. NE, ☎ 727-821-6164, holds a gamut of specialty souvenir shops, including one devoted entirely to hot peppers complete with a tasting bar, and another to cartoon memorabilia.

Book-lovers should head to block-long **Haslam’s Book Store**, 2025 Central Ave., ☎ 727-822-8616, www.haslams.com, Florida’s largest bookseller.

For mall-sized shopping, try **Tyrone Square**, 66th St. and 22nd Ave. N., ☎ 727-347-3889.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Other than business travelers, most people head to the beaches to stay. Lodging downtown tends to be priced slightly higher than on the beaches, but is quieter and more sophisticated.

Hotels, Motels & Resorts



To luxuriate totally, do what the rich folk did back in the '20s: check into the Vinoy. The **Renaissance Vinoy Resort**, 501 Fifth Ave. NE, ☎ 894-1000 or 800-HOTELS-1, is a renovated vision of roaring twenties with long, arched hallways, plush rooms (some with spas), pampered dining, and a convenient location on downtown’s waterfront. The marina, tennis courts, golf course, and fitness center cater to active types. Ask about packages. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Missed by the renovation-upgrade craze, **Beach Park Motel** at 300 Beach Dr. NE, ☎ 727-898-6325, offers affordable, clean, and convenient lodging downtown. Rooms, efficiencies, and apartments. \$-\$\$

Inns/Bed & Breakfasts

Downtown St. Petersburg has a number of bed-and-breakfasts and small accommodations. **Bay Gables** at 136 Fourth Ave. NE, ☎ 727-822-0044, is among the former, ensconced in a lovely 1910 Victorian house decorated with antiques. It is steps away from downtown's shopping district, and features a tearoom and garden. \$\$-\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

Florida Vacation Condos & Homes, 4700 34th St., ☎ 800-237-5960 or 727-866-2494, www.capalborental.com, lists short-term rental properties throughout the St. Petersburg, Clearwater, and Tampa areas.

Camping

Close to the beaches, **St. Petersburg Resort KOA Kampground** at 5400 95th St. N., ☎ 800-562-7714 or 727-392-2233, www.koa.com/where/fl/09144.htm, gives you the option of tent, RV, or air-conditioned cabin camping on lovely, oak-shaded grounds. It's great for outdoors enthusiasts, providing bike and canoe rentals, boat slips, a fishing dock, a swimming pool, three hot tubs, bike trails, miniature golf, shuffleboard, volleyball, bocci ball, and children's playground. Rates for two adults are \$35 for tent, \$45-\$47 for RV, and \$53-\$63 for a cabin.

Where To Eat



Downtown St. Petersburg has fine choices for dining out. Easiest for visitors are the many options at **The Pier** (see *Sights & Attractions*, page 104), 800 Second Ave. NE, ☎ 727-821-6164. The food court has a bakery, coffee and tea, pizza, steaks, burgers, and ice cream, all reasonably priced and above standard fast-food fare. Often you're entertained by minstrels.

On the fifth floor of The Pier, **ChaCha Coconuts**, ☎ 727-822-6655, is a fun place to eat, sky-high, panoramic, and all done up in bright, Caribbean colors. It serves lunch and dinner daily; sandwiches and entrées run \$4-\$10.

En route to the islands, stop at **Ted Peters' Famous Smoked Fish**, an enigmatic little spot at 1350 Pasadena Ave., ☎ 727-381-7931. Locals crowd the outdoor counter and picnic tables along a busy street. There's also air-conditioned, uncrowded indoor seating, but for some reason this is usually second-choice, even on hot summer days. The menu contains a handful of items centered around its famous smoked mullet, mackerel, and salmon,

and Manhattan [sic] clam chowder and German potato salad. Choices of beverage are milk, root beer, or beer. Sandwiches and lunch platters range from \$1.75 to \$7. Dinners are \$10-\$15. It's open for lunch and early dinner every day but Tuesday.



Away from downtown, **Skyway Jacks** at 6701 34th St. S., ☎ 727-866-3217, is legendary. A colorful version of passé funk, it's popular with fishermen, businessmen, and all sorts. The food is homemade, Southern style, and plain cheap. Open daily, it prices its popular breakfasts at \$3-\$5, lunches \$1.50-\$4, and dinners \$4-\$7. Look for the big chicken out front.

Nightlife



Downtown St. Petersburg is hopping, from **The Pier** and **waterfront** on down Central Ave. toward Tropicana Field, in an area being developed as **The Dome District**. Soon to open downtown, **BayWalk Complex** will hold 20 cinema screens and dozens of retail shops. For information on shows and events, call the Downtown St. Petersburg Entertainment Event Hotline, ☎ 727-825-3333.

ChaCha Coconuts (see *Where To Eat*, above) at The Pier, ☎ 727-822-6655, and other Pier businesses sponsor indoor and outdoor events with live rock or reggae, and often with mobs of people.

Fans of big band dancing or the movie *Cocoon* should visit the classic Big-Band **Coliseum Ballroom** at 535 Fourth Ave. N., ☎ 727-892-5202, where part of the above-mentioned flick was filmed. It's open for afternoon and evening sessions; call for specific times. Cover charge is around \$4-\$12.

Tampa

Overview

Tampa is big city – skyscrapers, industry, traffic jams, the whole bit. Known as “The Big Guava,” the city alone has a population of 293,920. Many of its guests come on business. Tourists and adventurers are more likely to head to the islands of St. Petersburg/Clearwater.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Downtown Tampa
- Apollo Beach
- Brandon
- South Hillsborough
- Northeast Tampa
- Northwest Tampa

Still, Tampa has its vacation appeal, and has since the 1880s, when **Henry Plant** brought his railroad to town and built an elaborate hotel designed after the Alhambra in Spain. With its deep port and easy water accesses, Tampa thrived. **Cigars** constituted one of its earliest big money-making industries and built an entire city named for industry magnate Don Vincente Martinez Ybor. Today, **Ybor City** retains the essence of the Cuban cigar-makers and their immigrant workforce and is the city’s best cultural attraction. Teddy Roosevelt added to Ybor City’s historic allure. Stationed with his Rough Riders in the vicinity during the Spanish-American War, he frequented a local club.

Busch Gardens is Tampa’s major attraction. It, along with the new **Florida Aquarium**, a number of museums, professional sports, and parks, gives Tampa a lot to offer the sightseer. Outdoor enthusiasts fare less well, but they will find a lot of indoor activities or attractions that deal with nature. In the great wide open, **Tampa Bay** (the largest harbor in the US between Norfolk and New Orleans), **Hillsborough Bay**, and the **Hillsborough River**, which wends its way from civilization to sheer wilderness, generate some recreational excitement. Most adventure is sought on the water and away from city lights. This chapter generally covers Tampa and its Hillsborough County outskirts as far north as to what spills into eastern Pasco County.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: A round, yellow fruit, the *guava* grows around Tampa and is popular in Latin cuisine. It is used to make jelly, paste, and juice. To some, the fleshy guava has an offensive odor. Others find their scent sweet and appealing.

The chapter is divided into three parts: **Downtown**, **Ybor City**, and **Northwest, Northeast & South Tampa**. The latter covers the area

around the airport and north into adjacent Pasco County, Busch Gardens, and southern Hillsborough County between Tampa and Bradenton.

Transportation

■ Airlines



Tampa International Airport (TPA), ☎ 800-767-8882 or 813-870-8700, www.tampaairport.com, is the West Coast’s largest and Florida’s third busiest. The table below shows domestic and international airlines that land in Tampa.

DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES SERVING TAMPA INT’L AIRPORT (TPA)	
American Airlines.	☎ 800-433-7300
Continental.	☎ 800-525-0280
Delta Air Lines.	☎ 800-221-1212
Northwest.	☎ 800-225-2525
Southwest.	☎ 800-435-9792
TWA.	☎ 800-221-2000
United.	☎ 800-241-6522
US Airways.	☎ 800-428-4322
Air Aruba.	☎ 800-882-7822
Air Canada.	☎ 800-776-3000
British Airways.	☎ 800-247-9297
Cayman Airways.	☎ 800-422-9626
Martinair Holland.	☎ 800-366-4655

■ Rental Cars

Rental cars are available at the airport and other locations throughout the area. Companies include **Alamo**, ☎ 800-327-9633; **Avis**, ☎ 800-331-1212 or 813-396-3500; **Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3131; and **Budget**, ☎ 800-527-0700 or 813-877-6051.

■ Bus, Train & Taxi Service

HARTline (Hillsborough Area Regional Transit), ☎ 813-254-HART, runs buses through the city. By permit, bike riders are allowed to transport bicycles on special bus bike racks. Fares are 55¢-\$1.50; exact change is required.

Amtrak, ☎ 800-872-7245, offers passenger train service into Tampa.

For ground transportation to and from the airport, contact **United Cab**, ☎ 253-2424, **Taxi Plus**, ☎ 813-228-7587, **Yellow Cab**, ☎ 813-253-0121, and **Alpha Limousines**, 813-247-6190.

■ Getting Around

Tampa lies at the crossroads of interstates 75, 275, and 4. **I-275** rushes east-west north of downtown, then veers north. It connects St. Petersburg to **I-75**. **I-4** branches off I-275, crosses I-75 farther south, then heads to Orlando. I-75 forms an eastern border to the metropolitan area. **Highway 41** pierces the city limits on the east side of town. The fastest route through town is **Crosstown Expressway** (Rte. 618), a toll road that runs north-south from **Highway 92** to downtown, then squiggles east-west to I-75, with limited exits. Three bridges cross Tampa Bay from St. Petersburg/Clearwater. North to south, they are **Courtney Campbell Causeway** (Rte. 60/Memorial Highway), **Howard Frankland Bridge** (I-275), and **Gandy Bridge** (Hwy. 92).

DID YOU KNOW?



I-4 is the lowest numbered interstate in the United States.

Information



An automated information line and attraction/accommodation reservation system is available 24 hours a day at ☎ 888-224-1733, 813-223-2752, or 800-36-TAMPA.

For additional information, contact **Tampa/Hillsborough Convention and Visitors Association**, 400 N. Tampa St., Suite 1010, Tampa, FL 33602, ☎ 800-826-8358 or 813-223-1111, www.gotampa.com. The **Visitor Information Center** is located at Madison St. and Ashley Dr. in the downtown area and is open Monday-Saturday, 9-5. **Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce** at 801 E. Kennedy Blvd., Tampa, FL 33602, ☎ 813-228-7777, open Monday-Friday, 9-5, is another source of local information.

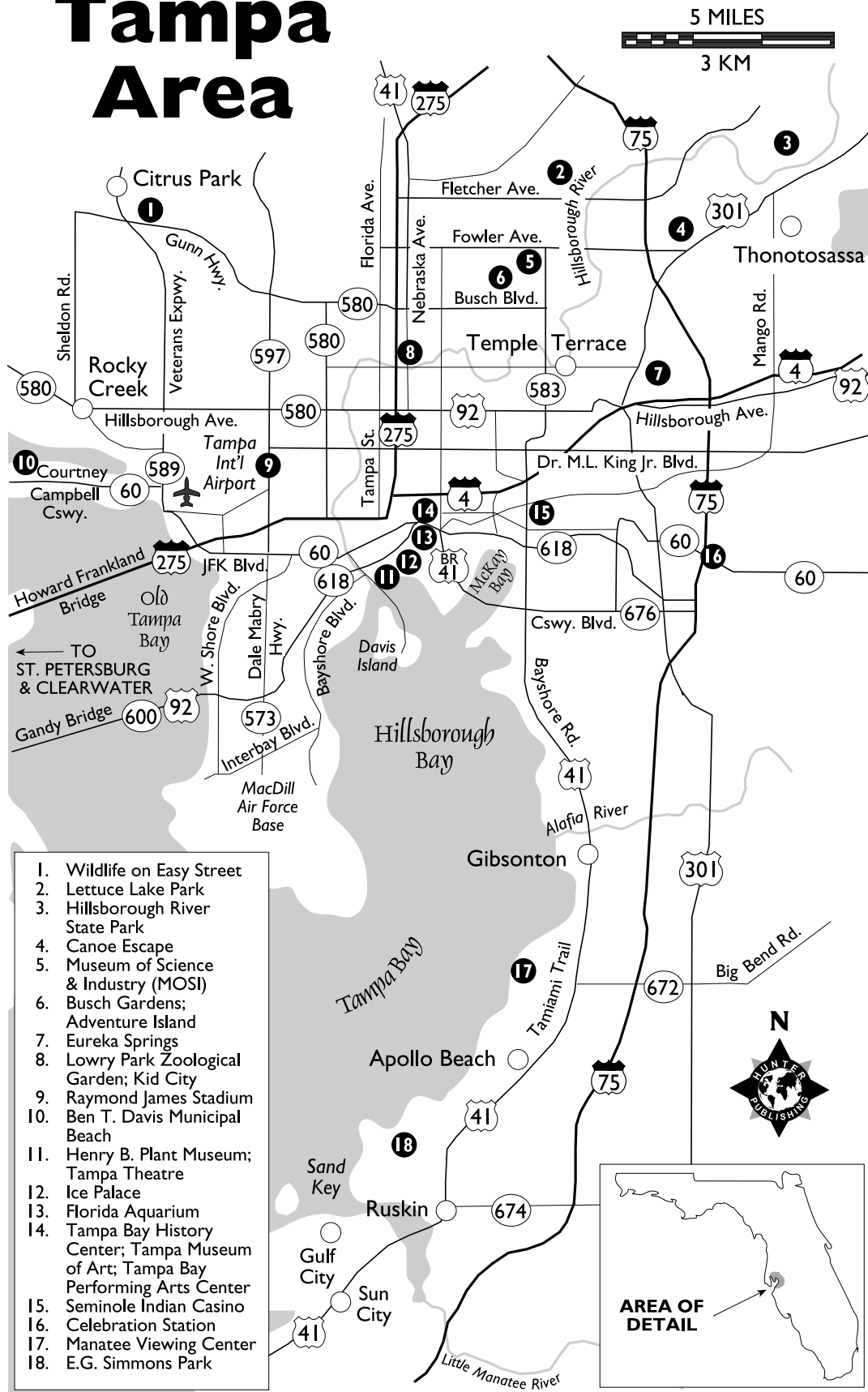
Festivals & Events



FEBRUARY – Tampa's most celebrated event takes place in February – **Gasparilla Pirate Fest**, ☎ 813-353-8108, re-creating the legend of a local hero, pirate Gasparilla. On Invasion Day hundreds of swashbuckling pirates raid the city aboard the three-masted *Jose Gasparilla* pirate ship and lead a boisterous parade along Bayshore

© 2000 HUNTER PUBLISHING, INC.

Tampa Area



Blvd. Month-long festivities include street dances, foot races, and art shows.

Ybor City's **Fiesta Day**, ☎ 813-248-3712, a street festival and illuminated night parade, runs concurrently with Gasparilla Days, as does the **Florida State Fair** at Florida State Fairgrounds, ☎ 813-621-7821 or 800-345-FAIR (FL). Admission is \$3-\$7.

OCTOBER - Ybor City's liveliest event is **Guavaween**, ☎ 813-242-4828, a Latin-flavored celebration. It features a costumed street party, hayrides, petting zoo, pony rides, and a night parade. Admission is \$7-\$8.

DECEMBER - Snow in Florida? Get it while it's cold at December's **Santafest**, ☎ 813-274-8518. Events include snowball fights, ice-skating, a parade, kids games, and a visit from St. Nick. **First Night**, ☎ 813-274-7054, rings in the New Year in downtown Tampa with hundreds of entertainers. Admission: \$5 in advance, \$10 at the door.

BUDGET TIPS

- If you're coming to Tampa from Orlando with plans to hit Busch Gardens, consider buying a **10-day FlexTicket**, which offers discounts on Busch as well as the four biggest non-Disney Orlando theme parks. Unlimited admission to Busch Gardens, SeaWorld Florida, Universal Studios Escape, Universal Studios Islands of Adventure, and Wet 'n Wild water park costs \$196.95 for adults, \$157.95 for children ages three-9. Tax is additional. FlexTickets can be purchased at each park's front gate, through travel agents, or through Flexticket office at ☎ 800-447-0665.
 - To save money on a day at **Busch Gardens**, pack your own snacks and beverages, or leave for lunch and walk across the street to a fast-food restaurant and return later. To make beverages stay cooler in Florida heat, freeze them first. Bring your own towels and rain ponchos so you won't be forced to buy them at highly inflated theme-park prices.
 - **Tampa Bay History Center** is open free to the public (see page 117).
 - There's no charge for seeing the manatees and touring the exhibits at Tampa Electric's **Manatee Viewing Center** (page 133).
 - Admission to **Tampa Museum of Art** (page 117) is free (or by donation) Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings.
-

Downtown Tampa

Downtown Tampa, a hub of business activity, is restructuring to widen its appeal to tourists. Each year, a new attraction increases the area's tourism opportunities. Scored into segments by waterways and channels, Tampa's downtown is also the center of shipping activity. Much of the restoration takes place in the once unsightly shipping zones of the Channel District, where a 16-story, 24-screen megatheater is being built.

Sights are basically divided between the neighborhoods of **Hyde Park** on the east side, **downtown/Harbour Island** in the center, and the under-renovation **Channel District**, on the east side.

WEEKEND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

■ **FRIDAY:** Arrive in north Tampa. Go canoeing on the Hillsborough River with **Canoe Escape** in the morning. Have a picnic lunch at **Hillsborough River State Park**. Visit **Museum of Science and Industry** or **Lowry Park Zoo** in the afternoon. Eat dinner at **Oystercatchers** or **Armani's** and spend the night in the Westshore region; try the Hyatt Regency DoubleTree Guest Suites, Tampa Hilton Airport/Westshore, or Hampton Inn.

■ **SATURDAY:** Go to **Busch Gardens** or take a **hot-air balloon ride** with Big Red Balloon in morning. Have lunch at **Mel's Hot Dogs**. Spend the afternoon back at **Busch Gardens** or at **Adventure Island**. Spend the night in north Tampa.

■ **SUNDAY:** Drive to **Ybor City**. Tour **Ybor City Museum**, shops, and brewery in morning. Eat lunch at **Columbia Restaurant**. Visit the **Florida Aquarium** in the afternoon. Drive to **Soho District** for dinner. Spend the night in downtown Tampa.

Getting Here



From I-75, the **Crosstown Expressway** (Rte. 618, Exit 50), a toll road, is the quickest way to downtown. From St. Petersburg, cross Gandy Bridge (Hwy. 92) and hop on the expressway. From I-4, take Exit 1 and head south on 22nd St.

In Hyde Park, **Swann Ave.** is the main through-street. **Kennedy Blvd.**, to the north, forms one border for the neighborhood, and leads into downtown. **Bayshore Blvd.** is Hyde Park's 4½-mile show-off promenade, where visions of the deep blue intermingle with the grandeur of old homes.

Main downtown streets running north and south are **Ashley, Tampa, and Florida** streets. **Platt** and **13th streets** take you into the Channel District. To get to Ybor City, follow 13th St. east to 22nd St., head north to Seventh Ave. and turn west.

Look for blue directional signs in the downtown area. They point out your way to major attractions along twisting, intertwining, confusing streets.

AUTHOR TIP



TIP: *The new green **Tampa-Ybor Trolley**, ☎ 813-254-HART, shuttles you around the area's sights for 25¢ a passenger and runs daily, 7:30-5:30.*

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Downtown Tampa brims with artistic and historical opportunities. To learn all about Tampa's history, visit the bizarre structure you can't help but notice. The **Henry B. Plant Museum** at 401 W. Kennedy Blvd., ☎ 813-254-1891, www.plantmuseum.com, was built in the 1890s to lodge rich railroad arrivals. With its onion domes and minarets, it looks like a set from the *Arabian Nights*. Dazzling, period-furnished rooms and priceless art treasures explore the hotel's fate and portray the times. Hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 10-4; Sunday, noon-4. Admission is by donation, suggested as \$5 per adult, \$2 for children under age 12.

The newly opened **Tampa Bay History Center**, downtown in the Tampa Convention Center Annex at 225 S. Franklin, ☎ 813-228-0097, has graphics, hands-on displays, and artifacts from 12,000 to 100 years ago. Admission is free; donations accepted. It's open Tuesday-Saturday, 10-5; Sunday, 1-5.

The seven galleries at **Tampa Museum of Art**, 600 N. Ashley Dr., ☎ 813-274-8130, host five changing and three permanent exhibits of classic antiquities, 20th-century American art, and Florida artists. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors, and \$3 for students. Everyone enters free (or by donation) from 5-8pm on Thursday and 10-noon on Saturday. It's open 10-5, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday; 10-8 on Thursday; and 1-5 on Sunday.

Performing Arts

The **Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center** at 1010 N. MacInnes Place, ☎ 813-222-1000 or 800-955-1045, www.tampacenter.com, is home to 12 performing arts groups and hosts operas, ballets, Broadway musicals, the Spanish Lyric Theatre, and more in its three theaters. Call for schedule and ticket prices.

Downtown also has its classic treasures, including the gothically embellished **Tampa Theatre** at 711 Franklin St., ☎ 813-274-8981, www.tampa-theatre.org. Restored to its 1926 grandeur, it stages films, concerts, and other special events. Guided tours and open houses tell the theater's story, including tales of the resident ghost, a former projectionist. Tours are held twice monthly and include a short film and mini organ concert; call for times. Cost is \$5 each.

Family Fun

The **Florida Aquarium** at 701 Channelside Dr., www.flaaquarium.net, ☎ 813-273-4000 or 813-273-4020, is the jewel of downtown redevelopment, part of the Garrison Seaport Center in the Channel District. Beneath a seashell-shaped glass dome, exhibit areas replicate the state's different watery environments: mangrove estuary, freshwater, beach, marine, and coral reef – the most popular with its sharks, angelfish, and other intriguing creatures of the deep. A new adjunct concentrates specifically on sharks with hands-on displays demonstrating the animals' jaw power, spinal flexibility, anatomy, and other attributes. Frights of the Forest displays some of the world's less-loved wetlands creatures – vampires, poison dart frogs, leeches, and scorpions. At the end, a touch tank holds small sharks and rays that are safe to pet. Three dive shows are held daily along with behind-the-scenes tours, all at no extra charge. Admission for adults is \$11.95; for seniors, \$10.95; for children ages three-12, \$6.95. Parking is \$3. Hours are 9:30-5, daily.

Spectator Sports

Nearby, the **Tampa Bay Lightning** hockey team plays October-April in the huge **Ice Palace**, near the Florida Aquarium at 501 E. Kennedy Blvd., ☎ 813-223-4919, www.tampabaylightning.com. Individual game tickets range from \$17.50 to \$60. ☎ 813-287-8844 to order tickets, or 813-229-8800 for ticket information.

Adventures

■ On Water



You're never far from water in Tampa, even in the middle of downtown. Its variety of water bodies gives saltwater and freshwater fishermen their due. From downtown, it's easy to hook up with a charter headed for deep waters. For a fuller menu of fishing and boating opportunities, head to the beaches around St. Petersburg (see pages 96-98 and 106-107). Some outlying areas (see below) offer better access to canoeing and freshwater pursuits.

Fishing

Ballast Point Pier at 5300 Interbay Blvd. on the south end of Bayshore Blvd., extends 1,000 feet into Hillsborough Bay.

In shore and near-shore fishing is the specialty of **Captain D's Tampa Bay Charter**, 5114 W. Commerce St, ☎ 813-831-1809. Price for up to six persons is \$250-\$600 for half-day to full-day charters.

Captain Dave Markett, 14913 Warman St., ☎ 813-962-1435, charges \$300-\$500 to take you and a boatload of fishermen out to the flats for four to eight hours and cover territory as far as Boca Grande to the south and Homosassa to the north.

Boat Ramps

You'll find boat ramps at these four locations: on the east side of the **Gandy Bridge**; on **Bayshore Blvd.** near Platt St.; at **Marjorie Park** on Davis Island's south end; and on the **22nd St. Causeway**.

Boat Charters & Tours

The **Tampa Town Ferry**, ☎ 813-223-1522, taxis you and your vehicle to Harbour Island and up the Hillsborough River to outlying attractions. Prices per person, \$4-\$16; cars, \$3.

Snorkeling & Diving

Divers Supply, 8601 W. Hillsborough Ave., ☎ 813-885-1717, www.divers-supply.com, teaches scuba, arranges dive travel, and stocks a full array of equipment and accessories.

For nearby diving spots, see the entries on *Snorkeling & Diving* in the *Bradenton & Sarasota* and *St. Petersburg & Clearwater* chapters.

■ On Foot

Nature Walks



For a quiet nature walk in the city, head to **McKay Nature Park** at Crosstown Expressway and 34th St., a 150-acre refuge for more than 180 species of birds and other wildlife. Trails head into uplands habitat.

Jogging & Skating

Bayshore Blvd., billed as the world's longest continuous sidewalk (4½ miles), is perfect for inline skating and jogging. It runs between Hillsborough Bay and some of the town's loveliest old homes.



ICE-SKATING IN FLORIDA? *Ice skate where the Tampa Bay Lightning pro hockey team trains. Ice Sports Forum, 10222 Elizabeth Place, ☎ 813-684-PUCK, has a double indoor rink for open ice skating and lessons.*

■ On Horseback



Horseback River Safaris, ☎ 813-659-0743. Guided tours combine horseback riding and canoeing for adventures that last anywhere from 2½ to six hours. The safaris take you into wildlife preserve lands where it's possible to see deer, wild turkey, feral hogs, and alligators. A horseback-only tour costs \$42 per rider. The horseback-canoe combo is \$57. Tax is not included. Children must be seven years or older and accompanied by a legal guardian. The stables close June-September.

Shopping



Old Hyde Park Village at Swann and Dakota avenues, ☎ 813-251-3500, is hip, trendy, and scenic, with lots going on besides the upscale, name-brand and one-of-a-kind stores that line old streets. Free parking. Shops are open Monday-Saturday, 10-9, and on Sunday from noon-5.

Tarpon Bay Trading Company, 1610 Snow Circle W, ☎ 813-258-8190, is a good place to shop for sports clothing. **Hyde Park Zoo**, 1624 Snow Circle W., ☎ 813-254-7736, carries a menagerie of cuddly toys.

Across the channel from downtown center (take the bridge at Franklin St.), **Harbour Island** has elite allure with posh dining, shopping, and housing. For more information, ☎ 813-202-1830.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Tampa Bay area visitors with a yearning for adventure typically park themselves in Tampa's northern regions or out on St. Petersburg's beaches. If you want to (or must) stay in the inner city, downtown has plenty of rooms in all price categories.

Top-of-the-line **Wyndham Harbour Island Hotel** at 725 S. Harbour Island Blvd. on Harbour Island, ☎ 800-822-4200 or 813-229-5000, is close enough to all the downtown attractions, yet aloofly removed. Sports enthusiasts will be happy about guest privileges at the Harbour Island Athletic Club (fees charged), with 20 tennis courts, five racquetball courts, and two squash courts. A pool, a marina, dining, and entertainment complete the amenities. \$\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$\$

Holiday Inn – Ashley Plaza at 111 W. Fortune St., ☎ 813-223-1351, is more reasonably priced. Many of the rooms have a view of the river, plus you're within walking distance of downtown sights, particularly the Performing Arts Center. \$\$\$

Where To Eat



Tampa stays on the cutting edge of cuisine trends and has carved out a reputation for its fine and eclectic dining. Some of the classics still remain favorite, however, in this town of old and new. Many of the most popular collect in a pocket dubbed the **Soho District**, because it is centered around South Howard Ave.



For that special night out, there is no other choice than **Bern's Steak House** at 1208 S. Howard Ave., ☎ 800-282-1547 (FL) or 813-251-2421, www.bernssteakhouse.com, where steaks are cut, aged, and prepared to perfection. All of the meal's other ingredients get at least as much attention: Bern's has its own live fish container, organic garden, bakery, and coffee roaster. The main menu diversifies into meats other than steak, with seafood selections as well. The wine selection is renowned (Bern's boasts the largest working wine cellar in the world), as is the upstairs dessert parlor, with cozy TV-equipped booths and some 40 dessert selections. Count on a slow, enjoyable evening of fine dining in a setting of baroque elegance. Entrée prices start at \$14 for chopped steak and go up to three figures for large cuts to share among many. It's open daily for dinner, except Monday. Reservations are required.



In Olde Hyde Park Village, **Cactus Club**, 1601 Snow Ave., ☎ 813-251-4089, www.cactusclub.com, is the place to meet friends and dine casually on quirky Southwestern specialties such as Texas pizza, scallop chimichanga, and moo shu quesadillas. It's known for its burgers and margaritas. Dine amidst red brick and rustic wood or street-side under an umbrella. It's open daily for lunch and dinner.

SideBern's, 1002 Howard Ave. S, ☎ 813-258-2233, began as overflow seating for Bern's, down the street. Since then it has defined its own style of "one world" fusion cuisine, featuring such dishes as Szechuan-glazed grouper, chorizo-scaled sea bass with truffled plantain purée, and grilled golden oyster mushrooms with blue corn tamales and green chile chutney. Open for dinner Tuesday-Sunday, it charges \$14-\$23 for à la carte entrées. The restaurant also plans to open for lunch; call for days and times.

Le Bordeaux at 1502 S. Howard Ave., ☎ 813-254-4387, is a new darling of Soho. The intimate little French restaurant features dining in a 1927 home and authentic seafood and meat dishes such as salmon Provençale and *tournedos de veau aux champignons*. Open daily for dinner, with prices in the \$16-\$33 range.

Nightlife



When completed in the summer of 2000, **Channelside Entertainment Complex** at Garrison Seaport Center will hold a 20-screen movie theater, a high-tech video game room designed by Steven Spielberg, a comedy club, and trendy restaurants and shops in a festive open-air venue. Nearby, the **Ice Palace** at 501 E. Kennedy Blvd., www.palacenet.com, ☎ 813-223-1000 for events, 813-287-8844 for tickets, hosts major musicians in concert.

Ybor City

Ybor (pronounced EE-bore) City emerged out of a puff of smoke in the 1850s. Here, Cuban immigrants from Key West settled to make a name for Tampa in the burgeoning cigar industry, following the lead of namesake Don Vicente Martinez Ybor. Germans, Italians, Spaniards, and other nationalities came to work the factories and give the neighborhood a boom-time aura and distinctive flavor. In its heyday, the cigar industry employed 12,000 *tabaqueros* (cigar-makers) in 200 factories and produced 700 million cigars a year.

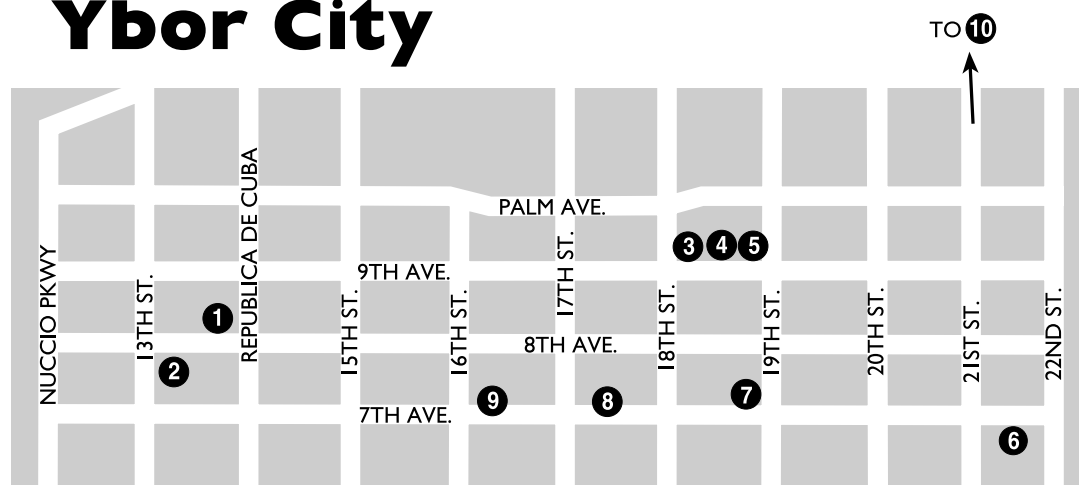
The district and its cobbled streets have been trying for a couple of decades to recover from a slump that left Ybor City looking rundown. The emergence is slow, but sure. It's gradually growing into a trendy shopping, nightclub, and dining zone. The resurgence of cigar smoking has helped and Ybor City seems to be thriving these days. Much of what's new is oriented toward upscale dining, shopping, and nightlife. Plans are to target an older affluent crowd with luxury housing, parking garages, and office space. The old Ybor-style restaurants still persist, with their *café con leche* and Cuban sandwiches, along with the tradition of hand-rolled cigars.

DID YOU KNOW?



TAMPA TRIVIA: *In the cigar factories of yore, one of the more educated workers was elected “El Lector.” His role was to read the day’s news, passages from the classics, and political treatises to the tabaqueros as they worked. The tradition began in Cuba and spread to Key West and Tampa.*

Ybor City



- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Ybor Square / Tampa Rico Cigar Co. | 6. Columbia Restaurant |
| 2. El Parque de Amigos de José Martí | 7. La Tropicana Café |
| 3. Ybor City Chamber of Commerce | 8. Hilton Garden Inn |
| 4. La Casita House Museum /
Preservation Park | 9. Ybor City Ghost Walk
(starting point) |
| 5. Ybor City State Museum | 10. Ybor City Brewing Co. |



© 2000 HUNTER PUBLISHING, INC.

Getting Here



Ybor City lies basically within a rectangle created by **Columbus Dr.**, **Nebraska Ave.**, **Seventh Ave.** (a.k.a. *La Septima*), and **22nd St.** Seventh is “main street.” Nebraska or 22nd will take you between Ybor and downtown. From I-4 west, take Exit 1.

Information



Contact the **Ybor City Chamber of Commerce** at 1800 E. Ninth Ave., ☎ 813-248-3712, www.ybor.org. It's open weekdays, 9-5.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Historic cigar factories and workers' homes, many of them reborn as shops, art galleries, and restaurants, fill the 110-block Ybor City district.

The **Ybor City State Museum** at 1818 E. Ninth Ave., ☎ 813-247-6323, www.ybormuseum.org, surveys the political, social, and cultural factors in Spain, Cuba, and the US that influenced the district's boom era. It occupies an old bakery building where Cuban bread was once made. Displays dwell on the history of cigar- and bread-making and the lives of the workers. The museum is open daily, 9-5.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Traditional Cuban bread is formed by hand into 36-inch-long loaves and baked to a golden crispiness with a single palm frond laid down the middle. The frond splits the crust, causing it to “bloom” down the center.*

La Casita House Museum, at 1804 E. Ninth Ave., sits among a row of six “shotgun” cottages (named for their straight-through design), typical of those where cigar factory workers lived circa 1895. This one is furnished. You’ll find it in **Preservation Park**, a period reconstructed streetscape. Combined admission/tour for the Ybor City State Museum and La Casita is \$2. La Casita is normally open daily, 10-2. The museum conducts one-hour tours of Ybor City at 10:30 every Saturday for \$4 each.

Tour the **Ybor City Brewing Company** at 2205 N. 20th St., ☎ 813-242-9222, www.ycbc.com, manufacturer of Ybor Gold beer. It occupies an 1890s cigar factory. Admission is \$2; tours are offered continuously from 11 to 3, Tuesday-Saturday.

The Cuban government holds title to **El Parque de Amigos de José Martí**, a small park across the street from Ybor Square (see *Shopping*, below). It contains a statue of Cuban revolutionary hero José Martí and soil from each Cuban province.

GUIDED TOURS OF YBOR CITY

Historic Tours and Events, 1320 E. Eighth Ave., ☎ 813-247-6692, organizes customized tours by an Ybor City native, whose mother once worked as a *tabaquero* (cigar roller). Sites include Ybor Square (see *Shopping*, page 126), a Cuban bread bakery, Ybor City State Museum, and Columbia Restaurant.

A different tour company, **Ybor City Ghost Walk**, 1616 E. Seventh Ave., ☎ 813-242-9255, takes you on a more ethereal excursion through Ybor’s colorful past and historic characters. Tours begin at 6pm, Thursday-Sunday. Cost is \$10 for adults, \$6 for children.

Adventures

■ On Foot



Stop at the **Ybor City Chamber of Commerce**, 1800 E. Ninth Ave., ☎ 813-248-3712, if you're interested in taking a **self-guided walking tour** of the area; a brochure with a map and site descriptions is available.

Shopping



For art, crafts, antiques, and cigars, you'll want to head to Ybor City. Wander the streets or visit **Ybor Square** at Eighth Ave. and 13th St., ☎ 813-247-4497, www.yborsquare.com – a cigar-factory turned into a shopperia, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It's open daily, 10-6, and Sunday from noon-5:30. It also has several restaurants.

At the **Tampa Rico Cigar Company** in Ybor Square, ☎ 813-248-0218, you can watch hand-rolled cigars in the making and stock up on humidored products.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Ybor City's first hotel, **Hilton Garden Inn**, 1700 E. Ninth Ave., ☎ 813-769-9267 or 877-FOR-HILTON, www.hilton.com/hotels/TPAYCGI, was built to blend with local architecture in Mediterranean style and a low skyline. The 95-room inn has a pool, fitness center, and complimentary shuttle. \$\$\$

Where To Eat



Once an enclave of inexpensive Cuban sandwiches, black bean soup, Cuban coffee, and other ethnic staples, Ybor City is watching its dining scene turn yuppy. But there are a few hold-outs where the past is still palpable and delicious.



Ybor's most renowned dining establishment, **Columbia Restaurant**, survives in rare form at 2117 E. Seventh Ave., ☎ 813-248-4961. You can't miss it: gaily tiled and Mediterranean in

style, it takes up a full city block. Inside, the rooms go on and on, each with its specific character. The main dining room is high ceilinged, with balconies and fountains. The Columbia, founded here in 1905, has spun off into locations throughout Florida, but this is the flagship. Along with its authentic Spanish-Cuban cuisine, it serves up live flamenco dancers Monday-Saturday. The restaurant is open daily for lunch and dinner. Dishes such as paella, *boliche*, *ropa vieja* (shredded beef), Spanish-style seafood, and chicken with yellow rice cost \$13-\$19. Tapas, sandwiches, and lunch entrées are priced at \$3-\$9.

Also a historic landmark, **Café Creole & Oyster Bar** at 1330 E. Ninth Ave., ☎ 813-247-6283, gives second life to an elite turn-of-the-century club. Elegant red-brick archways and casual formality recall its heyday, when Teddy Roosevelt was a regular. Open daily for lunch, Monday-Friday, and dinner, Monday-Saturday, it's especially known for its Wednesday night crawfish and shrimp boils in season. Specialties smack of Cajun influence: crab cakes, crawfish étouffée, and jambalaya. Lunch prices are \$6-\$10; dinner prices, \$9-\$16. Eat at sidewalk tables or indoors.

La Tropicana at 1822 E. Seventh Ave., ☎ 813-247-4040, hangs on to old Ybor traditions, with Cuban sandwiches, black beans and rice, and Cuban coffee. Specialties cost \$3-\$4. It's open for breakfast and lunch every day.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: A *Cuban sandwich*, Tampa style, not to be confused with a Miami-style Cubano, uses Cuban bread stuffed with roast pork, baked ham, Genoa salami, and cheese. If you have it dressed, you'll get mustard and pickles. If you have it pressed, the traditional way, it will be heated and squashed in a special press called a *plancha*. Some restaurants refer to this as "dresst and presst."



Across the street, **Cajun Cuban Seafood Grille**, 1831 E. Seventh Ave., ☎ 813-247-3593, is a throwback to its former incarnation, Silver Ring Café. Here you can sit at the counter or a table beneath a pressed-tin ceiling and taste authentic folk eats for old Ybor prices. Po'-boy sandwiches, voodoo wings, Cuban sandwiches, gumbo, étouffée, *ropa vieja*, and other ethnic specialties range \$4-\$7. Open daily for lunch, Thursday-Saturday for dinner. 'Dis here da real t'ing, baby.



On a trendier note, **Ovo Café** at 1901 E. Seventh Ave., ☎ 813-248-6979, reflects Ybor's new-age tendencies with a clean, fashionable setting and bistro cuisine. Waffles (cappuccino, peanut butter, etc.), salads, sandwiches, piazzas, and stuffed "pasta pillows" are served daily all day long (closed Monday and Tuesday for dinner). Martinis are a specialty. Prices range \$6.50-\$12.

Nightlife



From flamenco dancers to cool Southern jazz, you'll find the full extent of music in Ybor City's thriving clubs, the heart of Tampa's nightlife. **Café Creole & Oyster Bar** (see *Where To Eat*, above) at 1440 E. Ninth Ave., ☎ 813-247-6283, has live jazz Friday and Saturday, with no cover charge. The **Columbia Restaurant** (see *Where To Eat*, above) at 2117 E. Seventh Ave., ☎ 813-248-4961, features authentic flamenco dancers Monday-Saturday.

Northeast, Northwest & South of Tampa

Getting Here



Interstates 275 and **4** zip you across Tampa's northern reaches. The **northwest** quadrant, part of Westshore, is home to Tampa International Airport and professional sports teams. **Dale Mabry Highway** (Highway 92) and **Veterans Memorial Expressway** are the major north-south arteries.

The **northeast** quadrant lies across I-275 on its way north. **Nebraska Ave.** (Highway 41) parallels it to the east. **Hillsborough Ave.** (Highway 92), **Busch Blvd.**, **Fowler Ave.**, and **Fletcher Ave.** are roads you'll no doubt be spending time on in this part of town. They run east-west.

To reach the small towns **south of Tampa** – Gibsonton, Apollo Beach, Ruskin, and Sun City – take either **Highway 41** or **I-75**, Exits 47 and 46.

Information



For information on Tampa's northeast and northwest districts, contact the **Tampa/Hillsborough Convention and Visitors Association**, 400 n. Tampa St., Suite 1010, Tampa, FL 33602, ☎ 800-826-8358 or 813-223-1111, Web site www.gotampa.com.

For specific information about Ruskin and environs, contact the **Ruskin Chamber of Commerce** at 315 Tamiami Trail, Ruskin, FL 33570, ☎ 813-645-3808.

For Apollo Beach information, write or call the **Apollo Beach Chamber of Commerce**, 6432 US Hwy. 41 N., Apollo Beach, FL 33572, ☎ 813-645-1366.

Sights & Attractions

■ Northwest Tampa

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



Tampa's one saltwater beach, **Ben T. Davis Municipal Beach**, lies on the Courtney Campbell Causeway, ☎ 813-274-8615. Lifeguards are on duty during busy times along the slim stretch of sands. There's also picnicking and fishing.

To the north on Old Tampa Bay, **Upper Tampa Bay Park** at 8001 Double Branch Rd., off Rte. 580, ☎ 813-855-1765, offers nature-lovers a peek into many biological communities, from oyster bars to freshwater ponds and oak hammocks. Its nature center has a saltwater aquarium and exhibits on snakes and other indigenous critters. A boardwalk runs along a bay view. The park is open daily, 8-6.

Family Fun

Tampa is second only to Orlando for kid-designed attractions. Kids and animal-lovers especially like Tampa's oldest attraction, **Lowry Park Zoological Garden**, 7530 North Blvd., ☎ 813-935-8552, www.lowrypark-zoo.com. Its 26 acres hold an amazing amount of animals from around the world – manatees, Florida panthers, Komodo dragons, Sumatran tigers, an Indian rhinoceros, red pandas, lorikeets, and other exotic animals, plus native creatures in their natural habitat. For the toddlers, there are manatee splash fountains in which to cool off on hot days, a petting zoo, a carousel ride (\$1), and a discovery center with a video kaleidoscope, a puppet theater, and creepy crawly creatures. The park is open daily, 9:30-5. Admission is \$8.50 for adults, \$7.50 for seniors, and \$4.95 for children ages three-11.

Next door to the park, **Kid City, The Children's Museum of Tampa**, ☎ 813-935-8441, has indoor hands-on exhibits and a miniature outdoor city geared toward teaching safety. Admission is \$4 for ages two and older. Hours are 9-4, Monday-Friday; 10-5, Saturday; 1-5, Sunday.

Besides go-cart racing, **Malibu Grand Prix**, 14320 N. Nebraska Ave., ☎ 813-977-6272, keeps kids busy with miniature golf courses, batting cages, and game rooms. Hours are 11-10, Sunday-Thursday; 11-midnight on Friday and Saturday. Go-cart rides cost \$4.25-\$4.75 for two-seaters. Golfing fees are \$5.25 for children ages 12 and under, \$6.25 for others.

Spectator Sports

Sports fans head in this direction. At 3501 W. Tampa Bay Blvd., the new **Raymond James Stadium** hosts the National Football League's **Tampa Bay Buccaneers**, ☎ 813-879-BUCS, in winter and major league soccer's **Tampa Bay Mutiny**, ☎ 813-289-6811, April-October. The state-of-the-art stadium features lounges, sports bars, luxury suites, and a 20,000-square-foot replica of a 19th-century seaport village with a 103-foot-long pirate ship. Single-game Buccaneer tickets for the September-December season cost \$30-\$54. Mutiny tickets are \$13-\$17 for adults, \$8-\$10 for children.

Nearby, the Yanks play March's spring exhibition games at the new **Legends Field**, ☎ 800-96-YANKS, 813-879-2244, or 813-875-7753, which replicates the team's home field. In the off-season, there's rookie and semi-professional baseball. Tickets are \$3 for general admission and \$5 for box seats.

■ Northeast Tampa

Family Fun

Tampa's number one attraction, **Busch Gardens** at 3605 Bougainvillea Ave., ☎ 813-987-5000 or 813-987-5082, www.buschgardens.com, requires a whole day to experience all of its 300 acres and various African lands, such as Egypt, Morocco, and Timbuktu. The lands contain theme adventure rides, shops, shows, and restaurants. More than 3,000 animals from around the world wander freely; you swoop over them by skyride or pass them on a chug-along train. The Myombe Reserve features a gorilla area with plexiglass where visitors can "rub noses" with the beasts. There's free beer in the beer gardens, to steel your nerves for such roller-coasting terrors as the 60 MPH, just-try-to-breathe Kumba and the Montu – the tallest and longest of its kind with a *lot* of topsy-turvy action. Some of the rides will get you soaked, so bring extra clothes and rent a locker. Land of the Dragons provides less scary entertainment for pre-schoolers. Edge of Africa allows visitors a close-up and personal wildlife experience, where lions, hyenas, and other beasts can be viewed through plexiglass barriers. Interactive adventure tours, such as the Serengeti Safari, allow participants aboard a flat-bed truck to feed and pet ostriches, bongos, and giraffes, while getting close to zebras, African cranes, and other native and exotic animals. The latest, greatest attraction is a fast, double wooden roller coaster named Gwazi. Adult admission is \$45.68; for children ages three-nine, \$36.74 (plus tax). Second-day admission is discounted. Parking costs \$5 for cars. Normal operation hours are 9:30-6, daily, but are extended during summer and other select times. The Serengeti Safari costs \$20 person (adults and children). Participants must be five years old to take the tour.

Next door's **Adventure Island** at 4500 Bougainvillea Ave., ☎ 813-987-5660 or 813-987-5600, www.adventureisland.com, is also owned by Busch. It's one of Florida's best water parks, with a Key West theme and attractions like the Splash Attack maze, the Endless Surf pool, Caribbean Corkscrew, and Tampa Typhoon. It's open daily, mid-February to October, from 10 to 5 or longer; weekends only mid-September through late October; and closes the rest of the year. Admission is \$24.92 for adults, \$22.95 for children three-nine (tax extra). Parking costs \$3 per car or camper. Combination Busch Gardens and Adventure Island tickets costs \$60.42 and \$50.73, plus tax.

ADVENTURE ISLAND TIPS

Adventure Island is a great place to spend a hot summer day. Here are some tips for getting the most out of your wet adventure:

- To save money, bring a picnic lunch and arrive early to grab a picnic table.
 - Put surf shoes on the kids to prevent hot feet between water attractions.
 - Rent a locker to stash towels and extra sunscreen.
 - Adventure Island provides a smart, easy way to deal with no pockets – Caribbean Cash. It's actually a wristband you can acquire with a credit card. Each time you make a purchase of food or souvenirs, the cashier scans the UPC code on your wristband and the purchase is entered as a debit. Any unused portion of the advance is credited to your account the same day.
-

The **Museum of Science & Industry (MOSI)** at 4801 E. Fowler Ave., ☎ 813-987-6300, 800-995-MOSI, or 877-987-IMAX, www.mosi.org, tops the list of discovery attractions and claims to be the largest science center in the Southeast US. Here you can explore some 450 exhibits dealing with weather, health, flight, space, and Florida's environment and natural history. The planetarium features daily star gazing. A unique domed theater shows 180° views of volcanoes, the planets, the Amazon Rain Forest, and other filmed natural phenomena. On more than three miles of nature trails, you can explore local habitat. Admission is \$13 for adults, \$11 for seniors, and \$9 for kids ages two-13. The museum opens daily at 9. Closing hours vary according to season.

