

Destinations & Diversions



Photos by Matt May for USA TODAY

Laid-back Low-cost

Been looking for a place that's unpretentious, friendly and fun? Pull up a chair here, at the best-kept secret on the Gulf Coast

Island ritual: Watching the sun go down is an Anna Maria tradition. At The Sandbar, whoever guesses the minute the sun sinks wins Champagne.

Florida

By Kitty Bean Yancey
USA TODAY

ANNA MARIA ISLAND, Fla. — "Please be sweet and rinse your feet," hand-painted signs over troughs of water outside rooms at the beachfront, 23-unit Cedar Cove Resort & Cottages gently urge.

Tanned owner Eric Cairns makes his rounds in Jimmy Buffett-style tropical shirts and oversees the resort's "Queen for Your Stay" program, in which the name of a lucky woman staying a week or more is picked from a hat. She gets a crown, massage and other royal perks during her visit.

Down the 7-mile stretch of white sand on the Gulf of Mexico, waves lap and sea oats sway in the dunes. Two bridal parties and a few dozen tourists assemble by The Sandbar lounge/restaurant for Anna Maria's nightly rituals: sunset weddings and guessing which minute the red orb will drop below the horizon. The Sandbar winner typically gets a bottle of Champagne (dessert or T shirts for teetotalers).

Unlike similar sunset celebrations in Florida tourist meccas such as Key West, there are no rowdy crowds, wall-to-wall bars or panhandlers. Also absent on Anna Maria are high-rise condos and chain hotels. You'll have to drive off-island for a McDonald's or Starbucks fix.

"We've been all over Florida, but we love Anna Maria Island because it's so oldy-worldy," says Glynis Bayles of England, who is here with her husband, Robert, a retiree. Europeans and the value-minded favor this getaway, where low-rise is the rule. (Just one condo complex stands more than three stories high, and no more tall buildings are allowed.)

In the age of \$400-a-night beachfront resorts and mondo-condo high rises, it's hard to find an unassuming, wallet-friendly "Old Florida" vacation spot. Anna Maria, an easy drive from Tampa and Sarasota and just north of more developed Longboat Key, is one of few remaining. It's just 7 miles long and has about 8,000 permanent residents.

Those who own the mostly modest cottages or return to stay year after year in no-frills mom-and-pop lodgings (rates at some oceanfront ones start below \$100) include millionaires who love the laid-back, friendly atmosphere. Some live at the ritzier north end of the island, where you might see herons crossing the road undisturbed.

Residents and visitors gather for lattes at Ginny's

Cover story



Fish and chips: The Rod & Reel Pier on the northern tip of Anna Maria Island is home to an affordable seafood restaurant and a great spot to angle for snook and redfish.



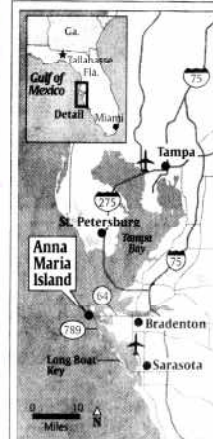
Simple pleasures: Braden and Marissa Trott of Fort Worth play in the calm, uncrowded waters off Anna Maria Island.

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Photos by Matt May for USA TODAY

Beach, beach, beach: Visitors flock from as far as Europe to enjoy Anna Maria's miles of white sand. The beach outside The Sandbar restaurant is a popular gathering spot.



If you go...

Getting there: Anna Maria Island is about an hour's drive southwest of Tampa International Airport and a half hour northwest of Sarasota Bradenton International Airport.

Where to stay: Cedar Cove Resort & Cottages (800-206-6293; cedarcove-resort.com) has units with kitchenettes (the modern beachside Palm and Sandcastle penthouses are coveted, as are the Old-Florida-funky Flamingo and Mermaid suites). Rates start at \$139 in the off-season, \$189 in high season (February-April). Seventy percent of guests are repeaters. **Harrington House Beachfront Bed & Breakfast** (888-828-5566; harringtonhouse.com) rents rooms in a historic 1920s home and in other buildings (including one with two modern Gulf-front condos). It has a wedding gazebo, pool and stand-alone honeymoon suite with heart-shaped tub. Rates start at \$149 in the off-season, \$199 in winter.

