

FLORIDA'S PEARL IN THE SUN

ANNA MARIA ISLAND

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“PLEASE, PLEASE, MAKE
THIS DESTINATION
A QUIET RETREAT
IN PARADISE.”

I kept repeating this to myself as I drove across the Skyway Bridge. I had had quite a frantic life (but who doesn't?) over the past months and the last thing I needed was another bubbling and noisy beach destination.

As I drove onto the Manatee River Bridge, I gazed at the sun in the pink sky. A light breeze wrinkled the calm surface on the water below. No heavy traffic on the road as I turned left on Gulf Drive. No frenzy on the sidewalks and on the terraces. Just a casual atmosphere among pedestrians and seasonal visitors. I released some tension and started to breathe normally.



background: Anna Maria Island offers an impressive array of beaches ranging from vibrant, family-oriented spots to more secluded gems such as this one.

bottom: Featuring sundaes, ice cream cones, cookies and other treats, Two Scoops is located across the street from the Anna Maria public pier.

I stopped in front of the SeaSide Inn Beach Resort, a small quaint motel. Owner David Teitelbaum greeted me and gave me a property tour. As we paused on the terrace roof to admire the turquoise sea blending in with the clear blue sky, David declared I would be under the spell of the island before the end of day. Later that afternoon, as I rested on my chaise longue on a white powdery sand beach, I came to understand this place was all about beauty and serenity. Nary a sound, only the music of the waves. Hardly anybody on the beach. A few steps to my right, a graceful blue heron kept me company while, in the distance, a sailboat crossed the Gulf on the horizon.

BEACHES GALORE

I was impressed by the vast array of beaches on Anna Maria Island. Ranging from vibrant and family-oriented spots, such as Manatee Public Beach or Holmes Beach, to more secluded beaches, such as Coquina Beach, Longboat Key Public Beach, to name just a few, you can experience it all. I personally fell for the gems on the northern tip of Anna Maria Island. Especially around 7 a.m. Not a soul. Only you, the Gulf of Mexico and your footprints on sugar-white sand.

In the evenings, I easily found a spot anywhere on the island to admire some of the most spectacular sunsets I've ever witnessed and scenery that left me with long-lasting memories.

ISLAND CUISINE

Anna Maria Island offers a host of opportunities to satisfy your appetite and taste for refined cuisine.



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top: Home to more than 35 artists, the Village of the Arts is Florida's largest art community.

bottom: Rated the No. 1 tourist attraction in Bradenton, Florida, horse surfing is extremely popular and may be sold out weeks in advance so reservations are highly recommended.



26 DREAMSCAPES Fall 2011

If you prefer a solid breakfast first thing in the morning, I recommend pancakes or waffles at the Gulf Drive Café & Tiki. For lunch, why not try to photograph a dolphin jumping out of the water as you enjoy a plateful of shrimps at the Anna Maria City Pier Restaurant? It is a unique spot from which to admire the blue Gulf waters and watch lazy pelicans navigate around fishermen's boats. Then, stop in for a coconut ice cream at Two Scoops across the street. For dinner, aim for the ultimate gastronomic experience at the Beach Bistro, a four-star restaurant with a very talented chef.

SPECIAL EXPERIENCES

When I wasn't swimming in the warm Gulf waters, I joined the Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch (AMITW) volunteers on the beach early in the morning to search for tracks of female turtles that had emerged the previous night. It was a wonderful way to learn first-hand about the turtles' nesting and hatching habits.

I even contemplated paddling standing up on a boat from Native Rentals. Unfortunately, I never did get around to it. It would have been a unique opportunity to escape into a world of tranquility while gliding on the waters of Bayfront Park with the Skybridge as a backdrop.



Instead, I ended the day horse surfing in Palma Sola Causeway waters. This one-hour adventure in the water with my horse consisted of swimming and playing with it, then hanging onto its tail and being dragged full speed in the water. A memorable experience I highly recommend for those who love horseback riding.

As I enjoyed a light lunch at the Village Cafe on Pine Avenue, I was introduced to the Historic Green Village—a project designed to generate more energy on-site than it will consume in a year thanks to a variety of green technologies. The project is built across five plots on the historic main street of Anna Maria City. All are historic old houses rescued from demolition and restored in accordance to the Green Village standards.

MAINLAND ATTRACTIONS

In Bradenton on the mainland, just a 15-minute drive from Anna Maria Island, I strolled among colourful wooden houses in the Village of the Arts, a cheerful and creative community where 35 eccentric and virtuous artists live, work and display their creations in their homes or studios.

I also took the opportunity to stop by the South Florida Museum to visit Snooty, the oldest and most famous manatee in Florida. The planetarium and the many exhibits displayed in this modern and smartly-staged museum are most compelling.

After only a few days, I felt relaxed and rejuvenated. The nonchalant and warmth of people as well as the stunning scenery make Anna Maria Island a very precious place in the sun. ■

TRAVEL PARTNERS:

For more information, visit:
VISITFLORIDA.COM
 Bradenton Area Convention and Visitor's Bureau:
annamariaisland-longboatkey.com
 SeaSide Inn Beach Resort:
seasideresort.com
 Anna Maria Historic Green Village:
annamariahistoricgreenvillage.com
 Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch and Shore Bird Monitoring:
islandturtles.com
 Great World Adventures:
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 Village of the Arts:
villageofthearts.com
 South Florida Museum:
southfloridamuseum.org

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