Spectator Sports

Tampa Bay Downs, at Rte. 580 and Race Track Rd., ☎ 800-200-4434 or 813-855-4401, is the only thoroughbred race track on Florida's West Coast. Season runs December 21-May 4, with year-round simulcast wagering. The track is open daily except Monday and Wednesday. Admission is \$1.50-\$3 for adults, children free. Parking is \$1.

On the east side of I-275 at the Bird St. exit, **Tampa Greyhound Track**, ☎ 813-932-4313, holds evening races at 7:30, Monday-Saturday. Matinees are 12:30 Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday. More than 130 TV monitors enhance race viewing. Admission is \$1-\$2.50. No live racing takes place from January-June, but it remains open for simulcast wagering.

Gambling

Poker and bingo are the names of the games at the **Seminole Indian Casino**, 5223 N. Orient Rd., ☎ 800-282-7016 or 813-621-1302, www.casino-tampa.com. Stakes are high, but admission is free. There are also video gaming machines, a cafeteria, and lounge. The casino is open 24 hours.

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

More than 120 exotic and endangered big cats live at **WildLife on Easy Street**, 12802 Easy St., ☎ 813-920-4130, www.wildlifeoneasystreet.com. The non-profit refuge is located just off Gunn Highway. Tours, by prior arrangement only, cost \$10 per person.

As you travel farther from city center, opportunity for adventure in a natural setting increases. **Lettuce Lake Park** at 6920 E. Fletcher Ave., a quarter-mile west of I-75, ☎ 813-987-6204, occupies 240 acres with a cypress swamp, alligators, birds, a wildlife boardwalk, an observation tower, a bike path, a playground, a fitness course, and picnic areas. Donation of \$1 per car suggested. Open daily, 8-sunset.

Wilderness Park is a system of county-operated recreational areas along the upper Hillsborough River (hardly recognizable as the origin of what flows through downtown Tampa). It lies east of Lettuce Lake Park off Morris Bridge Rd. Its main three components are **Trout Creek Park**, ☎ 813-987-6200; **Morris Bridge Park**, ☎ 813-987-6209; and **Flatwoods Park**, ☎ 813-987-6211. They offer picnic facilities, canoe launches, and, combined, 30 miles of off-road biking trails.

Hillsborough River State Park, 15402 Hwy. 301 N, east of I-75 Exit 35, ☎ 813-987-6771, sits prettily among a 16,000-acre preserve. It's one of Florida's oldest state parks, and wears its age gracefully. Here, the Hillsborough River frolics around limestone upcroppings, providing rapids for experienced canoeists. A reconstructed Seminole War historic site, **Fort Foster**, is open for touring four times daily, Saturday-Sunday in season and twice daily on the third Sunday of the month in summer. The park has two campgrounds, a swimming pool, a playground, canoe rentals, nature trails, and oak-shaded picnic grounds. Admission to the park is \$3.25 per car of eight persons or less, \$1 per pedestrian, cyclist, or additional persons in vehicle. Admission to the fort is \$2 for adults, \$1 or children ages six-12. Pool admission is \$1 per person; infants under one year, free.

■ South Hillsborough

A few steps south of the big city, rural agricultural communities are evolving into winter retirement enclaves. Quiet towns such as **Apollo Beach**, **Ruskin**, and **Sun City**, away from the mobile home parks and tomato fields, are fine places to launch a canoe or cast a rod into Hillsborough Bay.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

You can find good access to adventure at **E.G. Simmons Park** on 19th St. NW in Ruskin, two miles west of Hwy. 41, ☎ 813-671-7655. It has picnic facilities, a boat ramp, a sandy beach in the bay with roped-off swimming area, a campground, and wildlife areas. Open daily, 8-6.

Family Fun

At the junction of Hwy. 60 and I-75 in Brandon, **Celebration Station**, 10230 Palm River Rd., ☎ 813-661-4557, treats the family to a variety of activities geared toward all ages. The tiniest play on the soft playground and rides. The older bunch enjoys miniature golf, batting cages, go-carts, bumper boats, video games, and a pizzeria with an interactive video wall. Miniature golf costs \$4.99 per person. An all-day play pass covers all outdoor attractions and costs \$11.99.

ECO-ATTRACTION

In Apollo Beach, you can see manatees as they migrate to warmer waters in winter at Tampa Electric's **Manatee Viewing Center**, Big Bend and Dickman roads, off I-75 at Exit 47, ☎ 813-228-4289, www.teco.net/Manatee.html. An observation platform, educational displays, and a video familiarize visitors with the behavior of Florida's "gentle giants" and the history and workings of the power plant. It's open daily, 10-5, from mid-November to mid-April. Admission is free.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Light Tackle Fishing Expeditions, ☎ 800-972-1930 or 813-855-0430, tailors its outings to your fishing fantasies, ranging from four to eight hours and starting at \$140 for a half-day, including beverages, tackle, and bait.

Boat Ramps

E.G. Simmons Park (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) has a boat ramp into Hillsborough Bay.

To launch your craft into the lower Hillsborough River, use the ramp at **Lowry Park** (see page 129), for a nominal fee. There are also areas for fishing and picnicking there.

Paddling

Canoe and kayak owners can launch at several county parks along the upper Hillsborough River, including **Sargeant Park**, **Morris Bridge Park**, **Trout Creek Park**, **Lettuce Lake Park**, and **Rotary Park**.



Twelve miles from downtown Tampa is **Canoe Escape**, just east of I-75 on Fowler Ave. in Thonotosassa, ☎ 813-986-2067, www.canoeescape.com. The company offers excursions into the upper Hillsborough River, where wildlife abounds close to city limits. Alligators, water snakes, ibises, river otters, turtles, and feral hogs are common sights on this quiet, natural extension of Tampa's Hillsborough River. Here, it reaches into wilderness preserve and concession owners ensure peace by discouraging the beer-drinking crowd. No radios, dogs, or glass are allowed. Canoe Escape provides outfitting and shuttle service for two-hour to full-day excursions, priced at \$28-\$36 for two paddlers in a double canoe or kayak (extra paddler \$14-\$18, passenger \$8 or free if under age 12). Solo kayak or canoe prices are \$20-\$27. Tours and shuttle service for canoe owners are available. Hours are Monday through Friday, 9-5; Saturday-Sunday, 8-6. Reservations for rentals and tours recommended.

Hillsborough River State Park, 15402 Hwy. 301 N. in Thonotosassa, east of I-75 off Exit 35, ☎ 813-987-6771, rents canoes for use in the park. Cost is \$5.34 per hour, including tax.

The scenic **Alafia River** runs along the northern edge of south Hillsborough and is suited mainly to small crafts and canoes. A narrow, 13-mile canoe trail runs under a canopy of oak, cypress and cedar. The waterway runs east-west from Hillsborough Bay at Gibsonton. **Alafia Marine** at 9810 Vaughn in Gibsonton has a boat ramp you can use for a fee.

The **Little Manatee River** south of Ruskin is a designated canoe trail, accessed from paved ramps off Hwy. 41, three miles east of Ruskin.

Canoe Outpost on Hwy. 301 in Wimauma, ☎ 813-634-2228, outfits canoeists and kayakers for two- to four-hour excursions on the Little Manatee, priced at \$20-\$28, including rentals; \$10 for shuttle service only.

■ On Foot

Hiking



Museum of Science & Industry (MOSI), 4801 E. Fowler Ave., ☎ 813-987-6300, (800) 995-MOSI, or 877-987-IMAX, has three miles of backwoods trails where you can hike and experience local habitat. See page 131 for details about the museum.

You can take a leisurely hike around the cypress swamp wildlife boardwalk at **Lettuce Lake Park** (see page 132), 6920 Fletcher Ave., ☎ 813-987-6204. It also has a bike path and fitness course. \$1 donation per car suggested.

Eureka Springs on Eureka Springs Rd., near the junction of I-4 and Hwy. 301, ☎ 813-744-5536, has trails and boardwalks to hike, as well as a lovely botanical garden, greenhouse, and picnic area.

Climbing

Vertical Ventures, near the Tampa International Airport at 5404 Pioneer Park Blvd., ☎ 813-884-7625, offers the thrill of rock climbing at an indoor gym. It caters to all levels of learners, from beginners to experts. A pro shop rents and sells equipment, and visitors can watch from a viewing deck. The gym is open Tuesday-Thursday, 5-10; Friday, 5-midnight; Saturday-Sunday, 10-6. Daily classes are held for beginners, costing \$30, including gear. Climbing rates vary according to time of day and week, \$5-\$12.50.

■ On Wheels



Wilderness Park (see page 132) has a network of more than 30 miles of off-road biking trails between Morris Bridge Park, Flatwoods Park, and Trout Creek Park. Seven miles of the Flatwoods trail is paved and suitable for inline skating.

■ In The Air

Balloon Rides



Big Red Balloon at 16302 E. Course Dr., ☎ 813-969-1518 lifts off at sunrise for a four-hour, 1,000-foot-high view of Tampa's outlying wildlife and skyline. Prices begin at \$135 for children ages 10 and under, \$150 for adults. Parking is \$2. Sunrise flights include champagne brunch. It's open daily, 10-8.

Skydiving

Take the ultimate rush-adventure plunge at **Skydive City**, 4241 Skydive Lane in Zephyrhills (northeast of Tampa), ☎ 800-404-9399 or 813-783-9399, www.skydivecity.com. Facilities include training, a pro shop, and camping. First-time dives cost \$165 for a tandem freefall, which requires only about 30 minutes of training, or \$175 for a static line dive, with four-six hours of training. Subsequent static line dives are \$40; freefalls cost \$40 each.

Shopping



Near Tampa's major attractions, **University Mall**, 2200 E. Fowler Ave., ☎ 813-971-3465, www.shoppingtampa.com, is open daily with more than 150 department stores and shops, a movie complex, and a food court. In the Westshore region, **WestShore Plaza**, 250 West Shore Plaza at Kennedy Blvd., ☎ 813-286-0790, claims the area's only Saks Fifth Avenue, plus an upscale variety of name-brand stores and shops.

The newest addition to the major mall scene, **Citrus Park Town Center** lies at the northwest edge of town, just west of Veterans Expressway on Gunn Hwy. Department stores, 120 shops, 20 cinema screens, a food courts, and restaurants occupy the mall's American nostalgic architecture. It's open daily.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Hotels & Motels



Hotels cluster near the airport on Tampa Bay at Courtney Campbell Causeway and around Busch Gardens. Most are the chain variety, with everything from budget to luxury.

Near the airport, **Hampton Inn** at 4817 W. Laurel St., ☎ 813-287-0778 or 800-HAMPTON, is a good value, with complimentary breakfast bar, a heated swimming pool, and free local airport and local restaurant shuttle. \$\$

Tampa Hilton Airport/Westshore, 2225 N. Lois Ave., ☎ 800-445-8667 or 813-877-6688, offers more luxury. It has a restaurant, bar, pool, hot tub, tennis, and airport shuttle. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Doubletree Guest Suites at 3050 N. Rocky Point Dr. W., ☎ 800-222-TREE or 813-888-8800, gives you a water view for your money. Located at the Courtney Campbell Causeway, amenities include airport shuttle, pool, whirlpool, sauna, exercise room, and business center. Its 203 suites are designed with separate bedroom and living areas and contain wet bar and coffeemaker. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Top chic in the Westshore neighborhood, **Hyatt Regency**, 6200 Courtney Campbell Causeway, ☎ 800-233-1234 or 813-874-1234, www.hyatt.com, towers over bay waters and its own 35-acre wildlife refuge. Within the spread-out complex are 445 rooms, 45 “casitas,” 23 suites, three restaurants (see Armani’s and Oystercatchers under *Where To Eat*, below), and a pool. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Near Busch Gardens and MOSI, **DoubleTree Hotel**, 11310 N. 30th St., ☎ 813-971-7690, is made of suites, lush gardens, a pool, and complimentary shuttle to Busch. The two-room suites are stocked with microwave, fridge, and coffeemaker. Rates include complimentary breakfast. \$\$-\$\$\$



To stay close to northeast-side attractions, try the **Holiday Inn Tampa Busch Gardens** at 2701 E. Fowler Ave., ☎ 813-971-4710 or 800-29-OASIS. Recently renovated to enhance its family friendliness, the new, improved Holiday Inn has two swimming pools. In the kiddie pool is anchored a 20-foot-long pirate ship water playground with tunnels and slides that entertain kids from ages two to 12. It also added Kidsuites to its repertory of 395 rooms and suites. These innovative rooms provide a room within a room all for the kids. It sleeps three with a bunk bed arrangement and is stocked with its own TV, Sony Playstation, CD player, and phone (ours was in the shape of Shamu the Whale). In the food court, families find many of their favorite fast foods. The hotel provides free shuttles to Busch Gardens and other local attractions. \$\$-\$\$\$

Resorts



Outside of Tampa to the north, **Saddlebrook Resort** at 5700 Saddlebrook Resort, Wesley Chapel, ☎ 813-973-1111 or 800-729-8383, www.saddlebrookresort.com, is a destination in itself, especially for golfers and sports-lovers. Around a central “Superpool” hub, it clusters 36 Arnold Palmer-designed holes of golf, a golf academy, 45 tennis courts (including one Wimbledon-grass surfaced), volleyball, basketball, lawn games, a fitness center, and a spa, along with a kids’ program and a variety of dining options. Ask about packages. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Camping

Northeast of Tampa, around Zephyrhills, RV resorts are plentiful.

Hillsborough River State Park (see page 132), 15402 Hwy. 301 N, east of I-75 Exit 35, ☎ 813-987-6771, has two campgrounds – one riverside, the other in hammock vegetation – with 114 sites, playgrounds, laundries, and showers. Cost with tax is \$14.53 per night without electricity, \$16.67 with electricity.

E.G. Simmons Park (see page 133) on 19th Ave. NE, two miles west of Hwy. 41, ☎ 813-671-7655, has an open campground with a view of the bay. Fees are \$12 a night, including electricity.

Where To Eat



For top-shelf dining, make your reservations at **Armani’s** in the Hyatt Regency Westshore at 6200 Courtney Campbell Causeway, ☎ 813-281-9165. Exquisite 14th-floor views and superb northern Italian-style seafood and other specialties, including a large antipasto bar, are the draws. A jacket is required. It’s open for dinner every day but Sunday. Entrées are \$17-\$28. Reservations are recommended.

Also on the Hyatt Regency property is **Oystercatchers**, ☎ 813-281-9116, which overlooks the property’s 35-acre bayfront nature preserve. In a bright, open, polished setting, it serves new American-style seafood specialties, fine meats, soups, and salads. It is open weekdays for lunch and daily for dinner. A la carte dinner entrées range from \$20 to \$23.



If your idea of atmosphere is junkyard chic, you’ll love **Skipper’s Smoke House** at Skipper Rd. and Nebraska Ave., ☎ 813-971-0666. Particularly if you favor plain, ungarnished seafood. Slurp “sliders” in the oyster bar or relish their black bean ‘gator chili, crab cakes with black bean salsa, and other Florida and Cajun specialties, ranging in price from \$5 to \$14. It’s open for lunch and dinner daily, except Monday.

Wieners are an artform at **Mel's Hot Dogs**, 4136 E. Busch Blvd., ☎ 813-985-8000. Select from a classic Chicago-style dog, a bagel dog, bacon dog, corn dog, and others. Wash it down with a beer, wine, or soda. Prices run \$3-\$7. Open for lunch and dinner daily.

Nightlife



Skipper's Smoke House (see above) at Skipper Rd. and Nebraska Ave., ☎ 813-971-0666, has established itself as *the* place for alternative music in the Tampa Bay area. Live reggae, zydeco, and blues bands play open-air in the backyard of the ramshackle restaurant, nightly except Sunday. Cover charge varies.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

Bradenton & Sarasota

Overview

Though distinctly individual in character, the metropolitan areas of Bradenton and Sarasota often get lumped together. The two do sort of melt into one another geographically, but anyone who has gotten to know the cities can feel immediately when they've crossed the boundaries. This is demonstrated most dramatically on **Longboat Key**, a 12-mile island split between Sarasota County and Bradenton's Manatee County. In Bradenton's northern half, you find an old fishing village with easygoing seafood restaurants and beach cottages. In the Sarasota portion, everything climbs several steps upscale, and manicured landscaping exalts the island's prima donna status.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Bradenton
- Anna Maria Island
- Longboat Key
- Lido Key & St. Armands Key
- Sarasota
- Siesta Key
- Nokomis Area
- Venice

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Manatee County gets its name from one of Florida's most loveable animals. The ancient **manatee**, or sea cow, used to confuse sailors into believing they'd sighted a mermaid. The sailors had obviously been into the rum rations, as the manatee, with its burlap-like skin and 3,000-pound ungirlish figure, more closely resembles its cousin, the elephant. The gentle manatees fall victim only to man and red tide, which sadly bring their numbers to the brink of extinction.*

So while northern Bradenton and its islands of Anna Maria and Longboat Key exude something more casually Old-Florida, Sarasota and its string of island pearls affect utter sophistication, save for Siesta Key, with its strains of beachy, subtropic island behavior.

Bradenton and Sarasota each trace their identity back to a male historic figure. In Bradenton, it's none other than Hernando De Soto, whom historians claim made his first New World landfall on local shores. As a result,

Bradenton has a propensity for preserving history. Its Manatee River, Gulf front, and Intracoastal bays offer ample scope for watersports.

Sarasota owes its development and artistic reputation to, ironically, the circus, which wintered there beginning in the late 1800s. In contrast to circus raucousness, however, John Ringling was a man swayed by esthetics. The art he loved had a bit of three-ring showiness to it, nonetheless, as demonstrated by the baroque Italianate palace that he built here. It comprises, along with his art museum complex, Sarasota's most renowned attraction. Ringling is also responsible for building bridges – with his circus elephants, it is told – to Sarasota's cherished islands, some of the West Coast's most exclusive. On Sarasota's islands, you'll find world-class shopping, the coast's whitest beach, a premium marine laboratory, nature parks and beaches, and a love for the sea and its pleasures. The islands and the mainland put every bit of waterfront to use, much of it sea-walled and commercially developed. This affords heavy opportunity for boating, fishing, and other watersports.

At the southern reaches of Sarasota County, Venice hides in the shadow of its neighbor. Along with nearby communities of Osprey, Casey Key, Nokomis, and Nokomis Beach, it has much to offer seafarers and adventurous landlubbers on its Myakka River and Gulf front, and in its non-exploited parks and beaches.

Transportation

■ Airports



Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport (SRQ), www.srq-airport.com, ☎ 941-359-2770 or 941-359-5200, is in Bradenton, three miles north of Sarasota.

MAJOR AIRLINES & SHUTTLES SERVING SARASOTA-BRADENTON (SRQ) INT'L AIRPORT	
American Eagle	☎ 800-433-7300
Delta Air Lines / Comair	☎ 800-221-1212
Continental	☎ 800-525-0280
Northwest	☎ 800-225-2525
TWA	☎ 800-221-2000
US Airways	☎ 800-428-4322

■ Rental Cars & Taxi Service

Rental cars are available at the airport and other locations throughout the area. Try **Alamo**, ☎ 800-327-9633 or 941-359-5540; **Avis**, ☎ 800-331-1212 or 359-5240; **Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3131 or 941-355-8848; and **Budget**, ☎ 800-527-0700, 941-359-5353 (airport), or 941-383-6212 (Longboat Key).

Taxi companies that provide transportation to and from the airport include **Diplomat Taxi**, ☎ 941-355-5155, **West Coast Executive Sedans**, ☎ 941-355-9645 or 941-359-8600, and **Longboat Limousine**, www.longboatlimousine.com, ☎ 800-LB-LIMO-1 or 941-383-1235.

■ Getting Around

Highway 41 (Tamiami Trail) cuts close to the coastline in Bradenton and Sarasota, and takes you straight into downtown Sarasota. **Highway 301** parallels 41 to the east through Bradenton. The two converge in Sarasota. **I-75** swings wide from the coast here, to the east of Highway 41.

Information



For information on the area, call or write the **Bradenton Area Convention & Visitors Bureau** at PO Box 1000, Bradenton, FL 34206, www.floridaislandbeaches.org, ☎ 941-729-9177 or 800-4MANATEE. Its welcome center is located off I-75, Exit 43, and is open Monday-Friday, 8-5.

Or contact the **Sarasota Convention & Visitors Bureau** at 655 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL 34236, www.sarasotafl.org, ☎ 800-800-3906 or 941-957-1877, open Monday-Saturday from 9-5.

BUDGET TIPS

- Find **discount coupons** in “SEE” booklets and the orange “Welcome” guide map to Sarasota/Bradenton. Both are readily available from area establishments.
- **Gamble Plantation State Historical Site’s** visitor’s center (see page 148) has museum exhibits and is open free to the public.

Admission to the mansion is only \$3 for adults, \$1.50 for children ages six-12.

■ Bradenton's best free attractions are **Manatee Village Historical Park** (page 146) and **De Soto National Memorial Park** (page 147).

■ You can watch the **Pittsburgh Pirates** (page 148) practice for free at Pirate City during spring training in March.

■ **Mixon Fruit Farms** (page 147) in Bradenton gives free tours of its citrus groves and processing plant.

■ Admission to **Anna Maria Island Historical Museum** (page 155) is free or by donation.

■ Admission to **Ringling Estate** (page 170), by decree of John Ringling's will, is free on Saturdays.

■ At **City Island** (pages 164-165), between Lido Key and Longboat Key, you'll find a few things to do without opening up your wallet. There's Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary, Sarasota Bay Walk, and Sarasota Ski-A-Rees Show.

Festivals & Events



FEBRUARY/MARCH - The **Cortez Fishing Festival** on Rte. 684 in Cortez, ☎ 941-795-4637, takes place over two days in late February, and consists of food vendors, country music, arts and crafts with a nautical theme, net-mending demonstrations, and environmental exhibits describing Cortez's 100-year-old fishing industry. For four days in February or March, the Ringling Estate (see *Sights & Attractions*, page 170) hosts the wildly popular and artistically done **Medieval Fair**, ☎ 941-351-8497.

APRIL - Bradenton's entire Manatee County celebrates its past during **Florida Heritage Festival**, ☎ 941-747-1998. A reenactment of Hernando DeSoto's 1539 landing highlights the events. April also brings **Siesta Key Sand Sculpture Contest**, ☎ 941-316-1268.

JULY - Head to Sarasota's islands to watch **The Suncoast Offshore Grand Prix**, ☎ 941-951-3788, a national attraction that draws powerboat racers from around the world for Fourth of July week. Golf and fishing tournaments and entertainment are part of the festivities.

AUGUST - In Venice, the big event is the **Sharks Tooth Festival**, ☎ 800-940-SHARK or 941-488-2236, which means music, seafood, a shark tooth scramble, and marine life displays. Admission. The **De Soto Fishing Tournament**, ☎ 941-747-1998, takes place at Bradenton Yacht Club the third week of the month. Entry fees.

WEEKEND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

■ **FRIDAY:** Tour **Gamble State Historical Site** and **Manatee Historical Village** in the morning. Have lunch in downtown Bradenton at **Nadine's 10th Street Bistro** or **Twin Dolphin Marina Grill**. Spend afternoon at **Anna Maria Island beach** or out on the water on a boat rental. Have dinner at **Beach Bistro** in Anna Maria. Spend the night on the island.

■ **SATURDAY:** Begin with breakfast at **Gulf Drive Café** or **Bridge Street Café**. Tour **Mote Marine Aquarium** and board a **Sarasota Bay Explorers** excursion. Have lunch at **St. Armands Circle**. Visit the **Ringling Estate** in afternoon. Do dinner and theater in downtown **Sarasota** in the evening. Stay in downtown Sarasota.

■ **SUNDAY:** Drive to Venice for canoeing and lunch at **Snook Haven**. Go to Brohard Park for **shark-tooth collecting** or **fishing** on the pier. Have dinner at **Crow's Nest**. Spend the night in Venice.

Bradenton

After Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto left his mark here in 1539, then continued on his way to discover the Mississippi River, Bradenton remained wild and unsettled until the sugar plantations of the 1840s and the cattle industry of the 1880s established themselves.

Some find Bradenton too sleepy to be fun. If you're a history buff, you'll refute that. But if you're looking for action, head to the beaches or Sarasota.

Bradenton's outlying towns, particularly **Palmetto** and **Ellenton**, are more suited to adventure than Bradenton itself. Both of the above-mentioned lie north of Bradenton, on the opposite bank of the Manatee River.

Cortez juts into bay waters southwest of town. Its peninsular location catalyzed its development as a fishing town with lots of flavor and local color.

Getting Here



From I-75, Exit 43 takes you along the north side of the Manatee River via **Highway 30**. From Exit 42, **Rte. 64** travels straight into downtown and out to Anna Maria Island. From Exit 41, **Rte. 70** runs through the south part of town. **Highway 41** and **Business 41** stab through town's center. **Highways 301** and **41** merge in the north, then split south of town.

The Manatee County Area Transit (MCAT) system, ☎ 941-747-8621, travels around Bradenton, Palmetto, Cortez, Anna Maria, and Longboat Key. Basic fare is \$1 for adults, 50¢ for seniors and children.

Information



Call or write for more information: **Manatee Chamber of Commerce**, 222 10th St. W., Bradenton, FL 34205, www.manatee-cc.com, ☎ 941-748-3411. It's open Monday-Friday, 9-5.

Sights & Attractions

■ In Town

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Bradenton bygones are preserved in a shady park setting at **Manatee Village Historical Park**, 15th St. E. and Manatee Ave., ☎ 941-749-7165. Buildings of local historical significance include a circa 1860 county courthouse, church, Cracker farmhouse, one-room schoolhouse, smokehouse, and general store. Staff don period dress. Admission is free. Open Monday-Friday, 9-4:30, and Sunday, 1:30-4:30. The park is closed on Saturday, and during the summer it is generally closed on Sunday as well. This is a great place for a cool picnic.

Downtown's devotion to history is evident in its rejuvenating streets and old buildings, and at the **South Florida Museum**, 201 10th St. W., www.manatee-cc.com/planets, ☎ 941-746-4131. Displays cover local history through the eras of native Americans, Spanish conquistadors, and space exploration. Kids like the two resident manatees at Parker Manatee Aquarium and hands-on activity center. The **Bishop Planetarium** adjoins the facility and hosts laser shows and children's programs in its 50-foot hemispherical dome. From January through April, the museum and planetarium are open Monday-Saturday, 10-5; Sunday, noon-5. Closed on Mondays from May through December, and on Thanksgiving, Christmas,

New Year's Day, and the first Saturday in November. Admission for adults is \$7.50; for seniors, \$6; and for children ages five-12, \$4.

To honor Bradenton's trademark historical event, **De Soto National Memorial Park** at 75th St. NW, ☎ 941-792-0458, recalls the life and times of explorer Hernando De Soto – who is said to have made first New World landfall here – through displays, a film, an audio-narrated mangrove trail, and living history guides (in season only). The park also offers a lovely, out-of-the-way view of Old Florida and the Manatee River. Admission is free; hours are 9-5, daily.

DID YOU KNOW?



*The **Sarasota Bay National Estuary Program**, ☎ 941-359-5841, has organized a map of more than 150 Manatee and Sarasota County sights of historical, cultural, and environmental interest. The **Gulf Coast Heritage Trail** follows roads, walking trails, and bike routes.*

Performing Arts

One of Florida's longest running community theaters, **Riverfront Theatre**, 102 Old Main St., ☎ 941-748-5875, hosts the Manatee Players, which performs its main season September-May, plus a summer series and family productions. Tickets cost around \$17 for single shows, with student discounts available.

Family Fun

Baseball cages, a video arcade, a go-cart track, laser tag, bumper boats, and kiddie rides add to the fun of miniature golf at **Pirates Cove**, 5410 Hwy. 41, ☎ 941-755-4608. Golf prices are \$4.50 for adults, \$3.50 for children ages 10 and under. Laser tag costs \$5-\$6. It's \$4.50-\$5 for go-cart and bumper boat rides. The park opens daily; hours vary according to season and day of the week, generally 10-10.

Smugglers Cove Adventure Golf, 2000 Cortez Rd. W., ☎ 941-756-0043 charges \$6.49 for adults and \$5.49 for children ages 12 and under. It is open daily, 9-11.

At **Planet Fun**, 7250 Cortez Rd., ☎ 941-792-0555, 99¢ rides are geared toward young children. There are also video games and a food concession. Ticket packages are available. Open daily except Monday during school season; hours vary.

Tours

Here's a juicy attraction: **Mixon Fruit Farms** at 2712 26th Ave. E., ☎ 800-608-2525 (seasonal) or 941-748-5829; www.mixon.com. A self-guided tour takes you through orange groves and Mixon's processing plant in the height of the producing season (November-April). Sample the fruit and

juice and buy citrus by the bagful. Hours are Monday-Saturday, 8:30-5:30. Admission is free.

Spectator Sports

Baseball fans can watch a professional team in action in March when the **Pittsburgh Pirates** play their spring exhibition season at **McKechnie Field**, Ninth St. and 17th Ave. W., ☎ 941-748-4610. While in town, they practice from 10-1:30 at **Pirate City**, 1701 27th St. E., ☎ 941-747-3031.

■ Outlying Areas

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



To explore the region's sugar-coated past, visit a masterfully restored sugar manor north of Bradenton at **Gamble Plantation State Historical Site**, on Rte. 301 west of I-75, ☎ 941-723-4536. Besides learning about its former life as home for a sugar lord and the town's social center, you'll hear how the Greek-revival mansion, built in 1840, sheltered the Confederate Secretary of State as he fled for his life after the Civil War. The grounds are open daily, 8am-sunset. The house is open Thursday-Monday and may be viewed by tour only. Tour times are 9:30, 10:30, 1, 2, 3, and 4. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$1.50 for children ages six-12. A museum in the visitor's center tells the plantation's story through the eras and can be visited for free. It is open daily, 8:00-5:00 (closed 11:45-12:45).

To the west, facing downtown Bradenton across the Manatee River, the tomato processing town of **Palmetto** works at recycling the historic value of its downtown. **Manatee Agricultural Museum** is a coming attraction. In **Heritage Park**, Sixth St. W. and 10th Ave. W., ☎ 941-723-4580 (parks dept.), another attraction in the making, clusters some old Cracker buildings, including a circa 1929 one-room schoolhouse and an 1880 post office.

Parks & Natural Areas

On the water, **Riverside Park** and the neighboring **Regatta Pointe Marina** on Riverside Drive provide a milieu for boating, fishing, and dining enthusiasts (see more under *Adventures* and *Where To Eat*, below). From there, the so-called Green Bridge (Highway 41), takes you to the heart of downtown Bradenton.

East of I-75, **Lake Manatee State Recreation Area** at 20007 Rte. 64, ☎ 941-741-3028, provides an opportunity for communing with nature in 556 acres of wildlife habitat. You can swim in the freshwater lake (but beware of alligators), launch or rent a boat, fish, and picnic on grounds with a play area. Admission is \$2 per vehicle, \$1 for pedestrians and bicyclists. The park is open daily, 8-sunset.

Spectator Sports

De Soto Speedway, eight miles east of the interstate on Rte. 64, www.de-sotospeedway.com, ☎ 941-748-3171, hosts Saturday night stock car racing February through November on a paved oval track. Call for current schedule and ticket prices.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



You can fish for 50¢ (kids free) from the **Bradenton City Pier** on Bridge St. **Hunt Memorial Pier** at Riverside Park (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), along the Green Bridge Pier in Palmetto, is another popular spot. There are bait and tackle shops on the pier and nearby at Regatta Pointe Marina. **Green Bridge Pier Bait & Tackle**, 101 Eighth Ave. W., ☎ 941-722-5700, rents rods and reels and gives fishing lessons for kids.

Otherwise, most fishing and boating activity takes place on the islands or on the mainland at a fishing village named **Cortez**. Land and wading fishermen favor **Palma Sola Causeway** at Palma Sola Bay and Rte. 64, which heads from the mainland to Anna Maria Island.

For freshwater fishing, try **Lake Manatee State Recreation Area** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at 20007 Rte. 64, ☎ 941-741-3028. Huge Lake Manatee, a dammed portion of the Manatee River, yields bass, perch, catfish, and other freshwater species. It has a boat ramp and fishing dock. Boat motors are restricted to 20 hp or less. You can rent kayaks and canoes (with motors) nearby (see *Paddling*, below).

Fishing charters depart from **Green Bridge Tackle** and **Regatta Pointe Marina** in Palmetto. **Captain Allen Engle**, ☎ 941-920-1321, docks at the marina and specializes in backwater and light tackle strategies. He accommodates up to four on his 22-foot boat, at a cost of \$225 for a half-day, \$325 for all day.

The **Miss Cortez Fleet** at 4330 127th St. W. in Cortez, ☎ 941-794-1223, has a well-established reputation for its fishing and sightseeing charters, which last from four hours to a day. Four-hour deep-sea fishing trips cost \$25 for adults, \$22 for seniors, \$12.50 for non-fishermen and children under age 12.

Annie's Bait & Tackle, open daily at 4334 127th St. W. in Cortez, ☎ 941-794-3580, supplies bait, rents tackle, and arranges fishing charters.

Boat Ramps

To launch your own boat, proceed to **Palma Sola Causeway** at Palma Sola Bay and Rte. 64, where you'll find plenty of watersports activity.

Boat Rentals

For cruising the Manatee River, check out **Happy Dolphin Marina**, on 18th St. at I-75, Exit 45. Call for directions, ☎ 941-722-2391. Half-day pontoon rentals for up to eight persons run \$90, \$145 for full day, gas included.

Cortez Watercraft Rentals at the Cortez bridge, 4334 127th St. W, ☎ 941-792-5263, rents 21-foot pontoon boats for \$99 a half-day, \$155 a full day. Jet Ski rentals begin at \$35 for a half-hour. It's open daily, 8:30-6.

Boat Charters & Tours

One of the world's largest charter sailboat operations moors at Palmetto's Regatta Pointe Marina. **Sunsail Tampa Bay**, www.masseyyacht.com, ☎ 800-817-0807 or 941-723-1949, can take you on sails that last one day (\$275-\$600) to seven days (\$1,300-\$3,000). Prices depend on size of craft and time of year and week. As an accredited American Sailing School (ASA) instructor, Sunsail teaches basic sailing courses, bareboat chartering, coastal navigation, and advanced coastal cruising.

A four-hour cruise to Egmont Key (see page 96) departs three times each week with **Miss Cortez Fleet** at 4330 127th St. W. in Cortez, ☎ 941-794-1223, and costs \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors, and \$8 for children under age 12.

The Seafood Shack Showboat Dinner Cruise at 4110 127th St. W, ☎ 800-299-5048 or 941-794-1236, takes a scenic tour enlivened by entertainment and a cocktail bar. For the 1½-hour cruise of Sarasota and Tampa bays, adults pay \$14, seniors pay \$12, and children ages four-11 pay \$6 (prices include tax); for the three-hour cruise under the Skyway Bridge, tax-inclusive rates are \$16, \$14 and \$6.

Sail aboard the 36-foot catamaran **Mahina La**, departing from the Seafood Shack Restaurant at the bridge in Cortez, ☎ 941-713-8000. Cruises start at \$30 per person for a two-hour dolphin excursion to \$75 for a day on Egmont Key (see page 96) lunching, shelling, hiking, and snorkeling. Wannabe sailors can learn aboard a 23-foot trimaran.

Airboat Tours at Perico Harbor Marina, 12310 Manatee Ave., ☎ 941-795-5353, zips you into manatee and wildlife habitat. Rides cost \$12 per adult, \$10 per child.

Paddling

For getting around Lake Manatee, rent a canoe or kayak at **Lake Manatee Fish Camp**, the corner of Rtes. 64 and 675 near Lake Manatee State Recreation Area, ☎ 941-322-8500. Canoes and kayak rentals run \$7 an

hour, \$21 for four hours, and \$43 for eight hours. Small 5 hp motors are available for the canoes.

Canoeing adventures can last a half-day, whole day, or overnight at **Ray's Canoe Hideaway**, 1247 Hagle Park Rd., ☎ 941-747-3909. Canoe rentals run \$18 for a half-day, \$24 for a full day, and \$30 overnight. Kayak rentals cost \$10 an hour, \$25-\$35 for a half-day, and \$35-\$40 all day. Launching costs \$5. Expeditions follow the Upper Manatee River, rich with lore, fish, and birdlife. Tours and fishing pole rental are available. The facility closes Tuesday and Wednesday.

Personal Watercraft

Downtown Bradenton, you can rent a Jet Ski at **Jet Boat & Seadoo Rental**, Twin Dolphin Marina, 1000 First Ave., ☎ 941-747-3466, for \$30-\$40 a half-hour, \$50-\$60 for an hour. Half- and full-day rates and guided tours are available.

Parasailing

Zoom up to 1,200 feet, with an option to free fall, at **Cortez Parasail**, at the bridge, 12507 Cortez Rd., ☎ 941-795-2700. Cost is \$53 for one person, \$95.40 for two, tax included.

Windsurfing

Palma Sola Causeway Beach, on Rte. 64 heading to Anna Maria Island, is popular with windsurfers and WaveRunner operators, who can launch from the causeway's boat ramp. There are also restrooms and a picnic area.

■ On Foot

Skating



Work out and have fun where it's cool – at **J.P. Igloo**, an ice and inline sports complex at 5309 29th St. E., near Prime Outlets shopping mall in Ellenton (I-75, Exit 43), www.jpigloo.com, ☎ 941-723-3663. Besides regulation ice hockey and inline skating rinks, you'll find a restaurant, concession stand, play area, and video games. Public skating is scheduled daily; times vary. Ice skating admission is \$5.50; inline skating is \$5. Discounts are available for seniors and at non-prime times. Skate rental is \$2 each.

ECO-ADVENTURES

Around the Bend Nature Tours, 1815 Palma Sola Blvd., ☎ 941-794-8773, explores select spots from the Gulf Coast Heritage Trail by foot. The two-hour Coastal Bradenton Tour, for instance, explores DeSoto National Memorial, the manatee haven at Palma Sola Boat Basin, and Coquina Baywalk at Leffis Key. The price of \$15 per person includes a “gourmet” picnic lunch. Small-group tours (six or fewer) are led by a naturalist and transportation to the sites is provided. Other two-hour tours at the same price include Barrier Island Tour and North River Tour. The half-day Deluxe Tour costs \$42 per person.

■ In The Air



At **Gulfside Ultralight Tours** in Cortez, ☎ 941-761-FLYR, you can learn to fly with lessons lasting from 10 minutes (\$45) to an hour (\$120). The two-person Ultralight is equipped with floats.

■ On Horseback



Schomburg Farms & Riding Stables, 2504 24th Ave. E. in Palmetto, ☎ 941-729-2884, offers rides, lessons, a barnyard zoo, dairy tours, pony rides, and a picnic area. Rides through one of several wooded trails cost \$7.50 each for a half-hour, \$15 for an hour. Pony rides are \$5.

Shopping



Off I-75 at Exit 43, **Prime Outlets of Ellenton**, ☎ 941-723-1150, boasts a Caribbean setting and 135 stores full of factory merchandise.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Hotels & Motels



As for lodging on the mainland, Bradenton offers nothing spectacular. Near the airport, you'll find the usual business-chain array. If you want something close to downtown, try the 150-room **Quality Inn & Suites** at 2303 First St. E., ☎ 941-747-6465. \$\$

Holiday Inn Riverfront at Hwy. 41 and Manatee Ave., ☎ 800-23-HOTEL or 941-747-3727, has more atmosphere: Mission-style architecture, a river view, a courtyard pool with gardens and waterfalls. Amenities include a restaurant, bar, and whirlpool. \$\$\$-\$\$\$

Camping

Many of the area campgrounds are designed for retired winter residents and don't allow children except as visitors. If you have kids, call first and ask if they are welcome.

Lake Manatee State Recreation Area (see page 148) at 20007 Rte. 64, ☎ 941-741-3028, has 60 scrubland habitat campsites and does accept families. Campsites cost \$8.72 without electricity, \$10.84 with. No reservations are accepted.

You'll find several campgrounds in and around Palmetto, including **Frog Creek Campground** at 8515 Bayshore Rd. in Palmetto, ☎ 800-771-FROG or 941-722-6154. You can fish the creek or play shuffleboard and horseshoes. Tent camping allowed. Year-round rate for RVs with full hookup is \$16-\$18 a day for two persons; for tents, \$13. Weekly and monthly rates available. Pets are allowed for an additional \$1 per day, per pet.

Sarasota Bay Travel Trailer Park at 10777 44th Ave. W., ☎ 800-247-8361 or 941-794-1200, is another retiree camp, located on the bay with full RV hookups, a boat ramp and dock, fishing, horseshoes, exercise room, recreation hall, and entertainment. Daily rates for full hookup are \$25-\$30.

Where To Eat



In undiscovered Palmetto, **Riverside Café** at Regatta Pointe Marina, 955 Riverside Dr., ☎ 941-729-4402, overlooks a yacht harbor on the Manatee River. Seating is pleasant inside or out for breakfast, lunch, or dinner every day (no dinner Sunday or Monday). The extensive menu is priced \$3-\$5 for breakfast, and anywhere from \$6 for a luncheon salad or sandwich to a \$14 seafood sampler for dinner.



In its historic digs at pink neo-Mediterranean Riverpark Hotel, circa 1920, **Nadine's 10th Street Bistro**, 309 10th St. W., ☎ 941-748-0434, is becoming the new popular lunch spot downtown. Classic and imaginative salads and sandwiches come in generous portions with skinny breadsticks and a cheesy dip. The River Park Favorites sandwiches are all winners. Try the bruschetta, with pesto, muenster, roma tomatoes, fresh mozzarella and a lovely orange vinaigrette-dressed salad. High ceilings and windows, a stone fountain, a player piano in the background, and market umbrellas imbue a cheerful-

ness. It's open for lunch, Monday-Friday. Menu selections range from \$5 to \$8.

The locals' favorite downtown is **Twin Dolphin Marina Grill** at Memorial Pier, 1200 First Ave. W., ☎ 941-748-8087, known especially for its lunch buffet and Sunday brunch. Situated on the town's historic pier, it features large windows looking onto the water. The lunch menu offers sandwiches, pasta, and seafood entrées for \$6-\$17. The dinner menu, which concentrates on seafood with a Caribbean flair, has items costing \$12-\$20. It's open daily for lunch and dinner.

Anna Maria Island

The largest of the Bradenton-Sarasota islands, Anna Maria has three distinct communities. Northernmost Anna Maria has a casual air about it, along with a great public fishing pier, and some fun fish houses and bars. Holmes Beach, to the south, is more upscale, while Bradenton Beach, with its beach shops, sometimes borders on tacky but has some historic feel to it as well. Seven miles of beaches edge Anna Maria Island; the best are at Holmes Beach and Bradenton Beach.

Getting Here



Rte. 64 (Exit 42 off I-75) intersects with **Hwy. 41** and heads across the island's north bridge to Holmes Beach. From the south, take Exit 41 from I-75 follow **Rte. 70** to **Hwy. 41**. Turn north on Highway 41, then west on Rte. 684, which takes you across the south bridge. Both bridges connect to Gulf Drive (Rte. 789), the island's major thoroughfare.

In Anna Maria, follow **Pine Ave.**, **North Shore Dr.**, and **Bay Blvd.** to find the town's sights. In Holmes Beach, **Marina Drive** takes you away from commercial traffic and along the bay.

In Bradenton Beach, **Bridge St.** is the center of the town's historic district. South of it, **Rte. 789** connects to Longboat Key.

Information



For local information, call, write, or visit the **Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce** 5337 Gulf Dr., Holmes Beach 34217, www.annamariaislandchamber.org, ☎ 941-778-1541. Hours are Monday-Friday, 9-5.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Small and intimate, the **Anna Maria Island Historical Museum** at 402 Pine Ave., ☎ 941-778-0492, keeps photographs, maps, records, books, a shell collection, a turtle display, and vintage videos preserved in an old ice house. Next to it, the old jail house is a colorful sight. Admission is free; donations are accepted. It's open Tuesday-Thursday and Saturday, 10-1, June-August; 10-4 the rest of the year. Closed Monday, Friday, and Sunday.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Bayfront Park, on Bay Blvd. at Anna Maria's north end, rounds the tip of the island Gulf to bay and stays relatively uncrowded. The linear park offers picnic facilities, a playground, recreational opportunities, and a magnificent view of St. Petersburg's Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Open daily, 6am-10pm.

In Holmes Beach, **Manatee County Park** on Gulf Drive and Rte. 64 is fun and sunny, with a playground, picnicking, lifeguards, a snack bar, showers, and a fishing pier.

Equally popular **Coquina Beach** lies in Bradenton Beach at the south end of Gulf Dr., and wraps around Gulf and bay. Here, beachers enjoy picnic areas, concessions, boat ramps, good snorkeling, a playground, lifeguards, and lots of shady Australian pine trees. Across the street, the Coquina BayWalk at the 17-acre **Leffis Key Nature Preserve** provides a walk among mangroves and up a tall dune.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Along with the coast's usual complement of fish, Gulf waters around Bradenton are known as **Jewfish Country**. The huge fish school in great numbers around area wrecks and ledges.

Anna Maria City Pier at the northeast end of **Bayfront Park** (see above) on Bay Blvd. extends 700 feet into Anna Maria Sound and has food and bait concessions.

Rod & Reel Pier at 875 North Shore Drive in Anna Maria, ☎ 941-778-1885, has a café and bait shop. Admission is \$1.25 for adults, \$1 for kids ages eight-12.

In Bradenton Beach, a former bridge forms the T-shaped **Bradenton Beach City Pier** on Bridge St. It reaches into Intracoastal waters and has a restaurant and bait house. Fee for fishing is \$1 each for those ages 17 and older. You can walk on the pier for free.

Fishermen also cast off the bridge between Bradenton Beach and Longboat Key.

To get out in the deep waters, home of huge grouper, tuna, mackerel, cobia, barracuda, and snapper, book a charter with **Riptide**, Captain's Marina, 5501 Marina Dr. in Holmes Beach, ☎ 941-778-0662. Aboard the 27-foot customized Chriscraft, up to four fishermen can spend six hours for \$350 and nine hours for \$450. A 12-hour trip is offered twice weekly.

Boat Ramps

On the causeway at the Anna Maria Island end, **King Fish Park** has two public ramps.

On the bay side of **Coquina Beach** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) on Gulf Drive in Bradenton Beach, you'll find boat ramps and other facilities.

Boat Rentals

Palma Sola Boat Rentals on the causeway to Anna Maria, ☎ 941-778-4083, rents powerboats at \$70-\$155 for two hours, \$105-\$195 for a half-day, and \$145-\$260 for a full day. Pontoon boats rent for \$140 for a half-day and \$180 all day. Two hours on a Hobie Cat cost \$20. Parasailing is available for \$50.

Rent power and pontoon boats at **Bradenton Beach Marina** at 402 Church Ave., ☎ 941-778-2288. Half-day rates are \$185; full day, \$235. Gas and tax are extra.

Bradenton Beach Sailboat Rentals at 1325 Gulf Dr., ☎ 941-778-4969, gives free sailing lessons with its rentals, which are \$30-\$35 an hour for G Cats. It also rents three-seat WaveRunners from \$60 an hour.

Boat Charters & Tours

Spice Sailing Charters at Galati Yacht Basin in Anna Maria, ☎ 941-778-3240, whisks you off on a sea breeze to Egmont Key (see page 96) for a half-day (\$25 each) or sunset cruise (\$20). Prices include complimentary soft drinks. Sailing lessons are offered aboard the 27-foot vessel.

Paddling

Self-guided tours aboard sit-on-top kayaks depart from **Native Rentals**, 5340 Gulf Drive in Holmes Beach, ☎ 941-778-7757 daily. Cost for professional orientation, pick-up, delivery, gear, and four hours of paddle time is \$24 each.

Snorkeling & Diving

A sunken sugar barge and a close-to-shore ledge provide fascinating beach dives at **Coquina Beach** at the south end of Bradenton Beach. Other wrecks and ledges lie 10 to 19 miles from shore. Look for gigantic jewfish.

SeaTrek Divers at 105 Seventh St. N. in Bradenton Beach, www.seatrek-divers.com, ☎ 941-779-1506, leads two-tank, offshore dives for \$50 each. Snorkel trips to Egmont Key cost \$35 each, including equipment. The store rents diving and snorkeling gear, and teaches PADI certification courses. It is open on Monday and Wednesday-Saturday, 10-6 (closed on Tuesday), and Sunday, 9-1.

■ On Wheels



Neumann's Island Beach Store, 427 Pine Ave. in Anna Maria, ☎ 941-778-3316, rents bikes for \$3-\$6 an hour, \$7-\$14 a day. Weekly and month rates and free pick-up and delivery are available.

