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TRAVEL

LAIID-BACK ANNA MARIA IS FLORIDA'S BEST-KEPT SECRET



There is more to Florida than Disney ... as Matt Carroll found out

AWAY from all the theme parks and sprawling resorts, MATT CARROLL finds an unspoilt corner of the Sunshine State.

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Having been to Florida several times, I thought I knew what to expect from the Sunshine State. Over the years I've visited countless theme parks in Orlando, gone alligator-spotting

in the Everglades and stayed in a number of high-rise touristy hotels. I felt I had seen all that Florida had to offer. But the moment I drove across the bridge from the mainland, I knew I'd stumbled across something special. I was only an hour's drive from Tampa but it felt like I had entered a different world: an island paradise of cosy, clapboard guesthouses, endless white-sand beaches and family-run restaurants.

Located off the west coast, the Florida Gulf island of Anna Maria is the state's best-kept secret. Seven miles long and no wider than a few streets in places, it is bordered by petrol-blue waters and has some of the most amazing sunsets I've seen.

This is an island paradise of cosy, clapboard guesthouses, endless white-sand beaches and family-run restaurants.

On the first evening, I flip-flopped my way across the road from my guesthouse to admire a flaming orange sky that turned to neon pink as the sun melted into the horizon.

Take an evening stroll from Bradenton Beach, with its quirky clock tower, to Holmes Beach between April and October and you'll come across several nesting sites for turtles; I saw legions of little babies wobbling their way towards the shore guided by the moon's silver light.

There are plenty of reasons to keep your eyes peeled at other times of the year, too.

I headed to nearby Siesta Key, another Gulf island off Sarasota, and watched playful dolphins just off shore. If you want a closer look at the marine life in Bradenton you can book a scuba session with Sea Trek Divers to try to spot manatees (sea cows) and dolphins, or visit the Parker Aquarium, home to Snooty, a 58-year-old manatee.

On Siesta Key a session on a Wave Runner with Siesta Key Jet Ski will lift you from your sweaty stupor. Blast round the estuarine back alleys and catch air off the wake of passing boats.

Seafood is a big part of the attraction on Anna Maria. I feasted on an amazing grouper at the Star Fish Company in Cortez, where I was surrounded by boats and a bunch of pelicans jealously looking at my food.

I tucked into another specialty, freshly-caught crabs washed down with a beer, at the Sandbar restaurant on the island's north coast with local hotelier David Teitelbaum, who told me: "Life here is much more relaxed than the rest of Florida. When you wake up every day and see stunning beaches stretching out in front of you there isn't much to complain about."

Also, unlike the mainland, you won't find lots of high-rise hotels. I stayed at the spacious Tortuga Inn, where I spent a lazy afternoon lying in bed as a gentle sea breeze drifted in through the open patio windows.

After a huge breakfast at Harrington House on Holmes Beach, which felt more like a

Cornish teashop than a guesthouse, I needed an epic walk to burn it off. I was in the right place.

Holmes Beach turned out to be my favorite on the island. In contrast to the soft white sand elsewhere, I found myself crunching along a carpet of tiny, brightly-coloured shells – raspberry ripple, peach sorbet and butterscotch – each one polished to perfection by the surf.

With beaches this beautiful, you'd expect them to be packed but in the two hours I spent strolling through the ocean spray, I passed only a handful of people.

It's this understated, uncomplicated existence that has drawn numerous celebrities to the island, including Chris Martin and wife Gwyneth Paltrow, Stephen King and Jerry Springer.

They'd probably be hard to spot, though. Everyone walks around in board shorts, sandals and a T-shirt. It seems that for them, like me, Anna Maria represents the kind of idyllic existence that most of us spend our lives daydreaming about. The only surprise is to have found it in Florida.

GETTING THERE

Expedia (0871 226 0808/www.expedia.co.uk) offers seven nights room only at Tortuga Inn and Beach Resort from £628pp (two sharing), including return flights from Heathrow to Tampa. The Parker Manatee Aquarium (www.southfloridamuseum.org) is open Tuesday to Saturday: £11 per adult and £8 per child, under-fours free. Florida's Gulf Islands: 020 7430 7913/www.floridasgulfislands.com