

# Finding a new Florida

Fall in love with the Sunshine State all over again on two less-traveled getaways

There's no better way to beat the winter blues than with a quick trip down to Florida, and you won't find many New Yorkers arguing it — of the 77 million travelers who visited the Sunshine State in 2005, 11.9% were from New York. But where to spend the weekend? Miami's got nightlife and dining, and Orlando's great for family fun, but sometimes all you need on a winter getaway is sand, surf and a few good meals. For a lower-key escape, consider two Florida destinations that might not be on your radar.



Checking out one of Anna Maria Island's major draws, the Gulf Coast waters.



## Getting to know Anna Maria

Standing on white powdery sand and gazing down the shoreline, you'll notice that Anna Maria Island is missing something that defines most popular beach destinations: towering hotels.

And that's how the locals like it. This laid-back Gulf Coast island is drawing tourists with its near-turquoise waters, quaint cottages and two- and three-story motels.

"About 30 years ago, the city fathers and mothers got together and said we'd like to keep the island the way that it has always been — no high-rises, no McDonald's, no Burger Kings; only eclectic restaurants, a beautiful beach, small hotels and resorts, and that old Florida charm," says Eric Carnes, owner of Cedar Cove Resort.

The plan's working — TripAdvisor recently named Anna Maria Island the hottest U.S. destination for 2007. The area's season runs from February through spring, but bands of beach bums were dropping into town as early as December.

They come for reunions and weddings (a local hotel owner called it "the wedding capital of Florida"), but mostly to relax. At 7½ miles long, the narrow island is made up of three cities — Bradenton Beach, Holmes Beach, and Anna Maria — each with antique and homemade ice cream shops, good restaurants, water sports and access to the beach.

By car, Gulf Drive takes you from Bradenton Beach in the south, north to Holmes Beach and finally to Anna Maria. If you don't drive, there's a free trolley that runs up and down Gulf Drive every 20 minutes.

Bradenton Beach's Bridge St. is the center of the Historic Old Town District and the busiest strip on the island. Shops on either side sell beach gear and every type of shell and starfish souvenir imaginable. Drift In, a smoky bar on the eastern end of Bridge St., attracts middle-aged locals; a sports bar is next door.

The line was out the door at Island Crêpe-

rie — a tiny bistro that serves up the French pancakes stuffed with sweet or savory fillings for breakfast and dinner. But don't plan on a late lunch: It closes at 2 p.m. and reopens at 5:30. The Gulf Drive Cafe is a short trip north of Bridge St. This sunny beachfront diner is lively, extremely casual and known for its Belgian waffles.

At the southern tip of Bradenton Beach lies Coquina Baywalk at Leffis Key. Sandy paths and wooden footbridges lead you through this scenic spot that's perfect for spotting crabs and fish in lagoons.

Most of the hotels on Anna Maria offer studios and one- and two-bedroom suites. They're spacious, with suites generally including a living room and full kitchen. At Cedar Cove in Holmes Beach, quarters are spread out in separate small buildings on the beach and across the street in cottages. Suites are equipped with utensils, an ironing board and other necessities, making it ideal for week-long trips and families.

Cedar Cove is one of the oldest motels on

## Sandbar on the north end of the island serves seafood on the beach.

the island, and though the rooms could use an upgrade, they do have modern amenities like DVD players and flat-screen televisions. There are grills and a guest tiki bar on the beach. One-bedrooms range from \$125 to \$225, two-bedrooms range from \$160 to \$270.

Anna Maria Beach Cottages in the city of Anna Maria offers fresher, but similarly laid out rooms with the bonus of a pool. For more upscale accommodations, try the Tortuga Inn or Tradewinds Resort.

A short walk on the beach from the Beach Cottages leads you to the SandBar, run by the same owners. Seafood dishes range from pistachio salmon to blue crab cakes, with dinner entrées averaging \$20. You can eat at a table on the sand, a covered deck or inside the restaurant.

If you're not up for a beach day, downtown Bradenton and its cultural attractions are only a 20-minute drive from the island. The Village of the Arts is an entire neighborhood of adorable old pastel-painted homes that have been converted into galleries that house everything from jewelry to furniture made by local artists. Sidewalk cafes and shops selling vintage clothes and used books also line the quiet streets.