Island Rental, 3214 E. Bay Dr., Holmes Beach, www.worldamerica.com/islandrental.htm, ☎ 800-248-8797 or 941-778-1472, rents bikes with free delivery. First day rentals cost \$8-\$10, plus \$5-\$7 for subsequent days, with breaks for long-term rentals. It's open Monday-Saturday, 8-6; Sunday, 10-4.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Hotels & Motels



There's much to choose from for lodging on Anna Maria Island. You can rent a home or condo, sequester yourself in historic B&B charm, or stay in the midst of beachdom bustle.

Rod & Reel Motel at 877 N. Shore Dr., ☎ 941-778-2780, is tailor-made for fishing folks. Its 10 efficiencies are set on the shores of Tampa Bay, where a nice, long pier accommodates anglers. The compact, 10-unit motel sports bright touches in its landscaping and tiki shelter. \$-\$\$

In Bradenton Beach, **Tropic Isle Inn**, 2103 Gulf Drive N, www.annamariaisland.com, ☎ 941-778-1237, is a pleasant, intimate little place across the street from the beach and with its own pool and patio. The 15 units include guest rooms, efficiencies, and one- and two-bedroom apartments. \$\$-\$\$\$

Inns/Bed & Breakfasts

More delightful now, since taken over by the Harrington House (see below) and refurbished, **The Beach Inn**, 101 66th St. in Holmes Beach, www.thebeachinn.com, ☎ 800-823-2247 or 941-778-8303, takes its beach stance across a dead-end street from Beach Bistro (see *Where To Eat*, below). Designer furniture, custom tile, and continental breakfast augment the view of sea oat-trimmed beach. Rooms, suites, and efficiencies are available. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$



The island's most charming option, **Harrington House B&B** at 5626 Gulf Drive in Holmes Beach, www.harhousebb.com, ☎ 888-828-5566 or 941-778-5444, is one of Florida's few beach-front B&Bs. Added to that are its history and casual elegance. The one cottage and each of seven main-house rooms and four beach-house rooms have their own bath, fridge, TV, antique pieces, and Victorian appointments. A dramatic cut-stone fireplace dominates the sitting room. Guests have use of kayaks and bicycles. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Historic **Duncan House B&B** at 1703 Gulf Dr., www.duncanhousebb.com, ☎ 941-778-6858, is situated in an 1800s home that was moved to the beach from downtown Bradenton. A tropical color scheme and carved flourishes give it a whimsical personality. Cheery guest rooms, some with separate entryways, have private baths. Four of the rooms are in the main house. Two occupy a poolside cottage with common living and kitchen area. The B&B sits across the road from the beach, but has deeded access. \$\$-\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

For families and other large groups, vacation home and condominium rentals can be the smartest way to stay. **Mike Norman Realty**, 3101 Gulf Dr., Holmes Beach, www.mikenormanrealty.com, ☎ 800-367-1617 or 941-778-6696, will send you a catalog brochure listing more than 100 weekly and monthly options as low as \$500 a week in summer.

Where To Eat



You'll find a delightful array of beach restaurants, local eateries, fish houses, and dressy dining in the three Anna Maria Island communities.

A great place to go for lunch is **The Sandbar**, beachside at 100 Spring Ave. in Anna Maria, ☎ 941-778-0444. Get a deck table and watch the water world go by while you munch lobster salad or a seafood sandwich. It's open daily and also serves dinner. Prices for lunch are \$6-\$10; for dinner, \$6-\$17.

For typical Florida fish-house ambiance and food, try **Rotten Ralph's**, near the pier at 902 S. Bay Blvd. in Anna Maria, ☎ 941-778-3953. It straddles a dock within a marina, and serves fried seafood, steamed seafood pots, meat pies, sandwiches, and salads. Entrée prices run \$5-\$22. It's open daily for lunch and dinner.

For fine cuisine in an intimate surfside setting, follow the trail of rave reviews to **Beach Bistro**, 6600 Gulf Drive in Holmes Beach, ☎ 941-778-6444. It's open daily for dinner, serving small and large plates of creatively fashioned meat, fowl, and seafood, such as lobsterscargots (chunks of lobster prepared escargot-style), bouillabaisse, and roast duckling with pepper sauce. Main courses range from \$23 to \$30, with lighter portions available for most entrées.



Especially popular for breakfast (served anytime) with a view, **Gulf Drive Café**, 900 Gulf Drive in Bradenton Beach, ☎ 941-778-1919, also serves home-cooked lunch and dinner at reasonable prices seven days a week. Breakfast runs \$2.25-\$5.50; lunch and dinner, \$4.25-\$10 for burgers, sandwiches, seafood, and continental specialties.



The **Bridge Street Café** at 200 Bridge St., ☎ 941-779-1706, serves the best breakfast around and in the best venue. Humble but lovable, it straddles the historic city pier, with some seating inside but the most scenic is out on the pier under umbrellas. It is also open daily for lunch and dinner, specializing in burgers and fried seafood baskets. Standard breakfast items cost \$3-\$8, burgers \$4.50-\$7.50 and seafood dishes \$10-\$18. It's famous for its all-you-can-eat grouper, prepared fried, blackened or grilled, for \$13.

Longboat Key

A lovely, well-heeled island, Longboat Key has little to offer in the way of sights. Its public beaches are unspectacular. It provides panoramic passage between Anna Maria Island and the islands to the south. Its marinas supply water adventure and its bike path offers exercise for scenery-gazers. The superlatives are reserved for its dining. Die-hard shoppers might enjoy browsing the pricey boutiques, but shopping is not covered separately here because the choices in Sarasota and its islands are so much better.

Getting Here



Not directly connected to the mainland, Longboat Key can be reached by bridges from its northern and southern neighbors along **Rte. 789**, which here takes the extended name **Gulf of Mexico Drive**.

Information



Information is available from **Longboat Key Chamber of Commerce** at 6854 Gulf of Mexico Dr., Longboat Key, FL 34228, ☎ 941-383-2466. It's open 9-5, Monday-Friday.

Sights & Attractions

Local Color



Be sure to turn east off the north end of Gulf of Mexico Drive onto Broadway St. and visit **The Village**, Longboat Key's original settlement, where you'll find old-island spirit, the local art center, a couple of great seafood restaurants, and wild peacocks roaming the streets.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



The bridge at Longboat Key's northern end, spanning Longboat Pass toward Anna Maria Island, is a popular fishing spot.

For captained charters, bareboat adventures, and party cruises, contact **Spindrift Yacht Services** at 410 Gulf of Mexico Dr., ☎ 941-383-7781. Half-day offshore fishing excursions for up to four run \$300; bay fishing charters cost \$260. Six-passenger cruises cost \$400 for a half-day.

Boat Rentals

Cannons Marina at 6040 Gulf of Mexico Dr., www.cannons.com, ☎ 800-566-1955 or 941-383-1311, rents out top-quality fishing boats, skiffs, and deck boats. Half-day rates on runabouts are \$70-\$220; full day, \$100-\$290.

Deck boats hold up to 12 people. Gas and tax are extra. It also rents cell phones, tackle, and water skis, and sells bait, tackle, and other supplies. Cannons is open daily, 8-6.

Boat Charters & Tours

Sailing ventures for up to six at **Spindrift Yacht Services** (see above), 410 Gulf of Mexico Dr., ☎ 941-383-7781, cost \$225-\$300.

■ On Wheels



Cyclists slice through the 12-mile-long island's center along the paved bike path on **Gulf of Mexico Drive**. It's a flat, easy, scenic drive, flowered and manicured.

Rent your ride at **Backyard Bike Shop**, 5610 Gulf of Mexico Dr., ☎ 941-383-5184. Its selection of mountain, hybrid, beach, tandem, and BMX bikes rent for \$7-\$10 for a day, \$25-\$35 for a week. Skate rentals cost \$5 per hour, \$10 per day, \$40 per week. In season, it's open daily, 10-5, with shortened hours other times of year.

Shopping



With renowned St. Armands Key just over the next bridge, serious shoppers head south. If you want to wander out on your bike for some casual window-shopping and gifting, try **Avenue of the Flowers** and **The Centre Shops** along Gulf of Mexico Blvd.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



From beach cottages to grand high-rise resorts, Longboat Key offers it all. Most of its lodging you'll find on the Gulf or the bay, with ready access to adventure.

Hotels, Resorts & Cottages

Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites at 4949 Gulf of Mexico Dr., ☎ 800-HOLIDAY or 941-383-3771, has an outdoor swimming pool and spa, and another pool indoors. Outdoor recreation includes a wide beach, watersports rentals, four lighted tennis courts, and a beach bar. There's also an indoor rec center, sauna, bars, and restaurants. Accommodations include rooms, suites, and "kidsuites," specially designed rooms that have sleeping

cubbies for the kids, stocked with bunk beds, video game player, TV, and other fun amenities. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$



The Colony Beach & Tennis Resort at 1620 Gulf of Mexico Dr., ☎ 800-426-5669 or 941-383-6464, is perfect for beach-lovers, tennis-players, and dining aficionados. It boasts 21 soft and hard tennis courts, a beautiful stretch of beach, a small but complete spa, top-rated restaurants (see *Where To Eat*, below), and a complimentary kids' program. Townhouses occupy low-lying buildings with complete amenities and designer décor. Shoulder-season rates, packages, and other room options are available. \$\$\$\$

Serious sportsfolk will find bliss at **The Resort at Longboat Key Club**, 301 Gulf of Mexico Dr., www.longboatkeyclub.com, ☎ 800-237-8821 or 941-383-8821. The list of activities is practically endless: one 18-hole and three nine-hole golf courses, a golf school, two tennis centers with 38 Har-Tru courts, bicycles, rafts, sailboats, boogie boards, kayaks, snorkeling gear, an Olympic-size swimming pool, jogging and biking paths, an exercise track, a fitness center, and a kid's club. The 232 guest rooms include club suites and one- and two-bedroom suites. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

If your idea of a true beach vacation involves a little cottage with sand on the floor, check into **Rolling Waves Cottages**, 6351 Gulf of Mexico Dr., ☎ 941-383-1323. Its row of eight self-contained cottages exudes charm and relaxation. The 1940s units have been revamped to full modern convenience, only steps away from the beach. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

To rent privately owned homes and condos on Longboat Key and neighboring islands, contact **The Longboat Connection**, 3720 Gulf of Mexico Dr., www.longboatconnection.com, ☎ 800-469-4852 or 941-383-9505. Monthly rates in high season range from \$1,400 to \$4,600; in off-season, \$600-\$2,200; in pre-season (mid-November to mid-January), \$1,000-\$3,800. Some weekly rentals available.

Where To Eat



Dining is an art on Longboat Key. Either you do it sleeves rolled-up with gusto, or with pinkies extended while relishing haute cuisine.

To do the former, visit The Village (page 160), which contains two unpretentious restaurants long loved by locals and those visitors who have discovered them. **Mar-Vista Dockside Restaurant & Pub** at 760 Broadway St., ☎ 941-383-2391, occupies a cozily a-kilter little building that one could almost call a shack. Sit at the bar and tell fishing lies with the locals. Dine outside overlooking the boat dockage or inside at a mismatched assortment of tables. The fish is fresh and fixed in a variety of appealing ways. It's open for lunch (\$6-\$10) and dinner (\$10-\$18) daily.

Nearby, **Moore's Stone Crab Restaurant** at 800 Broadway St., ☎ 941-383-1748, specializes in stone crabs, which are in season only from mid-October to mid-May. Other dishes reflect Southern influences and Florida catches. Main courses are \$10-\$22. It's open daily for lunch and dinner.



The list of fine restaurants could go on for pages. For the splurge of a vacation (maybe of a lifetime), go to the unique and charming **Euphemia Haye**, 5540 Gulf of Mexico Dr., www.euphemia-haye.com, ☎ 941-383-3633. Local products are prepared in international style with stunning results. The setting is boutique and intimate. Dishes such as Grecian lamb shank and roast duckling are offered, and entrées range from \$18 to \$35, à la carte. Upstairs in the Haye Loft, the selection of desserts and coffees dazzles the mind and blows the diet. It's open daily for dinner. Reservations are recommended.

The Colony Dining Room at Colony Beach and Tennis Resort, 1620 Gulf of Mexico Dr., ☎ 941-383-5558, also has an impeccable reputation for serving the finest daily, for lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch. It receives special acclaim for its comprehensive and savvy wine list. The beach reaches up to the walls and their generous windows. Dishes are based on continental classicism, with creative nuances, all executed exquisitely. For lunch you'll pay \$9-\$13 for salads, sandwiches, and entrées. A la carte dinner prices for dishes like plantain-wrapped mahi mahi and grilled Texas ostrich range from \$19 to \$29. Dinner reservations are required.

Lido Key & St. Armands Key

Getting Here



The northern approach to Lido Key passes through Anna Maria Island and Longboat Key along **Rte. 789**. On Lido Key, Rte. 789 is called **John Ringling Parkway**. At St. Armands Circle, John Ringling Blvd./Causeway forms the western and eastern spokes; **Boulevard of the Presidents** heads south, then jogs into **Benjamin Franklin Drive**.

From Sarasota's south side, you can get to St. Armands Key, which is tucked into Lido Key's bayside belly, by crossing the **John Ringling Causeway** (Rte. 780), which branches off Highway 41 (Tamiami Trail) from the mainland. From I-75, take Exit 39 (Fruitville Rd) or Exit 38 (Bee Ridge Rd) to Highway 41 and follow the signs across the John Ringling Causeway.

Sights & Attractions

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



Nicest and sportiest of the island's Gulf strip of beaches, 130-acre **South Lido Beach** at the south end of Benjamin Franklin Dr., features a wide, sugar-sand white beach that wraps around Gulf to bay, fitness trails, a bayou for canoeing, volleyball, ball fields, and a shady picnic area. Fishermen enjoy casting into the pass at the tip.

Spectator Sports

Sarasota Ski-A-Rees Show takes place at City Island, behind Mote Marine (see below), every Sunday at 2 pm. There is limited bleacher seating. Performers are amateur. Admission is free.

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

Just north and east of the bridge from Longboat Key on Ken Thompson Parkway, City Island holds several eco-attractions for nature enthusiasts. The first, **Sarasota Bay Walk** at 1550 Ken Thompson Pkwy, takes you on a self-guided tour of the bay, estuaries, lagoons, and uplands along boardwalks and shell paths. Admission is free.



Nearby, **Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium** at 1600 Ken Thompson Pkwy, www.mote.org, ☎ 800-691-MOTE or 941-388-2451, specializes in the research and rehabilitation of marine mammals. Its most touted attraction is a 135,000-gallon shark tank, stocked with sharks and other local fish. Twenty-two smaller aquariums, a touch tank, and a touchless tank hold more than 200 varieties of common and unusual species. Ten new exhibits, including an outdoor ray touch tank, and an interactive shark theater opened in 1999. Special effects make you feel as though you're under water, let you feel a shark's skin, and show you a shark's anatomy. Three of the facility's research labs are now open for viewing. In the Marine Mammal Center, visitors can watch recovering whales, dolphins, manatees, or whatever happens to be the latest guest, in its 55,000-gallon marine mammal recovery tanks. Hugh and Buffett, two manatees born in captivity, charm with their docile demeanor. Sealife encounter boat tours depart from the site (see *Eco-Adventures*, below). Admission to the aquarium is \$10 for adults and \$7 for children ages four-17. It's open daily, 10-5.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Both passes at Lido Key's polar ends make for a good day of rod-and-reeling. The **New Pass Bridge**, and **Ken Thompson Pier** and **New Pass Pier** on City Island provide vantage points into north-end New Pass. **New Pass Bait Shop** on Ken Thompson Pkwy, ☎ 941-388-3050, serves angling needs in that neighborhood.

For south-end fishing in Big Sarasota Pass, go to **South Lido Beach** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at the end of Benjamin Franklin Drive.

Offshore, artificial reefs between two and 25 miles from shore attract marine life at New Pass and Big Pass. Contact Sarasota County Parks & Recreation Department for location information, ☎ 941-316-1172.

Tony Saprito Fishing Pier at Ringling Causeway Park accommodates fishermen with a bait concession and other facilities.

Saltwater Sportfishing Guide at 2529 Temple St., www.sarasota-fla-fishing.com, ☎ 941-366-2159 or 941-350-8583 (cellular), takes small char-

ters into deep-sea, bay, and backwaters for four to eight hours. Rates range from \$150 to \$635, depending upon trip length, time of year, and number of people in party (up to six). They pick up at New Pass Bait Shop on Ken Thompson Pkwy.

Boat Ramps

Boat-owners will find three public ramps at **City Island** into New Pass, on the east side of Lido Key's north end.

Paddling

South Lido Beach (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at the south end of Benjamin Franklin Dr., has a canoe launch and a self-guided canoe trail through Brushy Bayou.

From Mote Marine Aquarium (see *Eco-Attractions*, above), **Sarasota Bay Explorers** at 1600 Ken Thompson Pkwy, ☎ 941-388-4200, delves into the natural side of Sarasota, which isn't that easy to find these days. Highlights of the naturalist-narrated trip are a close-up view of Rookery Islands and a peek at sea life netted from the waters. Rates are \$24 for adults; \$20 for children ages four-17 (three and under ride free). You can also purchase combination Mote-cruise tickets. The almost two-hour cruise departs every day at 11, 1:30, and 4. Custom tours are also available. Sarasota Bay Explorers also hosts a **kayak adventure** guided by a marine biologist. The trip takes in the waters of South Lido Park, for three hours of close-to-nature encounters.

■ On Foot



At **South Lido Beach** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), a 20-minute nature trail takes you through woodsy parts into the swampland of Brushy Bayou.

■ On Wheels



The Longboat Key **bike path** crosses the New Pass Bridge and continues for a few miles through Lido Key's northern residential section.

Shopping



Flip-flops and fur coats (yes, in Florida!) intermingle at the spinning wheel shopping district that ranks itself with Rodeo Drive. **St. Armands Circle**, ☎ 941-388-1554, www.starmandscircle.com, was built as John Ringling had envisioned it, in the shape of a circus

ring. The inner park displays some of his Italian statuary, as well as plaques honoring circus illuminati in the Circus Ring Hall of Fame. “The Circle,” as locals call it, holds pricey boutiques, upscale chains, art galleries, restaurants, and clubs. Horse-drawn carriages give sunset rides. (Call **Buckingham Carriage**, ☎ 941-322-1762.)

Parking is free (but sometimes scarce) on the street and in a nearby garage. Look for **Wyland Galleries** at 465 John Ringling Blvd., ☎ 941-388-5331, showroom of the well-known namesake’s wildlife art. (Incidentally, you’ll find one of his nationwide “whale wall” murals on the exterior of Mote Marine Aquarium.)

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



If you’re looking for Lido Key’s beachy action, check into the **Radisson Lido Beach Resort** at 700 Benjamin Franklin Dr., ☎ 800-441-2113 or 941-388-2161, center of activity. A total of 116 rooms, kitchenettes, and suites stack up in a low-rise next to Lido’s central public beach. Very Florida with its pastel color scheme, it provides a pool, watersports rentals, a café, and a bar on premises. Accommodations are well furnished and roomy. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Something more serene? **Half Moon Beach Club** at 2050 Ben Franklin Dr., ☎ 800-358-3245 or 941-388-3694, is unusual, understated, and expensive. Two Art Deco buildings in the shape of a half moon hold 85 guest rooms, efficiencies and suites, all with refrigerators and coffeemakers. It’s a little bit Florida, a little bit Europe in style. Accent is on the outdoors, with bike rentals, a beach sundeck, volleyball, shuffleboard, and great sunsets. Ask about packages. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Where To Eat



Dining is centered in **St. Armands Circle**, where everything is classy or trendy, or both. Catch a snack in a deli or ice cream shop, or sit down to a multi-course culinary celebration.

Florida’s chain of Spanish-cuisine establishments, **Columbia Restaurant**, has a storefront at 411 St. Armands Circle, ☎ 941-388-3987. Open daily for lunch and dinner, it serves authentic Spanish-Cuban dishes, such as paella, *ropa vieja*, and grouper à la Rusa. Dinner plates are \$14-\$20; lunches run \$3-\$10. Reservations recommended for dinner.



The ever-changing menu at **David Michael's**, 328 John Ringling Blvd., ☎ 941-388-4429, touts its “harvest cuisine,” a style that celebrates freshness and earthy goodness. The lunch menu is famous for its creative salads and healthy beefalo and turkey burgers. Come dinner, the dishes reflect complexity and daring with such creations as ahi tuna with a crust of porcini mushrooms and toasted Szechuan peppercorns with Asian barbecue au jus. The restaurant accepts reservations and is open for lunch and dinner, Tuesday-Saturday.

Nightlife



In a town where nightlife glitters, **St. Armands Circle** contends for a great deal of the action. Its clubs and restaurants host live local rock bands and national artists in an intimate setting.

Two of the most popular clubs include **The Patio**, 411 St. Armands Circle at Columbia Restaurant, ☎ 941-388-3987, and **ChaCha Coconuts** at 417 St. Armands Circle, ☎ 941-388-3300. Cover charges vary.

Sarasota

Getting Here



From I-75, take exits 37 through 40 to get to Sarasota. From north to south, **University Parkway**, **Fruitville Rd.**, **Bee Ridge Rd.**, and **Clark Rd.** (Rte. 72) are Sarasota's big east-west streets. **Highway 41** (Tamiami Trail) heads through town close to the bay. It intersects with **Main St.** and **Bayfront Dr.** downtown. Between Highway 41 and I-75, **Tuttle Ave.**, **Beneva Rd.**, **McIntosh Rd.**, and **Cattlemen Rd.** run north to south. **Hwy. 301** branches off Highway 41 downtown.

Sarasota County Area Transit (SCAT), ☎ 941-316-1234, provides public transportation around town. Regular bus fare is 50¢. Monthly unlimited use passports and discount punch cards are available.

Information



The **Greater Sarasota County Chamber of Commerce** at 1819 Main St., Ste. 240, Sarasota, FL 34236-5983, ☎ 941-955-8187, has specific information on Sarasota. You can also contact

the **Downtown Association of Sarasota**, 1818 Main St., Sarasota, FL 34326, ☎ 941-951-2656.

Sights & Attractions

■ Downtown



Downtown Sarasota has perked up its waterfront and **Main Street**. Its renowned restaurants, art galleries, clubs, and theaters compose the Theatre and Arts District.

Performing Arts

Most of the action is centered in downtown's **Sarasota Theatre and Arts District**.

Grand dame of the downtown theater scene, **Sarasota Opera House**, 61 N. Pineapple Ave., ☎ 941-366-8450, is a beautifully restored historic mission-style building known as the A.B. Edwards Theatre. You can tour the facility by appointment (and see the chandelier from the set of *Gone With the Wind*) for \$2; advance arrangements required. **Sarasota Opera** (www.sarasotaopera.org) performs here from mid-February through March. The troupe, which has been performing for 40 years, stages Puccini, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, and other classics at night and Saturday and Sunday matinee performances. Tickets are \$15-\$63, including special student performances.

All your favorite musicals come to stage year-round at **Golden Apple Dinner Theatre**, 25 N. Pineapple Ave., ☎ 800-652-0920 or 941-366-5454. Tickets for dinner and a show range from \$23 to \$32.50.

For something more avant-garde, check out **Florida Studio Theatre** at 1241 N. Palm Ave. downtown, ☎ 941-366-9017. It uses its Mainstage and Cabaret theaters as testing grounds for up-and-coming playwrights during the December-August season and a summertime New Plays Festival. À la carte dining is available in the Cabaret. The box office is open daily. No shows on Monday. Cost of tickets ranges from \$27 to \$39.

Based in a movie house in the historic Burns Court district, **Sarasota Film Society**, Burns Court Cinema, 506 Burns Ln., www.filmsociety.org, ☎ 941-955-FILM, presents international films year-round and hosts the Cine-World Film Festival, a 10-day event in early November. Tickets are \$5.50 for non-members.

Natural Areas

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens at 811 S. Palm Ave., www.selby.org, ☎ 941-366-5730 or 941-366-5731, has 10 acres planted with palms, bamboo, hibiscus, tropical food plants, herbs, and other exotic species. It is par-

ticularly known for its collection of 6,000 orchids, set in a lush rainforest environment. The gardens are open daily, 10-5. Admission is \$8 for adults, \$4 for children ages six-11.

■ Outlying Areas

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

At **Museum of Cars & Music** at 5500 N. Tamiami Trail, www.sarasota-carmuseum.org, ☎ 941-355-6228, you can see more than 75 antique and classic cars and 1,200 antique and mechanical music boxes, phonographs and player pianos. To view the music collection, you must take the half-hour tour. A highlight of the museum is the collection of John Ringling's Rolls Royces and Pierce Arrows. Kids enjoy the antique penny arcade, where a nickel can buy them a game. Adult admission is \$9, \$5 for children ages six-12. It's open daily, 9-6.

Learn more about Florida's citrus industry on **Albritton Fruit Trolley Tour**, 5947 Clark Center Ave., ☎ 941-925-7155. Free tours occur at 10 and 3 on Mondays only. Call for reservations.

THE RINGLING ESTATE



The best of Sarasota's attractions spreads out its circus and arts heritage over 66 bayfront acres. John Ringling left the **Ringling Estate** at 5401 Bay Shore Rd., ☎ 941-359-5700, to the state upon his death. Its cornerstone is

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, whose 22 galleries specialize in late Medieval, Renaissance Italian, and Spanish religious and other baroque works, including five original Rubens tapestries.

You can also visit **Ca'd'Zan**, Ringling's 30-room Italianate palace, built in the 1920s at a cost of \$1.5 million; the **Museum of the Circus**, filled with calliopes, costumes, a scale-model circus, elaborate wagons, behind-the-circus scenes, and other Big Top art and memorabilia; the **Asolo Theatre**, an 18th-century Italian royal theater; and estate rose gardens.

Admission fees for entrance into all Ringling Estates attractions are \$9 for adults and \$8 for seniors. Florida students and teachers (with ID) and children ages 12 and under enter free. Admission is free for everyone on Saturday, by provision of Ringling's will. The complex is open daily, 10-5:30.

Performing Arts

Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall at 777 N. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 800-826-9303 or 941-953-3366, looks like a big purple clam shell on the outside. Inside, the 1,761-seat hall hosts Broadway shows, major classical orchestras, ethnic music, dance, choral music, a Saturday kids' program, and the Florida West Coast Symphony.

The Ringling tradition lives on through **Circus Sarasota**, ☎ 941-924-7054, which stages professional performances, December-February, under the one-ring Big Top in the parking lot of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall (above) and at other venues throughout the year. Call for dates and show times.

FSU Center for the Performing Arts at 5555 N. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 800-361-8388 or 941-351-8000, incorporates elements of a circa-1900 Scottish opera house into one of its two theaters. The professional **Asolo Theatre Company** (www.asolo.org) is at home in the 500-seat Harold E. and Esther M. Mertz Theatre November-June. The Sarasota Ballet of Florida performs here late October-early April. The other theater, Jane B. Cook, houses the FSU/Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training, where graduate level students perform with professional actors in an intimate 161-seat setting. Mertz Theatre tickets range \$5-\$38; \$17-\$27 in Cook Theatre. Children under age 12 are admitted half-price, and student discounts apply. Admission for the ballet is \$11-\$15. Call for performance schedule.

Family Fun

Scheduled to open at a new location by mid-2000, **G. Wiz** (formerly Gulf Coast Wonder & Imagination Zone), 1001 Blvd. of the Arts, ☎ 941-906-1851, will occupy the Selby Library Building with more than 60 imaginative and educational learning stations. Call for times and admission fees.

North of downtown, **Sarasota Jungle Gardens** at 3701 Bayshore Rd., ☎ 941-335-5305, is worth a few hours' time to stroll peaceful gardens, watch exotic bird and reptile shows, and look at monkeys, flamingos, swans, wallabies, and other animals. Hours are 9-5, daily. Admission is \$9 for adults; \$7 for seniors; \$5 for children ages three-12.

Spectator Sports

Sarasota Polo Club at 8201 Polo Club Ln., east of I-75 off University Pkwy, ☎ 941-907-0000, competes on Sundays at 1 pm from mid-December to mid-April. Adult tickets are \$5; children under 12 are admitted free.

East of Highway 41, the **Chicago White Sox** train during March at **Ed Smith Stadium**, 2700 12th St., ☎ 941-954-SOXX. Tickets cost \$4 and \$5, with Thursday night specials. In summer, the Sarasox take the stadium; ☎ 941-365-4460.

Buy some dog food (you may even win money!) at **Sarasota Kennel Club** at 5400 Bradenton Rd., ☎ 941-355-7744, where greyhound racing happens

at matinee and evening shows every day but Sunday, January through mid-April. The club also simulcasts greyhound and horse racing from around Florida and other locations year-round, Monday-Saturday. Admission is \$1.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Flying Fish Fleet at Marina Jack's in Island Park, www.flying-fishfleet.com, ☎ 941-366-3373, has deep-sea excursions: half-day and sunset (\$28 each), six-hour (\$34) and all-day (\$40). Special rates are available for children ages 15 and younger, seniors, and non-fishermen. The 85-foot boat is fully equipped with restrooms, a snack bar, and a carpeted sun deck.

Big Catch, ☎ 941-366-3373, works out of Marina Jack's also as a charter service. Expect to pay \$65 each or \$350 for a party of up to six for four hours. Six- and eight-hour rates also available.

Call **Gypsy Guide Service**, ☎ 941-923-6095, for light tackle and fly fishing in the bays and backwaters, half-day (\$250) or full day (\$400) and packages. Rates cover lunch and up to two fly fishermen or three spin fishermen.

Boat Ramps

To launch your own vessel, use the free ramps on **Sixth St.** at Boulevard of the Arts.

Boat Charters & Tours

For dining afloat, **Marina Jack II** at Marina Jack's Restaurant, Island Park, ☎ 941-366-9255, is one name you'll want to know. Take a lunch (starts at \$16) or dinner (\$23-\$25.50) cruise aboard a 100-foot stern-wheeler. Tax and gratuity are extra. Closed September.

LeBarge Tropical Cruises at Marina Jack's, ☎ 941-366-6116, is oh-so islandy, with live entertainment, palm trees on board, an aquarium bar, and your favorite seafood nibbles and exotic cocktails. Daytime cruises include narration and a bit of nature orientation. Accent is on party for the sunset cruises. The charge for either is \$15 for adults, \$12 for children.

Sailing

Enterprise Sailing Charters also departs from Marina Jack's, ☎ 941-951-1833, for half-day (\$35 per person) and sunset (\$20) sails on a 41-foot boat.

To learn how to sail or to rent a sailboat 19- to 27-feet-long, head to **O'Leary's Sarasota Sailing School** at Bayfront Park, ☎ 941-953-7505. Rental rates vary for half-days (\$100-\$150), full days (\$150-\$200), and weekly (\$700-\$1,000). Sailfish boats are rentable by the hour at \$20 for the first. Captained boats cost an extra \$20 an hour, with a three-hour minimum. Sailing instruction costs \$25 per hour (minimum is three hours).

Good as Gold, near the Holiday Inn Marina on Hwy. 41, ☎ 941-312-0900, takes guests into the sunset aboard a 30-foot sailboat for \$35 each. Half-day cruises cost \$45; full-day \$75. An eight-hour beginners' sailing course costs \$100 per person. Private charters available. Call for reservations and directions.

Key Sailing, Marina Jack's, ☎ 888-539-7245 or 941-346-7245, specializes in dining excursions aboard a 41-foot Morgan Classic. The one-day Dolphin cruise includes lunch and beverages for \$90 per person. The Manatee, a two-day trip that includes all meals, costs \$325 each. Key Sailing also offers a four-hour appetizer tour – The Pelican – for \$50 per person.

Wake-Boarding

Learn to wake-board from a master champion at **Above the Wake**, 3800 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-330-WAKE. Lessons are available for beginners to advanced wake-boarders.

Personal Watercraft

O'Leary's Sarasota Sailing School at Bayfront Park, ☎ 941-953-7505, rents Jet Skis for \$45 a half hour, \$60 an hour. Instruction is available.

■ On Foot



Take a walk around **Bayfront Park** for a pleasant form of exercise. If you get serious about it, there's a fitness walk and the path followed by the 1996 Olympic torchbearer. Let the kids splash in the interactive water fountain. It has a nice small-town atmosphere.

The **Ted Sperling Memorial Athletic Complex** at the Boys & Girls Club of Sarasota, 3100 Fruitville Rd., ☎ 941-366-7769, opens its indoor rock-climbing wall to the public every Wednesday evening and Saturday morning. All-day fees for use of the club are \$7 for adults, \$5 for kids ages six-18.

■ On Wheels



Bicycle Center at 4084 Bee Ridge Rd., ☎ 941-377-4505, offers pick-up and delivery. Mountain bike and beach cruiser rentals run \$15 by the day, \$35 by the week. It's open 9-6, Monday-Friday; 9-4 on Saturday.

Shopping



Downtown Sarasota has undergone a recent renovation which turned its historic district into a shopping mall where shops, boutiques, and restaurants occupy vintage buildings. It is best known for its art galleries, most of which line **Palm Ave.** The first Friday of each month, shops, galleries, and restaurants stay open later for the Palm Avenue Art Walk, held 6-9 in the evening. A charming artists' colony called **Towles Court**, ☎ 941-362-0960, is tucked away in downtown's southeast corner, off Hwy. 31 between Adams Lane and Morrill St. It throws its "Art of the Moon" gallery stroll the third Friday of the month from 6 to 10pm.

Book lovers won't want to miss **Main Bookshop** at 1962 Main St., ☎ 941-366-7653, where discounted books on every subject fill four floors. Nearby **Sarasota Quay** is headquarters for upscale shopping and dining.

Southgate Plaza, 3501 Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-955-0900, has Saks Fifth Avenue and other department stores, two restaurants, and a variety of food and clothing shops.

Sarasota Square Mall, Hwy. 41 and Beneva Rd., ☎ 941-922-9600, is one of the region's most complete shopping malls with more than 140 shops and department stores.

For bargains, check out **Sarasota Outlet Center** at I-75's Exit 40 and University Pkwy, ☎ 941-359-2050.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Most of the area's best lodging is on the beaches. Business visitors find chain and mom-and-pop places along Highway 41 around the airport, plus there's a **Ritz-Carlton** coming in 2001, on the grounds of the erstwhile Ringling Towers, near downtown. The resort will have boat docking at Bayfront Park and a club on Lido Beach.

Hotels

Hyatt Sarasota at 1000 Blvd. of the Arts, ☎ 800-233-1234 or 941-953-1234, is an option for folks who want to be on the mainland, yet on the water, and can afford luxury. The skyscraper overlooks a marina. Its 297 rooms and 12 suites are tastefully decorated, as are its spacious lobby and waterfront restaurant. Other amenities include lighted tennis courts, a fitness center, swimming pool, and close proximity to the Sarasota Quay and downtown attractions. \$\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Bed & Breakfasts



At the doorstep to downtown's gallery row and with a glorious harbor sunset view, **The Cypress B&B**, 621 Gulfstream Ave. S., ☎ 941-955-4683, is a sanctuary of historic and artistic quality. Each of its five individually crafted rooms creates a different mood. Antiques and art pieces decorate. Fresh flowers in the rooms, tea-time hors d'oeuvres, bedtime liqueurs, and turndown service with home-made cookies add pampered luxury to the experience. \$\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

For rental homes and condos at all prices by the day, week, or month in Sarasota and the islands, contact **Michael Saunders & Co.** at 100 S. Washington Blvd., ☎ 800-881-2222 or 941-951-6668.

Where To Eat



If you're culinarily adventuresome, plan to spend a lot of time relishing Sarasota's highly competitive dining scene. The prevailing style is cutting-edge creative, but you'll also find top-rate ethnic restaurants, down-home cooking, old-Florida oyster bars, and classic continental.

■ Downtown

Bright and stylish **Bijou Café** at 1287 First St., ☎ 941-366-8111, is a favorite for shoppers and theater-goers (it's across the street from the opera house). Its often-changing menu features dishes such as roast duckling and shrimp piri-piri (spicy, Mozambique-style). Lunch, served Monday-Friday, ranges from \$6.50-\$15, and dinner, served daily and à la carte, runs \$9-\$23 for an entrée only. Reservations are recommended.

For a Cuban departure and a kindness to your pocketbook, try **El Habanero** at 1766 Main St., ☎ 941-362-9562. Daily specials include Cuban sandwiches, Cuban reubens, and traditional dishes such as *bistec palo-milla* (thin sirloin steak fried in olive oil with butter, garlic and lime juice), *tostones* (fried plantains), and *puerco asado* (roast pork). Most entrées fall in the \$3-\$7 range. Paella is \$15.

At Sarasota Quay, **Michael's Seafood Grille**, 214 Sarasota Quay, ☎ 941-951-2467 sells a view as fresh as its fish and its preparation styles. Have yours grilled, fried, or fixed up creatively, like the pecan-crusted tilapia with peach and bourbon marmalade. Pasta and grilled steak complete the dinner menu; the wine selection is extensive. Entrées range from \$12 to \$27. Michael's opens daily for dinner; recommendations are suggested.

■ Outlying Areas



For something less budget-busting, look for one of Sarasota's old-Florida-style oyster bars. The best in the genre is **Phillippi Creek Village Oyster Bar**, waterside at 5353 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-925-4444. It's most famous for its combo seafood steamer pots, but the sandwiches and other seafood items are fresh and tasty, too. You can sit inside the old Southern-style fish house or creekside

on the patio or floating dock. It's open daily for lunch and dinner. A wide array of dishes range from \$3.25-\$17.

To escape the rat race on South Tamiami Trail, duck into **Café Baci**, 4001 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-921-4848, for fine but affordable Italian lunch or dinner. Lunch dishes of pasta, veal, chicken, and seafood run \$6.25-\$9. An extended selection of gourmet dinner offerings – from lasagna verde to polenta-crusted sea bass – are priced \$11-\$21. Open daily for dinner, weekdays for lunch. Dinner reservations are accepted.

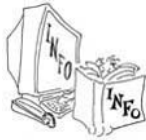


Sarasota is also known for its Amish/Mennonite restaurants, operated by members of a local farming community. Farm-house goodness prevails in a country atmosphere of lacy window treatments and stenciled detail. And the price is right. **Sugar & Spice**, 4000 Cattlemen Rd., ☎ 941-342-1649, is one of the most popular. You're apt to find baked chicken, beef and noodles, Swiss steak, or barbecue pork ribs as a daily special. Sandwiches and entrées are \$2-\$13. Leave room for pie. The restaurant serves lunch and dinner every day except Sunday.

Nightlife



Contrary to what you may have heard about the dearth of nightlife and culture in Florida's resort areas, Sarasota pulsates with live music and professional theater (see *Performing Arts*, page 169).



*For up-to-date information on community events, call the 24-hour **ArtsLine** at ☎ 941-953-4636, ext. 6000.*

Downtown nightclubs include **Gator Club**, 1490 Main St., ☎ 941-366-5969, and the **Blue Parrot**, 1377 Main St., ☎ 941-366-0813.

Sarasota Quay at Fruitville Rd. and Tamiami Trail has several options for jazz, top 40, whatever your pleasure. Cover charges vary. Disco dancers head to **Club Bandstand**, ☎ 941-954-7625, where live bands perform on occasion. **In Extremis** at the Quay, ☎ 941-954-2008, parties with laser, light, sound, and video shows. It's state-of-the-art nightlife. The adjoining **Zanzibar Lounge** caters to an older, mellower crowd. **Down Under Jazz Bar**, ☎ 941-951-2467, features live music nightly and comedy every Wednesday.

Siesta Key

Technically part of Sarasota, Siesta Key has developed a separate, slightly renegade personality, even compared to the other islands. It breaks from the chain both spiritually and physically – its two bridges connect with the mainland, but not with the islands to the north. Siesta Key's renown was built upon sand – the whitest, finest, softest sand south of Florida's Panhandle. Unlike other West Coast beaches, Siesta Key gets quartz sand. It drifts down from the Panhandle, where the beaches derive from Appalachian Mountain run-off.

Siesta Key's claim to the world's whitest beach has naturally made the island beach-preoccupied. It is quite heavily developed, but still within the boundaries of good taste that Sarasota sets. In the town center, an artist's community lends it depth of character. At its fringes, resorts are non-chain and the wealthy have built up exclusive communities.

Where does all this leave the visitor with a yearning for outdoor excitement? In good standing. Fishing, boating, kayaking, snorkeling, and sports of all sorts are a strong part of this stunningly white beach world hedged by protected bay waters.

Getting Here



From I-75, take Exit 37 or 38 to get to Siesta Key. Exit 38 takes you to **Bee Ridge Rd.** Turn north on **Highway 41** and west on **Siesta Dr.**, which leads to the north bridge. From Exit 37, head west on **Clark Rd.** (Rte. 72), which changes names to **Stickney Point Rd.** and crosses the south bridge.

On the island's north end, **Higel Ave.** and **Ocean Blvd.** are the main roads into the shopping district. **Beach Rd.** runs Gulf-side, and intersects with **Midnight Pass Rd.**, which travels to the island's south end, intersecting Stickney Point Rd.

Information



For specific information on the island, contact the **Siesta Key Chamber of Commerce** at 5100 Ocean Blvd., Unit B, Sarasota, FL 34242, ☎ 941-349-3800, www.siestakey-chamber.com. It's open Monday-Friday, 10-5.

Sights & Attractions

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



People cross to Siesta Key mainly for the beach. Shopping and dining are a sideline. Not all of its beaches are created equal, however. **Siesta Key County Beach** on Midnight Pass Rd. at Beach Way Drive is a half-mile long and luxuriously wide. Its porcelain-white sands are plush, and a dream-come-true for recreationists. The park contains volleyball nets, tennis courts, a fitness trail, ball fields, a soccer field, playgrounds, lifeguards, and rental and food concessions. For slightly more seclusion, park on the street, rather than at the huge parking lot, or walk to the public beach's outskirts.



For privacy and great snorkeling and fishing, head to the beach's south end, **Point of Rocks**. Parking access is just south of the intersection of Midnight Pass Rd. and Stickney Point Rd. Watch for the #12 access sign near the Siesta Breakers resort.

Although **Turtle Beach**, at the south end of Midnight Pass Rd., lacks Siesta Beach's powdery white sands, it is more secluded. It has a full line of amenities – horseshoes, volleyball, a playground, picnic shelters, and boat ramps. Serious seclusionists hoof it down to adjoining **Palmer Point Beach**, the sands that formed between Siesta and Casey keys when Midnight Pass closed in 1984. It is accessible only by foot or boat.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Good land points for fishing include the **Siesta (north) Bridge** and **Bay Island**; **Stickney Point (south) Bridge** or seawall; **Point of Rocks**, south of Siesta Public Beach; and **Turtle Beach's** pier and seawall at the island's south end on Blind Pass Rd. Turtle Beach Park also has two boat ramps, picnic facilities, a playground, volleyball, horseshoes, and a beach. This beach does not share Siesta Key's soft, white sand, however.

CB's at 1249 Stickney Point Rd., ☎ 941-349-4400, has fishing charters in Sarasota Bay for up to six people. Rates are \$225 for a half-day, \$300 for six hours, and \$375-\$400 for a full day. Night snook-fishing trips cost \$250. In tarpon season, tarpon charters run \$400 each. Offshore, light-tackle excursions for up to six anglers are \$325 for a half-day, \$575 for a full day. Rod and reel rentals and fishing licenses are also available. It's open daily, 7-6.

Boat Rentals

CB's at 1249 Stickney Point Rd., ☎ 941-349-4400, rents runabouts, center console boats, pontoons, and deck boats (capacity three to eight) for use in Intracoastal waters. Daily rates are \$125-\$180; half-day, \$85-\$130, plus tax and gas. It's open daily, 7-6.

Snorkeling & Diving

Point of Rocks (see above), on the south end of Siesta Public Beach near Midnight Pass Rd. and Stickney Point Rd., is a favorite spot with snorkelers looking for coral, caves, and marine life.

Parasailing

Siesta Parasail, located at CB's, 1249 Stickney Point Rd., ☎ 941-349-1900, gives 800-foot-high rides for \$40 each. You can even ride with a friend or opt for a freefall.

■ On Wheels



Bikers and joggers use the path that runs for 12 miles from Siesta Key's north bridge to Turtle Beach. You can rent one-speed beach cruiser bikes from **CB's** (see *Boat Rentals*, above) at 1249 Stickney Point Rd., ☎ 941-349-4400, for \$14 a day.

Siesta Sports Rentals at Southbridge Mall, 6551 Midnight Pass Rd., ☎ 941-346-1797, rents beach cruisers for \$4 an hour, \$14 a day; speed bikes for \$5 an hour, \$17 a day.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Resorts and condos are packed in tightly at Siesta's mid-section, so you won't have a problem finding a room except at the height of the season. Non-franchised, each place exudes its own sense of style. Some of those with the most to offer are listed here.

Hotels & Motels

Away from the beach, **Banana Bay Club** at 8254 Midnight Pass Rd., ☎ 888-622-6229 or 941-346-0113, is suited to nature lovers. Located on the brink of a quiet lagoon bird sanctuary, it accords guests free use of bikes, canoes, and pool. Its seven guest units are decorated with individual style, and are equipped with full kitchens. Accommodations range from studio apartments to a two-bedroom house. Weekly and monthly rates offer discounts. \$\$-\$\$\$

Bed & Breakfasts

One of the area's earliest bed-and-breakfasts, **Crescent House B&B** at 459 Beach Rd., ☎ 941-346-0857, occupies an unpretentious old home across the road from a beach access. Baths are shared in some rooms, private in others. Antiques and a fireplace add homey touches. \$\$-\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

Hartmann Accommodations, ☎ 941-346-2525, www.siesta-key.com/hartmann/, owns several small properties on Siesta Key that rent by the week (\$375-\$1,100 for efficiencies to three-bedroom apartments). Each property site has access to a swimming pool and all units are clean, modern, and equipped with kitchens.

For longer-term rentals of homes and condos, you are best off working through the **Siesta Key Chamber of Commerce**, 5100 Ocean Blvd., Unit B, Sarasota, FL 34242, www.siestakey-chamber.com, ☎ 941-349-3800. Homes begin at about \$2,000 a month and there's a one-month minimum requirement. Condos can be rented for any length of time.

Where To Eat



Casual and seafood are the catchwords of the Siesta Key restaurant trade. People drive out here just to eat.

Right before you reach the island at the south crossing, **Coasters Seafood Co.** at Sarasota Boatyard, 1500 Stickney Point Rd., ☎ 941-925-0300, flanks the Intracoastal Waterway and its scenic boat traffic. It blends old and new Florida styles with its architecture and menu of Cali-Florida cuisine. The dinner menu offers pasta, fresh seafood, steaks, and seafood-meat combos, ranging from \$15 to \$25. Lunch sandwiches and entrées – salmon burger, crab cake, omelette, reuben, etc. – run \$6.50-\$12. Open daily. Reservations accepted.

English and American casual eats such as fish & chips, custom-made burgers, and other seafood and sandwich favorites are served up at **The Old Salty Dog**, 5023 Ocean Blvd., ☎ 941-349-0158. You can sit indoors in a pub setting or outdoors amidst Siesta's "downtown" activity. It's open daily for lunch and dinner. Prices range from \$4 to \$8.

For breakfast, the favorite gathering spot is **The Broken Egg**, 210 Avenida Madera, ☎ 941-346-2750, where you can take a sidewalk table or one inside next to the bakery. Breakfast offerings include omelets, pancakes, quiches, blintzes, muffins, and coffee cake for \$3-\$7. It also serves lunch; salads, soups, and sandwiches range from \$2.50 to \$8. Open daily.



When the occasion calls for a touch of formality, indulge in the acclaimed “bring the outdoors in” surroundings of **Summerhouse**, 6101 Midnight Pass Rd., www.sarasotarestaurants.com, ☎ 941-349-1100. The dinner menu, served daily, is based on continental classics executed to perfection and with stylish flair. The tournedos Rossini, for example are topped with pan-seared foie gras and a Port wine and sage sauce. A la carte entrée prices are \$18-\$24.

Nightlife



I find the nightlife of Siesta Key more relaxed and less showy than in Sarasota’s other hot spots. Reflecting the island’s mix of creativity and wealth, the after-hours scene has a rowdy cast at one end of the scale, refined at the other.

For youthful, get-down action, the **Beach Club** at 5151 Ocean Blvd. in Siesta Village, ☎ 941-349-6311, rules. It’s open nightly with live contemporary bands. Slightly more upscale, **Coasters** (see *Where To Eat*, above) at 1500 Stickney Point Rd. on the mainland at the south bridge, ☎ 941-925-0300, jams Tuesday-Saturday with live music.

For jazz, check out **Fandango’s** at 5148 Ocean Blvd. in Siesta Village, ☎ 941-346-1711, Thursday-Saturday; or **Summerhouse** (see *Where To Eat*, above) at 6101 Midnight Pass Rd., ☎ 941-349-1100, Tuesday-Saturday.

