

Where Old Florida Lives On

Sanibel and Captiva Have Kept Big Developers (if Not the Snail's Pace Traffic) at Bay

By Cliff Terry

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One of the beautiful beaches on Sanibel Island in the Gulf of Mexico.

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By Cliff Terry

A while back, in a small fishing boat, Sanibel Island, it was just before 1974, when I was in my 30s. The water was shallow and the sand was white. The water was shallow and the sand was white. The water was shallow and the sand was white. The water was shallow and the sand was white.

of the 'Old Florida'—the original, unspoiled, unspoiled, unspoiled. There's no one else there. It's just the way it was. It's just the way it was. It's just the way it was. It's just the way it was.

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THE SHOWCASE IS HOWMAN'S BEACH RECENTLY NAMED ONE OF THE 10 BEST FAMILY BEACHES IN THE U.S.

Howman's Beach in Sanibel Island, Fla., has been named one of the top 10 best family beaches in the United States. The beach is known for its wide, sandy beach, clear water, and excellent facilities. It is a perfect spot for families looking for a relaxing beach vacation.

Sanibel
Sanibel Island, Fla., is a beautiful beach town. It is known for its white sand beaches and clear water. The island is a great place to visit for a relaxing vacation.

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Photo by Pat Terry

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BY CLIFF TERRY

A while back, in a seashell-cleaning hut on Sanibel Island, a man was heard telling a woman, "It's all about the shells, isn't it? That's why we come here." ■ "Well, actually," the woman replied, somewhat sheepishly, "we came here to get away from the kids." ■ Whatever the motive, Sanibel and its adjacent barrier island Captiva, have long been delightful destinations for tired-of-shoveling Northerners and others seeking sun and surf. My wife, Pat, and I first visited Sanibel/Captiva when our two boys were quite young, then returned with them in their teen years and came back as empty-nesters this February. ■ Part of the appeal is that a decades-long struggle to maintain these islands

as the “Old Florida”—as opposed to condo-intensive stretches of the state’s shoreline—have largely been successful. There’s one unobtrusive Holiday Inn, and that’s it for big chains. No Golden Arches or “big box” stores, either. Even the islands’ scattered “starter mansions” are shielded by native foliage. Plus, the beaches and shells are as lovely as ever.

“If you’re looking for high-rises and fast-paced Miami Beach vacations or Disney, this is not the place,” says Judith Ann Zimomra, Sanibel’s city manager. “But if you want world-class beaches, with great shelling, it is.”

Sanibel—145 miles south of Tampa and connected by a 3-mile-long causeway to the mainland’s Ft. Myers—is roughly 12 miles long and 5 miles across. Captiva, connected by bridge across a thin slice of water known as Blind Pass, is less than 5 miles long and half a mile wide. With the islands situated in the Gulf of Mexico on a geographical “slant,” they become an ideal catching grounds for all kinds of fantastic shells.

The islands boast 15 miles of beaches, 11 of them on Sanibel. There is access to six public beaches on Sanibel, which shares Turner Beach at Blind Pass with Captiva, home to public-access Captiva Beach at its far end. (Under Florida law, there are no private beaches, though not all beaches have public access. Everything between the water and the high-tide mark is public, but beach-walkers aren’t supposed to venture onto private property that lies above the high-tide mark.)

The showcase on Sanibel is Bowman’s Beach, recently named by TripAdvisor as one of the 10 best family beaches in the U.S. Bowman is beautifully kept up, has classy restrooms and even the spacious parking lot is landscaped with native vegetation. Like the other beaches, there are no shacks selling junk food or tacky souvenirs. At the entrance are large displays describing dune vegetation (sea oats, passion vine, bay cedar) and, of course, the lineup of seashells.

More than 400 species of multi-colored shells, from the commonplace lightning welk and Florida fighting conch to the rare junonia can be found along the coast. For those wishing to complement their finds, the islands feature several buy-’em-here shops with names like She Sells Sea Shells and Showcase Shells.

The Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum is reportedly the only North American museum devoted exclusively to seashells. It features an introductory video on mollusks, answering such questions as how they reproduce (very slowly), along with displays of shells from around the world, a children’s learning lab and answers to other such questions as, “Do giant clams eat man?” (No, they’re vegetarian.)

On a recent clear-sky February morning, a woman speaking German is clacking along the substantial boardwalk in her high heels;

other women are conversing in French on the beach while an American guy is doing business over his cell phone.

At Tarpon Bay Beach, midway on Sanibel, a sign reads, "Leave nothing on beach but footprints." Not many have ventured into the water (the air temperature is in the low 70s) and a man is sitting in a beach chair, quietly practicing guitar. Down the way, at the Gulfside City Park beach, "quiet" is probably not the operative word, as its shallow waters attract families with young children. Farther east is Sanibel Lighthouse Beach, known for its treasure of "miniatures"—microscopic versions of shells. And at the island's west end at smallish Turner Beach, surf fishermen standing on rock pilings are trying their luck.

West-facing Captiva attracts late-afternoon visitors hoping to catch the moment when, as novelist Richard Ford has written, "the sun turns the sea to sequined fires." A dutiful attendant from the tony South Seas Plantation Resort and Yacht Harbor, still recovering more than two years after Hurricane Charley's onslaught, provides umbrellas and beach chairs for the resort's guests in a roped-off area. The beach is composed of finely crushed shells, unlike the more sandy composition on Sanibel. Brown pelicans are floating out on the water, while a heron is standing in the shallows, seemingly oblivious to the nearby human activity.

Undoubtedly, the crown jewel of the islands is Sanibel's J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and named after a pioneer conservationist who was also, of all things, a Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist. More than 800,000 people visit it annually, many never getting out of their cars as they traverse the 5-mile Wildlife Drive. More than 220 bird species have been spotted there, and we saw pied-billed grebes, ibis, white and brown pelicans, anhingas, ospreys in their nests, willets, a variety of herons, brilliant roseate spoonbills and the dancing reddish egrets.

Another way to see the wildlife is to bike around or take the refuge's excellent 90-minute guided tram tour, or you might want to sign on with Canoe Adventures headed by outspoken, iconoclastic Mark "Bird" Westall, a former Sanibel mayor.

Other activities include biking the 27 miles of paths on Sanibel alone—it's all flat!—and visiting C.R.O.W. (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) and the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation's Nature Center, or taking a dolphin-spotting cruise on San Carlos Bay.

In August 2004, the islands were hit by

Charley, a Category 4 hurricane with winds of up to 141 m.p.h. Captiva was the hardest hit but, remarkably, there were no fatalities or injuries on either island. Perhaps the biggest problems were the downed Australian pine trees that made the main thoroughfares, Periwinkle Way and Captiva Drive, impassable. Elsewhere on the island, roofs were ripped off and power lines downed. At "Ding" Darling, 40 percent of the habitat was destroyed.

The eye of the hurricane passed within 2 miles of Captiva's large South Seas Island Resort, heavily damaging it and covering its golf course with sand. It fully reopened in March. All the hurricane-damaged areas on Sanibel have recovered and all accommodations are back up and running, city manager Zimomra says.

Sanibel incorporated as a city in 1974, while Captiva is unincorporated in Lee County. In 1976, a report on land use laid out concerns with such issues as wetlands and mangrove protection, beach-erosion control and wildlife conservation. It was the first U.S. city to base its land-development code on the preservation of natural resources.

With few exceptions, the city's buildings are restricted to a height of three stories, and on both islands, from May through October, the nesting season for sea turtles, residents must keep lights near the beaches off or shielded.

About 72 percent of Sanibel land is on conservation status, which means it can't be developed, through acquisitions by the city, the "Ding" Darling preserve and the non-

profit Conservation Foundation. The foundation, incorporated in 1967, has fought such development proposals as a huge trailer park and golf and tennis club, thus preserving 300-plus acres of wetlands, and campaigned for measures ranging from protection for alligators to eliminating junked cars.