Highlights at the South Florida Museum in Bradenton include a colossal fossil of an extinct Ice Age mammal, silver pendants that belonged to local Native Americans and a model of the NASA space shuttle Atlantis.

But the main draw is Snooty, a 1,300-pound manatee who looks just as relaxed in his aquarium as you'll be on Anna Maria Island's shores.



G.S. SWANSON DAILY NEWS



KAREN JONES

## Finding your way to Delray

Nestled between West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale, Delray Beach was once another sleepy Florida beach town in need of a face-lift.

But with recent revitalization efforts attracting hip, new establishments and clientele, it's becoming a hot spot without tons of attitude.

Accessible from either West Palm Beach or Fort Lauderdale airports, Delray is located off the A1A, Florida's historic two-lane ocean highway. Atlantic Ave., its mile-long main drag,

cuts west right off the beach and is where you'll find all manner of shops, boutiques, restaurants, galleries and accommodations.

"Delray is a quaint town where you can do everything or nothing," says former New Yorker Meridith Morrow-Binette, daughter of legendary disc jockey "Cousin Bruce" Morrow, who has lived in Delray for 10 years. She and her husband own East Coast Tees and Sunglasses on Atlantic Ave. "You don't need a car because everything is within walking distance."

Delray has a gorgeous public beach, and if you want to stay

right on the water, the Delray Beach Marriott has pristine views, restaurants, two pools and the new N. Reagan Spa (no connection to the former First Lady). Rooms start at \$229.

For old-school Florida digs with matching personality, try the Colony Hotel & Cabana Club (starting at \$185), a historic landmark dating from 1926, or Cranes Beach House (starting at \$219), a gorgeous gem with tropical-themed suites and a tiki bar.

Dining right on the ocean here runs the gamut, from beach-style pub grub at Bostons on the Beach to the more upscale but flip-flop friendly Cafe Luna Rosa. Both have open-air seating, a variety of entertainment and that special laid-back feeling that comes from mixing balmy air with mojitos.

Leaving the beach to explore Atlantic Ave., you'll cross a bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway, where you can pick up a boat excursion at Veteran's Park. The main drag is reminiscent of other, better-known trendy beach towns, full of small art galleries and boutiques, clothing shops and lots of eateries, many with outdoor sidewalk tables vying for space with pedestrians. Diners can sample Asian bistro fare at Lemongrass, local specialties at City Oyster and a diverse menu that changes daily at 32 East (bring your wallet).

Atlantic Ave. (left) and the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens (below.)



## if you go...

**Delray Beach Marriott** (561-274-3200, [www.delraybeachmarriott.com](http://www.delraybeachmarriott.com))

**Cranes Beach House** (561-278-1700, [www.cranesbeachhouse.com](http://www.cranesbeachhouse.com))

**Sundy House** (561-272-5678, [www.sundyhouse.com](http://www.sundyhouse.com))

**Colony Hotel & Cabana Club** (561-276-4123, [www.thecolonyhotel.com](http://www.thecolonyhotel.com))

For more information, contact the Delray Beach Downtown Marketing Cooperative (561-279-1380, or visit [www.downtowndelraybeach.com](http://www.downtowndelraybeach.com)).

For a delicious hamburger, try the walkup window service at no-frills Doc's American.

For a stay off the beaten path, Sundy House is the place. This restored Victorian mansion is set in an otherworldly realm of tropical gardens and waterfalls (starting at \$249).

For a break from the beach, spend a few hours at the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens. A 200-acre park with walking paths that wind through pine forests, lakes, fish ponds and rock gardens, Morikami also has an excellent Asian cafe.

The great thing about visiting this part of Florida is that you can use it as a jumping-off point for day trips. Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale are about 20 minutes by car, depending on traffic, and Miami is an hour away.

But if planting your chair in the sand and doing nothing more than soaking in the marvelous ocean views is the ticket, staying put in Delray is just fine, too.



PALM BEACH COUNTY CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

Delray Beach's Colony Hotel & Cabana Club, which opened on Atlantic Ave. in 1926, is known for its "old Florida" vibe.