Nokomis Area

Some may call it the in-between zone, situated as it is between Sarasota and Venice. It encompasses the communities of **Osprey**, **Casey Key**, **Nokomis**, and **Nokomis Beach**, with a state park and other attractions for the curious and adventuresome visitor.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *The tiny suburb of **Osprey** is named for a large bird of prey sometimes called a fish hawk. Ospreys nest in high trees or atop pole aeries that good citizens build for them. Mom and dad return to their same nest each winter and raise fledglings together.*

Getting Here



The communities of Osprey and Nokomis lie along **Highway 41** (Tamiami Trail). To get to Casey Key, turn west on **Blackburn Point Rd.** south of Osprey. To get to the south end at Nokomis Beach, turn west on **Albee Rd.** south of the town of Laurel. Exits 36 (southbound traffic only) and 35A (northbound traffic only) are the I-75 exits most convenient to the area.

Narrow, twisty **Casey Key Rd.** winds through the island from end to end.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



A woman named Mrs. Potter (Bertha) Palmer exerted nearly as much influence on Sarasota's growth and development as John Ringling. Although she was a well-known name among Chicago socialites at the time, we hear much less about her. Except at **Historic Spanish Point** at 337 N. Tamiami Trail in Osprey, ☎ 941-966-5214. Assembled on the 30-acre estate she once owned back in the dawning days of the 1900s is a collection of local historic structures that includes ancient Indian shell mounds, a pioneer homestead, an old schoolhouse, Mrs. Palmer's restored gardens, a late Victorian home, a reconstructed chapel, and a citrus packing house. Local actors give living history performances on Sundays from January to mid-April. Guided walking tours of about two hours' duration are available Monday-Saturday, 9-5; noon-5 on Sunday. Tram tours are available by 48-hour advance reservation three days a week. Adult admission is \$5; \$3 for children ages six-12 and seniors.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Experience the natural history of old Sarasota at **Oscar Scherer State Recreation Area**, 1843 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-483-5956. If you camp there, your neighbors will include river otters, alligators, scrub jays, bob cats, and bald eagles. The nearly 1,400-acre park also offers picnicking, a playground, hiking, freshwater swimming, canoe rentals, ranger-led tours, and fishing. Admission fee per car of eight passengers or fewer is \$3.25 per vehicle, \$1 for pedestrians and cyclists.

Casey Key is a scenic bite of old-island temperament that is unfortunately becoming more and more like its showy neighbors. These things happen as original family properties – tastefully demure – get sold and developed. The north end provides a pleasant, winding drive around an exclusive residential neighborhood. At its southern end, bustling **Nokomis Beach** is resortier. **North Jetty Park** tips the island, where a small pass separates it from Venice Beach (see *Venice*, below). This is a good place to

get out of the traffic, have a picnic, swim, and catch lots of fish. It has lifeguards and concessions.

From Nokomis, inland on Rte. 72, **Myakka River State Park & Wilderness Preserve**, www.myakka.sarasota.fl.us, ☎ 941-361-6511, appeases adventure hunger with camping, canoeing, and 29,000 acres of forest and wetlands. Through it runs 12 miles of one of Florida's two designated Wild and Scenic rivers, which forms two lakes within park boundaries and marshes between them. Lower Myakka Lake is part of the 7,500-acre wilderness preserve. Among its rare wildlife are sandhill cranes, bald eagles, and a nesting colony of endangered wood storks. Tour the park via tram (winter only, ☎ 941-365-0100), boat, airboat, guided walks, canoe, bicycle, or horse (must provide your own mount). A small visitor's center introduces the park and its wildlife. Admission is \$4 per car to enter for the day. The tram tour, which takes you to areas not accessible by car, costs \$7 for adults, \$3 for children ages six-12, and free for younger children on laps. (The tram does not run in off-peak periods, so call ahead.) The park is open for day use from 8 to sunset.

Near the state park at 16405 Myakka Rd., **Crowley Museum & Nature Center**, ☎ 941-322-1000, provides a leisurely stroll through time and nature. A boardwalk penetrates swamp habitat with an observation tower overlooking the marsh. Historic buildings include turn-of-the-century Cracker homes, a sugarcane mill, and a blacksmith shop. The 185-acre complex is open 10-4, Tuesday-Sunday (January-May); Thursday-Sunday (May-January). Admission is \$3 for adults, free for children under age 12.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



The **Intracoastal Waterway** at the narrow south end of Sarasota Bay and around Nokomis and Venice is known as "Snook Alley," because of the abundance of prized snook feeding there.

Cast into bay waters from the **Osprey Fishing Pier** at the west end of Main St.

Locals tell you the best fishing is from the **North Jetty** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at the south-end Casey Key Rd. Beach, where picnic areas give other members of the party something to do.

Marinas

Marinas at both of Casey Key's bridges provide fuel, docking, rentals, and food for boaters along the Intracoastal. They are **Blackburn Point Marina**, ☎ 941-966-3735, and **Casey Key Marina**, ☎ 941-966-1730, at the north end, and **Gulf Harbor Marina**, ☎ 941-488-7734, at the south bridge.

Boat Ramps

You'll find launch ramps at **Captain's Cove** on Blackburn Point Rd.

Boat Rentals

Don & Mike's Boat Rental at Casey Key Marina, 520 Blackburn Point Rd., ☎ 800-550-2007 or 941-966-4000, rents a variety of boats and water-sports gear, including ski boats, pontoons, Jet Skis, WaveRunners, pontoons, and water skiing equipment. Ski boat rentals are \$79-\$89 for three hours and pontoons rent for \$89 for three hours, \$10 for subsequent hours. Deck boats hold up to 13 people and start at \$99 for three hours.

Boat Charters & Tours

Bay Lady at Osprey Marine Center on Blackburn Point Rd., ☎ 941-485-6366, conducts two-hour narrated nature cruises in Venice's bays, Intra-coastal waters, and bird sanctuaries. Cost is \$9.50 for adults, \$8.50 for seniors, and \$6.50 for children ages four-12.

Take a one-hour narrated tour of **Myakka River State Park** on Rte. 72, ☎ 941-365-0100, aboard the "world's largest enclosed airboat," **Gator Gal**. The boat departs from the park's boat basin three or four times daily. Fare is \$7 for adults and \$4 for children ages six-12, young children seated on an adult's lap ride free.

Paddling

Myakka Outpost, inside Myakka River State Park (see above), ☎ 941-923-1120, rents canoes for use along the Wild and Scenic Myakka River and its two lakes. Rates are \$10 for two hours, \$18 for a half-day, and \$25 for a full day. In winter, it's open Monday-Friday, 9-5; on weekends, 8:30-5. Summer hours (June 1-December 15) are Monday-Friday, 10-4; weekends, 8:30-5.

Kayak classes, rentals, and tours are available at **By the Bay Outfitters**, 520 Blackburn Point Rd. in Osprey, ☎ 941-966-3937. A three-hour introductory course and a rolling and rescue class cost \$40 and \$50 respectively. Tours last two to four hours, taking in sunset, wildlife preserves, beaches, and fishing hot spots. They cost \$25-\$48. Rentals for a single sit-on-top kayak starts at \$20 for two hours; \$35 for cockpit-style.

Oscar Scherer State Recreation Area (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at 1843 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-483-5956, also rents canoes (\$5 an hour, \$25 a day, plus tax) and conducts ranger-led canoe trips.

You can join a guided tour or rent a kayak or canoe from **Silent Sports**, 2301 Tamiami Trail in Nokomis, ☎ 941-966-5477. Two-hour canoe and kayak rentals cost \$22 for a single, \$33 for a tandem. Three-hour tours cost \$36 for singles, \$58 for tandems.

Water-Skiing & WaveRunners

Don & Mike's Boat Rental at Casey Key Marina, 520 Blackburn Point Rd., ☎ 800-550-2007 or 941-966-4000, rents WaveRunners (\$30 a half-hour; \$45 for one hour). It also offers water-skiing instruction at \$50 a half-hour, \$80 an hour, all-inclusive.

■ On Foot

Hiking



Oscar Scherer State Recreation Area (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at 1843 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-483-5956, has more than five miles of nature trails, plus bike paths, which allow you to witness nature and wildlife as you exercise. A one mile-plus nature trail accommodates disabled persons and includes audio speakers and a butterfly observation area. During winter season, rangers lead bird walks.

Myakka River State Park on Rte. 72, ☎ 941-361-6511, is treasured by both bikers and hikers. It offers extensive nature trails, a bird walk, and the 39-mile Myakka Trail, a system of loops maintained by the Florida Trail Association. Wilderness backpacking trails cross prairies, hammocks, and pine flatwoods. Bobcats, bald eagles, sandhill cranes, deer, and wild turkeys inhabit the less traveled areas of the park not accessible to motorists. Six primitive campgrounds lie along the trails. Ask the park ranger for a "Hiking & Biking" map.

Hunting

Knight Trail Park, east of I-75's Exit 35A off Knight Trail Rd., ☎ 941-486-2350, has an archery course, trap and skeet, a pistol and rifle range, and picnic areas. Fees per person are \$4 a day. Open to the public Tuesday-Sunday, 9-4:30.

■ On Wheels



At **Myakka River State Park** (see above) on Rte. 72, seven miles of road wind through the park for cyclists, who often incorporate the scenic ride into longer treks along Rte. 72. The park's North Park Drive is preferred for its smoothness and lighter traffic. Backcountry fire-break roads not marked "no bicycling" are available to "dirt bikers." These can be sandy in spots, with areas dug up by feral pigs. Bike rental (☎ 941-923-1120) rates range from \$4 for two hours to \$18 for a full day. Tandem bikes cost \$8 for two hours, \$36 for a full day.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Florida's healthy population of feral pigs, a.k.a. wild boars, descends from Spanish stock brought by early explorers to La Florida, as they called it. They offloaded the hogs from their ships to ensure themselves food on the next visit. The wild animals today are a bane to farmers and a boon to hunters.*

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Motels



Nokomis Beach has several small lodges geared toward fishing or beaching. **A Beach Retreat** at 105 Casey Key Rd., ☎ 888-235-6161 or 941-484-0071, addresses the latter with units on the back bay as well as beach, boat docks, and proximity to North Jetty. Many of its newly redecorated units have kitchens. The property takes up two sides of the road with a prettily fenced small pool, 27 rooms, a courtyard, and a deck for barbecuing. \$\$

Camping

Two state parks in the area give you the best deal and optimum closeness to nature. At **Oscar Scherer State Recreation Area**, 1843 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-483-5956, campers feel secluded in a huge waterside campground, thanks to the palmettos, pines, oaks, and other native vegetation. Camping rates are \$11 in the summer, \$15 in winter. Tax and electricity are additional.

Myakka River State Park, ☎ 941-361-6511, is also nice, but tends to feel more closed-in and crowded, especially on weekends. Two family campgrounds contain 76 sites, plus there are five cabins, three group sites, and six primitive camp areas. Rates are about \$12-\$14 for sites without electricity, \$14-\$16 with electricity. Cabins rents for \$55 per night for up to four people, \$5 per additional person (except for children in the family).

Where To Eat



Pelican Alley, 1009 W. Albee Rd., ☎ 941-485-1893, is essentially an Old-Florida-style fish house where preparations are classic and seafood is flopping fresh. Choices range from burgers and fish 'n chips to shrimp tempura and a deep-fried seafood platter, priced \$6-\$16. Open daily for lunch and dinner.

Venice

Venice is the small-town version of Sarasota. It has the same Mediterranean architecture, fun beaches, art galleries, boutique shopping, and seafood restaurants as its big sister, but on a smaller scale. This keeps it less known, more lightly visited, but still as appealing to adventure-driven vacationers. In its past, it has hosted the Kentucky Military Institute, served as winter headquarters for Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers' retirement village, which built a model Italian city there. Above all, Venice is recognized for its shark-teeth collecting. Snorkelers and beachcombers search for fossil specimens that wash up from an ancient shark graveyard offshore. Its shark teeth caches, indeed, have given Venice an identity all its own.

Getting Here



Exit 35 or 34 off I-75 will get you to **Venice Ave.** **Highway 41** splits when it gets to Venice. Take the business end of it to cross the Intracoastal Waterway onto the island, where you will find the town of Venice proper. Turn west on Venice Ave. to head downtown and to the beaches. The Esplanade delivers you to Venice's resort district and to **Tarpon Center Dr.**, which goes to the island's northern end beach and jetties. **Harbor Drive** sightsees residential areas and leads to south-end beaches.

Information



The **Venice Area Chamber of Commerce** at 257 N. Tamiami Trail, Venice, FL 34285-1908, ☎ 941-488-2236, can give you information about the location and about shark's teeth. It's open 8:30-5, Monday-Friday. You can also contact **Venice Main Street** at PO Box 602, Venice, FL 34284, ☎ 941-484-6722.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



The historic **Triangle Inn's** architecture (circa 1926) is the most remarkable display at the **Venice Archives and Area Historical Collection**, 351 Nassau St., ☎ 941-486-2487, which it houses. The unusual three-sided building features Italian Renaissance characteristics. The archives are open to the public Monday and Wednesday, 10-4. Admission is free.

Performing Arts

Venice Little Theatre, 140 W. Tampa Ave., ☎ 941-488-1115, claims to be one of the most successful community theaters in the US. Its year-round season brings musicals, comedies, readings, contemporary plays, and children's productions to the stage. Main Stage tickets are \$80 each, Stage II tickets are \$32, Theatre for Young People tickets are \$5.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Venice's pebbly beaches each have their distinct qualities. At heavily visited **Brohard Park** on Harbor Dr., shark-tooth collectors and fishermen converge. It has picnic facilities, a restaurant, and a fishing pier (see page 191).

South of Brohard, **Casperson Beach** on S. Harbor Dr., ☎ 941-951-5572, has most of the same amenities – picnic areas and dune walkovers – but fewer shark’s teeth and more seclusion. A stroll along this beach leads to Manasota Key (page 199).

Good shark-tooth collecting is also reported at **Venice Municipal Beach** at Tarpon Center Drive. You can even rent a shark’s teeth sifter here. Facilities include a picnic area, showers, concessions, and lifeguards.

Local Color

South of Venice, spa-goers find their way to a little-known attraction called **Warm Mineral Springs** at 12200 San Servando Rd., Warm Mineral Springs, ☎ 941-426-1692. Some believe this was the Fountain of Youth that Ponce de León sought. Its 2½-acre lake holds a temperature of 87° and soothes bathers with a high mineral content. The facility shows its 50-some years of age, but believers are believers, and they find the waters healthful. To enhance the dunk experience, there are organic mud treatments, saunas, massages, and a wellness center. An old fashioned cyclo-rama relates the history of Ponce de León’s exploits and the area. The spa is open daily, 9-5. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$4.50 for students with I.D. Visitors can rent beachwear, chairs, and towels.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



The premier spot for fishing would be the **Venice Fishing Pier**. Among the state’s longest at 750 feet, it furnishes showers, beach, a bait house, and a restaurant. Admission to the pier is \$1 for adults, 50¢ for children.

The **South Jetties** on Tarpon Center Drive project into the pass toward Casey Key and are equally popular with the casting crowd.

Marinas

Crow’s Nest Marina, ☎ 941-484-7661, and **Fisherman’s Wharf Marina** at 505 N. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-484-9246, serve boaters in the backwaters.

Boat Ramps

Boat ramps are located at **Marina Boat Ramp Park**, 215 E. Venice Ave., and at **Higel Park** on Tarpon Center Drive.

Boat Rentals

Snook Haven, off I-75 at Exit 34, 5000 E. Venice Ave., ☎ 941-485-7221, is a water adventurer's paradise on the banks of the Wild & Scenic Myakka River. Rates for 12- and 14-foot boats (with 6hp engines) cost \$20-\$26 for an hour and \$65-\$75 for a day. Pontoon rentals run \$35 for an hour to \$150 per day, and hold up to nine people. There's also a boat launch and picnic-table dining (see *Where To Eat*, below).

Boat Charters & Tours

Myakka Queen, ☎ 941-485-7221, takes you on a one-hour cruise along the Myakka River, departing from Snook Haven (see above) at 3 every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Cost for adults is \$5.60 plus tax; \$2.80 plus tax for children.

Paddling

For canoeing on the Wild & Scenic Myakka River, and a taste of Old Florida, stop at **Snook Haven** (above). It rents canoes for \$15 for three hours and \$20 for up to eight hours.

Personal Watercraft

Island Jet Ski at Fisherman's Wharf Marina, 505 N. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-488-1124, rents Jet Skis and WaveRunners starting at \$50 for a half-hour, including gas.

Snorkeling & Diving

Fossil-seekers search underwater for shark's teeth and other finds, but visibility is often poor. The greatest caches are found in water around 18 feet deep. Offshore, ledges and artificial reefs harbor marine life out from the jetties at the north end.

Shark-Toothing

Equip yourself with a "Florida snow shovel," screen baskets on long poles, available at local hardware stores for less than \$15. Head to **Brohard Park** or **Venice Municipal Beach** (see page 190). At the latter you can even rent special colanders. Anything with a screen mesh will work. Next, sift at water's edge and pull teeth! It's the thing to do in Venice. If you're confused about what you're looking for, stop at the Venice Chamber of Commerce at 257 N. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-488-2236, and pick up some samples and a guide.



*People get very serious about shark-tooth collecting, so be prepared to be shown up. If you're having no luck, head for **Sharky's** bar (see Where To Eat, below), dig a couple out of the box of sand at the entry way, and have a beer instead.*

Shopping



Venice's shopping, like the town itself, is quiet, tasteful, and architecturally pleasing. Turn off Highway 41 onto **West Venice Ave.** An inviting sign heralds your arrival on a date-palm-lined boulevard where shops evoke the Mediterranean and drivers politely stop for crossing pedestrians. Shops, galleries, and restaurants sell the gaudy and the elegant along the avenue and its side streets.

A block over, **Venice Centre Mall** at 226 Tampa Ave., occupies the former winter quarters of the Kentucky Military Institute. The structure is listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings. Specialty shops fall into formation in a spit-and-polish hall.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Hotels & Motels



Venice has a small but pleasant selection of hotels, motels, and condominiums. Among its nicest resorts, **Inn at the Beach** at 725 W. Venice Ave., ☎ 800-255-8471 or 941-484-8471, has the beach advantage: Venice Municipal Beach lies directly across the street. Clean, modern, and stylish, it offers a small pool and rooms, kitchenettes, or one- and two-bedroom suites. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Warm Mineral Springs (see page 190) at 12200 San Servando Rd., Warm Mineral Springs, ☎ 941-426-1692, provides 200 rooms with kitchens or kitchenettes. High-season rentals (February through March) run from \$200-\$345 per week. Rates the rest of the year begin at \$145-\$185 and range up to \$250-\$320. Daily rates are available for some units.

Bed & Breakfasts

Banyan House B&B at 519 S. Harbor Dr., ☎ 941-484-1385, is part of Venice's old Mediterranean-fashion neighborhood of the mid-1920s. Distinct elements include a swimming pool that served the community as its first, a Greek goddess fountain under a huge banyan tree, cheery blossoms, a treehouse sundeck, a breakfast solarium, and a hot tub. Each of the four

rooms has a private bath and fridge; three of them are efficiencies. Weekly rental apartments are available in a separate structure. \$\$

Rental Agencies

The Rental Company of Venice, 236 Tampa Ave. W., ☎ 941-484-7644, has a repertoire of homes and condos for short-term rental.

Camping

Venice Campground at 4085 E. Venice Ave., ☎ 941-488-0850, is set under age-old oak trees along the Myakka River. Amenities include security gates, heated swimming pool, shuffleboard, horseshoe, nature trail, fishing, boat and canoe rentals, laundry room, and supply store.

Where To Eat



Swashbuckling, boating types will enjoy **The Crow's Nest Marina Restaurant** at 1968 Tarpon Center Drive on the South Jetty, www.crowsnst.com, ☎ 941-484-9551. Overlooking a yacht marina through tall windows, it is tastefully nautical through and through. The lunch and dinner menus offer seafood prepared flavorfully. It is open daily for lunch and dinner, with price ranges of \$6-\$10 and \$11-\$19 respectively.

Sharky's, on the Venice Fishing Pier at Brohard Park, ☎ 941-488-1456, is popular, but the quality of food seems watered-down by the demands of its crowds. Catch sunset and a relatively inexpensive meal here. It's open for lunch and dinner daily. Lunch prices for sandwiches and seafood plates are \$5-\$12; dinner's offerings are extensive in a \$12-\$19 range.



Snook Haven at 5000 E. Venice Ave., ☎ 941-485-7221, is a country fun kind of place on the Myakka River, where you can paddle a canoe, have some chow, and party to live music. It's open daily for lunch and dinner, with sandwiches and home-style meals ranging from \$3 to \$13. Closed Tuesday, June-September.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

Charlotte Harbor

Overview

Wide, deep Charlotte Harbor is a place known for pirates and tarpon. The pirates are long gone, leaving only their names and sense of adventure upon the islands where they supposedly once maintained their lairs. The tarpon are still there, most notably off Boca Grande on Gasparilla Island, one of Charlotte Harbor's islands far-removed from the hum of mainstream tourism.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- **Manasota Key/Englewood**
- **Gasparilla Island & Out-Islands**
- **Port Charlotte area**

The harbor – the second largest estuarine system in Florida – and its feeders, the Peace and Myakka rivers, section off Charlotte County, which boasts 219 miles of waterfront. The nation's earliest recorded history was written on these coastlines, local historians claim. At Punta Gorda, a park commemorates the landing and wounding of no other than Juan Ponce de León, legendary seeker of youth. In one section, Punta Gorda acts slightly metropolitan, having been a major commercial fishing port in a later heyday. Across the Peace, urban sprawl claims smaller communities along the Tamiami Trail. Subdivided by the Myakka River and Charlotte Harbor, a wide peninsula inhabited by golfing communities buffers Gulf barrier islands from the development seen on islands to the north and south.

Charlotte County in general is a hushed location bookended by its more highly touted neighbors. The population is largely retired. You'll notice that the Chamber of Commerce's Visitor's Guide devotes as much space to hospitals as to tourist attractions. What little tourism you do find in its highly residential communities has to do mainly with the great outdoors. Sports opportunities abound on all the waterfronts, especially fishing. The distance of the region's beaches from main thoroughfares keeps the barrier islands rural and lightly visited. In eastern regions, wildlands have been preserved for sportsmen and nature lovers.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: Tarpon (*Megalops atlantica*) have been around for more than 10 million years. For their sheer size – up to 300 pounds – and valiant fighting efforts, they’ve been nicknamed *Silver King* in these parts. They are the only fish that breathe through an air bladder. They roll at the water’s surface to air breathe. Their collective rolling in Boca Grande Pass is an awesome sight, and a heart-racing one for aspiring tarpon hunters. All tarpon fishing these days is done on a catch-and-release basis.

Transportation

■ Airports



Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport (SRQ), ☎ 941-359-2770, www.srq-airport.com, and **Southwest Florida International Airport** (RSW) in Fort Myers, ☎ 941-768-1000, www.swfia.com, both bring you close to the Charlotte Harbor area. Flights arrive at the two airports from all over the US, from Canada, and from limited international destinations. Major air carriers serving the two airports are listed below.

AIRLINES SERVING SARASOTA-BRADENTON (SRQ) AND SOUTHWEST FLORIDA (RSW) INTERNATIONAL AIRPORTS	SRQ	RSW
Air Sunshine ☎ 800-327-8900	✓	
Air Canada ☎ 800-776-3000		✓
American or American Eagle ☎ 800-433-7300	✓	✓
American Trans Air ☎ 800-225-2995	✓	✓
Continental ☎ 800-525-0280	✓	✓
Delta Air Lines / Comair ☎ 800-221-1212	✓	✓
Northwest ☎ 800-225-2525	✓	✓
TWA ☎ 800-221-2000	✓	✓
United ☎ 800-241-6522		✓
US Airways ☎ 800-428-4322	✓	✓

■ Rental Cars & Taxi Service

Rental cars are available at the airports and from locations within the immediate area. Try **Avis**, ☎ 800-331-1212, 359-5240 (SRQ), or 941-768-2121 (RSW); **Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3131, 941-355-8848 (SRQ) or 941-768-3100 (RSW); and **Budget**, ☎ 800-527-0700, 941-359-5353 (SRQ) or 941-768-1500 (RSW).

For transportation from SRQ, call **Diplomat Taxi**, ☎ 941-355-5155 or **West Coast Executive Sedans**, ☎ 941-359-8600; from RSW, **Aaron Airport Taxi Limo**, ☎ 941-768-1898, or **Majestic Transportation**, ☎ 941-768-5400.

■ Getting Around

Highway 41 (Tamiami Trail) runs roughly north to south through Charlotte County's major towns. **I-75** parallels it to the east and swings quite close to it around Punta Gorda. Main county roads – routes 771, 775, and 776 – take you into the area's hidden coastal regions, forming an imperfect triangle in the middle of Charlotte Harbor's peninsula. **Rte. 31** runs north-south through the wilderness on the county's eastern extreme. **Highway 17** is a major thoroughfare that travels eastward from Punta Gorda, intersecting I-75 at Exit 29.

Information



For information on the overall area, contact the **Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce** at 2702 Tamiami Trail, Port Charlotte, FL 33952, ☎ 941-627-2222, open Monday-Friday, 8-5; or at 326 W. Marion Ave., Punta Gorda, FL 33950, ☎ 941-639-6330, open Monday-Friday, 8:30-5. Its Web site is www.charlotte-florida.com/chamber.

Festivals & Events



MAY - Boca Grande hosts the **Millers Marina Tarpon Tide Tournaments**, ☎ 941-964-2232, the longest running, beginning in mid-May. Eight other tarpon tournaments also take place there during the year. The **Charlotte Harbor-Florida Fishing Tournament**, ☎ 941-625-0804, also takes place this month, and has a Kids' Day and barbecue.

JULY - Boca Grande's celebrated tarpon season runs from April through July, culminating in **The World's Richest Tarpon Tournament**, ☎ 941-

964-0568, with its hefty entry fee and up to \$100,000 purse. **Fishermen's Village** in Punta Gorda (1200 W. Retta Esplanade) is the site of several water-oriented festivals throughout the year. **Kids' Fishing Tournament**, ☎ 941-639-0969, takes place one Saturday this month. **Fourth of July Freedom Swim**, ☎ 941-639-8721, is a big event with hundreds of participants and boats crossing the wide mouth of the Peace River between Seahorse Marina in Charlotte Harbor and Fishermen's Village.

OCTOBER - Fishermen's Village in Punta Gorda hosts the **Southwest Florida Boat Show** in conjunction with a seafood festival. The **Punta Gorda Waterfront Foods-Arts-Jazz Festival**, ☎ 941-639-3720, brings 'gator wrestling, water activities, music, food, and crafts to Gilchrist Park in Punta Gorda.

BUDGET TIPS

Most of the **Charlotte Harbor** region, with the exception of Boca Grande and Gasparilla Island, provides quite affordable vacationing. Lodging, dining, and attractions are much less expensive than territories on either side of this chapter.

■ **Charlotte County Environmental Centers** are free and provide opportunity for hiking, learning, and canoe launching. There's one south of Punta Gorda and one in Englewood.

■ History and enlightenment on a shoestring? Check out **Florida Adventure Museum**, **Boca Grande Lighthouse Museum**, **A.C. Freeman House**, **Ponce de Leon Historical Park**, and **Peace River Wildlife Center**. All have low or no admission prices. Some request a donation.

■ It costs nothing but gas to ride around and appreciate the views. Charlotte Harbor rivals the Everglades for undeveloped and **waterfront scenery**. The ride to Boca Grande and Englewood Beach, Burnt Store Marina Rd. south of Punta Gorda, and Rte. 31 provide especially pastoral settings.

■ Itching to snag a flashy tarpon or other prize fish? **Fishing charters and rentals** are less expensive around Englewood Beach and Port Charlotte than in big-reputation Boca Grande.

Manasota Key/Englewood

The island of Manasota Key is actually a continuation of Venice Beach to the north, but the only way to get from one to the other without leaving the island is by foot.

Although two communities lie on way-off-the-beaten-path Manasota Key, the quieter, more exclusive community to the north is more commonly known as Manasota Key, while the resortier one to the south is called Englewood Beach. In north Manasota Key, homes – mostly upscale – greatly outnumber resorts and other commercial enterprises. Archaeological digs have unearthed a rich Amerindian past in Manasota Key. In the present, the entire community is a designated wildlife sanctuary. Its beaches are maintained in a more natural, less developed manner than those in Englewood Beach, a mecca for youthful and cost-conscious vacationers and day-trippers.

Across the bridge from Englewood Beach, the town of Englewood skirts the mainland. It got its start as a vast lemon farm. Today mostly a destination for winter-long golfers and retirees, it's also where beach vacationers go for non-resort services.

The waters that lie between mainland and island – Lemon Bay and Stump Pass – belong to the 7,667-acre **Cape Haze Aquatic Preserve**, a haven for sportsfolk and nature lovers.

Getting Here



Directions can get confusing here, so far from the main thoroughfares. That's what keeps the area so blessedly undiscovered. In addition to the directions that follow, you may want to procure a map.

To approach the area from the north via I-75, take Exit 35 and follow **River Rd.** to Rte. 776. From the south, take Exit 32, head west on Rte. 776, and turn right (north) on **Highway 41**. From Highway 41, turn west on **Rte. 776**. Via Highway 41 north, turn onto Rte. 776 south of Venice.

Manasota Key has bridges at its north and south ends. The south end bridge is known as the **Tom Adams Bridge**. From Rte. 776 at the north end, take Manasota Key Rd. across the bridge. From the south end, turn west on Beach Rd. (Rte. 776).

Manasota Key Rd. is the north end's main route. Its name changes to Beach Rd. in the south. **Gulf Blvd.** extends south of the bridge in Englewood Beach. Along it you'll find most of the town's resorts and a secluded beach.

Indiana Ave. (Rte. 776) comprises Englewood's "strip." To get into downtown, head west on **Dearborn Ave.** East of Englewood's north end, Rte. 776 goes by the name **McCall Rd.**

Englewood Taxi, ☎ 941-475-1111, provides airport pickups in Sarasota and Fort Myers.

Information



For information on Manasota Key's north end, contact the **Sarasota Visitor & Convention Center** at 655 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL 34236, ☎ 800-522-9799 or 941-957-1877, open Monday-Saturday 9-5. To learn more about Englewood Beach and Englewood, contact **Englewood Area Chamber of Commerce**, 601 S. Indiana Ave, Englewood 34223, ☎ 800-603-7198 or 941-474-5511. Open Monday-Friday, 9-5.

WEEKEND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

■ **FRIDAY:** Drive to **Manasota Key**. Spend morning on **Blind Pass** or **Chadwick Park Beach**. Have lunch at **Mad Sam's Grille**. In afternoon, **rent a boat** or hire a **fishing guide** to explore Lemon Bay and Gasparilla Sound. Have dinner at **Crabby George's**. Spend night in **Englewood Beach**.

■ **SATURDAY:** Do a morning **kayak or pontoon nature excursion** with Grande Tours. Drive to Boca Grande for lunch at **Harper's. Shop** in Boca Grande or **bicycle** and explore the island. Have dinner at **PJ's Seagrille**. Return to hotel in Englewood Beach.

■ **SUNDAY:** Drive to **Punta Gorda** in the morning. Drive around the **historic district** and hike at **Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center**. Head to **Fishermen's Village** for lunch. **Shop** or go on a **King Fisher's Fleet Excursion**. Have dinner at **Captain's Table** and spend the night in **Punta Gorda**.

Sights & Attractions

■ North End

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



Manasota Key's two beaches are developed with services and facilities, but allow you to get away from it all and do some serious

beach hiking. Fourteen-acre **Manasota Beach** at 8570 Manasota Key Rd. draws crowds because it is conveniently located where the north bridge makes landfall on the island. Active beachers can hike up to Casperson Beach on the south end of connecting Venice Beach, or use the boat ramp facilities across the road on Lemon Bay.



Blind Pass (Middle) Beach at 6725 Manasota Key Rd. has 63 acres, and is the less used and most natural of the two. It has a boardwalk nature trail into the mangroves. Both offer picnic facilities, restrooms, and other conveniences.

■ Englewood Beach

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Englewood Beach also has two distinct choices for beaches. If you like 'em secluded and natural, head for **Stump Pass Beach State Park**, at the very south end. It now has only a few parking spaces, but is currently expanding to 40, which will bring more traffic to the one-mile-long stretch of beach that touches down in Stump Pass. **Chadwick Park Beach**, ☎ 941-475-6606, is located squarely where the south bridge meets the Gulf of Mexico. Because of its extensive picnic facilities and recreational options – volleyball and basketball courts, horseshoe pits, and other play areas – it draws crowds. It's also close to shops, restaurants, and watersports rentals. You'll hear locals refer to it simply as "Englewood Beach." The park is open sunrise-sunset; parking costs 25¢ an hour or \$1.75 a day.

■ Englewood

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

Indian Mound Park on Winson Ave. in downtown Englewood (follow the signs from Dearborn Ave.), preserves an ancient Indian midden mound more than 2,000 years old in a lovely bayside park. Take the short nature trail and have a picnic.

Performing Arts

Fine community theater takes the stage at **Lemon Bay Playhouse**, 96 W. Dearborn in downtown Englewood, ☎ 941-475-6756, www.sunline.net. Tickets for comedies, dramas, and musicals run \$10-\$12 during the troupe's September-July season.

Family Fun

Pelican Pete's Playland at 3101 McCall Rd. S., ☎ 941-475-2008, has miniature golf, go-carts, batting cages, a game room, pizza, ice cream and a kiddy train ride. It's open Monday-Thursday, 10-10; Friday-Saturday, 10-

11; Sunday, 11-10 (hours may vary with the season). Miniature golf costs \$5 for those ages 13 and over, \$3.50 for children. Go-carts cost \$2.25-\$4.50 and the train ride is \$1.25.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



The swift waters of **Stump Pass** flush out a wide variety of salt-water fish. Tarpon is king – the silver king, by name – but mackerel, snapper, grouper, and sheepshead also make worthy trophies.

Try casting from the south end of **Port Charlotte State Recreation Area** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) or from a boat in Lemon Bay. You'll find fishing piers along Beach Rd. on the east side of the drawbridge.

For bait and gear, stop at **Island Court**, 1939 Beach Rd., ☎ 941-474-8236; open daily, 7:30-6. On the bridge to Englewood Beach, **Englewood Bait House**, ☎ 941-475-4511, sells bait, tackle, gas, and supplies, plus rents docks and boats.

Captain Jack's Charters, at the Englewood Bait House (see above), 1450 Beach Rd., ☎ 941-475-4511, takes up to six people aboard the 39-foot #1 *Hooker* for half-day trips (\$360) or full-day trips (\$480). Night, overnight, and weekend trips also available. Aboard the *Shadow*, you can fish offshore on a seven-hour trip for only \$35 each. Trips depart daily at 8.

Boat Ramps

At Manasota Key's north end, the county maintains docks and a ramp on the Intracoastal Waterway, across the road from **Manasota Beach**. There are others at **Indian Mound Park** (above) on Winson Ave. in downtown Englewood.

Boat Rentals

Rent Carolina Skiffs and pontoons from **Bay Breeze Boat Rentals**, just east of the south (Tom Adam's) bridge to Manasota at 1450 Beach Rd., ☎ 941-475-0733. Skiffs range \$70-\$90 for a half-day, \$100-\$110 for full; pontoons, \$90-\$140 for a half-day, \$125-\$200 for full. Fuel and tax are extra. Fishing equipment rentals are available. Open daily.

The Beach Place at 1863 Gulf Blvd. across from Chadwick Beach, ☎ 800-314-4838 or 941-474-1022, rents 18- to 21-foot skiffs or pontoons, half-day, \$65-\$95, and full day, \$95-\$145.

Boat Charters & Tours

Ko Ko Kai Charter Boat Service, 5040 N. Beach Rd., ☎ 941-474-2141, at the small resort by the same name (located about mid-island) takes you island hopping to Gasparilla, Palm, Cayo Costa, Cabbage Key, Upper Captiva, and Captiva islands, and on fishing and shelling excursions. Half-day rates begin at \$150 for up to six passengers.

Capt'n Bob's Inshore Charters, ☎ 941-475-6490, will take you sight-seeing inshore and 10 miles offshore. The rate for up to four people for three hours is \$150.

Paddling

Boating, canoeing, and kayaking into **Lemon Bay** affords rich opportunities for wildlife spotting. Manatees, dolphin, ibises, egrets, herons, and a host of other birds hang out here year-round.

Canoeists can launch into Lemon Bay from **Cedar Point Environmental Park** on Rte. 775, ☎ 941-255-1120. It's open Monday-Friday, 9-3.

Bikes and Boards at 966 S. McCall Rd., ☎ 941-474-2019, rents kayaks at \$24.50-\$28.50 for four hours. Hours are 10:30-6, daily.

Snorkeling & Diving

Local waters, though sometimes low in visibility, hold a number of wrecks and reefs worth exploring at depths of 45 to 60 feet. A beach dive from the south end of Manasota Beach takes you to an area known as **The Rocks**. Snorkelers search for sharks' teeth inshore.

Ko Ko Kai Charter Boat Service, 5040 N. Beach Rd., ☎ 941-474-2141, offers diving charters at a rate of \$150 a half-day for up to six people.

Sailboarding

Bikes and Boards at 966 S. McCall Rd., ☎ 941-474-2019, rents sailboards for \$125 a day and also sells sailboards, surfboards, skimboards, and bodyboards. It's open daily, 10:30-6.

■ On Foot



Take a hike on **Manasota Beach** (see *North End Sights & Attractions*, above). It's remote and connects to Venice's Casperson Beach, about 1½ miles to the north. Don't forget to take something to drink and to allow for the added difficulty of walking in sand. Watch for sharks' teeth at the shoreline.

Cedar Point Environmental Park on Rte. 775, ☎ 941-255-1120, has nature trails, picnic tables, a small playground, and a visitor's center with a kids' touch table. Bald eagles and gopher tortoises live among the 88-acre park's pine flatwoods, oak scrub, salt flats, and mangroves fringing

Lemon Bay Aquatic Preserve. Hours are Monday-Friday, 9-3. It offers guided tour every Saturday and Sunday and 10 and 2.

Nature trails explore the mangrove, wetland, and flatwood bayfront environment of 195-acre **Lemon Bay Park**, 570 Bay Park Blvd., ☎ 941-474-3065.

■ On Wheels



Four miles of Beach Rd. is shouldered with a bike lane, which starts in Englewood Beach and ends where the community of Manasota Key begins at the Sarasota County line.

Bikes and Boards, at 966 S. McCall Rd., ☎ 941-474-2019, rents, sells, and services bikes for \$6 a half-day, \$6 a day, and \$30 a week. Open daily, 10:30-6.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Cottages & Resorts



Part summer camp, part classic resort, **Manasota Beach Club** at 7660 Manasota Key Rd., ☎ 941-474-2614, is a family-run, 22-acre complex. You stay in a cottage in wooded, beachy surroundings, and eat in the communal dining room. Somewhat exclusive, the club focuses on nature, bird watching, and resting – aside from the tennis courts, pool, bocci ball, shuffleboard, basketball, horseshoes, croquet, bicycling, sailing, windsurfing, and charter fishing available. The club is open from November through April. In “social season,” which runs from January to mid-April, rates include three meals daily. Pre- and post-season rates don’t include meals. \$\$\$\$

Down at the south end, small condominium resorts, apartments, and mom-and-pop motels rule. Outdoor types will find most of what they need at the sprawling yellow resort community of **Weston’s Fish ‘n Fun Resort**, 985 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 941-474-3431. It has apartments on the beach or back bay, tennis, pools, slips, a boat ramp, boat rentals, and a fishing pier. Accommodations range from fully furnished efficiencies to one- to three-bedroom apartments. Weekly and monthly rates are available. \$-\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

To rent a vacation home in the Englewood area, contact **Manasota Key Realty**, 1927 Beach Rd. S., ☎ 800-881-9534 or 941-474-9536. They list condos and homes for weekly, monthly, and longer stays. Many require a minimum stay of a month or longer.

Where To Eat



Casual fish-house style prevails on the island and off. **Barnacle Bill's**, for years a dining mainstay on Englewood Beach, has moved to the mainland at 1599 McCall Rd. S., ☎ 941-474-9703. It has retained its penchant for fresh seafood, hardy burgers, and homemade soups. Open daily (except Sunday, November-May), its lunches run \$5-\$9; dinners, \$8-\$20. The atmosphere is cafeteria-bar casual with nice wooden booths.



For Caribbean food and attitude, stop for lunch or dinner at **Mad Sam's Grille**, 1375 Beach Rd. (on the bridge), ☎ 941-475-9505. Sandwiches and seafood are treated to rum, pineapple, Key lime juice, salsa, and other tropical innuendoes. Open every day but Monday. Prices range from \$6 to \$16.

The old Barnacle Bill's is now **Crabby George's**, 1975 Beach Rd., ☎ 941-475-7767, all dressed up in bright, stylish new trimmings. Focaccia bread sandwiches, pasta dishes, and a distinct Italian lean also help give the place an entirely new personality. It serves lunch (\$6-\$10) and dinner (\$12-\$17) daily.

Gasparilla Island & Out-Islands

The island Gasparilla got its name from a pirate of legend. Though pirate Gasparilla's actual existence has been disproved, his renegade spirit still lives on the island, which for decades remained aloof from development. The Gasparilla Inn set the tone back in the 1920s, when it was built to accommodate wealthy northern industrialists who arrived to exploit the deep harbor for phosphate shipping and cast for treasured tarpon in the island town of Boca Grande. Their influence kept the island exclusively wealthy for years, but in recent years, growth has visited Boca Grande and Gasparilla Island, as it has many of Florida's discovered treasures.

Tethered to the mainland by a long causeway, Gasparilla lies at the crossroads of island personalities. To its north, a string of islands, which through the years have become interconnected, resists the settling effect of attaching to the mainland. To its south begins a lily-pad trail of islands in various stages of naturalness and commercialism.

Getting Here



From Highway 41, northwest of Port Charlotte, turn west on **Rte. 776** (El Jobean Rd) and follow it to **Rte. 771**, which leads you to the island. Toll at the quaint little booth is \$3.20. If arriving by interstate, take Exit 30 and head west on Rte. 776, turn north onto Highway 41 to reconnect to Rte. 776, then proceed as above.

From Gasparilla Island and the Intracoastal towns of Placida and Cape Haze (on Rte. 775), you can find transport to the unbridged, interconnected out-islands of Little Gasparilla, Palm, and Don Pedro (see *On Water*, below).

Boca Grande Limousine, ☎ 941-964-0455 or 800-771-7433, provides connections to all Florida airports. For more grandiose arrivals and departures, call **Boca Grande Seaplane**, ☎ 800-940-0234 or 941-964-0234.

Information



Contact the **Boca Grande Chamber of Commerce** at PO Box 704, Boca Grande, FL 33921, ☎ 941-964-0568, www.charlotte-online.com/bocagrande/. Information centers are located in Courtyard Plaza at the island's north end; open Monday-Friday, 9-5, and on the second floor of Theatre Mall, 321 Park Ave., open daily, 8-11.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



People day-trip to Boca Grande just to wander its one business street (Park Ave.) – where a historic depot and theater house small shopping malls – and to gawk at the mansions along the Gulf. These are in fact nearly impossible to see from the road, but the island's other intriguing buildings are readily accessible, including the **Gasparilla Inn** at Fifth and Palm streets (see *Where To Stay*, below), the historic churches downtown, the pretty-in-pink **Johann Fust Community Library** at 10th St. and Gasparilla Rd., Tarpon Ave.'s historic fish-village shacks (known as **Whitewash Alley**), and the old dock worker cottages near the lighthouse.

Natural Areas

Gasparilla Island State Recreation Area, south of Boca Grande on Gulf Blvd., ☎ 941-964-0375, fronts one defunct historic lighthouse and another in use. The plush beach encompasses 135 acres subdivided into three areas – Sand Spur Beach, Sea Grape Beach, and Lighthouse Beach. Facilities include showers, restrooms, picnic tables, and grills. Swimming at Lighthouse Beach is treacherous because of the deep pass at the island's end, where in summer you can watch tarpon rolling and fishermen trying to lure them. Parking is \$2 per vehicle. The park is open daily dawn until dusk.

Don Pedro Island State Recreation Area, ☎ 941-964-0375, occupies 129 acres of unbridged island north of Boca Grande. Access is by boat only. See the *On Water* section below for details on how to get to Don Pedro for a day of isolated picnicking and beaching. Visitors are asked to pay a \$2 honor fee per eight persons.

AUTHOR TIP



*Take a shady, peaceful stroll or bike ride under the awesome tree canopy that lines **Banyan St.**, the area's most-photographed road.*

Museums

The **Boca Grande Lighthouse and Museum** at Gasparilla Island State Recreation Area on Gulf Blvd., ☎ 941-964-0375, is more than 100 years old. Renovated to Old Florida style, it is open for self-touring and has a new museum that deals with the history of the lighthouse and Boca Grande, Calusa Amerindians, and tarpon. The museum features a hands-on table for kids. Hours are Wednesday-Sunday, 10-4. Donations are accepted.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *The so-called **Calusa** people inhabited Southwest Florida from Charlotte Harbor to the Everglades, beginning about 2,500 years ago. Spaniards gave them their name, believing their leader to be named Calos. They met Ponce de León with bows and arrows when he dropped anchor in Charlotte Harbor. Excavations of their settlement prove that the Calusa were a war-like, well-developed nation with advanced engineering skills.*

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Fishing is practically synonymous with Boca Grande. Once winter's "social season" has ended, tarpon season brings a second influx of tourists, the rod-wielding type, from April through July. To learn the ropes about catching an in-your-dreams silver king, hook up with a pro through **The Boca Grande Fishing Guides Association**, ☎ 800-667-1612, an organization of close to 60 local guides.

Capt. Fred Scott, ☎ 941-964-2333, an experienced charter captain, charges \$160 for a half-day of trout spincasting or mackerel trolling; \$250-\$275 for a half-day of tarpon fishing and \$500 for a full day. Rates are for six or fewer passengers.

Captain Sandy Melvin, ☎ 800-4-TARPON, 941-964-0907 or (evenings) 964-1665, bases tarpon-fishing rates according to tides. A half-tide (three hours) costs \$325, full tide (five hours) \$500, and split tide (two three-hour trips) \$600. Backwater trips for snook, redfish, trout, and snook cost \$250 for a half-day, \$400-\$450 for a full day. Maximum is three persons.

Capt. Richard Hyland, ☎ 941-697-2190, takes you sight fishing for snook, redfish, and tarpon. He is a certified casting instructor and charges \$225 for a half-day aboard the *You Wish*, \$350 for a full day.

An old railroad bridge that pokes into Gasparilla Sound serves as **Gasparilla Pier**. Enter it from the parking lot near Courtyard Plaza at the island's north end. Just off the island, where the causeway road meets Rte. 775, you'll find **Coral Creek Pier**.

For bait, tackle, and supplies, shop at **Millers Marina**, 222 Harbor Dr., underneath Harper's restaurant, ☎ 941-964-2283.

Boca Grande Outfitters, 375 Park Ave., ☎ 941-964-2445, sells light tackle and fly-fishing gear, and offers lessons and seminar in fly-fishing. For guide service, ☎ 941-964-1112. Trips start at \$275.

Boat Rentals

At **Sunsplash Boat Rentals** at Uncle Henry's Marina, 5800 Gasparilla Rd., ☎ 941-964-1333, www.splashrentals.com, powerboats from 17 to 20 feet rent for \$90-\$130 for a half-day, \$130-\$280 for a full day. Fishing licenses are available for purchase.

Boaters can put in at the **Placida Public Boat Ramp** at the east end of the Boca Grande Causeway on Placida Rd. (Rte. 771).

Boat Charters & Tours

To hitch a ride from Boca Grande's north end to various restaurants and other establishments along the Intracoastal Waterway before the Englewood Beach bridge, contact **Pirates Water Taxi** at ☎ 941-286-5000 or 941-286-5001 (VHF-68). Fare is \$7.50 or \$15 for all day, including transportation to outer islands.

Boca Boat Cruise & Charters at Uncle Henry's Marina, 5800 Gasparilla Rd., ☎ 888-416-BOAT, sets out on BLT (Beach, Lunch & Tour) excursions (\$30), sunset cruises (\$20), and charter tours (\$300 for a half-day, \$500 for all day). Tours take in shelling, shark-toothing, and swimming. Reservations are required.

Capt. Fred Scott, ☎ 941-964-2333, makes charter boat excursions to local islands. Cost for six or fewer passengers ranges from \$45 to \$135.

Paddling

Sunsplash Boat Rentals at Uncle Henry's Marina, 5800 Gasparilla Rd.,

ECO-ADVENTURE

Get as close to nature as you choose on **Grande Tours** 12575 Placida Rd. in Placida (close to the Boca Grande Causeway), ☎ 941-697-8825. The premier charter company for get-back-to-nature tours, its varied menu ranges from catamaran Sea Life Excursions with seine-netting for hands-on encounters with sea creatures (3½ hours for \$35 per person) to guided kayak eco-tours (2½ hours for \$40 each). Specialty tours are geared toward birding, kids, watchable wildlife, manatees, dolphin, and touring Boca Grande.