Captiva has considerably fewer curbs on development, and there's a lot more of it there. Sanibel Islanders, it appears, have been longtime battlers. One elderly Sanibel couple in their 60s fought putting a road through their property, standing off a bulldozer with a crossbow.

Not everything, of course, is blue skies and roseate spoonbills. There is the numbing bumper-to-bumper traffic, which is why some vacationers shun these islands. The traffic jam is usually between 3 and 6 p.m., when workers and day-tripping tourists head back to the mainland along Periwinkle Way, Sanibel's main thoroughfare.

City manager Zimomra says one of the biggest challenges today is water quality, which is affected by water pathways from areas north. ("If someone pours a can of oil into a sewer basin at Disney World, it eventually will go down the Kissimmee River into Lake Okeechobee, down the Caloosahatchee River and then on to Sanibel.")

Another challenge is the burden on resources imposed by off-island growth. "We're protecting *our* areas, but if [nearby] Cape Coral goes from a town of 10,000 to 100,000, and they have no beaches of their

own, and every time their cousin comes down from Pittsburgh and they want to take him to the beach, that's 10 times as many people trying to get to our beaches every day." □

Cliff Terry is a Chicago free-lancer and former Tribune writer and critic.

Food...

The Mucky Duck, 11546 Andy Rosse Ln., Captiva. A favorite with locals and tourists alike, the Duck has wonderful views of the Gulf, and if you ask for a "window table," a waitress brings over a window mounted on rollers—always good for a laugh. Selections range from boiled shrimp and fish cakes to black-bean burgers, and specials include the exquisite tilapia. Near the entrance is a sign advising: "Children left unattended and running around will be served espresso and given a FREE puppy!"

Redfish, Blufish, 751 Tarpon Bay Rd., Sanibel. Serving small, tapas-style portions, this delightful 45-seat establishment offers up ambitious fare such as black grouper with timbale of scrambled eggs, sweet sausage and onion confit; American bison meatloaf with mashed sweet potatoes and porcini gravy; and snapper with mandarin pineapple salad and candied pecans. There's also an impressive wine list.

Sanibel Bean, 2240 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel. Known as simply "The Bean," this always-humming place serves up straightforward good coffee, bagels, fruit platters, salads, grilled Italian panini and deli sandwiches.

Amy's Over Easy Cafe, 630-1 Tarpon Bay Rd., Sanibel. A pleasant, airy place that's highly popular with the breakfast crowd. Some outdoor seating. Try the French toast with wonderful fresh strawberries or the pedestrian but tasty "Ho Hum" (eggs and bacon or sausage).

...and shelter

Our quaint Periwinkle Cottages of Sanibel (est. 1959), at 1431 Jamaica Dr., lived up to its claim of "affordable island charm and Old Florida comfort." The one drawback was that our unit was an "efficiency," with microwave but no stove and no kitchen sink, which meant we had to wash our dishes in the bathroom sink. But just outside our window was a pond, in which we saw a reddish egret, cormorant, great egret and ibis, and there are free bikes. The seven-day cost was under \$900, a bargain by Sanibel standards. (Other places can go to \$2,500-plus a week.)

Among Sanibel's other no-nonsense, "old island" lodging that caught our attention are **Shalimar Resort, 2823 W. Gulf Dr.**; **The Blue Dolphin, 4227 W. Gulf Dr.**; and the 50-year-old **Tropical Winds, 4819 Trade Winds Dr.**, prime sunset-watching territory.

On Captiva, **Jensen's on the Gulf, 15300 Captiva Dr.**, looked intriguing.

Pricier vintage places include the renovated **Tween Waters Inn, 15951 Captiva Dr., Captiva**; **The Castaways at Blind Pass, 6460 Sanibel-Captiva Rd., Sanibel**; the oldest of them all (est. 1895), the charming **Island Inn, 3111 West Gulf, Sanibel**, complete with, yes, a shuffleboard court; and the fancy-schmancy **Casa Ybel** (est. 1915), 2255 West Gulf, Sanibel.