☎ 941-964-1333, www.sunsplashrentals.com, rents single kayaks at \$20 for two hours, \$30 for a half-day, and \$40 for a full day. Tandem kayak rates are \$30, \$45, and \$60.

Grande Tours 12575 Placida Rd. in Placida (close to the Boca Grande Causeway), ☎ 941-697-8825, rents kayaks for two hours at \$20 a single, \$35 a tandem. Half-day rates are \$30 and \$45; full days, \$40 and \$55.

■ On Wheels



About a mile after Gasparilla Island's toll booth (only \$1 fee for bike riders), the Boca Grande bike path begins. It follows an old train route along Railroad Ave., through downtown, and seaside on Gulf Blvd., for a total of seven miles. At the south end, you may see iguanas. They're harmless and, although not indigenous, fondly protected by islanders.

Bike rentals are available at **Bike N' Beach**, 333 Park Ave., ☎ 941-964-0711, for \$5 an hour, \$9 for four hours. It's open daily, 10-5.

Shopping



Downtown Boca Grande holds a handful of shops and galleries in the historic settings of an old train depot and 1920s movie theater. Try **Boca Grande Outfitters**, 375 Park Ave., ☎ 941-964-2445, for quality fishing gear and outdoor wear.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Inns & Resorts



For the ultimate Boca Grande experience, book at the **Gasparilla Inn** on Palm Ave., ☎ 941-964-2201. That is, if it's not "social season," December through April, when potential guests are often turned away even though rooms may be available – all to protect the interests of the duPonts, Vanderbilts, and other regular upper-echelon types who winter there. During tarpon season, April through June, the fishing buffs arrive and stay in the inn's cottages, all that's open in the summer. Amenities include an 18-hole golf course, a beach club with swimming pool, a restaurant, croquet, and afternoon tea. Rooms are rather simple in this historic, 1920s yellow wood palace. Rates in social season include three meals a day; in tarpon season, breakfast and dinner only. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

The **Innlet**, nearby at 11th St. and East Ave., ☎ 941-964-2294, belongs to the same operation as above, but this is more motel-like and adventure-oriented, perched on bayside banks. Accommodations are newly renovated, and guests have use of a pool, boat ramp, and dockage. All rooms have kitchens. \$\$-\$\$\$



A getaway to **Palm Island Resort**, offshore at Cape Haze, ☎ 941-697-4800, US 800-824-5412, or FL 800-282-6142, will cure you of all reality-related blues. The Old Florida-style villas,

poised on a wide apron of sand, silky and soothing as baby powder, are a vision of fantasies unleashed. It's not for people who need lots of activity, although you can hook up with a number of different tours and charters, or swim and play tennis on the 200-acre property. You arrive by ferry boat from the mainland harbor. The main mode of transportation on the island is golf cart. One- to three-bedroom island villas are available; minimum two-night stay required. \$\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

Grande Island Vacations, ☎ 800-962-3314 or 941-964-2080, rents condominiums on the island for short-term vacationing.

Where To Eat



Boca Grande is a fun place to go for lunch or dinner in a novel setting. The experience is sure to teach your palate lessons on how seafood should really taste.



Water-lovers will enjoy the ambiance and Caribbean style of **Harper's** at Millers Marina, 222 Harbor Dr., ☎ 941-964-0232. It overlooks a harbor filled with zillion-dollar yachts and marina activity. Formerly the well-loved, slightly rickety Light-house Hole, its spiffy makeover has left some loyal patrons chagrined. The renovated bathroom is without doubt an improvement, so is the menu. Try the marinated shrimp club sandwich, arti (as in artichokes) grouper, or red beans & rice. Not spicy enough? Buy one from a vast selection of designer bottled pepper sauces displayed throughout the restaurant. Harper's serves lunch (\$4-\$8) and dinner (\$12-\$23) daily. Reservations are accepted for dinner.

South Beach fronts the beach at 777 Gulf Blvd., ☎ 941-964-0765. Sand-between-the-toes casual, it seats guests open-air, inside a screened lanai, or indoors and air-conditioned, near the bar. It's the utmost in beach funky. Daily lunch and dinner menus range \$5-\$10 and \$14-\$22 respectively for burgers, salads, and grouper as fresh as it comes. It features weekly all-you-can-eat shrimp or fish nights.

If you're looking for a meal-time adventure, hop aboard the Palm Island Resort ferry at 7092 Placida Rd. in Cape Haze and take the short, slow ride (fare \$1 each) to **Rum Bay**, ☎ 941-697-0566. Tender baby-back ribs are a specialty; its daily lunch and dinner menus are complete with burgers, salads, chicken wings, fish, and steaks. Prices are \$5-\$7 for lunch, \$9-\$14 for dinner. The ferry departs at 1 and 2 for lunch and hourly 3-6 for dinner. It returns to the mainland every hour on the half-hour. Ferry reservations must be made 24 hours in advance.



For something slightly more formal, **PJ's Seagrille** in the Old Theatre Mall at Fourth and Park avenues, ☎ 941-964-0806, does linen and candlelight for dinner, and also serves lunch. The setting is unfinished wood and aquariums. Lunch will run you \$7-\$11 for creative sandwiches, salads, and seafood dishes; dinner, in the vicinity of \$18-\$23 for changing entrées the likes of chargrilled yellowfin tuna, Key lime chicken, crab cakes, and other innovative, artistically presented delights. The restaurant closes Sunday and August-September. Dinner reservations are recommended.

Port Charlotte & Environs

Port Charlotte grew up on the Tamiami Trail as the area developed into a residential community tuned primarily for retirement. It consists of a strip of highway shopping centers, fast-food restaurants, and smaller branch communities, with no true downtown heart. It has a few attractions to offer sightseers, but not a lot in the way of adventure.

Getting Here



Exits 30 and 31 take you into town from I-75. **Highway 41**, a.k.a. Tamiami Trail, runs congestedly through its center. **Kings Highway** (Rte. 769) and **Harbor View Rd.** are major streets to the east of Highway 41. **Edgewater Drive** is a main through-street to the west.

Sights & Attractions

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



The best bet for recreationists is the **Port Charlotte Beach** at the end of Harbor Blvd., ☎ 941-627-1628. The man-made beach is central to a variety of facilities and activities, including volleyball, basketball, tennis, horseshoes, a playground, boat ramps, a fishing pier, picnic facilities, a swimming pool, and a kiddy pool. Parking is 25¢ an hour. Admission to the swimming pool complex is \$2.50 plus tax for adults ages 18 and over, \$1.50 for youths ages three-17. The park is open sunrise-sunset.

Family Fun

Putt-putt around the two 18-hole miniature courses at **Fish Cove Adventure Golf**, 4949 Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-627-5393. 18 holes cost \$5.99 for ages 12 and older, \$3.99 for ages five-11. Hours are 10am-11pm, daily.

Spectator Sports

In the offshoot town of **Murdock** you'll find the headquarters for **Texas Rangers Spring Training**, ☎ 941-625-9500, at **Charlotte County Stadium** on Rte. 776, off Hwy. 41. The team plays its exhibition season during March and the latter part of February. Ticket prices are \$7 and \$9. In summer (April-September), the **Charlotte Rangers** play; tickets are \$3 and \$4.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



There is a fishing pier with bait and tackle concession at the **Port Charlotte Beach** recreational complex on the southeast end of Harbor Blvd., ☎ 941-627-1628. It pokes into Alligator Bay off Charlotte Harbor. The park also has a boat ramp.

The old railroad bridge that crosses the Myakka River at El Jobean Park is a popular spot for angling. Known as the **Myakka South Fishing Pier**, it's located on El Jobean Rd.

Charlotte Harbor Pier juts into the mouth of the Peace River on Bayshore Rd. in the community of Charlotte Harbor, which lies on the northern banks of the river.

For freshwater fishing, try the small lake at **Kiwanis Park** (see *Hiking & Biking*, below) on Donora St. at Victoria Ave.

Tarpon Hunter II in Port Charlotte, ☎ 941-743-6622, offers charters in Charlotte Harbor and backwaters. Specialties include fly and light tackle fishing. Rates are \$225 for a half-day; \$350 for a full day.

Boat Rentals

Buccaneer Water Sports, 4975 Tamiami Trail in Charlotte Harbor just north of the bridge, ☎ 941-766-1113, rents pontoon boats for \$119 a half-day and \$159 a full day. Jet skis rent for \$35 a half-hour, \$60 an hour. Gas is included in the prices.

Paddling

Rent a single kayak for \$10 an hour, \$35 a half-day, \$50 a full day at **Buccaneer Water Sports**, 4975 Tamiami Trail in Charlotte Harbor, just north of the bridge, ☎ 941-766-1113.

■ On Foot

Hiking & Jogging



Kiwanis Park on Donora St. at Victoria Ave., ☎ 941-624-3057 or 627-1628, has a jogging/fitness trail, a self-guided nature trail, and a lakeside Audubon trail, as well as picnic facilities. It's open daily, sunrise-9.

■ On Wheels



The Bicycle Center, 3755 Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-627-6600, rents a variety of bikes, including beach cruisers, hybrids, tandems, children's bicycles, and adult tricycles. Rentals are available by the day, week, or month.

Where To Stay

Inns/B&Bs



For convenience to the sights of both Punta Gorda and Charlotte Harbor and a glorious riverfront view, rest your head at **Harbour Inn**, 5000 Tamiami Trail at Charlotte Harbour, ☎ 800-646-6037 or 941-625-6126. It is located just north of the Peace River bridge and offers guests of its 44 rooms an on-site antique mart, a boat dock, and swimming pools. \$-\$\$.

Camping

East of town, **Riverside RV Resort & Campground**, 9770 SW County Rd. 769 (Kings Highway), ☎ 941-993-2111 or 800-795-9733 posts overnight rates of \$23-\$34 for tents and RVs with full hookup.

Where To Eat



Highway 41 leaves a trail of fast-food and chain restaurants from one end of Port Charlotte to another. For something with more personality, head to Boca Grande or Punta Gorda.

Local places often change hands and names before you can make a return visit. One that gets current acclaim for its steaks is **Cap'n and the Cowboy**, 2200 Kings Hwy., ☎ 941-743-3969. It's open daily (except Monday) for lunch (\$2-\$10) and dinner (\$11-\$21).

Nightlife



The newest local sensation is **Area 51**, 1615 Market Circle off Hwy. 41, ☎ 941-766-9055. The club's décor simulates a UFO crash landing site and provides nightlifers with a frisky deejay dance hall.

Punta Gorda

Port Charlotte's neighbor across the river provides a historic counterpart to the newer town's lack of identity. Its history begins with Ponce de León, who is believed to have landed and suffered fatal Indian arrow wounds on the shores of Charlotte Harbor at Punta Gorda's western boundary. Within the shelter of the Peace River, a turn-of-the century community cropped up around a deep port and commercial fishing industry. Once a thriving city and resort, Punta Gorda today is a quiet, neighborly community where history is being revived and the wilderness beckons at the side door.

Charlotte Harbor

Getting Here



Follow **Highway 41** to reach Punta Gorda's heart. Downtown, it's known as **Cross St.** From I-75, take the short drive off of Exit 29. **Marion** (one-way westbound) and **Olympia** (one-way eastbound) avenues are the main streets downtown. **Retta Esplanade** is a scenic riverside route to the north of and paralleling Marion Ave.

Sights & Attractions

■ Downtown

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Explore Punta Gorda's past within its **historic district**, which hugs Tamiami Trail along Nesbit St. and Marion and Olympia avenues. Old commercial buildings have been spruced up for a second

life. Sculptures, murals, and old-fashioned street lamps adorn business streets. For a walking tour brochure of **Punta Gorda's Historic District**, listing 35 sites, stop at the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce at Punta Gorda's City Hall, 326 W. Marion Ave.; ☎ 941-639-6330, open Monday-Friday, 8:30-5. Take a slow drive along **Retta Esplanade**, absorbing the riverfront scenery on one side and the row of handsome historic homes on the other.

Throughout old Punta Gorda, artists have painted 29 **murals** at 10 different sites, all depicting the city's glorious past. One of the most impressive decorates downtown's Punta Gorda Mall, 115 Tamiami Trail. It portrays the erstwhile Hotel Charlotte Harbor and some of its illustrious guests, including Thomas A. Edison, Henry Ford, and Clarence Darrow. More murals are on their way.

During season and at Christmas time, you can tour the **A.C. Freeman House**, east of Retta Esplanade at 639 E. Hargreaves Ave., ☎ 941-637-0077, one of Punta Gorda's loveliest Victorian treasures, built in 1903. Through community effort, it was recently restored and furnished to its original splendor. Regular tours are conducted December-April, Monday-Friday, 11-3. Donations are welcome.

The changing exhibits at **Florida Adventure Museum of Charlotte County**, 260 W. Retta Esplanade, ☎ 941-639-3777, deal with local natural history, ecology, history, and other Florida-related subjects. Permanent exhibits include a room full of stuffed big cats and old clothes for kiddy dress-up. Admission is \$2 for adults, \$1 for children ages 12 and under. Hours are 10-5, Monday-Friday; 10-3, Saturday; closed on Sunday.

To commemorate Juan Ponce de León's local landing in his quest for youth, **Ponce de León Historical Park**, on the west end of Marion Ave., holds an unpretentious monument, nature observation boardwalk into the mangroves, and lovely waterside picnic area with barbecue grills. Admission is free. It's open daily except Tuesday, dusk-dawn.

Spectator Sports

Charlotte County Speedway at 8655 Piper Rd., ☎ 941-575-2422, runs a year-round schedule of weekend car-racing events. Cost of tickets runs \$10-\$12 for adults; \$5 for children ages six-12. Call for a schedule of events.

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

On the grounds of Ponce de León Historical Park, **Peace River Wildlife Center**, 3400 W. Marion Ave., ☎ 941-637-3830, conducts tours among orphaned, injured, and recovering animals that are being rehabilitated for release. Annually, some 1,300 patients are admitted, including gopher tortoises, pelicans, and owls. Permanent injured residents include bald eagles and hawks. It is open Wednesday-Monday, 8-4, with tours offered 10-3:30. A donation is requested.

To slip into the bygones of Florida wilderness, enjoy the low-key attractions at **Babcock Wilderness Adventures** off Rte. 31 east of Punta Gorda, ☎ 941-489-3911 or 800-500-5583, www.babcockwilderness.com. A swamp buggy is your chariot through time and the pristine wetlands of 90,000-acre Telegraph Cypress Swamp and Crescent B Ranch. The 90-minute tour shows you an old-Florida working ranch and settlement, alligators, deer, relocated bison, turkeys, and panthers. You can see the Cracker shack built for the filming of *Just Cause*, which starred Sean Connery, and have lunch at the mess hall. Admission is \$17.95 for adults; \$9.95 for kids three-12. Tours run by advance reservations daily, 9-3.

South of town, the **Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center** at 10941 Burnt Store Rd., ☎ 941-575-5435, conducts guided tours around three miles of nature trails, and displays educational exhibits about local wildlife in its Discovery Center and Bat Center. One trail provides a wildlife observation and bird blind. Admission is free. Season hours (October-May) are 8-3, Monday-Saturday; 11-3 on Sunday. In summer, it's open 8-noon on weekdays only. Guided walks take place at 10 and 1 on weekdays, 10 only on Saturday.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Gilchrist Park on Retta Esplanade has a fishing pier that reaches into the wide mouth of the Peace River. For fishing needs, stop at **Bill's Tackle Shop** at 135 W. Marion Ave., ☎ 941-639-1305. Hours are normally 8-5, Monday-Saturday.

King Fisher Fleet at Fishermen's Village Marina, 1200 W. Retta Esplanade, ☎ 941-639-0969, www.kingfisherfleet.com, has been doing fishing excursions for years and years. Rates for deep-sea fishing aboard a 35-footer are \$450 per day for up to six persons; for back-bay fishing, \$300 per day, \$175 for a half-day for up to three. Extra persons pay \$10.

Boat Ramps

Boat ramps in Punta Gorda are located at **Ponce de León Park** on the west end of Marion Ave., at **Laishley Park City Marina** on Nesbit St.,

and at **Riverside Park** on Riverside Dr., on Washington Loop Rd., and on Darst Ave.

Boat Rentals

At Fishermen's Village, **Holidaze**, ☎ 941-505-8888, rents boats for periods of two hours to a full day. A 17-foot Carolina Skiff costs \$40 for two hours, \$69 a half-day, and \$135 a full day. At the high end of the scale, rent a bowrider for \$70 two hours, \$99 half-day, or \$165 full day. Pontoons also available.

Boat Charters & Tours

At **King Fisher Fleet** at Fishermen's Village Marina, 1200 W. Retta Esplanade, ☎ 941-639-0969, www.kingfisherfleet.com, sightseeing voyage fares begin at \$6 for a sunset cruise. The menu of other excursions ranges from a 90-minute harbor tour to a full-day trip to Cabbage Key or Cayo Costa (see page 235), \$8.50-\$19.95 per adult. Children board for half-fare. Tax is not included in prices.

Sailing

International Sailing School at Fishermen's Village, 1200 W. Retta Esplanade, ☎ 800-824-5040 or 941-639-7492, www.IntlSailSch.com, conducts a variety of sailing courses from two to six days. They begin with basic keelboat and safe boating classes for two days, \$455 each. For beginners, it's \$595 for three days. Liveaboard cruising courses cost \$1,425 for three days of either daysailing only or overnight onboard sailing. Other courses include bareboat cruising for couples and advanced cruising.

Paddling

Go up the creek with a paddle at **Shell Creek Lodge**, 3269 Highway 17 (five miles north of I-75's Exit 29), ☎ 941-575-8171. Single kayak rentals start at \$20 for two hours; double kayaks at \$30, and canoes at \$24. Guided tours penetrate the wild and natural Shell Creek, cypress swamp, and river forest. Sunset, full moon, and fossil trips are available by reservation. Prices begin at \$35 per person; kayaking instruction is included.

■ On Foot

Hiking



The **Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center** (see page 217) at 10941 Burnt Store Rd., ☎ 941-575-4800, has three miles of nature trails where marsh rabbits, bald eagles, ospreys, alligators, and pileated woodpeckers dwell amidst the slash pine and saw palmetto. Admission is free. Season hours (October-May) are 8-3, Monday-Saturday;

11-3 on Sunday. In summer, it's open 8-noon on weekdays only. Guided walks take place at 10 and 1 on weekdays, at 10 on Saturday.

Hunting

Fred C. Babcock-Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area, east of town off Rte. 31, ☎ 941-575-5768, covers more than 65,000 acres populated by doves, quail, deer, and wild hogs. A management stamp is required to enter, and hunters must have proper licenses. For management stamps, call the county tax collector's office at ☎ 941-637-2150.

The **Cecil M. Webb Shooting Range**, on Tucker Grade at Rifle Range Rd., east of I-75 at Exit 27, is open to the public during daylight hours every day except the fourth Saturday of each month from daylight to 2pm, when hunter education training is held on-site. For information and rules, contact the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's office at ☎ 813-644-9196.

For sport shooting, make a reservation at **Telegraph Cypress Field Club**, three miles east of Rte. 31 on Rte. 74, ☎ 941-575-0550. It consists of sporting clays courses, a pistol range, a five stand field, and a pro shop. Instructors are available. You can make appointments for 8 and later on Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday, and after noon on Wednesday.

■ On Wheels



Gilchrist Park runs along the river on Retta Esplanade and has bike paths plus picnicking, a huge playground, basketball, and a tennis court.

Nearby, **Ralph's Bicycle Shop**, 258 W. Marion Ave., ☎ 941-639-3029, rents bikes for \$10 daily, \$20 a week. The shop is open 9-5, Monday-Friday; 9-12 on Saturday.

Shopping



Downtown Punta Gorda provides a small, charming place to browse for books and gifts. **Fishermen's Village**, 1200 W. Retta Esplanade, ☎ 800-639-0020, www.fishville.com, has more to offer. It was once the site of a crab packing plant, circa 1940. Today, in a marina-side setting, many of its clothing and gift shops tend toward the nautical and craftsy.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Motels



Sea Cove Motel at 25000 E. Marion Ave., ☎ 941-639-0060, lies on the Peace River east of town, and offers fishing, swimming, and shuffleboard. Rooms, efficiencies, and one- and two-bedroom apartments are available. Minimum stays required on efficiencies and apartments. \$-\$\$

Time-share units at **Fishermen's Village Villas**, 1200 W. Retta Esplanade, contain a full kitchen and two bedrooms at a reasonable price. They overlook the shopping-entertainment mall's courtyard, but are well sound-proofed. Guests can use the property's swimming pool, tennis courts, and bicycles. \$\$

Bed & Breakfasts



Punta Gorda has its share of chain motels. To avoid them, try the local antithesis, **Gilchrist Bed & Breakfast Inn** at 115 Gilchrist St., ☎ 941-575-4129. Tin-roofed and lattice-trimmed, the 1914 home holds two guest suites and a three-room apartment (available only in summer). Breakfast is served on a screened porch that also has a hot tub. The inn is convenient to downtown's historic district and Gilchrist Park (see pages 217 and 219). \$\$-\$\$\$

A newer B&B, **The Virginia House**, has opened nearby at 233 Harvey St, ☎ 941-575-8841, in an old church building with beautiful board-and-bead wood paneling. In one of the three suites, the 12-foot ceiling dramatizes the circa-1887 building's original role. \$\$-\$\$\$

Camping

Most of the local RV resorts and campgrounds lie east of I-75 in Punta Gorda's vast wilderness. **Punta Gorda RV Resort** is closer to town, south of Punta Gorda at 3701 Baynard Dr., ☎ 941-639-2010, on Alligator Creek. Facilities in the adults-only park include a rec room, clubhouse, pool and spas, shuffleboards, a boat ramp, a bait shop and convenience store, and docks. Daily rates range \$18-\$20 a day. Weekly and monthly discounts are available.

One of the east-lying resorts, **Palms & Pines Riverside Resort**, 5400 Riverside Dr, ☎ 941-639-5461, borders the Peace River with fishing piers, boat ramps, shuffleboard, and horseshoes. Lots rent for \$20 a night.

Where To Eat



Many head to **Fishermen's Village**, a waterside shopping-dining complex at 1200 W. Retta Esplanade, to find a variety of meal-time options, from deli to sit-down.

The most formal at Fishermen's Village is **Captain's Table**, ☎ 941-637-1177. The setting is tastefully nautical, with lots of pewter, classic sailing ship models, and a great view of the river. The lunch buffet (\$8) is popular. Menu items are continental in nature, featuring local fresh fish. Lunch (\$6.50-\$10) and dinner (\$12-\$17) are served daily. Reservations are suggested, especially for dinner.

Below the Captain's Table, **Harpoon Harry's**, at the same address and phone, is more casual and also opens daily for lunch and dinner. Deli sandwiches, salads, steamer pots, and fried seafood baskets range from \$5 to \$13.

Locals avoid that tourist scene, especially in season, and stick to downtown. One of the business community's best finds is **The Legal Café**, next to the courthouse at 210 Taylor St., ☎ 941-639-6761. The menu lists a full spectrum of breakfast and lunch dishes, including omelets, burgers, and healthy choices. Staff is friendly and accommodating; the dining rooms are cheerful; the food unpretentiously good. Legal Café serves daily breakfast (\$2-\$4) and lunch (\$4-\$9).

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

Lee Island Coast

Overview

“There is only one Fort Myers and 90 million people will find it out,” declared Thomas Edison in the late 1880s. The genius inventor moved his winter quarters to town after northern chills threatened his health and he discovered a stand of bamboo on a Caloosahatchee riverside plot. The bamboo would come in handy for his experiments in creating a lightbulb. The area’s balmy weather would extend his life another 46 years.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Cape Coral
- North Fort Myers
- Pine Island & Out-Islands
- Fort Myers
- Sanibel & Captiva Islands
- Fort Myers Beach
- San Carlos Park & Estero
- Bonita Springs

As Edison predicted, plenty have discovered Fort Myers, and it has grown into a major city, the hub of Lee County. The tourism bureau has adopted the name Lee Island Coast for this kingdom bordered by the Gulf of Mexico, mottled by islands, and stabbed through by the wide Caloosahatchee River. The moniker promotes what visitors these days favor about Fort Myers – its quiet, protected waters and proximity to wild and play-happy islands.

Lee County guards some of the West Coast’s most precious historical and natural treasures. Edison’s winter home and laboratory remain, along with the remnants of a peculiar turn-of-the-19th-century religious cult at Koreshan State Historic Site. From more distant times, ancient wetlands survive untouched and protected, along with Calusa Amerindian mounds, wooded preserves, barrier islands, fruit farms, fishing communities, and wildlife estuaries. The Lee Island Coast offers endless possibilities for outdoor activity on land and sea. It is held as a model of ecotourism by the state agencies that help other communities and regions develop environmental attractions within their boundaries.

Transportation

■ Airports



Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) in Fort Myers, ☎ 941-768-1000, www.swfia.com, services this segment of coast, with flights from all parts of the country and to and from

Canada, Germany, and limited other international destinations. Major airlines servicing this facility are listed below.

AIRLINES SERVING SOUTHWEST FLORIDA (RSW) INT’L AIRPORT	
Air Canada	☎ 800-776-3000
American or American Eagle	☎ 800-433-7300
American Trans Air	☎ 800-225-2995
Continental	☎ 800-525-0280
Delta Air Lines / Comair	☎ 800-221-1212
Northwest	☎ 800-225-2525
TWA.....	☎ 800-221-2000
United.....	☎ 800-241-6522
US Airways	☎ 800-428-4322

TAKE A SIDE TRIP TO KEY WEST

Currently three modes of transportation provide fast service to Key West. They include **Cape Air** (☎ 800-352-0714), with two daily round-trip flights from Southwest Florida International Airport; **X-Press to Key West** (☎ 800-273-4496 or 941-765-0808; [www. atlantisxpress.com](http://www.atlantisxpress.com)), a four-hour (one-way) high-speed ferry departing from Fort Myers Beach; and **Buquebus** (toll-free ☎ 877-461-0999, 941-461-0999), a ferry scheduled to begin service sometime in 2000, which will make the trip from downtown Fort Myers in three hours.

■ Rental Cars & Taxi Service

Rental cars are available at the airport and other locations throughout the area. Major companies include **Avis**, ☎ 941-768-2121 (airport) or 800-331-1212; **Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3131 or 941-768-3100; and **Budget**, ☎ 941-768-1500 (airport) or 941-275-6886.

Several taxi companies provide transportation to and from the airport, including **Aaron Airport Taxi Limo**, ☎ 941-768-1898, and **Majestic Transportation**, ☎ 941-768-5400.

■ Getting Around

I-75 and **Highway 41** (Tamiami Trail) are the major arteries, and they run parallel to each other, north-south. Both connect to Tampa and the East Coast metropolitan area of Miami-Fort Lauderdale.

Information



Contact **Lee Island Coast Visitor & Convention Bureau**, 2180 W. First St., Ste. 100, Fort Myers 33901, ☎ 941-338-3500 or 800-237-6444, www.leeislandcoast.com.

Festivals & Events



JANUARY - Like many things in Fort Myers, the town's grandest festival revolves around the memory of Thomas Edison. **The Edison Pageant of Light Festival** takes place in late January to early February and features a lighted night parade. ☎ 941-334-2550 for details.

FEBRUARY / MARCH - The **Fort Myers Beach Shrimp Festival** is held in late February or early March, ☎ 941-334-0552. The **Sanibel Shell Fair and Show**, ☎ 941-472-2155, kicks off the month of March, as it has for more than 50 years. Held at the Sanibel Community Center, it showcases sea life, specimen shells, and shell art.

JUNE - 'Tween Waters Resort on Captiva Island hosts **Caloosa Catch & Release Fishing Tournament** (☎ 941-472-5161 or 800-223-5865, extension 318), a four-day event.

JULY - Pine Island celebrates **Mangomania** (\$3 adult admission), ☎ 941-283-0888, with food (especially dishes and drinks made with mangoes), music, and a craft fair.

OCTOBER - Cape Coral celebrates **Oktoberfest**, a celebration of German music, food and culture, at the German-American Social Club, ☎ 941-283-1400.

NOVEMBER - The **Fort Myers Beach Sandsculpting Contest**, ☎ 941-454-7500, takes place in early November at Outrigger Beach Resort and the Holiday Inn.

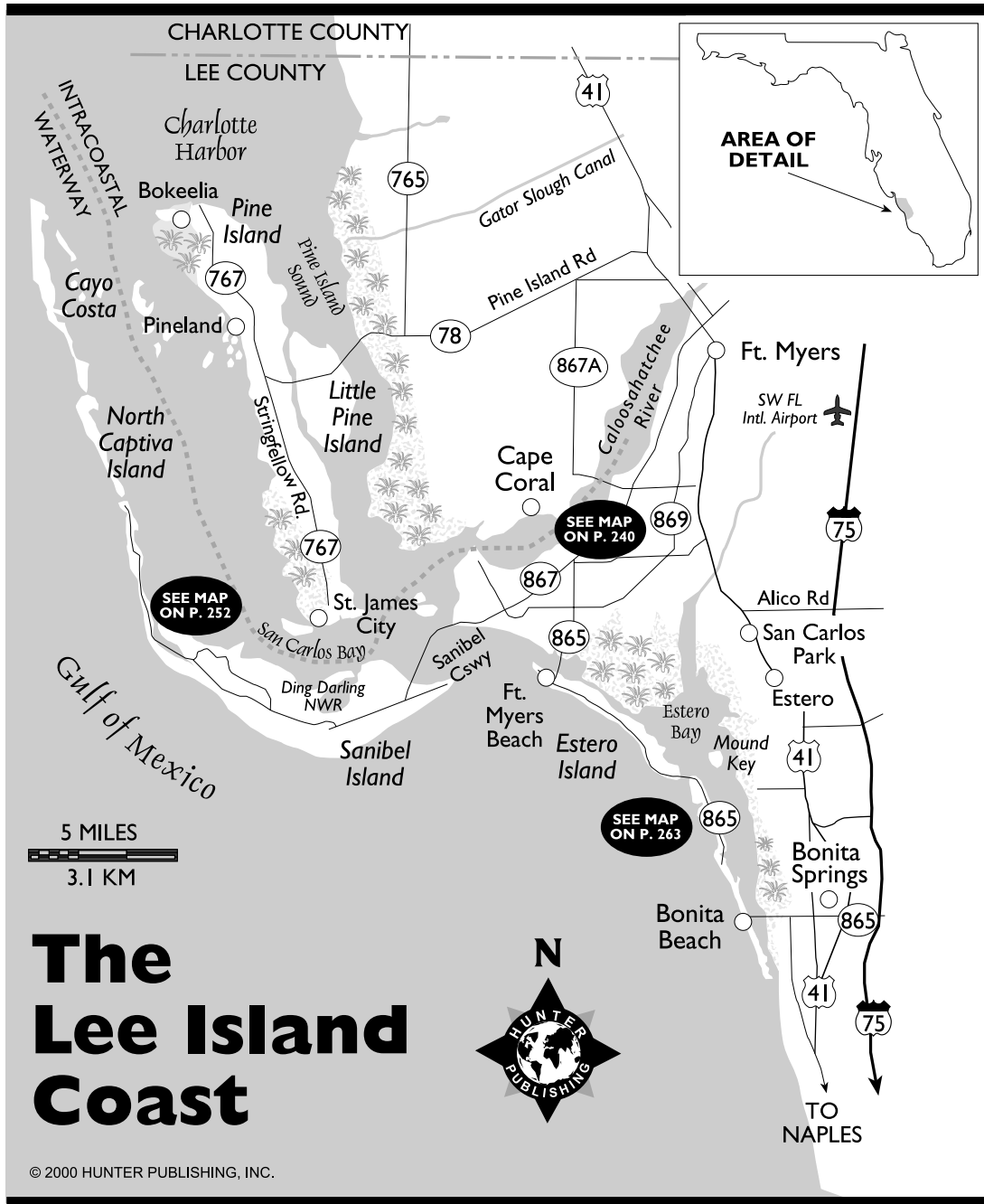
DECEMBER - Cape Coral's **Christmas Boat-a-Long**, a decorated boat parade with live entertainment, ☎ 941-574-0801. Best Western Pink Shell on Fort Myers Beach hosts the three-day **Southwest Florida Paddlefest** (☎ 941-437-0956), which includes a kayaking symposium and the long-running Captiva Classic race.

BUDGET TIPS

- Instead of Sanibel Island, head to **Pine Island** or **Fort Myers Beach** for less expensive lodging and dining.
 - Some restaurants serve many of their same dinner dishes at lunch, for a significantly lower cost. **Plan a late lunch** out and snack or picnic for dinner.
 - Instead of a fishing charter, book with a **Fort Myers Beach party fishing boat**.
 - Also in Fort Myers Beach, visit **Ostego Bay Marine Foundation** and **Matanzas Pass Preserve** for free (or a donation).
 - **Koreshan State Historic Site** charges only \$3.25 for up to eight persons in a vehicle and provides a half's day worth of sight-seeing, hiking, canoeing (rentals at a small extra charge), and picnicking.
 - Many local restaurants offer **early bird specials** to dinner guests who arrive before a certain time.
 - The region's historical museums provide bite-sized, budget morsels of education. Check out **Sanibel Island's Historical Village** and **Pine Island's Museum of the Islands**. Adults are asked to make a small donation. Admission is free at **Captiva History House**.
 - At **Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation**, you get your \$2 worth and more of nature.
 - Take a hike. The trail at "**Ding**" **Darling Refuge's Bailey Tract** is free.
-

Cape Coral & North Fort Myers

North Fort Myers and Cape Coral lie on the north bank of the Caloosahatchee River, across from Fort Myers. They are two separate, relatively new communities. Cape Coral is the largest, a growing residential town with interesting family attractions and lots of water around – it claims more canals than the Italian city of Venice. It is gateway to off-beat **Pine Island** and its complement of unbridged islands.



Getting Here



Approaching from the north via I-75 or Highway 41, you will first reach North Fort Myers. To get to North Fort Myers and Cape Coral from I-75, head west along **Bayshore/Pine Island Rd.** (Rte. 78, Exit 26). **Highway 41** takes you directly into North Fort Myers. Head west again on **Rte. 78** to reach Cape Coral.

Del Prado Blvd. and **Santa Barbara Blvd.** are Cape Coral's major east-west thoroughfares. Bridges cross to Fort Myers at I-75, Highway 41,

Business Highway 41 (Edison Bridge at Fowler St.), Colonial Blvd. (Midpoint Memorial Bridge), and Cape Coral Parkway/College Parkway (toll).

WEEKEND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

■ **FRIDAY:** Drive to **Pine Island** in the morning. Take half-day fishing charter, sightseeing charter or rental boat to **Cayo Costa** or **Cabbage Key**. Have lunch at **Cabbage Key Inn** or back at **Lazy Flamingo** in Bokeelia. Drive to Fort Myers to tour **Edison Home** in afternoon. Have dinner downtown at the **Veranda**. Spend the night in Fort Myers.

■ **SATURDAY:** Drive to **Sanibel Island** in the morning. Kayak the **Commodore Creek Canoe Trail** into J.N. “Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Drive to **Captiva Island** for lunch at the **Mucky Duck**. Drive back to Sanibel in the afternoon and visit the **Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation** and the **Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum**. Have dinner at **Twilight Café**. Spend the night on Sanibel.

■ **SUNDAY:** Drive to **Fort Myers Beach** in the morning. Head south to **Lovers Key State Recreation Area** to spend time on the beach. Drive to **Bonita Beach** for lunch at **Flying Fish Café**. Drive to **Estero** to tour **Koreshan State Historic Site**. Return to Fort Myers for dinner at **Bistro 41**. Spend the night in Fort Myers.

Information



Contact the **North Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce**, at 13180 N. Cleveland Ave., North Fort Myers 33903, ☎ 941-997-9111, with questions.

For information on Cape Coral, contact **Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce**, PO Box 747, Cape Coral 33910, ☎ 941-549-6900 or 800-226-9609. The office is located at 2051 Cape Coral Pkwy and is open 9-5, Monday-Friday.

A **Southwest Florida Chamber of Commerce** visitor's information center is located at 1625 Cape Coral Pkwy E, ☎ 941-542-3721, open Monday-Friday, 9-5.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Learn more about the history of Cape Coral, a young river town created from a vast hunting preserve, at the **Cape Coral Historical Museum**, Cultural Park Blvd., ☎ 941-772-7037. Exhibits include one explaining the natural history of the burrowing owl, a local inhabitant and icon. Hours are 1-4, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday. Adults are asked to donate \$1.

Look for the overgrown conch shell on Highway 41 in North Fort Myers, and you'll have found **The Shell Factory** at 2787 N. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-995-2141 or 800-282-5805. Admission to most of the attractions is free. The main draw is its bazaar for shells, shell things, and other Florida souvenirs. It also offers a bumper boat ride (\$4), aquariums, the Waltzing Waters lighted fountain shows, a stuffed African animal collection, live animals, and eats. Hours are 9-9, daily.

The **Railroad Museum of Southwest Florida** is located at The Shell Factory (see above), ☎ 941-997-2457, and is open 10-6, Monday-Saturday, noon-6 Sunday. Admission is by donation.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Headquarters for fishing types, boaters, and beachers, **Cape Coral Yacht Club**, 5819 Driftwood Pkwy., ☎ 941-574-0815, is a city facility set on the Caloosahatchee River. The public beach is enhanced by a barbecue area, shaded picnic tables, restrooms, outdoor shower, tennis, horseshoes, a heated pool (\$1.50-\$3.50 admission), adult and youth classes and programs, a 620-foot lighted fishing pier, and a free public boat ramp. A large beach pavilion is available for rental. The beach closes at dusk.

Family Fun

Many of Cape Coral's attractions are kid-oriented. A favorite for families on steamy summer days, **Sun Splash Family Waterpark** at 400 Santa Barbara Blvd., ☎ 941-574-0557, offers refreshment for all ages. The smallest can splash around shallow pools, climb on an alligator's back (not real, of course), or ride with mom and dad on an innertube. Taller ones will want to stand in line for the speed-demon slides. Lockers, snacks, and gifts are available. Coolers are not allowed in the park, but there is a picnic ground with play equipment outside the gate. Admission is by height: \$10.55 for anyone 48 inches or taller; \$8.43 for children under 48 inches and older than two. Prices include tax. In summer, the park is open 11-5, Wednesday-Friday, and 10-5, Saturday and Sunday. Hours vary other times of the year. The park is closed in slow seasons. Call ahead for current schedule.

The Children's Science Center, 2915 NE Pine Island Rd., ☎ 941-997-0012, is a five-acre, indoor-outdoor opportunity to learn about Florida Am-

erindian history, ecology, electricity, computers, fossils, NASA satellites, and various scientific phenomena through games, puzzles, and other interactivity. You'll see live iguanas, tarantulas, scorpions, and snakes. It's open Monday-Friday, 9:30-4:30; weekends, noon-5. Admission for children ages three-16 is \$2; for adults, \$4.

Batting cages, go-carts, bumper boats, miniature golf, and a video arcade make **Greenwell's Bat-A-Ball and Family Fun Park**, at 35 NE Pine Island Rd., ☎ 941-574-4386, a hit with the kids. It is named after Red Sox baseball player Mike Greenwell, a Cape Coral son. Hours are 10-10, weekdays, and 10-midnight on Friday and Saturday. Admission is per activity. Eighteen holes of mini-golf costs \$1.50-\$4.50, depending upon age.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Cape Coral Yacht Club's (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) 620-foot lighted fishing pier is a popular convergence point for land-bound fishermen. For charter fishing, contact **Capt. Ron Smith**, ☎ 941-549-9366. He specializes in tarpon fishing and charges \$200 for up to four per half-day, \$380 for a full day.

Boat Ramps

Boat launching is free at **Cape Coral Yacht Club** (see page 229).

BOATING SCHOOL

Learn to captain a sailing or power vessel through a live-aboard experience with **Florida Sailing & Cruising School**, based at Marintown Marina, 3444 Marintown Lane NW in North Fort Myers, ☎ 800-262-SWFY or 941-656-1339, www.swfyachts.com or www.flsailandcruiseschool.com. Classes range from a \$40 day course on safe boating to weekend and week-long sail or power courses, \$400-\$1,400 each. Combination power and sail courses are also available, all taught aboard well-equipped yachts.

Houseboat Rentals

Florida Houseboat Rentals, 1227 SW 52nd Terrace in Cape Coral, ☎ 941-945-2628, rents luxury 38-foot houseboats for live-aboard water adventures in local waters. Fully furnished and sleeping eight adults, the

boats rent for \$995 for four nights, \$1,695 for a week. It also rents single kayaks and three-person WaveRunners.

■ On Wheels

Bicycling



Many of Cape Coral's city streets designate bike lanes. Bikers also branch out from town along rural roadways. One scenic, low-traffic route on the city outskirts, **Burnt Store Rd.**, connects to Pine Island Rd. northwest of town.

BMX Park, 1410 SW Sixth Place, has a Bicycle Moto-Cross track, as well as a picnic area, playground, and sand volleyball court.

Paintball

Daredevils Indoor Paintball Arena, 4506 Del Prado Blvd. S, ☎ 941-542-2272, is open 5-10, Monday-Friday, and 10am-midnight on Saturday.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Not widely known for its tourism and resorts, Cape Coral offers mostly chain hotels. Visitors to the area tend to stay in Fort Myers or closer to the Gulf front.

For sports enthusiasts, **Cape Coral Golf and Tennis Resort**, at 4003 Palm Tree Blvd., ☎ 941-542-3191 or 800-648-1475, provides reasonably priced accommodations in a lovely golf course setting with newly renovated facilities. Golf and tennis packages available. \$\$\$

Where To Eat



Cape Coral is known for its Italian restaurants, growing Hispanic population, and annual Oktoberfest. Its restaurants reflect its multi-dimensional heritage.

You can't miss **Iguana Mia's** lizard-green exterior at 1027 Cape Coral Pkwy, ☎ 941-945-7755. The large dining room is casual, with plastic chairs and Mexican kitsch. One of the area's most popular Mexican restaurants (there are spinoffs in Fort Myers and Bonita Springs), it serves standard specialties with a few creative variations. Its chicken sampler plate is popular. Prices run \$7-\$14 for main dishes. It's open daily for lunch and dinner.

Pine Island & Out-Islands

You must be a specialty traveler to truly appreciate Pine Island. Only utterly devoted fisherfolk, history buffs, or exotic fruit and fresh seafood connoisseurs need apply.

Don't come here looking for beaches and yuppie bars. Go to neighboring Sanibel Island or Fort Myers Beach if that's the kind of traveler you are. Beaches do not really exist on Pine Island (there's one man-made beach in St. James City) and that is the very reason it has ducked tourism's inherent damage to island heritage and identity. Tucked between barrier islands and the Cape Coral mainland, Pine Island hides from hedonistic sun-seekers. Still today, as in centuries past, it is about Amerindian villages, farming, and fishing.

Pine Island's south-end **Galt Island** and its community of **Pineland** once held major Calusa Amerindian religious centers with elaborate canal systems and sizable shell midden mounds. In the Calusas' wake settled Cuban immigrants who set up fishing camps and began a way of life that continues to this day. A recent ban on net-fishing has changed life somewhat for Pine Islanders. Many have turned to related careers, such as crabbing and charter fishing guides. Artists inspired by the fishermen, their boats, and their way of life have now become more representative of Pine Island occupation.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Midden mounds* were the earliest compost piles. Native Americans tossed their dinner debris – oyster shells, bird bones, small animal carcasses, broken pottery – on a heap and covered it with soil. These shell mounds revealed to archaeologists important details about how the Calusa lived, work, and ate.

Getting Here

From Highway 41 or I-75, take **Rte. 78**, a.k.a. **Pine Island Rd.** (Exit 26) heading west. The road shoots straight across the Pine Island Bridge (known as the World's Fishingest Bridge) to and through Matlacha, one of the island's four communities, and into Island Center. At **Rte. 767** (Stringfellow Rd), turn left to reach **St. James City**, the biggest town, or right to go to **Pineland** and **Bokeelia**.

Pine Island is the departure point for **water taxis** and **charters** to the unbridged islands of **Useppa**, **Cayo Costa**, **Cabbage Key**, and **North Captiva**. Light aircraft owners can use North Captiva's 2,300-foot grass airstrip. Few cars run on the island, but golf carts and bicycles can be rented there.

Cabbage Key operations are also based on Pine Island at Bokeelia. For reservations and information on transportation, ☎ 941-283-2278.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Two of Pine Island's four towns have tongue-twister names that are often mispronounced, and probably developed in the first place from mispronunciations and misspellings. **Matlacha** (MATT-la-shay), historians surmise, derived from an Indian word for defender. **Bokeelia** (Bo-KEEL-ee-ya) is an Anglicized rendition of the Spanish word boquilla, meaning mouth.*

Information



Contact the **Greater Pine Island Chamber of Commerce**, PO Box 525, Matlacha, FL 33909, ☎ 941-283-0888. An information center is located before east of the bridge to Matlacha on Pine Island Rd. It's open Monday-Saturday, 10-4.

Sights & Attractions

■ Pine Island

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Turn left on Pineland Rd. for a scenic trip through time-stilled **Pineland**, a tiny town studded with historic Cracker shacks and Amerindian mounds. A plaque commemorates archaeological finds, proving the island's importance as a Calusa cultural center.

At Phillips Park on Pine Island, **Museum of the Islands**, 5728 Sesame Dr., ☎ 941-283-1525, concentrates on the island's Calusa and fishing heritage with vignettes and a replica of an Amerindian midden mound, modeled after one excavated on the island. Hours are daily, 1-4, in season; closed Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in the off-season. No admission; donations accepted.

Local Color

Artists relish Pine Island for inspiration and seclusion. Several nationally known artists hide out in the island's backwaters and backwoods. Others hang their shingles in town or sell their work in island galleries. In Matlacha, look for **Matt Lacha's Little Store**, ☎ 941-283-6453, to find local sculpture and paintings both whimsical and realistic. **Claymates**, ☎ 941-283-0178, carries handmade pottery. **Florida Gallery**, ☎ 941-283-3984, specializes in photographic art. In Pine Island Center, **Mel Meo's Fish 'N Art**, ☎ 941-283-9484, is the eclectic collection of Pine Island's foremost resident artist, who paints and designs in island style. Bokeelia's sophisticated **Crossed Palms Gallery**, ☎ 941-283-3304, carries the works of locals and North Carolinian potters, jewelers, and painters.

■ Upper Islands

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Lee Coast's unbridged islands may be its most tantalizing feature, especially for adventurers. Two barrier islands feature state parks with secluded beaches and other treasures.

North Captiva, also referred to as Upper Captiva, is a long, skinny island whose park lands contain primitive beachfront with no facilities. **North Captiva State Recreation Area's** 500 acres at the island's southern end provide refuge for waterfowl, shore birds, and migrating species (including human). Recreational boaters head here with their suntan lotion and picnics, or boat around to Safety Harbor on the northern lee side for lunch in one of four little restaurants. Home and condo rentals are available on the island (see *Where To Stay*, below).



Cayo Costa State Park, ☎ 941-964-0375, to the north, offers more formal beach facilities on its northern Gulf side. Rustic cabins and tent sites accommodate primitive campers (see *Camping*, below), and picnic tables, grills, pavilions, and showers serve the need of picnickers. **Johnson Shoals**, a sandbar to the north, is a popular stop for shellers. Off the beach, hikers can follow a trail to an old cemetery and other remnants of a bygone fishing community. Take lots of bug repellent. There's a dock on the Gulf side and sheltered moorings on the bay side, with a tram that runs between. There are also stretches to the south with no facilities, which are favored by lovers of isolation. Fee for admission to the park is \$1 per person.

Adventures

■ On Water



Pine Island's lack of beaches keeps away throngs of wildlife-disturbing tourists. The even better news is that it attracts rich sea life to its mangrove inlets, canals, and mudflats – for example, the blue-eyed bay scallop, blue crab, and a wide variety of fish, from the tasty snook to the disdained catfish. Serious fisherfolk will find Pine Island, with its predilection for angling, pure heaven.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *The Atlantic bay scallop, *Argopecten irradians*, has 100 blue eyes and is smaller than the more common larger scallop. Commercial and recreational fishing of the bay scallop, once an important food source in Southwest Florida, has been banned due to pollution.*

Fishing

The bridge to Pine Island is known as the **World's Fishingest Bridge**. Get your supplies, bait, and licenses at **Seven C's Bait & Tackle Shop**, before the bridge in Matlacha, ☎ 941-283-1674.

Fishing charters run about \$250 for a half-day, \$350 for a full day. Contact **Captain Bill Czerwinski**, ☎ 941-283-0106, a long-time island guide.

Boat Ramps

Boaters can use the public boat ramp at **Matlacha Park** for free. It's on Island Ave., south of Stringfellow Rd. in Matlacha.

ECO-ADVENTURES

Pine Island's backwaters are a great place for spotting manatees, dolphins, and rare birds. **Pine Island Sound Aquatic Preserve** encompasses 54,000 acres of protected submerged land and shoals. The **Pine Island National Wildlife Refuge**, offshore from the island's west side, can be seen only by boat. It consists of a number of keys, including **Big Bird Rookery**, the principal one.

Boat Rentals

From **Four Winds Marina** at 16501 Stringfellow Rd., Bokeelia, ☎ 941-283-0250, you can rent a 19- to 21-foot powerboat for \$135-\$151 a half-day, \$200-\$225 a full day. You can rent kayaks from **Tropic Star Cruises** at the marina, ☎ 941-283-0015, www.TropicStarCruises.com, for \$25 per single for a half-day, \$35 a full day; \$35 per double for half-day, \$45 a full day.

On North Captiva, rentals are available from **North Captiva Island Club**, for Sunfish sailboats (\$60/half-day) and kayaks (\$20-\$30/two hours). Fishing and shelling charters can be arranged by calling ☎ 941-395-9303.

Boat Charters & Tours

You can board a daily water taxi to Cayo Costa (at least three times daily) and Cabbage Key (once daily), which includes an eco-tour. Reserve through **Tropic Star Cruises** at Four Winds Marina above, ☎ 941-283-0015, www.TropicStarCruises.com. Tours cost \$25 for adults, \$15 for kids under age 11.

Island Charters, ☎ 941-283-1113, based at Pineland Marina, runs shuttle boats to North Captiva daily, 9-5, for \$15 one-way per person, \$25 round-trip (discounts on groups of four and larger). It also shuttles passengers daily to Cabbage Key for \$20 per person, round-trip.

Paddling

The best way to explore Pine Island's unplundered natural pleasures is with the **Gulf Coast Kayak Company** in Matlacha, ☎ 941-283-1125. It offers day trips into Matlacha Aquatic Preserve (part of the Pine Island Sound Preserve), overnight trips to Cayo Costa (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), and full moon and new moon astronomy ventures. Average cost for a four-hour nature tour is \$35 per person. Call ahead to reserve.

Snorkeling & Diving

Buccaneer Adventures at Four Winds Marina (see *Boating Rentals*, above), takes divers eight miles or more offshore for wreck and ledge diving in the Gulf. Minimum is three divers, maximum is six. Two-tank dives cost \$65; gear is extra. It also offers snorkeling tours to the upper islands for \$45 per person, including equipment.

■ On Foot



Residents and guests of North Captiva most often get around via golf cart. The trails make for good hiking along paths covering several miles that lead to preserved state park land.

On **Cayo Costa** (see page 235) six trails cover five miles at the island's wooded north end. One takes you to a pioneer cemetery. Quarantine Trail recalls the island's former life as a circa-1904 quarantine station. **Cabbage Key** provides a short, marked nature trail, perfect for walking off lunch in the Inn.

■ On Wheels



A short, sporadic bike path/route on **Stringfellow Rd.** wends through Bokeelia and St. James City. The road is lightly traveled and provides safe, easy, and extensive on-road biking. Plans are in the works for a continuous bike path connecting St. James City, Bokeelia, and Matlacha in a 40-mile loop.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Motels



Matlacha has lots of small fishing motels ensconced in its historic downtown section of knick-knack Cracker houses. St. James also has its fishing lodges, such as **Water's Edge** at Oleander & Sanibel Blvd., ☎ 941-283-0515. This place is on a canal and provides guests with boat slips and a ramp across the street. \$\$-\$\$\$ for rooms and efficiencies.

Rental Agencies

Most visitors to the island rent long-term. Throughout the island you can find rentals, from mobile homes to luxury condominiums. In season, monthly rates are \$800-\$2,300. For information call **Pine Island Realty**, ☎ 941-283-1028.

For the ultimate island getaway, escape to North Captiva. You'll find no cars, no pressure, and lots of peace. For home rentals, contact **North Captiva Island Club**, PO Box 1000, Pineland, FL 33945, ☎ 941-395-1001 or 800-576-7343. Weekly rates are \$700-\$3,500 in season. Bring groceries and supplies with you, or order them ahead when you reserve. Tennis courts, a fitness center, a pool, a game room, and children's activities are provided.

Camping

Fort Myers-Pine Island KOA in St. James City at 5120 Stringfellow Rd., ☎ 941-283-2415 or 800-992-7202, accommodates tent and RV campers. Sites for campers with full-hookups run \$34-\$38 for two adults per night; tent sites with no hookups, \$23-28. Weekly and monthly rates are available. The campground has three on-premises fishing lakes, a tennis court, shuffleboard, a pool and spa, saunas, horseshoes, laundry, activities, and its own tour/beach boat.

At **Cayo Costa State Park**, you can reserve one of 12 rustic cabins or set up a tent on the Gulf. Bring your own drinking water. In season, huts are reserved a year in advance. Tent sites are less in demand. To reserve a cabin call the office, ☎ 941-964-0375, Monday-Friday, 8-5. Boaters can anchor bayside in a safe harbor.

Where To Eat



Mangoes and Pine Island are synonymous. The island hosts a mango festival (see *Festivals & Events*, page 225) in the height of mango season. Exotic fruit farmers also grow guavas, longans, carambolas (star fruit), lychees, and other rare species. You can buy them fresh off the tree from stands along Stringfellow Rd.

With its fishy preoccupation, the island also has a reputation for fresh seafood. Matlacha's fish houses, where fresh oysters, shrimp, blue crab, grouper, snapper, pompano, and scallops are off-loaded for transshipment, are the place to buy. The island boasts a slew of small restaurants using local products, but with a Midwestern, comfort food approach.

A favorite of boaters and residents is situated on a canal in St. James City. The **Waterfront Restaurant** at 2131 Oleander St., ☎ 941-283-0592, occupies a historic one-room schoolhouse and has indoor and outdoor seating. The menu ranges from grouper sandwiches to shrimp dinners, priced from \$4 to \$15. It is open daily (except Wednesday) for lunch and dinner.



Lazy Flamingo, a spin-off from a well-loved Sanibel establishment (see page 260), recently opened at Four Winds Marina in Bokeelia, 16501-8 Stringfellow Rd., ☎ 941-283-5959. This one overlooks the harbor and its boats, and is decorated in the chain's typical old shrimp-boat wood and corrugated tin. Open daily for lunch and dinner. Items are priced at \$6-\$15.

One of the most delightful dining adventures the region has to offer involves island-hopping to somewhere with no cars and lots of character. **Cabbage Key Inn** on Cabbage Key, ☎ 941-283-2278, is most popular among tour and recreational boaters. In a historic home built by novelist Mary Roberts Rinehart in the 1930s, diners tape autographed dollar bills to the wall and feast on cheeseburgers, stone crabs, and grouper sand-

wiches. Open daily for lunch and dinner. Prices for lunch are \$5-\$10; for dinner, \$16-\$20.



Lesser known (but building a following) and harder to reach, **Barnacle Phil's** at 4401 Point House Trail in North Captiva's Safety Harbor, ☎ 941-472-6394, is known for its black beans 'n rice – the rage among reclusive stars who visit here, such as Henry Winkler. It also serves burgers, fish sandwiches, and other casual fare, priced at \$4-\$11. Open daily for lunch and dinner.

Fort Myers

As the metropolitan hub on this slab of coast line, Fort Myers is home of Southwest Florida International Airport and the new Florida Gulf Coast University. It was settled back in the days when the Caloosahatchee River was the major thoroughfare, plied by steamboats. It got its “fort” designation during Civil and Seminole wars, which, in their wake, brought its first wave of settlers: soldiers who fell in love with the pleasant climate. Inventor Thomas Alva Edison moved his winter quarters here in the late 1880s, which brought other rich and famous types, including automobile manufacturer Henry Ford, his next door neighbor, and Harvey Goodyear, tire tycoon.

In recent years, the focus of seasonal visitors has shifted to the Gulf front and Fort Myers struggles to keep its downtown alive.

Getting Here



Highway 41 becomes **Cleveland Ave.** as it crosses the Caloosahatchee River from the north into Fort Myers. Exits off I-75 lead to the main east-west arteries: **Palm Beach Blvd./Rte. 80** (Exit 25), **Martin Luther King Blvd./Rte. 82** (Exit 23), **Colonial Blvd./Rte. 884** (Exit 22), and **Daniels Parkway** (Exit 21). Traveling (roughly) north-south, historic and royal palm-lined **McGregor Blvd.** (Rte. 867) follows the river and its old homes. **Summerlin Ave.** (Rte. 869), **Cleveland Ave.**, and **Metro Parkway** run parallel to the east.

Lee County Transit provides public transportation in Fort Myers. Full fare is \$1, 50¢ for seniors, 15¢ transfers, free for pre-schoolers. For a schedule, call ☎ 941-275-8726.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

Information



For information on Fort Myers, contact the **Greater Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce**, PO Box 9289, Fort Myers, FL 33902, ☎ 941-332-3624. A welcome center is located downtown at 2310 Edwards Drive and in south Fort Myers at 6900 Daniels Pkwy, Ste.A11. They are open 9-4:30, Monday-Friday.

Sights & Attractions

■ Downtown

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Fort Myers' premier attraction remembers its most illustrious citizens. **The Thomas Edison Winter Home and Museum and Ford Estate** at 2350-2400 McGregor Blvd., ☎ 941-334-3614, conducts tours of the famous neighbors' river homes. See a lightbulb lit by its inventor – still glowing. Walk through Edison's botanical gardens whose rare plants he imported to use in experiments. The 90-minute tour includes Edison's winter lab and a visit to Ford's restored home. You may even run into Edison, Ford, or one of their contemporaries – portrayed by actors, of course. Afterwards, you are free to browse the museum, which displays many of Edison's 1,000 patented inventions. Admission for all attractions is \$12 for adults and \$5.50 for children ages six-12. Guided tours are conducted continuously Monday-Saturday, 9-4, and on Sunday, noon-4.

Nearby in a historic train depot, the **Fort Myers Historical Museum**, at 2300 Peck St. (at Jackson St.), ☎ 941-332-5955, displays prehistoric Calusa Amerindian models, graphic depictions, historical IQ games, rare glass and art collections, a circa-1930 private rail car, a baseball exhibit, a stuffed scrub cow, and changing exhibits. It's open Tuesday-Saturday, 9-4. Admission is \$6 for adults; \$5.50 for seniors, \$3 for children ages three-12.

Performing Arts

Downtown's most aggressive and high-brow attempt at reestablishing itself comes in the guise of **Florida Repertory Theatre**, ☎ 941-332-4488, or the box office number 332-4665. November through May, the professional company performs comedies, classics, and musicals in the setting of the historic **Arcade Theatre** at 2267 First St. Weekend tickets cost \$25, Weekday and night tickets are \$18. Students pay \$10.

Family Fun

The **Imaginarium: Hands-On Museum and Aquarium**, at 2000 Cranford Ave., ☎ 941-337-3332, transformed the city's old waterworks into an interactive facility where you can feel a cloud, learn about the world of finance, touch a horseshoe crab, and get blown away by a hurricane. Be sure to check out the gift shop; it has a great collection of nature-oriented toys and books. Museum hours are 10-5, Tuesday-Saturday. Admission is \$6 for anyone over 12 years old; \$3 for children ages three-12 when accompanied by an adult.

If you're looking for cool action, head to **Fort Myers Skatium** at 2250 Broadway, next to the City of Palms Park stadium, ☎ 941-461-3145, www.fortmyerssskatium.com. The Skatium is open for public inline and ice skating Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday-Sunday. Call for hours. Regular admission is \$6 for adults and \$4.50 for children under age 13. Skate rental is \$3.

Go-karts, miniature golf, a pizza parlor, and video games provide a city oasis for kids at **Kartworld**, 1915 Colonial Blvd., ☎ 941-936-3233. Go-kart rides and golf cost \$3.50 each. Kids earn rewards for report card A's.

Spectator Sports

The **Boston Red Sox** play their spring exhibition game season (March-April) at **City of Palms Park** on Edison Ave. at Jackson St., ☎ 941-334-4700, www.redsox.com. Tickets cost \$10 and \$11.

■ Outlying Areas

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Lakes Park at 7330 Gladiolus Drive in south Fort Myers, ☎ 941-432-2004 or 432-2017 (marina), a 277-acre complex, has trails, playgrounds, picnic areas, a restaurant, paddleboats, canoes, and a model train you can ride. You can rent bikes, volleyballs, and horseshoes. The train runs 10-2, Monday-Friday; 10-4, Saturday; noon-4, Sunday. Parking costs 75¢ an hour or \$3 a day. Train rides, ☎ 941-267-1905, cost \$2.50 for persons over five years old, 50¢ for children ages five and under. The park is open 8-6, daily.

AUTHOR TIP



A trolley shuttles people from the mainland to the beaches. Fare is 25¢ per passenger. ☎ 941-275-TRAM.

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

Small and homey, **Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium** at 3450 Ortiz Ave., ☎ 941-275-3435, offers a two-mile wildlife trail, a Seminole Amerindian village and a native bird aviary. Snakes, tarantulas, alligators, and bees are among the live animal exhibits. Staff demonstrate snake and alligator behaviors daily. The planetarium uses telescopes, laser lights, and astronomy lessons in its presentations. Museum and trails open 9-5, Monday through Saturday; 11-5 on Sunday. Adult admission to the museum and trails is \$4; children under age 12, \$2.50. Call for astronomy and laser show times; admission is \$2-\$5.

Manatee Park, at 10901 Rte. 80, opposite the Florida Power and Light plant, ☎ 941-432-2004, features a manatee-viewing deck on the Orange River with special polarized filters, manatee exhibits, a canoe launch, and interpretive programs in season. It serves as a rescue and release site for rehabilitated injured manatees being returned to their native environment. The park is open daily, 8-5, October-March; 8-8, April-September. For current recorded information, call the Manatee Viewing Update Line, ☎ 941-694-3537. Parking costs 75¢ an hour.

Performing Arts

Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre, at 1380 Colonial Blvd., ☎ 941-278-4422, serves a lavish buffet with professionally performed comedies and musicals. Matinees are presented twice weekly, Wednesday or Thursday and Saturday or Sunday, for \$30.50. Evening show prices are \$34, Tuesday-Friday; \$37 on Saturday. Gratuities are extra. Children ages 12 and under pay \$17 for any show.

Local Color

Ride the **Seminole Gulf Railway** from the corner of Colonial Blvd. and Metro Pkwy, (☎ 941-275-8487 or 800-SEM-GULF, www.semgulf.com) into the past and nature's hidden spots. Round-trip excursions last 75-105 minutes and cost \$7-\$11 for adults, \$4-\$6 for children ages three-12. Family discounts are available. Special dinner, theater, holiday, and themed excursions are scheduled throughout the year.

Spectator Sports

South of town, the **Lee County Sports Complex**, 14100 Six Mile Cypress Rd., hosts **Minnesota Twins** spring league action. From April through August, the **Miracle Professional Baseball** team, member of the Florida State League, competes. For information on Miracles' games, ☎ 941-768-4210. For Twins tickets, ☎ 800-33TWINS or 941-768-4270. Twins tickets cost \$8-11; Miracles tickets, \$3 and \$4.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Fishermen cast from the pier at **Centennial Park**, downtown on Edwards Drive near the Yacht Basin. It provides picnic and playground facilities. For freshwater fishing, try **Lakes Park** at 7330 Gladiolus Drive in south Fort Myers, ☎ 941-432-2017 (see page 242).

For deep-sea and backwater fishing charters or boat rentals, it's best to head out to the islands. One knowledgeable guide who operates out of south Fort Myers at Punta Rassa (just before the Sanibel Causeway) is **Capt. Dave Gibson**, ☎ 941-466-4680. He specializes in fly-casting (and offers instruction), backbay, and light tackle fishing, and charges \$185 for up to three for a half-day, \$350 for a full day.

Boat Ramps

Boaters can launch their vessels into the bay from **Punta Rassa**, just before the Sanibel Causeway on Summerlin Rd.

Boat Charters & Tours

In Fort Myers, you are more apt to find sightseeing tours – for instance, **J.C. Cruises**, which depart from the Fort Myers Yacht Basin, ☎ 941-334-7474 or 334-2743. Excursions aboard the 600-passenger, three-decker paddlewheeler *Capt. J.P.* last from three hours to a day and tour the Caloosahatchee River, the Gulf, and Lake Okeechobee. Some tours include dinner in season. Tickets cost \$14-\$74 plus tax (discount for children).

Paddling

For freshwater canoeing, you can rent at **Lakes Park**, 7330 Gladiolus Dr., ☎ 941-432-2000, for \$8 an hour. Paddleboats and rowboats rent for the same rate.

Ace Performer Windsurf, Kayak & Sailboat Shop, 16340 San Carlos Blvd., ☎ 941-489-3513, rents 12-foot mini-sailboats for up to four people at \$80 a day. Single and tandem kayaks rent for \$30 a day.

Snorkeling & Diving

Fort Myers and vicinity have their share of dive operators. Because of the normal murkiness of local waters and lack of offshore reefs, dive trip leaders often take you out of the region for open-water dives.

To inquire about lessons and equipment, call **Underwater Explorers Diving Center & School**, at 12600 McGregor Blvd., ☎ 941-481-4733.

ECO-ADVENTURES

Aboard an 80-passenger pontoon boat, **Everglades Jungle Cruises**, ☎ 941-334-7474 or 334-2743, goes sightseeing and manatee-spotting (November-April), costing \$12 plus tax for adults, half-price for kids under age 12. Call for schedules.

On the east side of town, manatee-sighting cruises up the Orange River are the popular thing. Contact **Fort Myers Manatee World**, at Coastal Marine Mart, Rte. 80 at I-75, Exit 25, ☎ 941-693-1434. Adults pay \$14; children three-11, half-price. Tours begin at 10, 12, 2, and 4, daily (fewer tours in summer), and last two hours.

Leave from Sanibel Harbour Resort (see *Where To Stay*, below), east of the Sanibel Causeway, for wildlife, eco-history, fishing, and shelling adventures aboard the **Sun Princess**, ☎ 941-466-4000, extension 2991. Tours are captained by a knowledgeable archaeologist and cost \$15-\$35.

Windsurfing

For your windsurfing needs, visit **Ace Performer Windsurf, Kayak & Sailboat Shop**, 16340 San Carlos Blvd., ☎ 941-489-3513. You can get lessons for \$60 an hour or rent a board for \$25 an hour, \$45 a half-day, and \$60 all day. Best local windsurfing waters are along the Sanibel Causeway.

Parasailing

For high adventure on the Caloosahatchee, contact **Ranalli Parasail** for reservations at ☎ 941-565-5700 or 542-5511. It gives rides daily, 9-6, for \$30-\$75.

■ On Foot



Three miles of trails loop through the woods at **Calusa Nature Center**, 3450 Ortiz Ave., ☎ 941-275-3435 (see *Sights & Attractions*, above). Admission to the trails is included in the price of museum admission.

Centennial Park (see *Fishing*, above) has a short fitness trail, plus picnic pavilions, and a fishing pier. It's the site of open-air concerts and special festivals.

Lakes Park (see page 242) at 7330 Gladiolus Drive in south Fort Myers, ☎ 941-432-2017, has extensive bike trails and a fitness trail, along with its other facilities. Parking costs 75¢ an hour or \$3 a day. The park is open 8-6, daily.

Boardwalks meander one mile through wetlands ecology at 2,200-acre **Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve**, Six Mile Cypress Pkwy. at Penzance Crossing, ☎ 941-432-2004. It's open daily, 8-5, October-March; 8-8, April-

September. Guided walks are offered throughout the year at 9:30, on Wednesday and Saturday from May through October and daily, November-April. From January through April an additional tour is given at 1:30. Guided walks are free; parking costs 75¢ per hour (maximum of \$3).

■ On Wheels



A stretch of bike path along **Daniels Blvd.** reaches from Summerlin Ave. to the airport. Another path follows **Linear Park**, a length of recreational area fronting a canal parallel to Metro Parkway, between Colonial Blvd. and Six Mile Cypress Parkway. The Summerlin path leads to the **Sanibel Causeway**, which you can cross to connect with island paths (see *Sanibel & Captiva Islands*, below).

Shopping



For air-conditioned shopping, head to **Edison Mall** on Cleveland Ave. at Colonial Blvd., ☎ 941-939-5464. Anchor stores include Burdines, Dillards, Sears, and JC Penney.

Other more specialized shopping centers take advantage of Southwest Florida's balmy climate and palmy landscaping. Near Edison on Cleveland Ave., **Page Field Commons** is newly opened and features discount and major retail outlet stores. At exclusive **Bell Tower Shops**, on S. Cleveland at Daniels Parkway, ☎ 941-489-1221, you'll find Saks Fifth Avenue, Jacobson's, and a variety of upscale boutiques. **Royal Palm Square**, corner of McGregor Blvd. and Colonial Blvd., ☎ 941-939-3900, is another enclave of specialty shops. Near Sanibel on Summerlin Blvd., **Sanibel Tanger Factory Stores**, ☎ 941-454-1974, offers a collection of factory outlet and other bargain shops.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



For the most part, hotels in Fort Myers are geared toward business and are chains.

Close to the beaches, **Radisson Inn Sanibel Gateway**, at 20091 Summerlin Rd., ☎ 941-466-3797 or 800-333-3333, exudes Spanish mission style with fountains, tiling, and archways. The 156 units are small suites with mini-refrigerators and a second fold-out bed. Guests may use its swimming pool, fitness facilities, restaurant, and bar. Bicycle rentals are available. \$\$-\$\$\$

More upscale and fitness-conscious, **Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa**, 17260 Harbour Pointe Dr., ☎ 941-466-4000 or 800-767-7777, www.sanibel-resort.com, boasts first-class spa and exercise programs and facilities. A canoe trail right on the property allows adventurers an intimate encounter with nature in the mangroves. The resort's eight lighted clay and Spin-Flex courts will thrill tennis buffs. Full service, the resort offers a couple of dining options (with and without spa cuisine), bars, swimming pool, excellent kids' program, boating tours, watersports rentals, a bayside beach, and fishing pier. Rooms, suites, and condos, more than 400 in all, come in various sizes and prices. Packages available. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Where To Eat

Downtown Fort Myers has an excellent selection of restaurants whose reputation is based on fine cuisine or waterfront location. Local seafood typically dominates the menu.

■ Downtown Restaurants



At **The Veranda**, a downtown landmark at 2122 Second St., ☎ 941-332-2065, seafood comes accented Southern-style. In a historic Victorian-decorated home and its garden courtyard, diners enjoy fresh corn muffins with pepper jelly and creative entrées, such as grilled grouper with blue crab hash and black caper vinaigrette or medallions of beef tenderloin in smoky sourmash whiskey sauce. Leave room for the peanut butter pie. Entrées are \$14-\$27. Lunchtime brings in the local business community for sandwiches, salads, and entrées in the \$6-\$9 range. It's open Monday-Saturday for dinner; Monday-Friday for lunch. Reservations recommended.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *Grouper is a large deepwater fish with mild meat that lends itself to culinary versatility. Fried grouper sandwiches are a Florida restaurant staple.*

Shooters Waterfront Café USA, at 2220 W. First St., behind the Holiday Inn Sunspree, ☎ 941-334-2727, is a fun, casual place on the river. Omelettes, pasta dishes, sandwiches, and other specialties are \$7-\$16. Evenings bring music to the outdoor bar, and a party boat that departs from its dock.

■ Outlying Areas

For a taste of local Cuban and Puerto Rican culture, pull up a chair at **Café Cabana** at 2158 Colonial Blvd., ☎ 941-278-5533. Everything is home-cooked (don't expect fast food) and served up in a jungly, thatched atmosphere. Open daily for lunch and dinner with dishes ranging in price from \$4 to \$10.



Bistro 41, at Bell Tower Shops, Daniels Pkwy and Cleveland Ave., ☎ 941-466-4141, makes a cutting edge statement with bright, minimalist atmosphere and eclectic dishes such as Mighty Meatloaf and Yucatán Pork. Pay attention to the day's specials. It's open Monday-Friday for lunch and daily for dinner. Lunch salads and sandwiches run around \$7; dinner entrées range from \$9 to \$20.

Nightlife



Downtown slowly blooms into a hip nightlife scene as the sun sets. Throughout the year, street parties enliven the cobblestones. **Peter's Upstairs** at Peter's La Cuisine Restaurant, 2224 Bay St., ☎ 941-332-2228, has been a longtime station for blues, booze, and jazz in an uptown atmosphere. Pub crawlers also make the rounds to **Liquid Café**, at First and Hendry streets, ☎ 941-461-0444; **Indigo Room**, 2219 Main St., ☎ 941-332-0014; and the **Downtown Tobacco and Cigar Bar**, 1502 Hendry St., ☎ 941-337-4662. **Shooter's Waterfront Café USA**, 2220 W. First St., behind the Holiday Inn Sunspree, ☎ 941-334-2727, is another party site. Live music keeps the scene lively outdoors under the tiki bar. Boats also depart for party cruises down the Caloosahatchee River.

Sanibel & Captiva Islands

Alluring names with an exotic ring, the sister islands of Sanibel and Captiva sound like adventure. Legend has it they were named by a Spanish pirate called Gasparilla. Whether or not the old legend holds water, the water holds plenty of opportunity for outdoor recreation, from voracious shelling to tarpon fishing and 'gator-spotting. As much nature preserves as resort islands, Sanibel and Captiva provide prime wildlife experiences.

Getting Here



From Southwest Florida International Airport or Exit 21 off I-75, head west on **Daniels Parkway** for about 10 miles. Turn left on **Summerlin Rd.** (Rte. 869) and continue for about 10 miles to cross the **Sanibel Causeway** (\$3 toll for most vehicles).

Turn right at the four-way stop sign at **Periwinkle Way** to get to Captiva Island. Turn right four miles later onto **Tarpon Bay Rd.**, then left onto **Sanibel-Captiva Rd.** Drive about eight miles and cross the Blind Pass bridge.

Sanibel Island has two main roads that more or less parallel each other. **Periwinkle Way** is the main business route. **Gulf Drive** roves along the resorts, beaches, and homes at water's edge. It is segmented into East, West, and Middle Gulf Drive. **Sanibel-Captiva Rd.**, known as San-Cap, connects the two islands at the Blind Pass bridge. On Captiva, the road becomes **Captiva Dr.**, a lovely tunnel of jungle growth.

Information



Contact the **Sanibel-Captiva Islands Chamber of Commerce** for more information: PO Box 166, Sanibel, FL 33957, ☎ 941-472-1080, www.sanibelcaptiva.org. You'll find its information center on the right side shortly after the causeway ends; it's open Monday-Saturday, 9-7; Sunday, 10-5.

Sights & Attractions

■ Sanibel Island

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum, at 3075 Sanibel-Captiva Rd., ☎ 941-395-2233, is the only one of its kind in the US. It underlines Sanibel's reputation as a top shell-collecting destination. Opened in 1996, it employs nature vignettes, games, and artistically arranged displays to demonstrate the role of shells in ecology, history, art, economics, medicine, religion, and other fields. One of the most popular displays is the

collection donated by the late actor Raymond Burr, who helped establish the museum. Kids can play in the Children's Science Lab. Hours are Tuesday-Sunday, 10-4. Admission is \$5 for ages 17 and older; \$3 for children ages eight-16.

Nearer to Sanibel's shopping and restaurant district, the **Sanibel Historic Village**, at 850 Dunlop Rd., ☎ 941-472-4648, has been a catch-all for the island's vintage homes and buildings, beginning with a pioneer Cracker house that serves as a historic museum. Additions include a 1920s post office, historic general store, tea house, and turn-of-the-century island home that houses an old French-cut Sanibel Lighthouse lens along with other lighthouse artifacts. The village is open 10-4, Wednesday-Saturday, mid-October to mid-August. From December through April it is also open on Sundays, 1-4. Admission is by donation (\$2 per adult suggested).

You'll find the circa-1884 **Sanibel Lighthouse** at the island's eastern tip, surrounded by a popular beach that curves from Gulf to bay side. Facilities include restrooms, a fishing T-dock, nature trail, and an interpretative station. Currents make it dangerous to swim at the island's southern tip.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Bowman's Beach, to the north on Bowman's Beach Rd., is the island's most secluded and arguably best shelling beach. It has picnic tables, restrooms, and shade trees. Parking is 75¢ per hour. Like all of Sanibel's beaches, it is maintained in its natural state, which means the sand is un-groomed (great for beachcombing) and facilities are basic.

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

Sanibel's prime nature attractions lie on Sanibel-Captiva Rd. The most prominent is **J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge**, ☎ 941-472-1100, <http://dingdarlingsociety.org>. It takes up about half of the island with its 5,000 acres of wetlands and other habitat. Denizens of the haunting Everglades-like refuge include American alligators, manatees, pelicans, roseate spoonbills, Louisiana herons, ospreys, river otters, bobcats, and about 290 species of birds, 50 types of reptiles and amphibians, and 32 different mammals. Wildlife Drive takes you around the area, and you can climb the observatory tower for an osprey's-eye view, but it's best to follow the short trails into the mangroves or see the refuge by canoe or kayak (see *On Water*, below). You can catch an interpretative tram from **Tarpon Bay Recreation**, at 900 Tarpon Bay Rd., ☎ 941-472-8900; \$8 for adults and \$4 for children ages 12 and under. Call for a schedule. Otherwise, admission to the refuge is \$5 per car or \$1 per cyclist or walk-in. It's open daily, except Friday, from sunrise to sunset. Admission to the refuge's visitor's center is free. The refuge is open daily, 9-5 (9-4, May-October), except Friday.

Nearby, you can take a longer nature hike and learn more about native critters and ecology at the **Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation Center** at 3333 Sanibel-Captiva Rd., ☎ 941-472-2329. Interactive teaching tools include a touch tank, a pliable life-sized manatee that children can climb, an alligator's jawbone, and a mangrove vignette. The center hosts guided walking and boat tours. From mid-October to mid-May the center is open every day except Sunday, 8:30-4. In the off-season, it closes at 3 and is usually closed on Saturday as well. Admission is \$2 for visitors 12 and older.

C.R.O.W. (Care and Rehabilitation of Wildlife), at 3833 Sanibel-Captiva Rd., ☎ 941-472-3644, replicates natural habitat to make comfortable its special patients – birds, bobcats, raccoons, rabbits, and other critters brought from near and far to mend and be reintroduced. Visit by appointment or take regularly scheduled tours in season (November-April) at 11, Monday-Friday; 1 on Sunday. Adults are asked to make a \$3 donation.

■ Captiva

Captiva shines more for its watersports opportunities than its tourist attractions. It's a lovely island worth driving around and stopping for lunch, if you do nothing else.

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

While exploring, peek in at **Chapel-By-the-Sea**, at 11580 Chapin St., a charming country-style church close to the beach. Next to it, early settlers rest in a small cemetery. Stop and look for free anytime during the day.

For a brief history of the tiny island, visit the **Captiva History House**, ☎ 941-472-5111, at the entrance to South Seas Plantation Resort. Housed in a cottage once occupied by farm hands – back when the resort was really

a plantation that grew Key limes and coconuts – the small museum explores bygones with photos, artifacts, and the memories of a living reincarnation of the plantation’s founder, C.W Chadwick. Admission is free.



Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



The **Sanibel Lighthouse Beach T-Dock**, **Sanibel Causeway**, and bridge between Sanibel and Captiva attract fishermen praying for snook, tarpon, sheepshead, and snapper to grab their hook.

For bait, tackle, and fishing licenses, stop at the **Bait Box**, 1041 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-1618, open 7-6 daily, 7-8 in summer.

Sanibel Light Tackle Outfitters, ☎ 941-472-2002, offers fishing outfitter and guide service. **Mangrove Fishing Adventures**, ☎ 941-395-9647, leads three-hour sessions from Captiva on the fine art of fly casting. Cost is \$50 per person. Guiding service is also available.

Several competent and knowledgeable fishing guides are headquartered at **Sanibel Marina**, 634 N. Yachtsman Dr., ☎ 941-472-2723. Rates for up to four people are \$225 for a half-day, \$450 for a full day. Guides are available for sightseeing charters to the upper islands as well.

Boat Rentals

For your boat rental needs on Sanibel, go to **The Boat House** at Sanibel Marina, 634 N. Yachtsman Dr., ☎ 941-472-2531. It rents powerboats from there for use in Intracoastal waters only. Rates for 19- and 21-foot vessels are \$90-\$100 for a half-day, \$165-\$175 for a full day; for a 20-foot deck boat, \$125 half-day and \$200 full day. Tax and fuel are additional.

To captain your own vessel, contact **Sweet Water Boat Rentals** at 'Tween Waters Inn Marina on Captiva Dr., ☎ 941-472-6336. It rents 19-foot center-console boats holding up to six passengers for \$160 a half-day, \$275 a full day. Tax and fuel are additional.

Jensen's Marina, also on Captiva at Twin Palm Resort, ☎ 941-472-5800, offers a variety of rental boats, from a 14-foot skiff for \$65 per half-day, \$100 per day to a 24-foot pontoon for \$135 per half-day, \$205 per full day. It also provides shuttle service to Upper Captiva Island for \$24 each, Cayo Costa or Cabbage Key for \$29, and Boca Grande. Guides are available for charters.

Adventures in Paradise in Port Sanibel, ☎ 941-472-8443 or 437-1660, rents 19- to 24-foot powerboats, including pontoon boats, for \$95-\$125 per half-day, \$165-\$200 per full day.

Sailing Charters & Instruction

For an adventure under sail, **New Moon**, at 'Tween Waters Inn Marina, ☎ 941-395-1782, www.newmoonsailing.com, conducts excursions and

teaches classes. Reserve in advance. Half-day cruises begin at \$35 per person. Sailing instruction for kids costs \$15 for three hours. Rentals are also available.

Offshore Sailing School at South Seas Plantation Marina, ☎ 941-454-1700 or 800-221-4326, was founded by Olympic and America's Cup sailor Steve Colgate. It is internationally known for its sailing course and club. Sailing instruction begins at \$55 per person, per hour. Private, big-boat, and three- to seven-day courses are available.

Paddling

The islands offer various canoeing and kayaking adventures. In 1998, *Canoe & Kayak Magazine* named Sanibel Island as one of the top 10 paddling destinations in North America, based primarily on trails through and from J.N. "Ding" Darling Wildlife Refuge.

Tarpon Bay Recreation, at 900 Tarpon Bay Rd., ☎ 941-472-8900, rents canoes and kayaks for exploring the backwaters of "Ding" Darling, where you can spot alligators, manatees, roseate spoonbills, ibises, and other birds. It also conducts guided ecology canoe tours of the refuge. Tarpon Bay Recreation is open every day, 8-5; 8-4 in summer. Canoe and kayak rentals cost \$20 for two hours, \$5 each additional hour. Basic guided tours cost \$20 for adults, \$10 for children age 12 and under for two hours and free paddle time.

For guided nature canoe tours along the Sanibel River by paddle, contact **Canoe Adventures**, ☎ 941-472-5218.

ECO-ADVENTURES

Operators on Sanibel and Captiva conduct group tours to local places of interest on the high seas. Some are nature-oriented, others head to beaches and upper islands to fish or picnic. These provide a less expensive option for getting out on the water. **Adventures in Paradise** in Port Sanibel, shortly before the bridge to Sanibel, ☎ 941-472-8443 or 437-1660, uses its pontoon boat for backwater fishing, sealife encounters, and sunset cruises. Costs are \$18-\$35 for adults, \$10-\$25 for children older than three. Trolley transportation to the cruise departure point across the causeway is provided from several island resorts.

The **Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at 3333 Sanibel-Captiva Rd., ☎ 941-472-2329, runs interpretative nature tours to the out-islands, cooperating with **Captiva Cruises**, ☎ 941-472-5300. They depart from South Seas Plantation Resort Marina. The 150-passenger *Lady Chadwick* also runs shelling and luncheon tours to the upper islands, including Useppa Island, a private club on an island where Zane Grey, Hedy LaMarr, and other stars of the 1920s came to fish for tarpon. With up to 40-foot shell mounds, it claims some of the highest elevation on the coast. Excursion fees are \$17.50-\$35 for adults, \$10-\$17.50 for children ages 12 and under.

You can rent canoes for \$10 a half-day, \$18 a full day, at **Castaways Marina**, 6460 Sanibel-Captiva Rd. on Sanibel at the bridge to Captiva, ☎ 941-472-1112.

For guided sea kayaking, contact **Adventure Sea Kayaking**, out of Tween Waters Marina on Captiva, ☎ 941-437-0956 or 472-5161 (ask for marina). Tours include instruction, whether the guest is at a basic level or wants to learn advanced technique such as rolling. The sea kayaks are of the highest quality, and half-day trips, departing daily at 8:30 and 1, cost \$40 each; evening tours, departing around 4, cost \$30. Tours explore local waters and islands, led at a 6 to 1 ratio.

Snorkeling & Scuba

Because of low visibility, island waters don't attract snorkelers and divers in great numbers, except for one specific sort: the sheller. By snorkeling off the sandbar that fronts island beaches, collectors find the great variety and numbers of shells for which Sanibel especially is famous.



Remember that to collect live shells on Sanibel Island, you must, by law, be more than a half-mile from the mean high tide mark.

Wrecks and other man-made reefs help restock waters with fish for the benefit of divers and fishermen alike. More than a dozen artificial reefs lie within a 15-mile radius of Sanibel and Captiva. One of the largest is the **Edison Reef**, created from the rubble of a former mainland bridge. It was built less than 15 nautical miles from the Sanibel Lighthouse in 42 feet of water. Closer to home, the **Belton Johnson Reef**, about five nautical miles off Bowman's Beach, was named for a well-known island fishing guide. A yellow and white marker shows the location of the reef, constructed of concrete culverts. Other popular sites include the **Redfish Pass Barge**, less than a nautical mile from Redfish Pass between Captiva and North Captiva, in 25 feet of water, and the **Doc Kline Reef**, a popular tarpon hole less than eight nautical miles from the Sanibel Lighthouse.

On Captiva, you can rent snorkeling equipment for \$5 an hour from **Jim's** at 11534 Andy Rosse Ln., ☎ 941-472-1296.

Shelling Tours & Charters

Sanibel Island ranks among the world's best shelling destinations. Because, unlike the other Gulf coast barrier islands, Sanibel takes an east-west heading, it better intercepts the diverse shells that arrive from the Caribbean Sea. For generations, serious and casual collectors have gathered on Sanibel shores to do the so-called "Sanibel Stoop" as they look for shells. Shelling is equally good on all beaches, best after a storm and in winter. **Bowman's Beach** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) is more secluded, so its shells are less picked-over.



The State of Florida enforces a law prohibiting the collection of live shells on Sanibel Island. This includes sand dollars and starfish. Captiva and the rest of Lee County limits collection of live shells to two per person, per day.

Many charter and tour boat operators conduct shelling excursions to the upper islands, particularly to **Johnson Shoals** off Cayo Costa (see page 235).

HELLING TOURS

Any boating excursion that puts you on the beach could be considered a “shelling tour.” Plenty of them can be found between Charlotte Harbor and Ten Thousand Islands. Some are actually called shelling tours, indicating that shelling is the main purpose, and that along with the boat trip comes someone with a certain amount of expertise in finding and identifying shells. The truly shell-bent, those often referred to as “the hard-cores,” don’t wish to gang-shell. They don’t need someone telling them the difference between a coquina and a conch. They don’t mind paying the extra money for someone to take them to where the shelling is best that day – away from the crowds and tour boats – and to guide them to exactly where the shells are. Pick your shell tour according to your level of shelling and budget.

Aboard Captiva Cruises' 18-passenger *Shell Seeker*, ☎ 941-472-5300, knowledgeable captains talk about the different shells passengers will find on either Cayo Costa or North Captiva. After the captain's instructional talk, shellers scatter on the beach to see what they can find within two hours' time, and return to show off their discoveries and ask questions. Three-hour tours cost \$35 for adults, \$17.50 for children.

Captain Mike Fuery, ☎ 941-472-1015, at Tween Waters Marina, has been doing shelling charters for decades and has learned the habits of shells so he knows exactly where to find them and when. This is a serious sheller's tour for about four people. He charges \$150 for three-hour tours.

Watersports

Jim's at 11534 Andy Rosse Ln on Captiva, ☎ 941-472-1296, gives parasail rides for \$40 to \$60, depending on height, and rents WaveRunners for \$55 a half-hour, \$75 an hour.

■ On Foot



One of the best nature trails on the islands takes you along four miles of natural habitat at **Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at 3333 Sanibel-Captiva Rd., ☎ 941-472-2329.

Along "Ding" Darling Refuge's (see *Eco-Attractions*, page 251) two-mile **Indigo Trail**, you can see ospreys, herons, hermit crabs, and alligators. At **Bailey Tract**, a portion of "Ding" Darling located off Tarpon Bay Rd., south of Periwinkle Way, almost two miles of trails take visitors past similar forms of wildlife, with no entrance fee.

■ On Wheels



Sanibel's 23-mile **bike path** takes you around the island's main streets and back woods. Joggers and inline skaters also use the paved trail. You can rent bikes and inline skates from **Finnimore's Cycle Shop**, at 2353 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-5577, open daily, 9-5. Bikes rent for \$5-\$10 (plus tax) a day; skates for \$10 for two hours, pads included.

Captiva has no bike path and the narrow roads are dangerously contorted. To get around the "downtown" area, rent a bike from **Jim's**, at 11534 Andy Rosse Ln., ☎ 941-472-1296, for \$5-\$10 an hour, \$22-\$50 a week.

Shopping



Not known as a great shopping mecca, Sanibel and Captiva are recognized for their art galleries – many of them dealing in wildlife renderings – and shell shops.

For shells, try **Showcase Shells** at Heart of the Islands Center, 1614 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-1971; or **Neptune's Treasures** in Treetops Center, 1101 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-3132, both on Sanibel, open daily.



Among the islands' many fine galleries are **Tower Gallery** at 751 Tarpon Bay Rd. on Sanibel, ☎ 941-472-4557, featuring the wildlife graphics of local artists; and **Jungle Drums** at 11532 Andy Rosse Lane on Captiva Island, ☎ 941-395-2266, which shows the wildlife work of local and national artists.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Sanibel



From simple beach cottages to big-name destination resorts, the islands have practically infinite possibilities. Prices in general are somewhat steep, but most resort units are equipped with kitchens, which saves on dining costs.

Sanibel's largest, most full-service resort, **Sundial Beach Resort**, 863 E. Gulf Dr., ☎ 941-472-4151 or 800-237-4184, specializes in families, with kitchen-equipped suite units and a top-notch kid's recreation program. Amenities include restaurants, 13 tennis courts, eco-center with touch tank, beach, watersports and bicycle rentals, five heated swimming pools, and 10 Jacuzzis. One- and two-bedroom condos also available. Ask about packages. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$



For something small and laid-back on Sanibel, **Seaside Inn**, at 541 E. Gulf Dr., ☎ 941-472-1200 or 800-831-7384, is a newly renovated old-island property on the beach with a swimming pool and modern studios, suites, and cottages. Each has some kitchen facilities. Continental breakfast is included in the rates. Guests are welcome to use facilities at Sundial Beach Resort, above. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

The Castaways, 6460 Sanibel-Captiva Rd., ☎ 941-472-1252, spreads from Gulf to bay at Sanibel's north end. With its full-service marina and beach-cottage style, it provides equal doses of beach relaxation and adventure opportunity. It also has a swimming pool. Cottages are old but well-kept, with one to three bedrooms. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Captiva



Jensen's Twin Palm Cottages & Marina at a curve in Captiva Dr., ☎ 941-472-5800, is one of Captiva's most affordable lodging options and is specifically designed for the fishing aficionado with bayside docks, fishing charters, boat rentals, and bait supplies. Its 14 charming one- and two-bedrooms cottages are vintage but cheerful. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Bay to Gulf on Captiva, **'Tween Waters Inn** on Captiva Dr., ☎ 941-472-5161, US 800-223-5865, or FL 800-282-7560, has rooms, efficiencies, apartments, and cottages, plus restaurants, a lively bar, a swimming pool, and a full-service marina. Packages available. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

About a fourth of Captiva Island is occupied by **South Seas Plantation**, ☎ 941-472-5111, 800-237-3102 (US) or 800-282-3402 (FL), www.south-seas.com, a spacious beach resort perfect for families. Pick whatever type of lodging best suits your requirements: hotel room, suite, villa, cottage, or home. Recreational opportunities are virtually endless, including an excellent kids' program, two marinas with rentals and guides, fishing dock, nine-hole golf course, fitness center, 18 swimming pools, 21 tennis courts, watersports rentals and lessons, excursion cruises, and 2½ miles of well-maintained beach. There are also several restaurants and lounges, all within security gates. A free resort trolley transports you around the 330-acre property. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

Furnished homes, most of them on a beach or golf course, are available to rent throughout Sanibel (one-month minimum) and Captiva (one-week minimum). Range of rates: Sanibel, \$2,000 to \$5,000/month; Captiva, \$1,500 to \$8,000/week. Agencies offer condominiums at lower prices and with only a one-week minimum required on Sanibel. Contact **Sanibel Realty** at 1630 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-6565 or 800-572-6423.

Where To Eat



Seafood is the main course at Sanibel restaurants. Many feature a new Florida style that incorporates elements from New Orleans, the Caribbean, the Deep South, and the Pacific Rim. Most are casual.

Sanibel Island

McT's Shrimp House & Tavern, at 1523 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-3161, is a perennial favorite that serves shrimp in every guise imaginable, including steamed in the shell all-you-can-eat. The atmosphere is casual, with old island charm. It's open daily for dinner. Entrées are \$13-\$20.

Lazy Flamingo, 6520 Pine Ave., ☎ 941-472-5353, is a neighborhood hang-out. The menu concentrates on seafood and finger foods. The grilled grouper sandwich is a sure bet; ask for a Caesar salad instead of fries, if you're so inclined. There are two restaurants bearing the name. The original one at Blind Pass, where Sanibel ends, is favored by locals. The newer one at 1036 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-6939, occupies a building shaped like a ship's bow. Both are can't-miss-'em pink. They open daily for lunch and dinner. Items are priced at \$6-\$16.



Fusion cuisine with a Southwestern-tropical flair describes the exciting tastes at Sanibel's **Twilight Café**, 751 Tarpon Bay Rd., ☎ 941-472-8818. Grilled meats, seafood, and vegetables form the foundation for sublime dishes such as grilled veal chop with roasted corn, crawfish mashed potatoes and cola veal stock reduction. Tiny and tucked-away, the café boasts an artistic, bistro atmosphere as fresh as the food. The menu changes regularly. It's open Monday-Friday in season for lunch, and Monday-Saturday year-round for dinner. Lunches run \$6-\$10; à la carte dinner entrées, \$19-\$30. Reservations are recommended for dinner.

Captiva Island

Boaters like **The Green Flash**, 15183 Captiva Dr., ☎ 941-472-3337, for its docks. All its guests love the view overlooking the bay from on high. Open daily for lunch and dinner, serving sandwiches and seafood (\$6-\$10 for lunch dishes, \$14-\$19 for dinner entrées). Try the Green Flash Sandwich or Grouper "Café de Paris."

The **Mucky Duck**, 11546 Andy Rosse Ln., ☎ 941-472-3434, www.mucky-duck.com, is a must-do. Go early, put your name in, and spend the hour-or-so wait on the beach right outside the door. Sunsets here are spectacular. The menu covers seafood in sandwiches and fine dishes, plus a smattering of English specialties. The restaurant is open daily except Sunday for lunch and dinner. Lunches are \$5-10; dinners \$12-\$18.

Chadwick's at South Seas Plantation Resort, ☎ 941-472-5111, is the place to go for all-you-can-eat buffets. Besides daily lunch (\$9.50) and Sunday brunch (\$17.95) spreads, it hosts theme nights, such as Caribbean and seafood (\$21-\$23.50). Prices are reduced for kids ages four-10; under age four they eat free. On the regular menu, seafood with an island flair dominates. Prices are \$20-\$24 for entrées. Open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Reservations are recommended for dinner and Sunday brunch.

Nightlife

The islands' best nightlife offerings are found in its cozy little theaters – **Pirate Playhouse**, 2200 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-0006; and **Old Schoolhouse Theater**, 1905 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-6862.

For music and dancing, try Sanibel's **Jacaranda**, 1223 Periwinkle Way, ☎ 941-472-1771 or Captiva's **Crow's Nest Lounge** at 'Tween Waters Inn (see *Where To Stay*, above), ☎ 941-472-5161.

AUTHOR TIP



*Don't miss the **Nascrab Races** at 'Tween Waters' Crow's Nest Lounge every Monday night at 6 and 9 (go early for a ringside seat). It's the island's best entertainment.*

Fort Myers Beach

This resort town on Estero Island has a reputation for fun. It attracts a value-conscious clientele, including families and college students on spring break. Shrimping is a major industry, which brings seafood-lovers to its reasonably priced restaurants. Watersports enthusiasts also find plenty of reasons to visit.

Getting Here



From Fort Myers' Southwest Florida International Airport or Exit 21 on I-75, follow **Daniels Parkway** west 10 miles to **Summerlin Rd.** (Rte. 869). Turn left and follow Summerlin until you reach **San Carlos Blvd.** (about seven miles) and turn left. Continue to the island's **Matanzas Pass High Bridge**. After the bridge, you'll reach "**Times Square**," a busy intersection at the core of beach activity. A right turn takes you to the quieter north end. Turning left leads you through the island's commercial district and southward to Lover's Key and Bonita Beach before reconnecting to the mainland.

AUTHOR TIP



Fort Myers Beach has a trolley that shuttles people to and from the mainland. Fare is 25¢ per passenger, and there are dozens of stops along Estero Blvd. (look for the signs). ☎ 941-275-TRAM.

Information



For specific information on Fort Myers Beach, contact or stop in at **The Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce** at 17200 San Carlos Blvd., Fort Myers Beach, FL 33931, ☎ 800-782-9283 or 941-454-7500, www.coconet.com/fmbeach. Open weekdays, 8:30-6; Saturday, 10-6; Sunday, 11-5.

Sights & Attractions

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



Fort Myers Beach's biggest draw is its beaches. The main one, **Lynn Hall Memorial Park** on Estero Blvd. in the commercial district, ☎ 941-338-3300, features a free fishing pier, a small playground, picnic tables, grills, restrooms, and a bathhouse. Hours are 7-10. Parking is limited and metered. Restaurants, bars, and shops line the beach. Several public beach access points lie to the south along Estero Blvd. Park (only in marked areas). Cars are frequently towed for illegal parking.

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

Peek into aquariums, a touch tank, and other exhibits focused on local sea life at **Ostego Bay Marine Foundation**, 718 Fisherman's Wharf (turn north of the high bridge), ☎ 941-765-8101. Waterfront tours are available. It's open Wednesday-Friday, 10-4; Saturday, 10-1. Admission is free.

Matanzas Pass Preserve at the end of Bay Rd., ☎ 941-463-0435 or 432-0868, provides a quiet respite from the bustle of Fort Myers Beach with a short loop trail, boardwalks through mangroves to the bay, and a historic cottage filled with artifacts and exhibits. Admission is free; donations are accepted.



For wildlife and fewer crowds, head south and cross over the bridge to Lovers Key. **Lovers Key State Recreation Area**, ☎ 941-463-4588 is a lovely getaway with a totally natural beach lying on the other side of a wildlife-rich estuary. Admission to the 712-acre park is \$4 per vehicle with up to eight passengers, \$2 for single passengers, and \$1 for extra passengers, bicyclists, and pedestrians. It includes a round-trip mini-tram ride from the parking lot to the southernmost beach. Facilities include free boat ramp, outdoor showers, restrooms, picnic tables, grills, canoe and kayak rentals, and food concessions in season. Open 8-sunset, daily.

Bowditch Point Regional Park, at the north end of Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-339-3300, is quieter than Lynn Hall, but has no parking. You must catch a trolley from the Park and Ride lot, just north of the high bridge. Facilities include showers, restrooms, changing rooms, picnic tables, grills, a small

playground, and hiking paths. The trolley charges 25¢ each and runs from 8:30 to sunset.



Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Fish for free from the pier at **Lynn Hall Memorial Park** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) at the center of activity in Fort Myers Beach. You'll find bait and snack shops. Or cast off the bridge that connects the island's south end to Lover's Key.

Fort Myers Beach's fishing party boats provide a less expensive option than private charters and rentals. At **Getaway Deep Sea Fishing**, Getaway Marina at 18400 San Carlos Blvd., ☎ 941-466-3600, a 90-foot boat takes you to deep water for grouper, mackerel, snapper, and other offshore catches. All-day rates are \$45 for adults, \$30 for kids age 12 and under, \$25 for non-fishers; reservations requested. For half-day trips from 9-2, rates are \$30, \$25, and \$20; no reservations necessary.

Boat Ramps

Boaters can use the free boat ramps at **Lovers Key State Recreation Area** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above).

Boat Rentals

Rent a boat at **Mid-Island Marina**, 4765 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-765-4371. Models range from 15-foot Carolina Skiffs (\$35 half-day, \$60 full day) to 23-foot Aquasports (\$225, \$350), and 27-foot Silverton Cruisers (\$225, \$350). Refueling, collision insurance, and tax are extra. Pontoons, C-Kats, kayaks, and canoes also available. Open 8-5, daily.

Boat Charters & Tours

Island Water Tours depart aboard the *Pelican Queen* from Best Western Pink Shell Resort, (see *Where To Stay*, below) at 275 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-765-4354, and offer pontoon cruises for bay fishing, Sanibel Island shelling, and nature observing. Cost is \$18.50-\$24.50 for adults.



Tours offered by **Calusa Coast Outfitters** at Fish Tale Marina, 7225 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-418-5941 or 332-0709, have a little bit more substance than most local sightseeing excursions. Led by a local Calusa Indian expert, they take you on an archaeology tour of Mound Key (see page 270) or on a dolphin tour with a difference – special underwater microphones actually allow participants to hear the dolphins communicating with one another. Three-hour trips cost \$25 for adults, \$14 for children ages 12 and under.

For romance on the high seas, take a sunset cruise on the red-sailed, multi-masted *Island Rover* with **Jammin Cruises**, ☎ 941-765-7447, setting sail from Snug Harbor Restaurant (see *Where To Eat*, below). Offshore champagne tours, 2½ hours long, cost \$30; four-hour coastal sails cost \$45 per passenger, and include steamed shrimp tray.

The ultimate water excursion takes you out to sea for dining, dancing, and gambling. **Europa SeaKruz**, ☎ 941-463-5000 or 800-688-PLAY, also departs from Snug Harbor restaurant and takes daytime brunch buffet and evening sit-down dinner cruises daily. Cost is \$22.50-\$35. No children under age 18.

Paddling

You can rent canoes and kayaks at **Wild Vision**, a concession at Lovers Key State Recreation Area (see page 262) ☎ 941-765-1880, for use in local estuaries and bay waters, where dolphin and other wildlife abound. Canoe and kayak rentals are \$10 for the first hour and \$5 for each additional, or \$20 a half-day and \$30 all day. Sea kayaks with rudders cost \$25 for a half-day and \$35 for a full day. A daily naturalist-led tour takes participants into the mangroves for \$25 adult price, \$15 for children ages 12 and under.

Windsurfing

Beach Sailing, 8701 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-765-SAIL, gives sail boarding lessons for \$26 and rents boards for \$20 an hour.

Other Watersports

You can book a Jet Ski tour to see dolphins, or head skyward by parasail with **Holiday Water Sports**, located at Best Western Pink Shell Resort, 250 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-765-4FUN, and Best Western Beach Resort, 684 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-6778. Sun Cat, kayak, aquacycle, and Wave-Runner rentals available, with lessons. Dolphin WaveRunner tours last 1½ hours and cost \$70 for two people.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Hotels, Motels & Resorts



Hotels, resorts, and condominiums line the shore for the entire nine-mile length of Fort Myers Beach.

The only resort that is a true destination in itself, **Best Western Pink Shell**, 275 Estero Blvd., at the island's quieter north end, ☎ 941-463-6181 or 800-237-5786, spreads Gulf to bay with an assortment of accommodation options, from classic stilted cottages to modern upscale condos, all with kitchen facilities. A restaurant, boat tours, a kids' activity program, watersports rentals, swimming pools, and tennis courts complete the amenities. Accommodations range from efficiencies to two-bedroom beach villas. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

To be close to the action on Fort Myers Beach, try **Ramada Inn Beachfront**, at 1160 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-6158 or 800-544-4592. It's crowded in among shops, restaurants, and hotels near the fishing pier, but has a nice patch of beachfront, a small pool, a beach bar, and beach concessions. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

At the island's south end, activity quiets down to an easy pace of beaching and playing in the water. **The Outrigger Beach Resort**, at 6200 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-3131 or 800-749-3131, is casual and unstructured, with an on-site café, a pool, a sundeck, a tiki bar, and watersports concessions. Rooms and efficiencies available. Ask about special packages. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Rental Agencies

For vacation condo and home rentals that range from \$450 to \$1,500 a week, contact **Hussey Company Real Estate**, 2450 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-3178.

Where To Eat



Head to Fort Myers Beach for fresh seafood at good prices with great water views.

For a taste of authentic Greek food in an open-air milieu near the beach, try **Plaka I**, at 1001 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-4707. This longtime beach fixture serves breakfast (\$4), lunch (around \$5.50), and dinner (\$8.50) daily in a casual beachside atmosphere.



An old favorite decorated in stylish Florida décor, **Snug Harbor Waterfront Restaurant & Café**, at 645 San Carlos Blvd., ☎ 941-463-4343, operates a fish market and sells only the freshest seafood in sandwiches, salads, pasta dishes, and other specialties. Its two indoor dining rooms and one outdoor dining area are situated on a dock hanging over the Intracoastal Waterway, which provides lots of waterfront scenery and action. It's open daily for lunch and dinner. Prices are \$3-\$19 for sandwiches, salads, pasta, and entrées.

Anthony's on the Gulf, at 3040 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-2600, specializes in Italian dishes served in a modern, breezy, indoor-outdoor setting. Sandwiches, salads, and pasta dishes comprise the lunch menu, priced at \$5-\$9. Veal, seafood, and chicken entrées are \$8-\$14 on the dinner menu. It serves lunch and dinner daily.

Nightlife



Fort Myers Beach parties day and night. Hot spots include **The Bridge**, 708 Fisherman's Wharf, ☎ 941-765-0050; **Lani Kai Island Resort**, 1400 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-3111; and **The Reef**, 2601 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-4181.



DAYLIFE: *You don't have to wait until the sun goes down to party on Fort Myers Beach. On weekends and weeklong in season, people whoop it up hours before the sun sets. Many find themselves a bar headquarters and set up their beach party outside. Popular beach party spots include the **Junkanoo** bar at Anthony's on the Gulf restaurant, 3040 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-2600, and **Lani Kai Island Resort**, at 1400 Estero Blvd., ☎ 941-463-3111. Beach bars often prohibit coolers on their waterfront. Some serve food (usually inexpensive) as well as drink.*



The **Bridge Restaurant**, 708 Fisherman's Wharf, puts on a Sunday reggae dock party that draws boaters and motorists for an afternoon of island-style music and casual fun. It's the best in island partying, and it's free.

San Carlos Park & Estero

Florida Gulf Coast University recently debuted in the vicinity of South Fort Myers/San Carlos Park, a blossoming area. At its southern fringe lies Estero, an old, quiet community offering opportunities for outdoor activity.

Getting Here

The communities of San Carlos Park and Estero straddle **Highway 41** south of Fort Myers proper.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Koreshan State Historic Site, US 41 at Corkscrew Rd., ☎ 941-992-0311, puts Estero on the map. Contained within a park, the site has restored a commune established in 1893 by a religious cult that settled on the banks of the Estero River. Under the tutorship of Dr. Cyrus Teed (who adopted the Biblical name Koresh), members of Koreshan Unity believed the earth lined the inside of a hollow globe that looked down into the solar system. Teed and his followers envisioned an academic and natural "New Jerusalem." They planted

exotic crops and vegetation and built a theater, one of several reconstructed buildings on the site. Besides exploring bygonas, you can picnic, camp, walk the short nature trail, boat, fish, and canoe in the park. Day-use hours are 8-sunset. Admission is \$3.25 per vehicle of eight passengers or less, \$1 for extra passengers, pedestrians, and cyclists.

Spectator Sports

The Florida Everblades, Southwest Florida's new professional ice hockey team, plays its October-April season at the new TECO arena, 11000 Everblades Pkwy. in Estero, off I-75 (Exit 19) at Corkscrew Rd., ☎ 941-948-7825, www.floridaeverblades.com. Tickets cost \$7-\$16. The public can skate at the rink daily (times vary) for \$4 a two-hour session and \$6 for three hours. Skate rental is \$3. Family skating is \$3.50 and free rental for children ages nine and under.

Adventures

■ On Water

Paddling



Koreshan State Historic Site (see above), rents aluminum canoes for the four-mile trip into the park's wildlife asylum for \$3 plus tax per hour, \$15 plus tax per day. There is also a boat ramp in the park.

Across the street from the park, you can rent vessels at **Estero River Tackle and Canoe Outfitters**, 20991 S. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-992-4050. Half-day rentals cost \$22.50-\$27.50 for canoes, \$17.50-\$35 per person for kayaks. There is a boat ramp on the river and it also sells bait and tackle. Open every day, 7-6.

Where To Stay

Camping



Koreshan State Historic Site (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), US 41 at Corkscrew Rd., ☎ 941-992-0311, has 60 tent and RV sites with or without electricity that rent for \$16 per night, plus tax and electricity, for up to eight people, \$10.90 in off-season.

Where To Eat



For restaurants near the San Carlos Park/Estero area, head north to Fort Myers or south to Bonita Springs. Check the *Where To Eat* sections under those towns for suggested dining options.

Bonita Springs & Bonita Beach

Once a fertile tomato-growing and fishing community, Bonita Springs is trading in farm land for grand residential communities these days. Tourism does not figure as importantly here as it does in neighboring towns, which keeps it a bit more low-key and natural. Fishing and boating possibilities abound, mainly from Big and Little Hickory islands, home of Bonita Beach. Other small, uninhabited islands attract wildlife and those seeking to spy upon them.

Getting Here



Bonita Springs bills itself as “Gateway to the Gulf” because its exit off I-75 (#18) comes closer to the beach than the other exits. Just follow **Bonita Beach Rd.** to its end, for about eight miles, to find the sands. Close to toney Naples (see the chapter on *Naples & The Everglades*), Bonita Springs has in recent years seen neighborly influence bleed north, especially in developments along Highway 41.

Highway 41, or **Tamiami Trail**, runs along the western edge of the town of Bonita Springs. **Old 41 Rd.** penetrates the town center.

To reach **Bonita Beach** from Bonita Springs, turn west off of Highway 41 onto Bonita Beach Rd. and follow it to the bend at the public beach, where it becomes **Hickory Blvd.** This is Bonita Beach’s main thoroughfare. Resort services lie at the north and south end of the approximately three-mile-long island.



*You can also get to Bonita Beach by a more scenic route from Fort Myers Beach (however, in winter, traffic moves very slowly during rush hours): Follow Fort Myers Beach's **Estero Blvd.** south to Lover's Key along Rte. 865. Here the road becomes lightly traveled and bordered only by greenery and park facilities. Watch the sky for ospreys, frigates, and other birds. Continue about three miles over another bridge to Bonita Beach's Hickory Blvd.*

Information



You can get more information on Bonita Springs and Bonita Beach through **Bonita Springs Area Chamber of Commerce**, 25071 Chamber of Commerce Dr, Bonita Springs, FL 34135, ☎ 941-992-2943 or 800-226-2943, www.bonitaspringschamber.com. Its welcome center is open weekdays, 8:30-5.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



Offshore **Mound Key** is an unexploited island of special interest to bird watchers and archaeologists, who believe it was once an important ancient Native American headquarters. Digs now probe it for secrets of the past, many preserved within 30-foot-high shell mounds. A segment of the island is designated **Mound Key State Archaeological Site**, an arm of Koreshan State Historic Site (see page 267). Charter tours in the area take you there to do your own exploring, but artifact collecting is strongly discouraged.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

Bonita Beach has top-notch recreational beaches. At **Bonita Public Beach**, on Hickory Blvd. at Bonita Beach Rd., ☎ 941-338-3300, you'll find sheltered picnic tables, a new bathhouse and boardwalks, handicap access, lifeguards, a food stand, a Hobie Cat sailboat concession, and other watersports rentals and restaurants nearby. Parking costs 75¢ per hour; the lot fills early at busy times. North of the main beach, along Hickory Blvd., 10 access points offer limited facilities and free parking.



The turnoff to **Barefoot Beach Preserve**, ☎ 941-353-0404, lies near main beach parking on Bonita Beach Rd. Its 342 acres contain a coastal hammock, 8,200 feet of beach, and low dunes. Facilities include changing rooms, showers, restrooms, nature interpretation stations, and snack bar. Hours are 8-sunset. Parking is \$3 a day.

Spectator Sports

Attend matinees or night races for \$2 each (children under age 18 admitted free with parent or guardian) at **Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track**, 10601 Bonita Beach Rd. SE, ☎ 941-992-2411 or 540-2254. Track-side dining is available. Call for current race times.

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Estero Bay Boat Tours at Weeks Fish Camp on Coconut Rd., north of Bonita Springs, ☎ 941-992-2200, can take you to where the fish are biting. Half-day backbay fishing charters cost \$150 for up to four people.

Big Hickory Fishing Nook, 26107 Hickory Blvd., ☎ 941-992-3945, can take care of all your fishing needs: bait, tackle, fuel, equipment repair, fishing charters, and rental boats. It's open daily. You can rent a rod for \$6 a half-day, \$10 a full day. Fishing charters with *Puddlejumper II*, ☎ 941-992-0167, range from \$300 for six people and four hours to \$600 for a full day. Take a sightseeing trip for \$40 per hour, two-hour minimum.

Boat Ramps

You can launch your boat into the **Imperial River**, with access to the Gulf, at a ramp off Highway 41, just north of Bonita Beach Rd.

Boat Rentals

Bonita Beach Resort Motel at 26395 Hickory Blvd., ☎ 941-992-2137, rents 22-foot pontoon boats that hold up to 12 people for \$65 half-days, \$110 full days (fuel and tax not included). It sells live bait and tackle and rents rods for \$4-\$6.

To rent pontoons, skiffs, fishing boats, canoes, and kayaks, look for **G.R. Boating**, near the public beach at 4892 Bonita Beach Rd., ☎ 941-947-4889. Half-day rates for canoes and kayaks are \$25-\$35, \$60 for skiffs, \$75

for center console boats and \$75-\$100 for pontoons and deck boats. Open daily, 8:30-5.

Boat Charters & Tours

Estero Bay Boat Tours at Weeks Fish Camp on Coconut Rd., north of Bonita Springs, ☎ 941-992-2200, offers sightseeing tours of Mound Key's Amerindian history and Big Hickory Island's wildlife, conducted by a local native and his staff, who know these islands and waters like family. Two-hour sightseeing/shelling cruises cost \$14 for adults, \$10 for children under age 12.

For fishing, sightseeing, cocktail, and picnic cruises, contact **Sheila-Marie & Manta Ray** charter boats at Bonita Bay Marina, Highway 41 and Bonita Bay Blvd., ☎ 941-566-6510.

■ On Wheels



A **bike path** runs the length of Bonita Beach, nearly three miles long, and connects to another at its south end, which leads to Vanderbilt Beach (see page 291).

Bonita Beach Bike, at 4892 Bonita Beach Rd., Bonita Harbor Plaza, ☎ 941-947-6377, rents inline skates and bikes, and does bike repair. Rates run \$8 a day for kids' bikes to \$12 for six-speed mountain bikes. Inline skate rentals are \$8 for two hours, \$16 for 24 hours, including knee, wrist, and elbow pads. Other specialty rentals also available. It's open Monday-Saturday, 9-5.

■ On Horseback



See Old Florida through the eyes and words of an old cowhand at **Broken Gate Ranch** in northeast Bonita Springs, ☎ 941-992-2555. Mount a horse and become a part of the working ranch operations by helping to check fences and count cattle, or slip into wildlife habitat where wild boars, deer, alligators, wild turkeys, and other rare birds live and breed. Rides are geared for beginners as well as horseback veterans, and begin at \$15 an hour with a two-hour minimum. Call for reservations and directions.

Shopping



The Highway 41 corridor has become a prime shopping venue in Bonita Springs. The new Mediterranean-style **Promenade** in Bonita Bay presents an array of fashionable jewelers, clothiers, and restaurants arranged around courtyards, streams, and waterfalls.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Beach buffs will enjoy the unfancy surroundings of **Beach House Motel**, 26106 Hickory Blvd., ☎ 941-992-2644. About a dozen two-story block cottages line up two-deep along wide sands. They can be rented as one- or two-bedroom apartments, efficiencies, or rooms. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Representative of the Naples influence, the new **Trianon** hotel at Bonita Bay, 3401 Bay Commons Dr., ☎ 941-800-859-3939 or 948-4400, www.trianon.com, is a spin-off of a boutique hotel in Old Naples. Created in the likeness of European luxury inns, it is richly decorated in marble and fine fabrics. Guests have access to a pool bordering a lake, a lounge with fireplace, and complimentary continental breakfast. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Where To Eat



Seafarers and landlubbers alike will feel right at home in **Bogert's Chop House**, 24080 N. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-947-0268, which occupies a building that looks like a double-master run aground on a busy highway. In a rich, warm setting, fine aged steaks are the specialty, with seafood pasta dishes for variety. Open for dinner daily; entrées range from \$13 to \$26. Specialties include chateaubriand for two and stuffed filet with lobster and brandy-peppercorn cream sauce. Filet mignon is offered in three different sizes.

Especially popular for its Sunday brunch, **The Rooftop Restaurant**, at 25999 Hickory Blvd. in Bonita Beach, ☎ 941-992-0033, overlooks Gulf and bay waters near the island's north bridge. Its seafood strudel and Derby pie (chocolate chip spiked with brandy) are signatures. It's open daily during season (closed on Mondays and Tuesdays from May to November) for dinner (\$12-22) and Sunday for brunch (\$17). Breakfast and lunch are served downstairs at **The Flying Fish Café**, ☎ 941-992-2600. Prices are \$6-\$10. You can dine indoors or outdoors dockside.



Simplicity and subtlety describe Hawaiian-inspired **Roy's Bonita Springs**, found at The Promenade at Bonita Bay, 26831 South Bay Dr., ☎ 941-498-7697. Friendly in an aloha kind of way, Roy's excels at Pacific Rim cuisine infused with European classic and nouvelle styles. The magic of Roy's lies in exquisite, coy sauces and exotic ingredients: poke vinaigrette on sesame seared opakapaka (pink snapper); charred tomato horseradish cream sauce on filet mignon; soy chili sauce with rock shrimp potstickers; wild black currant natural reduction with tri-peppercorn-dusted Atlantic salmon; and macadamia curry sauce with crispy Thai stuffed chicken.

The essence of casual Florida waterfront dining, **Doc's Beach House**, 27908 Hickory Blvd., ☎ 941-992-6444, hugs the wide sands at Bonita Public Beach. Beachers grab a burger at a seat outside or in the lower level, with its own bar and sports TV. Upstairs is air-conditioned with an overview of beach goings-on through walls of windows. Open daily for breakfast ((\$3-\$5) and lunch and dinner (sandwiches, salads, and entrées, \$3-\$11).

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

Naples & The Everglades

Overview

Collier County puts the “wild” in Florida’s “West.” It set the stage for gun-slinging outlaws, plucky mosquito-slapping pioneers, and prosperous adventure-seekers. The former took cover in the Everglades’ nearly impenetrable, wet wilderness. Pioneers and visitors settled in around Naples, Marco Island, and the largest of the Ten Thousand Islands. Here, they tried to eke a living from bountiful sealife, year-round crops, and often a shady deal here or there. They invented swamp buggies – plodding, big-wheeled vehicles – so they could travel the Everglades’ outback. They poled flatboats across the River of Grass and between the mangrove-clotted Ten Thousand Islands. They created a new way of life in these parts, a new life that thrived on adventure.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Naples
- Marco Island
- Goodland
- Isles of Capri
- Everglades City
- Chokoloskee Island

Naples eventually rose above the crudeness of pioneer settlement to make a stance in the ultra-civilized world. As an outpost for people of means looking to get away – completely away – from it all, it developed along exclusive lines etched in wetland muck. Contrast defined Naples and its surroundings: pearlescent beaches and alligator-infested swamps, dapper neighborhoods and thatched Amerindian villages, Mercedes and swamp buggies.

The contrasts remain in this land at the end of Florida’s West Coast. The wild juxtaposes with the refined at Naples’ doorstep. Adventure still lures, especially in the past decade as Naples resorts, once considered snooty, urge their privileged guests into the rich muck of the Everglades, where life thrives at its rawest and most basic.

Transportation

■ Airlines



The closest major airport is **Southwest Florida International Airport** (RSW) in Fort Myers, ☎ 941-768-1000, www.swfia.com. Taxi services will transport you to Naples in under an hour and to Marco Island in just over an hour.

AIRLINES SERVING SOUTHWEST FLORIDA (RSW) INT’L AIRPORT	
Air Canada	☎ 800-776-3000
American or American Eagle	☎ 800-433-7300
American Trans Air	☎ 800-225-2995
Continental	☎ 800-525-0280
Delta Air Lines / Comair	☎ 800-221-1212
Northwest.	☎ 800-225-2525
TWA	☎ 800-221-2000
United	☎ 800-241-6522
US Airways	☎ 800-428-4322

Small commercial flights come into **Naples Municipal Airport**, ☎ 941-643-0733, usually shuttles and commuter flights from other Florida ports. Carriers servicing this airport include **American Eagle**, ☎ 800-433-7300; **Delta ComAir**, ☎ 800-354-9822; **USAir Express**, ☎ 800-428-4322; and **Cape Air**, ☎ 800-352-0714, which flies from Naples to Key West.

■ Rental Cars & Taxi Service

From the airport you can rent a car through **Avis**, ☎ 941-643-0900 or 800-331-1212; **Budget**, ☎ 941-643-2212 or 800-527-0700; and other agencies. For local taxi service, contact **Naples Shuttle**, ☎ 941-262-8982, **Naples Taxi**, ☎ 941-643-2148, or for Marco Island, **Classic Taxi**, ☎ 941-394-1888.

■ Getting Around

Highway 41, also known as the Tamiami Trail, runs through the center of Naples, then heads southeast to the Everglades. It ends at Miami. **I-75** runs parallel to the north of Highway 41, connecting with **Alligator Alley**, which requires a toll of \$1.50 and ends at Fort Lauderdale.

WEEKEND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

■ **FRIDAY:** Drive to north Naples. Spend the morning at **Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary**. Take a picnic lunch to **Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Recreation Area** and spend the afternoon on the beach and fishing. Have dinner at **Bha! Bha! Persian Bistro** and stay the night in North Naples or Vanderbilt Beach.

■ **SATURDAY:** Visit the **Conservancy of Southwest Florida's Nature Center** or **Caribbean Gardens** in the morning. Have lunch at **Riverwalk Fish & Ale House** and spend the afternoon shopping and sightseeing in Olde Naples. Take a sunset cruise and have dinner at **Terra**. Spend the night downtown Naples.

■ **SUNDAY:** Drive to **Everglades City**. Take a boat or kayak tour of Ten Thousand Islands. Have lunch at **Rod & Gun Club**. In the afternoon, **bicycle** around the island and **W.J. Janes Scenic Memorial Drive** or take a **nature hike** at **Collier-Seminole State Park**. Spend the night at the **Ivey House B&B** or **Collier-Seminole State Park**.

Festivals & Events



JANUARY - The **Goodland Mullet Festival**, ☎ 941-394-3041, is a hometown event that draws a small crowd to eat fish and Indian fry bread, and to dance the “Buzzard Lope,” a goofy, high-energy step invented by event promoters.

FEBRUARY - In Everglades City, the **Everglades Seafood Festival**, ☎ 941-695-4100, features music, an artisan fair, and lots of seafood.

MARCH - Three times yearly (March, May and October) the nationally televised **Swamp Buggy Races**, ☎ 941-774-2701 or 800-897-2701, take place in Naples at Florida Sports Park on Rte. 951.

DID YOU KNOW?



***Swamp buggies** are vehicles adapted to the Everglades' marshy terrain. Speedy, souped-up versions add the thrill of race-car action to this event.*

MAY - The **Great Dock Canoe Race** headquarters is The Dock at Crayton Cove restaurant, ☎ 941-263-9940. The **Silver Slam Tarpon Tournament**, ☎ 941-597-6798, features a catch-and-release competition, kids' tournament, and Recycled Raft Race. Swamp Buggy Races are held; see March, above, for contact information.

BUDGET TIPS

- Collier County's small museums provide quick lessons at bargain prices. Admission to **Collier County Museum** is by donation; \$2 gets you into **Museum of the Everglades**. Adults pay \$2.50 for admission into **Smallwood Store Museum**, seniors \$2, children under 12 are admitted free when accompanied by an adult.
- Enjoy the region's good nature by foot for next to nothing. **CREW Marsh Trail System** and **The Conservancy of Southwest Florida's nature trails** are open free to the public. At **Briggs Nature Center**, you can hike Monument Trail for free or pay a minimal fee to walk along its mangrove boardwalk. **Fakahatchee Strand** and **Big Cypress Preserve** also have free boardwalks into local habitat.
- You can often find new **designer threads** for less than half-price at local consignment shops. Naples' consignment shops are considered some of the best bargain shopping in the state.

Naples

“Walter, this is the most beautiful place in America. Let's build a town here,” said Senator John Williams to publisher Walter Haldeman from the deck of their chartered schooner, according to legend. With a toddy of Kentucky bourbon, they toasted their decision to move their families from Louisville to the wilderness that was then Naples. The year was 1885.

Touted as the town “where roses bloom in December,” young Naples had died on the vine itself by 1890. Haldeman, publisher to the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, bought the town from partners. Naples later flourished with an influx of wealthy winterers and the support of Barron Collier, builder of the Tamiami Trail.

Perched on plush sands at the edge of Florida's primeval Everglades, meticulously manicured Naples today transcends its wild setting like a diamond in the rough. In fact, the only rough many visitors to this cultural oasis ever see is the one that sets them back two strokes on the seventh fairway. For along with Naples' reputation for outland poshness comes its claim for most golf holes per capita of any statistically tracked city in the US.

But it wasn't always that way. Naples' high-brow, high-rent status came about primarily in the past decade, after The Ritz-Carlton came to town. Not long ago, it was Florida's roughest neighborhood, roughest in the sense of unsettled and adventure-conducive. As gateway to the Ten Thou-

sand Islands and the Everglades, it attracted well-to-do sportsfolk along with unsavory characters taking cover in the land of great erasure. Naples still holds some of that undiscovered mystique, along with its polished image of glamour resorts, pricey shopping, top-shelf restaurants, an active arts scene, and finely barbered golf courses.

Getting Here



Highway 41, or the Tamiami Trail, is Naples' main thoroughfare, known also as **Ninth St.** in town. From I-75, take Exits 17 and 16 and head west to reach North Naples; Exit 15 gets you eventually downtown and to south Naples.

Other main roads that run parallel to Highway 41 to the east are (west to east) **Goodlette-Frank Rd.** (Rte. 851) and **Airport-Pulling Rd.** (Rte. 31). East-west trunks are **Naples-Immokalee Highway** (846) at the north edge of town; **Pine Ridge Rd.** (896), **Golden Gate Pkwy.** (886), **Radio Rd.** (856), and **Davis Blvd.** (84) in town; **Rattlesnake Hammock Rd.** (864) is at the southern extreme. **Central Ave.** divides north from south numbered avenues mid-town. **Gulfshore Blvd.** provides a winding, scenic drive along the Gulf and its mansions.

AUTHOR TIP



Naples Trolley Tours, ☎ 941-262-7300, transports you around town for a two-hour narrated lesson on 100 points of interest, with free re-boarding. It runs daily beginning at 8:30 am. Cost: \$14 for adults, \$6 for children. Just look for signs indicating its many stops.

Information



For information, visit or contact **Visit Naples**, PO Box 10129, Naples, FL 34101, ☎ 800-605-7878, www.naples-online.com. The **Naples Chamber of Commerce** Visitors Center at 895 Fifth Ave. S., Naples, FL 34102-6605, is open Monday-Friday, 9-5, ☎ 941-262-6141.

Sights & Attractions

■ Downtown



Unlike most Florida cities these days, Naples has kept its heart and soul contained in its downtown section. Historic neighborhoods have been remade into fashionable shopping centers in **Olde Naples** (see *Shopping*, below).

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

In Olde Naples, **Palm Cottage** at 137 12th Ave. S., ☎ 941-261-8164, demonstrates pioneer building methods and lifestyles. Made from local cypress, Florida pine, and tabby mortar, a sort of cement made from seashells, it has housed visiting celebrities such as Hedy Lamarr and Gary Cooper. Today it houses the **Collier County Historical Society**. It is closed weekends and summer to early fall (except by appointment); otherwise, it's open daily, 8:30-11 and 12:30-4, for guided tours or by appointment. Admission is free.

Performing Arts

Sugden Community Theatre, the latest darling of the fashionable Fifth Ave. South scene, hosts two seasons of comedies and dance musicals presented by **The Naples Players** community theater group. The new theater is located at 701 Fifth Ave. S., ☎ 941-263-7990. Tickets cost generally \$10-\$12 for students, \$20-\$22 for adults.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

The district's most distinguished landmark, **The Naples Fishing Pier**, ☎ 941-434-4696, extends 1,000 feet into the Gulf (more on page 281). It is the longest free-access pier in the state, and makes for a nice sunset stroll and a great place from which to cast. It juts out from the public beach on Gulf Shore Blvd. at 12th Ave. S. and is open 7:30-6. Parking is metered. More beach access points with parking lie to the north and south.

The city's most popular beach, **Lowdermilk Park**, is located along Gulf Shore Blvd. at Banyan Blvd., ☎ 941-434-4698. The play-full park has 1,000 feet of sandy beach, outdoor showers, volleyball, a playground, two gazebos, a shaded pavilion, picnic tables, and a concession stand. A special beach access, accessible restrooms, and free use of special wheeled surf chairs accommodate disabled users. Park hours are 7-dusk.

Family Fun

Part botanical garden, part zoo, **Caribbean Gardens**, 1590 Goodlette Rd., ☎ 941-262-5409, www.caribbeangardens.com, takes an environmental and educational approach to showing off monkeys, tigers, and other an-

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

imals rare and exotic. A boat ride takes visitors to Primate Island. Trails pass Alligator Bay, a petting zoo, rare cats, and a kiddy playground. Shows and demonstrations involve lions, 'gators, tigers, birds, dingos, and monitor lizards. Admission is \$13.95 for adults and \$8.95 for kids four-15, plus tax. The park is open daily, 9:30-5:30 (ticket office closes at 4:30).

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

The **Conservancy of Southwest Florida Naples Nature Center**, Merrihue Drive at 14th Ave. N., ☎ 941-262-0304, occupies 13 acres of mangrove and hammock habitat where you can tour a Nature Discovery Center with interactive and other displays and programs, a serpentarium, a wildlife rehabilitation facility, and nature trails. Free boat tours (with paid admission) of the mangrove waterway are available (see *On Water*, below). The facility also offers off-site nature hiking, canoe, and boat tours in conjunction with Briggs Nature Center (see page 295). Canoe and kayak rentals are available for use in the Gordon River, which runs through the property. Rental rates start at \$13 for two hours. The facility is open 9-4:30, Monday-Saturday, and 1-5 on Sunday from January-March only. Nature Center admission is \$6 for adults and \$2 for children ages three-12 (good for same-day admission to Briggs). Admission to nature trails and rehab facility is free.

Heavy on education, **Naples Aquarium** at Old Naples Seaport, 1001 10th Ave. S., ☎ 941-403-7300, conducts 40-minute guided tours into its aquarium-lined facility. The 7,000-gallon tank holds local species of fish. Tour guides introduce you to creatures such as stingrays, flounder, and shrimp, which you can stroke in the touch tank. You learn the unusual characteristics and habits of tank denizens, and little ones are invited to feed the snook, sheepshead, nurse sharks, and other creatures. Guests wait for their tour to start in a room that holds a sand touch table and small touch tank. Displays and guides educate the public about pollution, water management, and the importance of mangroves and sea grass. The aquarium is open Tuesday-Saturday, 10-6; Sunday, noon-5. Admission for adults is \$6.95; for children \$4.95. Kids ages three and under are admitted free.

■ Outlying Areas

Of Historic or Cultural Interest

In its four-acre historical park, **Collier County Museum**, at 3301 Tamiami Trail E., ☎ 941-774-8476, chronicles the region's adventurous past. Cleanly displayed exhibits make time travel easy. Take in a Seminole Indian village, a classic swamp buggy you can climb onto, an archaeological lab stuffed with stuffed stuff, a 1926 cottage for hands-on discovery, native Florida gardens, a giant tree sloth skeleton, and a steam locomotive, plus indoor vignettes featuring life-size mannequins of the characters who peopled Collier's bygones. Hours are 9-5, weekdays. Donations are accepted.

Performing Arts

For a plunge into Naples' warm cultural climate, check with **Philharmonic Center for the Arts** at 5833 Pelican Bay Blvd., ☎ 941-597-1900. The 77-piece Naples Philharmonic is based at "The Phil" and the Miami City Ballet performs there three times a year. It hosts audiences of up to 1,222 for Broadway productions, touring orchestras, chamber music, and children's shows. Its art galleries host changing exhibitions and guided tours of renowned works. A new art gallery opened recently.

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas

For a beachfront away from mid-town's bustle, relax, fish, and hike at **Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Recreation Area**, at Rte. 846 and Gulf Shore Drive N, ☎ 941-597-6196. An observation tower gives you a treetop view of the park's two waterfronts: the Gulf of Mexico and Vanderbilt Channel, the latter of which separates the island from the mainland and affords boating opportunities. Fishing is great in the swift pass waters; but don't swim there. Besides a boat ramp and fish-cleaning station, you'll find picnic facilities, bathhouses, lifeguards, and lots of natural vegetation and beach. In summer, the park hosts Turtle Walks – educational beach programs about nesting loggerhead sea turtles. A new concession operation sells food and rents umbrellas and other beach paraphernalia. The park is open daily, 8-sundown, and costs \$4 per vehicle for two-eight passengers, \$2 for a single occupant in a vehicle; \$1 for pedestrians and bikers. For kayak rentals, call ☎ 941-594-3400. Tandem and single kayaks cost \$10 for the first hour, \$5 each additional hour.

LOGGERHEAD TURTLES

They rise from the sea every summer, all 200 or so pounds of them, dragging their awkward, sea-designed bodies ashore to lay 100 ping-pong-ball-sized eggs. They come in the dark of the night and leave only tractor-tire trails as signs of their tearful labor. Then they disappear, never to see their spawn. Sixty days later, the baby **loggerhead turtles** (*Caretta caretta*) that have survived fire ants and raccoons scurry to the sea to begin their ancient-ongoing ritual of life. Patrollers up and down the coast fence in loggerhead nests and help along the hatchlings in a life fraught early with danger.

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

In Naples' outlying areas, the wilds encroach. To the north, one of the nation's most important birding and wildlife sites hides off the beaten path, 21 miles east of Hwy. 41 off Immokalee Rd. at 375 Sanctuary Rd. **Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary**, ☎ 941-348-9151, www.audubon.org/local/sanctuary/, operated by the National Audubon Society, comprises 11,000 pristine acres, two miles of boardwalk that cross wetlands inhabited by rich plant and marine life, alligators, deer, otters, and wild hogs. The sanctuary is most famous for its 700-acre stand of bald cypress trees – the largest pure, unmixed forest of the specimen found anywhere in the world. More than 500 years old, the trees grow up to 130 feet tall, forming a natural, moss-hung cathedral ceiling. They are the nesting habitat of choice for the endangered wood stork. The sanctuary is open daily: May-November, 8-5; December-April, 7-5. Admission is \$8 for adults, \$5.50 for fulltime college students, and \$3.50 for children ages six-18.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *The finicky wood stork* (*Mycteria americana*) acts as a barometer for the health of local wetlands. The unmistakable, large bird – also known as Ironhead for the coloring of its neck, face, and bill – will nest only when the water table is deep enough so it may feed, but not too deep so that the fish are dispersed over a large area. If conditions aren't just so, it won't nest that year.

Family Fun

Families find fun away from the beach at **King Richard's Amusement Park**, 6780 N. Airport Rd., ☎ 941-598-1666. Rides and activities include water bumper boats, batting cages, video and other electronic games, go-carts, a kiddie train, and two 18-hole miniature golf courses. In season, it is open noon-9, Sunday-Thursday; noon-10, Friday-Saturday. Tickets cost \$3.50 per amusement, \$12 for four amusements. A full-day's admission costs \$14 for children ages three-nine, \$18 for children ages 10 and older.

One of the area's most unusual attractions, **Teddy Bear Museum of Naples**, at 2511 Pine Ridge Rd., ☎ 941-598-2711, www.teddymuseum.com, is stuffed with bears of all sizes and ages. Some are collectors items, such as a signed first edition copy of A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, others are posed in vignettes, such as the bears on parade – more than 3,500 teddies in all. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$4 for seniors, \$2 for children ages four-12. The museum is open 10-5, Wednesday-Saturday (also Monday in season); 1-5, Sunday.

Adventures

■ On Water



Naples City Docks at 10th Ave. S. on the bay, ☎ 941-434-4693, is headquarters for water-bound action. You'll find rentals and charters at **Old Naples Seaport**, 10th Ave. and 10th St. S., ☎ 941-434-9300, and to the north at **Tin City**, 1200 Fifth Ave.

Fishing

Naples' charters take you to **Rookery Bay** (see *Marco Island*, below) and **Ten Thousand Islands** for the best backbay fishing. Some go into deep waters or haunt the passes. From land, piers and passes offer best access to fish congregations, including snook, sheepshead, ladyfish, trout, and snapper.

Naples Fishing Pier at 12th Ave. S., ☎ 941-434-4696, in the heart of Olde Naples, is Florida's longest free-access fishing pier, extending 1,000 feet into the Gulf. Facilities include bait shop, cleaning tables, snack bar, restrooms, and shower, with metered parking. Hours: concession, 7:30 am-6 pm; parking until 11 pm.

The ***Lady Brett 45***, at Tin City on Highway 41, ☎ 941-263-4949, departs twice daily for half-day fishing trips aboard a 45-foot powerboat. Fish in deep water about 12 miles from shore. Cost is \$45 per adult, \$40 per child under age 12. Tax is not included in prices.

If fly-fishing is your thing, contact Capt. Tom Shadley at **Mangrove Outfitters**, 4111 E. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-793-3370, www.mangrove-outfitters.com. He conducts classes in fly-tying on Tuesday evenings in season, 7-9 (no reservations required; \$5 for supplies), and holds casting clinics by prior arrangement. Guided trips are \$375 for full day, \$250 for half-days, and take you to the Everglades, Rookery Bay, Pine Island Sound, Estero Bay, and other local backwaters.

Boat Ramps

Boat owners can launch their vessels into Vanderbilt Channel at **Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Recreation Area** (see *Outlying Sights & Attractions*, above) at 11100 Gulf Shore Dr. N., ☎ 941-597-6196. There's an entry fee into the park. A free ramp is located at **Cocohatchee River Park** off Vanderbilt Dr. The park has picnic tables and a playground.

Boat Rentals

Port-O-Call Marina, off Hwy. 41 E, ☎ 941-774-0479, rents deck boats and powerboats from 17 to 23 feet in length, to accommodate six to 12 persons. Rental rates for half-days are \$115-145; for full days \$165-\$215, gas and tax extra.

At Old Naples Seaport, **Naples Watersports** (see above), ☎ 941-435-9595, rents new boats; center-console types (four to six passengers) to deck boats (six to 10 passengers) cost \$160 per half-day, \$215 per day. Mini-pontoons (four to six passengers) run \$120 a half-day, \$160 for a full day. Gas and tax are extra. Open daily at 8.

Boat Charters & Tours

Sweet Liberty docks at Boat Haven off Hwy. 41, ☎ 941-793-3525. The 53-foot sailing catamaran departs daily for shelling, sightseeing, and sunset trips. Cost is around \$20 for adults, \$10 for children, plus tax. Call ahead for reservations.

Odyssey Boat Tours, at Crayton Cove City Dock, ☎ 941-566-6557, advertises the same agendas as above, but faster and more intimate. Powerboat cruises for up to six passengers cost \$25-\$35 each, plus tax, for shelling, sightseeing, and sunset-gazing in Rookery Bay.

Most famous for its dolphin watch cruises, **Double Sunshine**, at Tin City on Hwy. 41, ☎ 941-263-4949, is a two-decked vessel that departs five times daily for 1½-hour narrated sightseeing, sunset, and dolphin excursions. Cost is \$20 per adult, \$10 per child under age 12. Tax is extra. Reservations suggested.

The Naples Princess, at Old Naples Seaport, 1001 10th Ave. S., ☎ 941-649-2275, is the premier dinner cruise vessel in the area. Its excursions are \$20-\$40 per person, plus tax, gratuity, and port charge. Cruises include a Conservancy-narrated nature cruise with continental breakfast; Naples Bay buffet lunch cruise; mid-afternoon sightseeing; sunset cruise with hors d'oeuvres; sunset dinner buffet on the Gulf; and Sunday brunch cruise. Call ahead for times and to make reservations.

Paddling

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Merrihue Drive at 14th Ave. N., ☎ 941-262-0304, (see *Downtown Sights & Attractions*, above) leads free 45-minute on-site boat tours through mangrove forest.

Snorkeling & Diving

Diving on the West Coast appeals to die-hard divers only, because of low visibility and lack of natural reefs. However, local operators teach scuba courses, usually taking students out of the region for open-water dives. For information and supplies in Naples, contact **Scubadventures**, 971 Creech Rd. at Seabreeze Plaza on Hwy. 41 N, ☎ 941-434-7477.

■ On Foot

Hiking



Five miles of hiking trails intertwine with pine flatwoods and oak and palm hammock terrain at the edge of **CREW Marsh Trail System** on Corkscrew Rd. (Rte. 850), 19 miles east of I-75 Exit 19, ☎ 941-332-7771 (must dial 1-941 from Collier County). The five miles of three loop trails are open free to the public daily during daylight hours. A 12-foot observation tower overlooks the marsh. Free guided tours are offered the second Saturday of each month, October-May. In summer, the trails are soggy, but it's a good time to see animal tracks, so grab your galoshes.

At **The Conservancy of Southwest Florida**, Merrihue Drive at 14th Ave. N., ☎ 941-262-0304 (see *Downtown Sights & Attractions*, above), naturalists take you on a free guided hike through a sub-tropical hammock. You can also hike the two trails unguided.

Shelling

You'll find avid shellers combing local beaches. The most devoted head to **Key Island**, a barrier island at the mouth of the Gordon River at Naples' south end, almost entirely owned by local conservation agencies and the state. Local charters will take you there to go shelling and birding. You'll also hear the island referred to as Keewaydin Island.

■ On Wheels



Naples lays out a start-and-stop loop of metropolitan bike paths. One favorite route of local cyclists runs through **Pelican Bay**, a huge development at the north end of town with a 580-acre nature preserve.

The Bicycle Shoppe of Naples at Pelican Bay, 8789 Tamiami Trail N., ☎ 941-566-0060, rents bikes for \$7 a day, \$30 a week. It is open Monday-Friday, 10-6; Saturday, 10-4.

■ On Horseback

Trail rides, Western riding lessons, and hayrides are all on the agenda at **M&H Stables**, 2750 Newman Dr. in East Naples, ☎ 941-455-8764, www.mhstables.com. Cost for trail rides is \$20 an hour. Children ages three and under ride free with parents; those over three cost an additional \$10. Lessons are \$40.

Shopping



Naples' renowned shopping has spread throughout the city, in old restored downtown areas and new, fashionable shopping plazas. Art galleries are abundant, as are jewelry, antique, home decor, and fashion shops and boutiques. Its posh shopping centers are known for its one-of-a-kind shops. recommendations.

For the best in window shopping, head to Olde Naples' newly renovated **Fifth Avenue South** and **Third Street South Plaza and the Avenues**, or to the new, spectacular plazas: **The Village of Venetian Bay**, at Gulfshore Blvd. N. and Park Shore, and **Waterside Shops at Pelican Bay**, Seagate Drive and Tamiami Trail N. Part of the Third Street South Plaza center, **Gallery Row**, includes nine of Naples' finest art shops. The plaza also boasts the world's first street concierge, who helps arrange transportation for packages and makes store recommendations.

Sportsmen will want to stop at **Everglades Outfitters**, 775 Fifth Ave. S., ☎ 941-262-8117, and next door at 779 Fifth Ave. S., **Naples Sporting Goods**, ☎ 941-262-6752. They're both open daily.

More touristy, but also more affordable, are **Old Marine Waterfront Marketplace** at Tin City, 1200 Fifth Ave. off Highway 41 S., and **Dockside Boardwalk**, 1100 Sixth Ave. S. You'll find nice wildlife-themed shops at both.

At the core of new Naples on Tamiami Trail at Fleischmann, **Coastland Center**, ☎ 941-262-2323, occupies more than 950,000 square feet, making it Naples' largest and only enclosed, climate-controlled shopping center.

The mall's 150 stores include a full array of shopping options, from major department stores to small specialty shops, all in a Key West ambience.

To buy the unaffordable at more affordable prices, vie for the cast-offs of the rich at upscale consignment shops, of which there are a wealth. Some of the best include **Conservancy Upscale Resale Shoppe**, at 732 Tamiami Trail N, ☎ 941-263-0717, open Monday-Friday, 10-4, and Saturday, 10-2 ; **Kid's Consignment**, at 5400 Taylor Rd., ☎ 941-596-1764, open Monday-Friday, 10-5, and Saturday, 10-4 ; **New To You Consignments**, at 933 Creech Rd. and Hwy. 41, ☎ 941-262-6869, open Monday-Saturday, 10-5; and **Encore** at 3105 Davis Blvd., ☎ 941-775-0032, open Monday-Saturday, 10-4. The shops sell clothes, furniture, and decorative items.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Naples lodging doesn't come cheaply, as a rule, although it does have its off-ramp chains and older motels for budget travelers.

Downtown



Great for all manner of sportslovers, **Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club**, at 851 Gulf Shore Blvd. N, ☎ 800-237-7600 or 641-261-2222, www.NaplesBeachHotel.com, lines the beach at the heart of Olde Naples. The 135-acre resort is especially popular with golfers. It also offers extensive watersports, a pool, tennis courts, and a fine kids' program. Complete with restaurants, bars, shops, and spa and fitness center, the hotel has recently renovated accommodations in Old Florida-style buildings and high-rises. Packages available. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Stay right on the bay for some of Olde Naples' most reasonable prices at **Cove Inn**, 900 Broad Ave. S., ☎ 800-255-4365 or 941-262-7161. Situated at Naples City Dock, it's close to boating activity and waterfront restaurants. It has its own pool and coffee shop. Units range from rooms to two-bedroom apartments. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

On Fifth Ave. South, new boutique hotels recall European city hotels. Closest to the action, **Inn on Fifth**, 699 Fifth Ave. S., ☎ 888-403-8778 or 941-403-8778, can't be missed with its ochre exterior and ever-bustling Irish pub shipped directly from Dublin. Rooms and suites overlook Fifth Ave.'s activity and the Sugden Theatre next door, but keep the noise out. A small pool lies across an alleyway. \$\$-\$\$\$\$

In a less-trafficked neighbor a couple of blocks away, **Old Naples Trianon**, 955 Seventh Ave. S., ☎ 800-859-3939 or 941-435-9600, boasts spacious rooms and suites done up in Old World good taste. Its conversation piece is the on-property Olde Naples home restored by TV handyman Bob Vila. It

is used for meetings and sometimes breakfast buffet, which is included in rates. There are also a lounge and swimming pool. \$\$\$-\$\$\$

Vanderbilt Beach

Vanderbilt Beach, the Gulf-side community at Naples' north side, has two fun beach resorts in different price ranges. The ever-popular **Vanderbilt Inn**, 11000 Gulf Shore Drive N., ☎ 941-597-3151 or 800-643-8654, has been around for decades to keep beach- and water-lovers happy. Locals know it for its happening chickee (thatched roof) beach bar. It also has a nice restaurant and pool, and a variety of watersports rentals. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

La Playa Beach Resort, 9891 Gulf Shore Dr., ☎ 800-237-6883 or 941-597-3123, exudes a privileged tropical air. Rooms are Caribbean-style gorgeous and the beach is wide and beckoning. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

The Ritz-Carlton, 280 Vanderbilt Beach Rd., ☎ 941-598-3300 or 800-241-3333, is the grande dame of Naples hotels. Book there if you want a splurge on the wild side, because aside from its inherent good manners, the Naples Ritz has a nature-loving proclivity that starts with its mangrove preserve and ends with its eco-tourism concierges. \$\$\$

Rental Agencies

For private condo, cottage, or home rentals, the request a catalog from **Bluebill Vacation Properties**, 4628 Tamiami Trail, ☎ 800-237-2010 www.bluebill.com. Weekly and monthly rates are available.

Where To Eat



Naples has a well-deserved reputation for its restaurants, which come in all varieties, but are heavy on fine, eclectic cuisine. Downtown, the renaissance of Fifth Ave. S. has turned it into a bustling promenade of boutiques and sidewalk cafés. The Third Street South district keeps up with its own fine offerings, old and new.

Naples

Feel a part of the boating and fishing scene as you dine waterside on the docks at **Riverwalk Fish & Ale House** at Tin City, 1200 Fifth Ave., ☎ 941-263-2734. Boats pull up, fishermen ready their crafts as diners munch open-air on seafood specialties with a Cajun spark. Open daily for lunch and dinner, serving salads, sandwiches, and entrées in the \$8-\$20 range.

One of the oldest favorites, **The Dock at Crayton Cove**, at 12th Ave. S., ☎ 941-263-9940, sits outside on Naples Bay and attracts swarms in season. It's very casual, but you'll find a lot of Naples' wealthy population gracing its wooden tables. The menu gives you a little of the old mixed with

a bit of the new, selections the likes of Cuban barbecued ribs, lobster fritters, and fish & chips. It's open daily for lunch and dinner. Dishes are \$8-\$17.

For a taste of Naples' cutting edge, try **Zoe's**, downtown at 720 Fifth Ave. S., ☎ 941-261-1221. Décor is chicly bistro and the dishes are masterpieces with a noticeable Asian influence (sesame-crusted yellowfin tuna and smoked Thai BBQ chicken, for example). Open daily for dinner, its entrées run \$13-\$22. Many dishes are available in half-portions. Reservations recommended.

Close to another shopping front, at 1300 Third St. S., **Terra**, formerly The Chef's Garden, ☎ 941-262-5500, is a landmark. It's a perfect setting for a special occasion, with Mediterranean specialties and a veranda setting. Try lamb shank osso buco, focaccia pizza, Mediterranean seafood stew, grilled pork sausage with warm apple-gorgonzola slaw, Moroccan chicken and penne, and other wholesome, creative renditions of Riviera classics. It's open daily for lunch (\$6-\$14) and dinner (\$8-\$27) in season. Reservations suggested.

If you crave good, authentic Spanish cuisine, you'll be pleased with **Meson Olé**, 2212 N. Tamiami Trail at Oaks Plaza, ☎ 941-649-6616. It has your typical "gringo" expectations – enchiladas, tamales, and burritos. Its greatest strength, however, lies in the unexpected, such as mussels in salsa verde, Castilian garlic soup, and sole with mushrooms and artichoke hearts. Serving lunch and dinner daily, it charges \$6-\$12 for entrées.

Vanderbilt Beach



For a true tastebud thrill, venture to **Bha! Bha! Persian Bistro**, a one-of-a-kind culinary experience at the Pavilion shopping center, 847 Vanderbilt Rd., ☎ 941-594-5557. It specializes in traditional and innovative Persian cuisine served in a modern Turkish setting. California, Italian, and Oriental styles influence the classics. The intriguing scope includes such novelties as duck *fesenjune* (braised in orange saffron stock with pomegranate walnut sauce), chicken *isfahan* (with eggplant, provolone cheese, and garlic saffron sauce), and almond-crusted turmeric-spiced fish with homemade yogurt. Lunch sandwiches and entrées range from \$6 to \$10; dinner selections, \$12-\$17.50. Closed Monday. Reservations accepted for dinner.

For the utmost in top-scale dining, make your reservation at **Lafite** in The Registry Resort, 475 Seagate Dr., ☎ 941-597-3232. It's the perfect way to celebrate a special occasion, with its refined atmosphere of harp music and impeccable service. The menu makes delightful departures from anything staid and stale. Dishes such as lemongrass-infused Chilean sea bass, green peppercorn venison chops, and grilled fennel-rubbed swordfish use what's fresh and wild. Daily dinner during season, shortened hours off-season. A la carte entrées cost \$30-\$40.

Nightlife



The streets of Olde Naples hop, skip, and jump with lively music pouring from pubs and bars into the street. The scene is dressier than your typical pub crawl. The new Sugden Theatre on Fifth Ave. S. (see page 289) brings a certain class to the clientele, who afterward hit **McCabe's Irish Pub** at Inn on Fifth, 699 Fifth Ave. S., ☎ 941-403-7170; **Zoe's**, 720 Fifth Ave. S., ☎ 941-261-1221, **Yabba Island Grill**, a Caribbean-inspired celebration at 711 Fifth Ave. S., ☎ 941-262-5787; and any number of local cafés and bistros with convivial bars and live music.

Elsewhere throughout the town, nightlifers congregate at The Registry Resort's **Club Zanzibar**, 475 Seagate Dr., ☎ 941-514-3777, **Heaven**, a cigar bar at 2950 Tamiami Trail N, ☎ 941-649-6373; and **Vanderbilt Inn's Chickee Bar** on the beach at 11000 Gulf Shore Dr. N, ☎ 941-597-3151.

Marco Island

Floating offshore in the middle of nowhere, Marco Island is surprisingly developed. Outdoors lovers may at first be put off by its skyscraping row of beachfront resorts and condos, but upon closer inspection you'll find the island thoroughly steeped in water-bound sports. As chief among the Ten Thousand Islands stretching to the south, Marco Island provides great opportunities for serious fishermen, bird watchers, and outdoors folk in general.

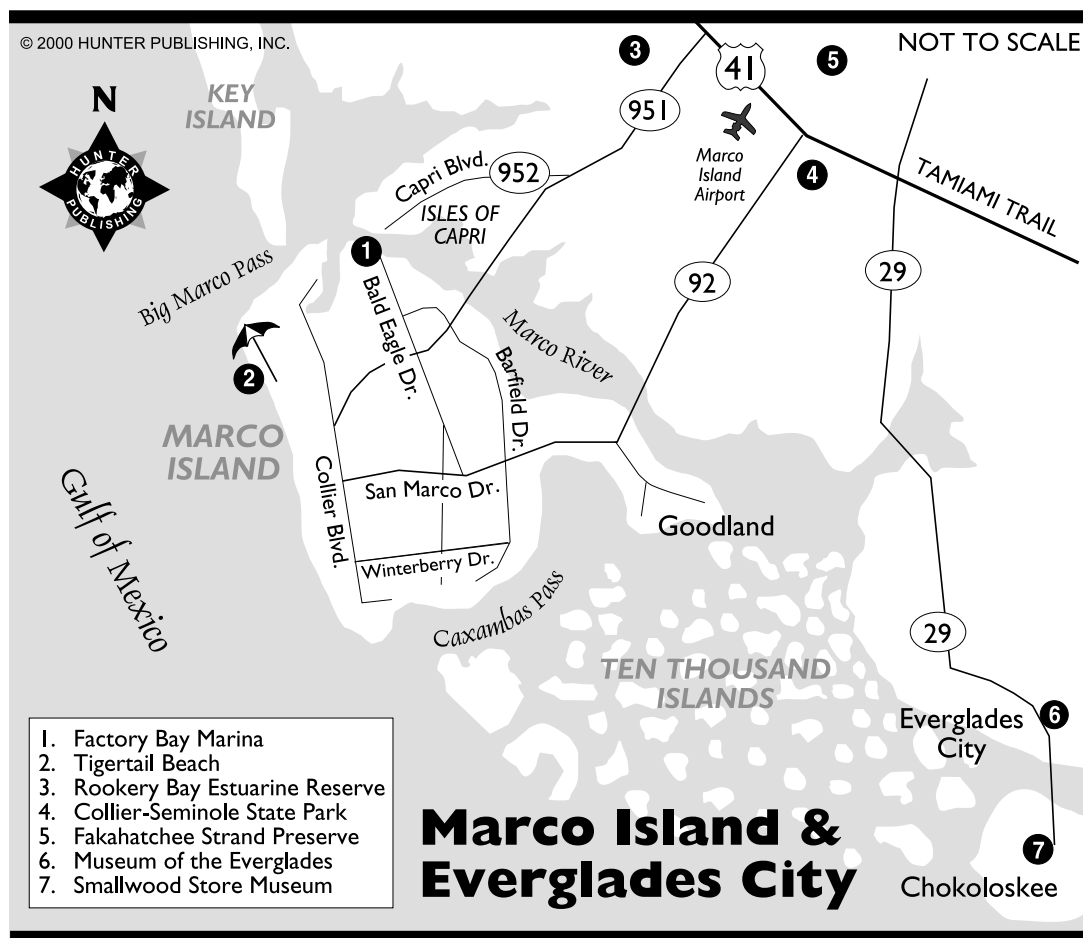
Away from its glamour front, you'll find charming time-stilled communities, waterfront fish houses, and thriving marinas. Here is a civilized departure point for deep adventure in the Everglades.

Getting Here



Marco Island consists of several communities. The least known, **Isles of Capri**, is a series of interconnected islands at Marco's northern threshold. It has been developed for residential use. You can't get to Isles of Capri from Marco Island proper, but must turn off **Rte. 952** onto **Capri Blvd.** before Marco (watch for signs). Capri Blvd. continues through the community.

To get to Marco Island proper from Highway 41 or I-75, take **Rte. 951** (Exit 15). Two bridges span the bay waters known as Marco River to reach the island. The **main high bridge** lies at the island's north end and gets you closest to Olde Marco and the island's resort area.



The **south-end bridge** is a better access if you're approaching from the east along Highway 41 or if you want to get straight to **Goodland**, the fishing community at that end of the island. Turn southwest off Highway 41 onto **Rte. 92** to cross the south bridge.

Collier Blvd. (Rte. 951) crosses the north bridge and continues through the island's commercial section and along the Gulf front. Crossroad **Bald Eagle Dr.** (953) heads north-south to Olde Marco and mid-island. It connects to **San Marco Dr.** (92), which crosses the south bridge.

AUTHOR TIP



*The **Marco Island Trolley Tour**, ☎ 941-394-1600, makes stops throughout the town of Marco, and issues passes for one-day reboarding. A complete island tour – thorough and delivered with a sense of fun – takes nearly two hours. Cost is \$10 for adults, \$4 for children under age 12. Look for signs indicating its numerous stops.*

Two speedy ferry boats transport guests from Marco Island to Key West for day trips. Contact **Key West Water Express**, at Marco River Marina,

☎ 941-394-0014, and **Key West Shuttle** at Factory Bay Marina, 1079 Bald Eagle Dr, ☎ 888-KEYBOAT or 941-394-7979.

Information



For more information, contact the **Marco Island & The Everglades Convention & Visitors Bureau**, 1102 N. Collier Blvd., Marco Island 34145, ☎ 941-394-7549 or 800-788-6272. Hours are Monday-Friday, 9-5; in season they are also open on Saturday, 10-3.

Sights & Attractions

Beaches, Parks & Natural Areas



One of the area's most vital attractions sits at Marco Island's doorstep. **Rookery Bay Estuarine Reserve & Briggs Nature Center** on Shell Rd. off Rte. 951, ☎ 941-775-8569, is 8,000 acres of prime wilderness that looks much the way it did before this rough-and-tumble land was settled. Go there to gaze at birds, alligators, and manatees. A stroll along the 2,500-foot boardwalk reveals the wonders of mangrove ecology (admission \$3 for adults; \$1 for children ages three-12). You can hike Monument Trail around the bay for free. An exhibit hall interprets the environment, and hosts boat, canoe, and birding trips. The bay is popular with fishermen; there's a small boat ramp on premises. The center is open 9-4:30, Monday-Friday; also 9-4:30 on Saturday from October to June, and 1-5 on Sunday, January-March.

Two public accesses allow visitors onto Marco Island's beautiful sands and one has no facilities. Hence, **Tigertail Beach**, Hernando Dr., ☎ 941-353-0404, is a popular place. Go early in nice weather to find a parking spot. Or take the trolley there. If you walk to the north end, away from the parking lot, you can find solitude. Facilities include a food concession, picnic tables, sailboat and personal watercraft rentals, volleyball, restrooms, playgrounds, and showers. Its hours are 7-dusk. Parking is \$3 per car.

Local Color

The neighboring residential community of **Isles of Capri** has no strong tourist attractions, but does offer visitors a nice variety of restaurants. The time-stilled fishing village of **Goodland** makes a pleasant drive-around and stop for lunch (see *Where To Eat*, pages 300-301).

Adventures

■ On Water

Fishing



Marco's fishing preoccupation is self-evident. An abundance of marinas offer charters, rentals, docking, bait and tackle shops, and other facilities. They include **Marco River Marina** at 951 Bald Eagle Dr., ☎ 941-394-2502; **Factory Bay Marina** at 1079 Bald Eagle Dr., ☎ 888-642-6717 or 941-642-6717, www.FactoryBayMarina.com; and **Goodland Bay Marina** at 604 Palm Ave., ☎ 941-394-2797.

Fishing charters concentrate on the fish-full waters of Marco Islands' many waterways. **Rookery Bay** is a favorite, especially in winter. **Gordon** and **Caxambas passes** have a reputation as hot summer fishing spots.

For party boat fishing in deep seas and reefs, board the **Marco Cat**, ☎ 941-642-6400, at Factory Bay Marina (above). Six-hour trips cost \$55 for adults, \$35 for children ages five-14 (not recommended for children under age five). Excursions depart every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. Reservations required.

Capt. Russ Gober, ☎ 941-394-5513, has long-time experience fishing local waters. You can have your catch prepared at his father's place, Stan's Idle Hour (see *Where To Eat*, below). Rates for charters of one to four people are \$250 for a half-day, \$350 for a full day.

Sunshine Tours out of Marco River Marina, ☎ 941-642-5415, takes fishermen aboard a 32-foot boat with bathroom for offshore excursions (\$325 for half-day, \$550 for full day, parties of five or less; \$350 and \$600 for parties of six). Backwater fishing and shelling trips cost \$38 and \$28, respectively (\$28 and \$18 for children under age 10). For current local fishing information, call its **Fishing Hotline**, ☎ 941-642-8888.

Captain's John and Pam Stop at Stop's Marine in Goodland's Calusa Island Marina, ☎ 941-394-8000, runs backwater fishing adventures lasting 2½ hours for \$35 per person, \$30 for children under age 10. For private half-day charters, the cost is \$225 for up to four, \$35 for each additional person up to six. Tax is extra.

Boat Ramps

Marco Island's only public boat ramp, on Roberts Bay at the island's south end, is accessible from **Caxambas Park** on S. Collier Ct. Restrooms, bait and fuel are available. Small boats can be launched free-of-charge on the shell ramp at **Rookery Bay Estuarine Reserve** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above) on Shell Rd. off Rte. 951 on the way to Marco Island, ☎ 941-775-8569.

Boat Rentals

Moran's Barge Marina at the Goodland Bridge on San Marco Rd. (Rte. 92), ☎ 941-642-1920, rents 17-foot center-console boats for \$100 a full day, \$70 a half-day. Gas and tax are extra.

Factory Bay Marina, 1079 Bald Eagle Dr., ☎ 888-642-6717 or 941-642-6717, www.FactoryBayMarina.com, rents pontoons boats, center consoles, Grady Whites, and deck boats accommodating from four to 12 people for \$100-\$165 half-days and \$150-\$225 full days.

Boat Charters & Tours

For all varieties of personalized water adventures into Ten Thousand Islands – sightseeing, shelling, fishing, snorkeling, dolphin spotting, and nature tours – connect with **Captains John and Pam Stop** at Stop's Marine in Goodland's Calusa Island Marina, ☎ 941-394-8000. Modes of transportation include a 26-foot luxury vessel and a 25-foot center console boat. Rates start at \$35 per person (\$30 for children under age 12) for a three-hour shelling, nature or island tour. Call between 7am and 9pm for reservations.

Factory Bay Marina, 1079 Bald Eagle Dr., ☎ 888-642-6717 or 941-642-6717 www.FactoryBayMarina.com, schedules twice-daily shelling and sightseeing charters that cost \$30 per adult, \$15 per child three-14. Airboat tours into Ten Thousand Islands leave mornings and afternoons every day except Wednesday, for \$25 adult admission, \$12.50 for children.

To escape under sail, book with **Sail Away Charters**, at Royal Tarpon Yacht Club on Isles of Capri, ☎ 877-263-SAIL (toll-free) or 941-642-1608, www.sailawaycharters.com. Luxury catamarans whisk you away for sunset sails (\$40 for adults, \$20 for children, includes beverages and hors d'oeuvres), day sails (\$75 for adults, \$37.50 for children, including beverages, snacks, and lunch), and other adventures.

ECO-ADVENTURES



The Conservancy of Southwest Florida (in Naples at Merrihue Drive at 14th Ave. N., ☎ 941-262-0304), sponsors a host of eco-adventures at locales throughout the region. Fun for kids, parents, nature-lovers, and beach buffs, the **Night Seining** program takes you to **Tigertail Beach** at dusk. Participants pull two grades of nets to capture, identify, and release creatures tiny as a dwarf seahorse and big as a snook. Naturalists tell interesting anecdotes about their behaviors. The 90-minute night seining programs are held throughout the year and cost \$10 per person. From October through May they are held the first, third and fifth Wednesday of each month at 7pm. Preregistration is requested; ☎ 941-775-8569.

Marco Island Ski & Water Sports, at Marriott's Marco Island Resort, ☎ 941-394-6589, and Hilton Beach Resort, ☎ 941-642-3377, rents Sunfish sailboats for \$25 an hour, Hobie Cats for \$25.

Padding

Beach Sports Surf & Tackle at 571 S. Collier Blvd., ☎ 941-642-4282, covers a variety of adventure needs. It sells live bait, tackle, and fishing licenses. It rents sea kayaks in season and launches you on self-guided adventures for \$35 a day single or double.

From Isles of Capri, you can set off for nature kayak tours from **Get Wet Sports**, 203 Capri Blvd., ☎ 941-394-9557. Sunset, two-hour, and three-hour tours run \$25-\$40 per person. Rentals include free delivery on Marco Island. Half-day rentals are \$45 for a single kayak, \$40 for a double; full day rentals are \$40 and \$50. Weekly rates available. Open daily.

Snorkeling & Diving

The *Baja California*, a Honduran freighter torpedoed 80 miles from shore in 1942 by a German U-boat, supplies a fish-fraught destination for local diving charters. **Beach Sports Surf & Tackle** at 571 S. Collier Blvd., ☎ 941-642-4282, can put you in touch with an instructor for PADI certification and diving trips.

Scubadventures, 1141 Bald Eagle Dr, ☎ 941-389-7889, is a full-service dive operation offering air, instruction, sales, repair, local dive trips, and dive travel excursions. Students can become open-water certified in four days or more for \$250. Two-tank Gulf dives range from \$65 to \$85.

Other Watersports

Marco Island Ski & Water Sports operates out of Marriott's Marco Island Resort, ☎ 941-394-6589, and Hilton Beach Resort, ☎ 941-642-3377. It provides 10-15 minute parasail rides (\$60 with photo) and towed tube rides (\$15 for 10 minutes). The shop rents WaveRunners for \$70 a half-hour, \$125 double an hour. Ten Thousand Islands WaveRunner excursions cost \$125 for singles or doubles. Water-skiing (seasonal) rates are \$50 for 20 minutes, \$150 for an hour.

■ On Wheels



Bike paths run along Collier Blvd., Marco Island's resort road, Rte. 92, and in other parts of the island. At **Scooter & Bicycle Rentals**, 845 Bald Eagle Dr, Marco, ☎ 941-394-8400, bike rental rates begin at \$5 for one hour for a regular or BMX kid's bike. Speed, hybrid, and road bikes rent for \$10-\$12 for one hour. Daily rates range \$10-\$20. Inline skates cost \$5 for one hour, \$15 for a day. Multiple-day rates are available. Open Monday-Saturday, 9-6; Sunday, 10-4.

■ In The Air



Sightsee Marco Island, Naples, and Ten Thousand Islands from a bald-eagle's vantage with **Marco Heli-Tours**, Marco Island Airport, ☎ 941-389-9669, www.marcohelitours.com. Tours begin at \$40 per person, minimum of two.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.



Marco Island proper lays out a strip of high-reaching resorts and condos along its crescent beach. This is the Marco Island most know about. To find something less Miami Beach-ish, head to the north and south ends of the island.

Marriott is the monarch of Marco beach resorts. **Marriott's Marco Island Resort and Golf Club** at 400 S. Collier Blvd., ☎ 800-GET-HERE or 941-394-2511, is a large property offering all manner of outdoor activities. It has its own miniature golf course, playgrounds, more than three miles of beach, and a great program for kids. For big kids, there are watersports rentals, a shopping arcade, swimming pools, an off-property golf course, tennis, and a fitness center. Guests have several dining options. The resort also organizes tours to the Everglades and other nearby attractions. Rooms and suites available. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Radisson Suite Beach Resort, 600 S. Collier Blvd., ☎ 800-814-0633 or 941-394-4100, also occupies Marco's golden beach with an array of accommodations (from rooms to large suites), watersports rentals, restaurants, and activities. It has two tennis courts, a basketball court, a large pool and Jacuzzi, and shuffleboard. Popular with families, it engages children in a well-planned recreational program. Packages available. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

At the island's north end, in Olde Marco, **The Boat House Motel**, 1180 Edington Place, ☎ 800-528-6345 or 941-642-2400, www.theboathouse-motel.com, provides a more secluded, boating-oriented option. The operation rents bicycles, paddleboats, WaveRunners, pontoons, and fishing boats, and offers docking to boat owners (no boat trailer parking or launch facilities). It is situated on the Marco River, with a wood deck and pool stretching along the water. Condo rentals available. \$\$-\$\$\$

In Goodland, **Mar-Good RV Park**, 321 Pear Tree Ave., ☎ 941-394-6383, rents cottages and RV sites in its self-sustaining low-budget community with its own marina, restaurant, and museum. RV sites cost \$30 per two persons per day, with full hookups and cable TV. Cottages rent for \$50-\$70 per day. Weekly and monthly rates available. \$-\$\$

Rental Agencies

For private condo, cottage, or home rentals, the request a catalog from **Bluebill Vacation Properties**, Chamber of Commerce Plaza, 1110 N. Collier Blvd., ☎ 800-237-2010, www.bluebill.com. Weekly and monthly rates are available.

Where To Eat



Restaurants are rife on Marco Island, everything from the utmost casual to tiptop elegance. Seafood reigns, particularly stone crab claws, a Florida delicacy encased in a rock-hard shell – hence the name. They are in season from mid-October to mid-May and can be quite costly, depending upon availability. To keep restaurant tabs down, try them as an appetizer, prepared steamy hot or iced with drawn butter or tangy mustard sauce.

Marco Island experiences a strong German influence, and that's reflected in many restaurants.

To obtain a sense of Marco Island's salty demeanor, savor the seafood and seaside atmosphere of **Snook Inn** at 1215 Bald Eagle Dr., ☎ 941-642-6944. It fronts the Marco River, and has a lively outdoor chickee bar. Those who can't watch boat traffic from a window can peer into an aquarium. The food is typical Old Florida-style – beer-battered grouper, breaded shrimp, plus steaks, chicken and a salad bar, entrées ranging from \$9 to \$20. Lunches are \$7-\$10. Thursday and Friday nights' seafood buffet is a popular choice for \$19. The restaurant is open daily.



For a brush with island tradition, dine grandly at **Olde Marco Island Inn**, 100 Palm St., ☎ 941-394-3131, www.oldermarco-islandinn.com. Built in 1883, it has been restored to its original gracious Southern style. Its six rooms display distinctive personalities – from fully formal to veranda style. The menu blends classicism with inventiveness – weiner schnitzel, grouper with avocado butter and mango-kiwi-scotch bonnet chutney, stuffed filet of sole. Prices range from \$18 to \$22 for à la carte entrées. It's open daily for dinner; reservations are accepted.

Konrad's Seafood & Grille Room at Mission Plaza, 599 S. Collier Blvd., ☎ 941-642-3332, provides an elegant setting for fine grilled seafood, steaks, and other new continental specialties. Serves dinner and lunch daily in season; dinner only, Monday-Saturday, in summer. Lunch dishes are \$7-\$10; dinner entrées, \$15-\$23.

Goodland

Goodland has its share of good-eating restaurants, primarily fish-house types. Most notorious is **Stan's Idle Hour Seafood Restaurant** at 221

W. Goodland Dr., off Rte. 92, ☎ 941-394-3041. Named for its colorful owner, the restaurant embodies Goodland's spirit with fresh seafood, done mostly Old Florida-style (fried). Pies are homemade and delicious. You can dine outdoors on the canal front or indoors in a modern setting of light wood. Go Sunday afternoons for Buzzard Bash dancing and country crooning. In season, it's open daily for lunch and dinner, except Monday; in the summer, it's open only Friday-Sunday. Sandwiches and dinner entrées are in the \$6-\$18 range. Reservations accepted for dinner.



Little known to the outside world, but well known to locals, **Little Bar** at 205 Harbor Dr., ☎ 941-394-5663, outdoes its modest name with lots of dining space, some on a screened porch dock-side, some in a room decorated with the remains of a historic boat, some in rooms paneled with oak pipe organ pieces. Cuisine goes beyond Old Florida-style with tropic flair, featuring everything from frog legs and Buffalo clam strips to kielbasa and kraut, grouper Sicilian, and *tournedos au poivre*. The wine list is impressive and the beer is served in frosted mugs. Lunches are \$4-\$10; dinners \$11-\$17, depending on the market price of fish. It serves lunch and dinner daily; reservations suggested for dinner.

Isles of Capri

Isles of Capri has restaurants both fine and casual. On the finer side and with a German flavor, **Alexander's Shrimp Boat Restaurant** at 203 Capri Blvd., ☎ 941-394-0252, is open for dinner daily and accepts reservations. Continental and seafood selections run \$12-\$22.

Truly island style with a Caribbean rhythm, **Backwater Nick's** at 231 Capri Blvd., ☎ 941-642-5700, serves creative sandwiches, seafood, and grilled Caribbean-style entrées under a thatched chickee roof, open-air on the water. Open daily for lunch and dinner, it's dishes range from \$8 to \$17. **Nick's Caribbean Café**, at the same location and phone, is an indoor adjunct that opens daily for dinner. Entrées run \$16-\$20.

Everglades City & Chokoloskee Island

At Naples' back door lies Florida's proudest possession, the Everglades. This vast region was saved from the ravages of man's greed by the writings of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, though it still teeters on the brink of destruction. The State of Florida recently engaged in a costly restudy project to restore the Everglades to a closer-to-original state. It is the second largest national park, after Yellowstone. Its appeal is subtler than that of most national parks, so it often gets ignored.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: *The term **Everglades** has two frames of reference. Generically, it refers to the type of environment that spreads from Naples to Miami, Lake Okeechobee to Cape Sable, including the 721,000 acres of nearby Big Cypress National Preserve. Specifically, it means that territory bought by the United States Park Service in the 1940s, and protected to this day against development.*

These massive wetlands – home of the endangered Florida panther and American crocodile – cover 2,100 square miles and shelter more than 600 types of fish and 300 bird species. Its land of Ten Thousand Islands holds one of the largest mangrove forests in the world; its shores support pine and hardwood hammocks and strands, cypress stands, and wetland prairies.

The best known Everglades features are its **mangrove islands** and its so-called **River of Grass**, the slowest-moving river in the world. Both are fertile wildlife incubators. The region puts on the best bird show around, hosting wood storks, white pelicans, roseate spoonbills, ospreys, sandhill cranes, frigates, great white herons, tri-color herons, bald eagles, and other species both rare and common. In the water, dolphins come to feed, mullet jump, manatees mow the sea grasses, and alligators ogle. This is also the home of more reclusive animals, most notably the seriously endangered Florida panther, along with the Florida black bear, white deer, and bobcat.

DID YOU KNOW?



*The **Florida panther**, *Felis concolor coryi*, is actually a sub-species of the cougar and relative to the mountain lion. Tawny in color, it distinguishes itself from its cousins with a kinky tail and cowlick – a result of inbreeding. Only 30-50 adult panthers are estimated to be alive in Florida. They prefer the relatively undisturbed habitat of the Everglades, where they feed on raccoons, rabbits, birds, and even larger prey, such as deer, hogs, and alligators.*

Here is a whole different world from the kingdom of Florida beyond. This world holds Florida's heart. If it stops beating, so will the arteries that lead out of it. So will a wealth of wildlife.

The best way to explore the 'Glades is by water, but some hiking and biking opportunities also exist. To base your exploration on this side of the Everglades, you will want to head to one of the major camping areas, or to the slightly redneck island towns of **Everglades City** and **Chokoloskee Island**, both of which are steeped in a history of adventure. Everglades City began as a company town, headquarters for Barron Collier's road-building project, Tamiami Trail, in the early 1920s. Chokoloskee Island, inaccessible by car until 1955, was a rough-and-tumble outpost for early settlers, fishermen, outlaws, and the Amerindians who traded with them.

Getting Here



To penetrate the Everglades from the West Coast, you can approach from either **Highway 41** or from **Exit 14A** off the stretch of I-75 known as Alligator Alley (\$1.50 toll). The exit takes you down **Rte. 29**, a narrow, lightly traveled road from which you get snapshot glimpses of what awaits ahead.

Everglades City lies near the juncture of Highway 41 and Rte. 29. To get to Chokoloskee Island, follow the signs in Everglades City that direct you to turn right at Captain's Table. After driving around the circle that is the town hub, you'll head south (left) across the **Chokoloskee Causeway**.



SCENIC DRIVE: *The drive along Tamiami Trail (Highway 41) between Naples and Everglades City's Rte. 29 is one of stark wilderness. The prairie-like fields you think you are seeing are actually a shallow waterway, the famous River of Grass. Only an occasional hardwood hammock, Seminole village, and airboat concession break its interminable stretch. Watch the waterways closely, especially in winter, for protruding alligator snouts and tire-tread backs.*

EVERGLADES TRANSPORTATION TRIVIA

The Everglades gave birth to two unusual modes of transportation, adapted to its shallow, swampy waters. **Swamp buggies** are modified Jeep-like vehicles built for any number between two and a crowd. They were developed by early 'Glades hunters and today are used widely for touring wetlands. **Airboats** are fast, shallow-draft, noisy boats that zip across the water's surface. Environmentalists detest them almost as much as WaveRunners. Although not exclusive to the Everglades, **pontoon boats** – flat, shallow-draft vessels – are popularly used in the area's skinny waters. They allow passage where V-shaped hulls deny it.

Information



Contact **Everglades Area Chamber of Commerce**, PO Box 130, Everglades City, FL 34139, ☎ 941-695-3941. It has a welcome station-store at the corner of Hwy. 41 and Rte. 29; it's open daily, 9-5. For information about **Everglades National Park**, write Information, Everglades National Park, 40001 State Rd. 9336, Homestead, FL 33034-6733. The **Gulf Coast Visitor Center** is located on Rte. 29, a half-mile south of Everglades City, ☎ 941-695-3311.

Sights & Attractions

Of Historic or Cultural Interest



The islands slowly develop their historic past into tourist sites. Located in the historic former wash house for Barron Collier's company operations, **Museum of the Everglades**, downtown Everglades City, ☎ 941-695-0008, www.colliermuseum.com, preserves the lore and history surrounding the monumental task of building a road,

ECO-ATTRACTIONS

Collier-Seminole State Park at 20200 E. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-394-3397, is one of the most newcomer-friendly ways to access the Everglades environment. The park covers more than 6,423 acres, of which 4,760 is wilderness mangrove preserve. You have options to camp, picnic, hike, bike, canoe, and boat around the encompassing area to become better acquainted with the plants and animals that dwell in the pinelands, salt marsh, and cypress swamp. It features a wildlife interpretation center inside a structure replicating Seminole War blockhouses and a historic walking dredge that was used to build Tamiami Trail out of the alligator-infested muck. Mosquito-swatting is the favorite sport between May and November. Other times, folks enjoy the pontoon boat tour along the Blackwater River, canoeing, and hiking. Entrance to the beautifully maintained park, open sunrise to sunset, is \$4 per car of up to eight passengers or \$2 per vehicle with single occupant. Admission by bike, by foot, or per extra passenger is \$1.

Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, ☎ 941-695-4593, protects a 74,000-acre stretch of Big Cypress Swamp, but offers limited access. At **Big Cypress Bend**, west of Everglades City on Hwy. 41, you can follow a 2,000-foot boardwalk to sample Everglades environment. Another access, **W.J. Janes Memorial Scenic Dr.**, connects to Rte. 29 north of Highway 41. Along the gravel-paved route, you may see wild turkeys, black bears, deer, and rare birds among cypress and native royal palms. Fakahatchee Strand boasts the state's largest population of the reclusive, endangered Florida panther, cypress forest, and the largest stand of royal palms and largest concentration and variety of orchids in North America. No admission.

Tamiami Trail, across the swampy, mosquito- and alligator-infested Everglades in the early 1920s. It also deals with the region's fishing heritage. The tiny, growing museum is open Tuesday-Saturday, 11-4. Admission is \$2.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: A *strand* is a linear swamp forest that snakes along ancient sloughs, rising above the prairie-like skyline. Fakahatchee is one of the largest and most outstanding of Big Cypress Swamp's many such strands, which run north to south.

The first and main historic attraction is **Smallwood Store Museum** in Chokoloskee at 360 Mamie St., ☎ 941-695-2989. Not so long ago, the barn-red building served as an Indian trading post. It remained a store and post office until it closed in 1974, and part of it retains the general store atmosphere while one room is given to exhibits on the Everglades' pioneer days. Its most sensational claim and homespun yarn centers around the gun-down of outlaw Ed Watson, subject of a best-selling novel by Peter Matthiessen, *Killing Mister Watson*. The museum's best feature is the

view from the back porch, overlooking Ten Thousand Islands and the scene of the crime. The store is open 10-5 daily, December-April; 10-4, May-December. Adults pay \$2.50 for admission, seniors \$2, children under 12 are admitted free when accompanied by an adult.

Despite its natural temperament, the Everglades is tainted with inevitable commercialism. You'll find alligator wrestlers and airboats and panthers in cages. Those places announce themselves; some offer tours. For more information on airboat rides, see *On Water*, below.

Adventures

■ On Water



You can spend several hours in the water here without seeing another boat or other sign of humanity. With all that water, water everywhere, Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge and River of Grass afford the aqua-inclined opportunities unparalleled anywhere in Florida. It is recommended that you explore the area in cool weather, late October through March, to avoid the battalions of mosquitoes. Boating requires a shallow draft and local knowledge of the labyrinthine waters. For first-timers, it's best to hire a guide.

Fishing

Fishing guides are plentiful. **Captain Max Miller**, ☎ 941-695-2420, specializes in light tackle backbay fishing. Rates for one to three people are \$250 for a half-day, \$350 for a full day.

Boat Rentals

Outdoor Resorts of Chokoloskee Island, ☎ 941-695-2881, rents boats for \$85 a day; canoes, \$25.

Boat Charters & Tours

For sightseeing tours of Ten Thousand Islands, you can find private charters or hop aboard two available group tours. **Everglades National Park Boat Tours**, located on the Chokoloskee Causeway, Rte. 29, ☎ 800-445-7724 or 941-695-2591, conducts naturalist-narrated tours through Ten Thousand Islands and its teeming bird and water life. Tours depart daily every 30 minutes, 9-4:30 or 5, depending upon what time the sun sets. They last about an hour and 45 minutes. Reservations are not accepted. Cost is \$13 for adults and \$6.50 for kids ages six-12.

ECO-ADVENTURES



For a more intimate wildlife experience, try **Majestic Everglades Excursions** in Everglades City, ☎ 941-695-2777. A pontoon boat takes up to six passengers on a tour of the Ten Thousand Islands, their nature, and their history. Narrated by owners Frank and Georgia Garrett, the trip reveals obscure places and lore that may be new to even the most knowledgeable bird- and wildlife-lover. Binoculars are provided. Depending upon the day, you may get a dolphin show that beats any theme park, a peek at ospreys setting up housekeeping, or a tour along the route taken by the murderers of the Everglades' favorite outlaw, Ed Watson. Tours depart twice daily when weather and tides permit, and last about four hours, costing \$60 for adults, \$30 for children under age 12. Morning tours include a light lunch; afternoons, fruit and cheese. This is the way to go if you want to learn more than sur-

Airboat Tours

Airboats can load you up with only one other person or a boatload. You won't have to look very far to find someone who will take you sightseeing in this uniquely Floridian fashion. Some add alligator shows and other land-borne attractions to the trip. If you don't like noise and commercialism, try another mode of exploration.

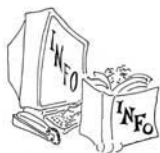
To give it a go, contact **Everglades Private Airboat Tours**, one mile west of Rte. 29 on Hwy. 41, ☎ 941-695-4637 or 800-368-0065. Rates are \$60 for one or two passengers, \$25 for each extra adult, \$10 for children ages four-12.

Combine land and water exploration with an expedition from **Everglades Tram Ride**, a half-mile west of Rte. 29 on Hwy. 41, ☎ 877-695-2820 (toll-free). Large airboat only tours begin at \$14 for about a half-hour. Smaller airboats take you into shallower waters for \$30. Tours in the \$30-\$50 range combine pontoon boat, airboat, tram, and foot transportation.

Paddling

By canoe and kayak, you can reach the region's most hidden places. Strike out on your own or follow a guided tour through the Ten Thousand Islands' 100-mile **Wilderness Waterway** canoe trail. Canoeists must register with park rangers. You can paddle portions of the trail; the entire length takes at least a week. Chickee (Amerindian-thatched) roofed landings provide primitive shelter for campers.

For canoe rentals, call **Everglades National Park Boat Tours** at ☎ 800-445-7724 or 941-695-2591. Canoe rentals cost \$21.20 for one day, including tax. Longer rentals and shuttle service to Flamingo (the Everglades east coast access) and Highway 41 are available. The facility is open daily, 8:30-5. Several outfitters run guided tours within the park.



A list of canoe rentals, outfitters, and recommended gear, plus necessary charts, guidebooks, and complete information are available from US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Everglades National Park, PO Box 279, Homestead, FL 33030.

Embark on a half-day, all-day, or overnight adventure into Ten Thousand Islands or the Everglades with **Waters Edge Kayaking**, ☎ 941-470-2050. Adult rates range from \$40 to \$125; kids, \$25-\$95. Sea kayaks, canoes, and sit-on-top kayaks in stock. Rentals available.

You can rent canoes at **Collier-Seminole State Park** (see *Sights & Attractions*, above), 20200 E. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-394-3397, for use on the Blackwater River, with access to Ten Thousand Islands (filed float plan required). In winter (December-April), guides lead 13.6-mile canoe trips into the park's wilderness preserve (reservations necessary). Primitive overnight camping in the preserve is available to canoeists. Canoe rentals are \$3 an hour, \$15 a day, plus tax.

North American Canoe Tours/Everglades Canoe & Kayak Outpost, ☎ 941-695-4666, www.evergladesadventures.com, rents 17- to 19-foot aluminum canoes for \$20-\$35 a day. Quality kayaks (with rudder and spray skirt available) rent for \$35-\$55 a day. The service also rents equipment and complete outfitting, and provides shuttle service. Weekend tours include two nights of camping for \$250 each. Three-night tours range from \$450-\$550, including meals, equipment, and a one-night stay at Ivey House B&B (see *Where To Stay*, below). You can arrange longer trips. Closed summers.

■ On Foot



The 6½-mile trail at **Collier-Seminole State Park**, 20200 E. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-394-3397, ribbons through pine flatwoods and cypress swamp. Plus you can walk a self-guided 45-minute board trail to experience life in a salt marsh. Guided walks are conducted December through April.

Rangers lead swamp walks into **Fakahatchee Strand Preserve** (see page 305), ☎ 941-695-4593; call for schedule and reservations; the tours are limited to 15 people. On your own, you can trample your way along old dirt logging roads and see rare orchids and bromeliads. This is a rugged adventure for the committed devotee or experienced botanist. Expect to get wet – up to your waist if you're truly adventurous.

■ On Wheels



A new 5½-mile mountain bike trail has opened at **Collier-Seminole State Park**, 20200 E. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-394-3397. It travels cabbage palm hammock and runs close to swamp habitat.

DID YOU KNOW?



FLORIDIOM: A Florida *hammock* is not always something you can lounge in with a glass of iced tea. The Amerindian word describes a rise in land where hardwood trees grow. Mound-shaped, they're known as domes; linear, they're strands.

Bike paths traverse Everglades City and cross the causeway to Chokoloskee Island. W.J. Janes Memorial Scenic Drive branches off Rte. 29 north of Everglades City to lead you along a gravel-paved road into **Fakahatchee Strand** (see page 305). Its forest of royal palms, cypress trees, and air plants provides pristine scenery and bird habitat. Stillness is the drive's greatest asset; you feel completely removed from the everyday world.

In Everglades City, you can rent bikes from the **Ivey House B&B**, ☎ 941-695-3299, for use in Everglades City only. Rates are \$3 per hour, \$15 per day. Guests are allowed free use when available.

Everglades Bicycle Tours, ☎ 941-455-7211, provides transportation from I-75 (Exit 15) to the Everglades, guides, bikes, and binoculars for a six-hour (including pick up, drop off, and four hours' riding time) adventure into the wilderness. Prices are \$65 per person, plus tax.

■ In The Air



To see the Ten Thousand Islands from cloud-level, go flight-seeing with **10,000 Island Aero-Tours**, Everglades City Airport, ☎ 941-695-3296. Prices start at \$45 per person, minimum of two per flight. Closes summers.

Where To Stay

For accommodations price key, see page 23.

Hotels & Motels

The islands are known for their RV parks more than any other type of lodging. They do have several inexpensive motels, including some located in

RV parks. One of the largest, best maintained of these is **Outdoor Resorts of Chokoloskee Island**, ☎ 941-695-2881 (motel) or 695-3788 (RV resort). It has what's important to vacationers in these parts: a marina, boat rentals, a bait and tack shop, and guide service for fishing and touring. Pull into one of 283 full-service sites or stay in the motel. Either way, you can take advantage of the resort's three pools, health spa, lighted tennis and shuffleboard courts, and restaurant. Site use for two people runs \$35-\$45 a day year-round (monthly rates available). Motel efficiency and rental trailers are \$75 (and are also offered by the week). Boat and canoe rentals available.

Aside from the camping resorts, Everglades City boasts one hotel that has gained attention for its historic, Southern charm. The **Rod and Gun Club** at 200 Broadway, ☎ 941-695-2101, offers nothing fancy but is a complete escape from the real world. It boasts famous guests through the years, from Burl Ives to Sean Connery. Cottages are basic, perhaps in need of a bit of repair, but loved by a devoted following. There's a pool and restaurant (see *Where To Eat*, below) on premises, plus docking and other boating amenities. \$\$

Bed & Breakfasts

Outdoor enthusiasts find **Ivey House B&B**, 107 Camellia St. in Everglades City, ☎ 941-695-3299, www.evergladesadventures.com or www.ivey-house.com, to their liking. Lodge-like, the hostelry has rooms and cottages, and a cold breakfast is included in the rate. It offers guided tours into the Ten Thousand Islands by canoe, kayak, or boat, and rents equipment. Bike use is complimentary for guests. Closed from mid-April to November. \$\$-\$\$\$

Camping

Five miles east of Rte. 29 on Hwy. 41, **Big Cypress Trail Lakes Campground**, ☎ 941-695-2275, lets you camp by tent or RV in Big Cypress National Preserve, a magnificent sanctuary adjacent to Everglades National Park. Tent sites cost \$12 per night. Two RV campers pay \$15 per night, electric and water included. Weekly and monthly rates available.



Collier-Seminole State Park (see *Everglades Sights & Attractions*, above) at 20200 E. Tamiami Trail, ☎ 941-394-3397, has 130 sites for tent- and RV campers in two separate campgrounds, plus canoeing and hiking trails. Sites without electricity cost \$14.17 per night, \$16.29 with electricity in season; \$8.72 and \$10.84 out of season. (Prices include tax.) Reservations are accepted.

Where To Eat



This part of Florida more closely approximates Southern culture than any other area of the Southwest coast. Accents are twangy and food typically fried. Frog legs, stone crab, blue crab, and grouper appear on most menus.

Everglades Seafood Depot, 102 Collier Ave., Everglades City, ☎ 941-695-0075, serves standard Everglades fare – blue crab, shrimp, oysters, and freshly made hush puppies – plus some tropical specialties, in an historic depot building overlooking the water with regal elegance. Open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Breakfast includes a buffet, only \$3 between 6-8. Lunch sandwiches, salads, and fried baskets run \$4-\$9. Expect to pay \$10-\$16 for most entrées.



With its tin roof, columned front porch, cypress-lined lobby and mangrove view, the venerable **Rod and Gun Club**, 200 Broadway, Everglades City, ☎ 941-695-2101, firmly grasps its Southern roots. Inside the lobby, an alligator hide stretches along a wall behind a copper-topped center fireplace. Built circa 1889 as a home that grew into an inn for hunters, fishermen, and yachters, it once entertained presidents and dignitaries within its pecky cypress walls. Today, the Rod and Gun Club still feeds intrepid sportsfolk who arrive by boat or car. The main dining room feels like a sportsman's lodge, wooded and clubby. A screened porch dining room invites leisurely dining. Sample Dixie-Florida fare: fried fresh fish, steamed shrimp in beer, frog legs, fettuccine Alfredo, stone crab, Southern peanut butter pie (if you don't have room, get a piece to go), and bourbon pecan pie. It's open daily for breakfast, lunch (\$7-\$9.50) and dinner (entrées are \$10-\$24.50). No credit cards accepted.