Where to eat: The **Beach Bistro** (entrees \$30-\$60, small plates in the \$10-\$15 range) has the best food on the Gulf Coast, according to the latest Zagat guide, and diners flock from miles around. The intimate beachside dining room offers a rose on every linen-covered table; locals gather for drinks and eats at the friendly bar. **Bridgetender Inn and Dockside Bar**, near the Bradenton Beach pier, is beloved by folk who drive or cruise in by boat for fresh stuffed grouper, steaks and melt-in-your-mouth Cajun grouper fingers (entrees \$12.95-\$31.95). There's nightly live entertainment in the bar, and Green Bay Packers memorabilia (reflecting the Wisconsin owner's passion) decks the walls. **Ginny's and Jane E's** is an island gathering spot for morning lattes with \$5.50 crème brûlée French toast and homemade soup, salad or sandwich lunches. It's also an internet cafe and vintage furniture/art/gift emporium.

Information: Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce, 941-778-1541 and amichamber.org; amiweddings.com.

Many come to visit — and never leave

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and Jane E's, a funky cafe/store in a former IGA grocery owned by two sisters. Chatting with a stream of friends at the cash register, co-owner Ginny Dutton, 62, grins from under the brim of her pink baseball cap and explains the eclectic jumble of antiques, purses from Bali and works by local artists. "I have dreams at night about where to place things, and what (color) to paint" the whimsically hued shop.

"There's a spirit here," she says, explaining what made her exit the broadcast ad-sales rat race in New York, Boston, Chicago and L.A. and put down roots here 15 years ago. "I can run a business and stand on my tippy-toes and see Tampa Bay."

Local historians can't say for sure how the island got its name — one theory is that it was named by a Spanish explorer — but Anna Maria was settled by a homesteader named George Emerson Bean in the late 19th century. Home sites were hacked out of jungle; residents and visitors came by boat until a bridge was built in the 1920s. In later years, communities here had more success than most in Florida in keeping out developers.

The island used to be "blue-hair, and nothing was happening," Dutton says. Now, all ages swarm in, spawning more art galleries, festivals and last year's first bridal fair, where inns, caterers and photographers displayed their wares to woo engaged couples. (The Anna Maria Chamber of Commerce is promoting it as a Florida beach wedding capital and plans another fair Jan. 25).

As for residents, Anna Maria "draws a lot of talented, intelligent people," Dutton says. "It's a very special place. It has got a blessing on it."

On this Friday, a manatee swims lazily at Lefliss Key nature preserve at the island's southern tip. A sand-castle-building competition is underway in Bradenton Beach. Near the island's midpoint, a group of white-haired women sit in white plastic chairs at the Cafe on the Beach to share wacky games of contract bridge



'Old Florida' feel: Guests share a beachside table at The Cedar Cove Resort & Cottages, with tiki huts and suites with tropical décor.



Wedding bells: Jared Kohn and Rebecca Wright of Grand Rapids, Mich., tie the knot. Beach weddings are becoming an industry here.

See more scenes of "Old Florida" at travel.usatoday.com.

and conversation. That night at the Bridgetender Inn and Dockside Bar, a locals' hangout in Anna Maria's Bradenton Beach — the most commercial of three incorporated communities on the island — waitresses call visitors "hon" and "dear," and the couple at the neighboring table starts a conversation while a guitarist plays a white-bread version of reggae star Bob Marley's *Stir It Up*. "We're very proud of our area," says Barbara Irvotti, a vivacious redhead sipping a Corona Light on the terrace overlooking a marina under a full moon. "We have a very safe environment here."

She and her husband, George, a finance professor, live across from the island in Cortez, Fla., and often drive over to eat.

Indeed, the dining is as good as the fishing that lures many visitors. Options range from a simple grouper sandwich for \$8.50 and a \$6.95 pitcher of beer at the old Rod & Reel Pier, where you can cast a line, to the world-class, white-tablecloth Beach Bistro, where chef/owner Sean Murphy stirs up great reviews with a locally adored plum-tomato soup with Maytag blue cheese and risotto with truffle foie gras and mushrooms. He arrived three decades ago, not planning to stay, and he and his wife brought up two kids in a place "where everybody knows your name."

The bistro's clubby lounge,

Four other Old Florida favorites

A sampling of other locales with the flavor of Old Florida from VISIT FLORIDA and its "Authentic Florida Expert," Lucy Beebe Tobias, who used to live on Anna Maria Island and also is the author of *50 Great Walks in Florida*:

Apalachicola: A National Trust for Historic Preservation 2008 "Distinctive Destination," the fishing town in the Northwest Panhandle has 200-plus buildings dating before 1910, Tobias says. Oysters, shrimp and blue crab tempt tourists. "Sit at Boss Oyster restaurant, see the sun go down, and eat seafood caught that day ... and the boat will be tied up at the dock. It's off the beaten path, but well worth it." apalachicola.org.

Tarpon Springs: The Greek fishing village northwest of Tampa can be touristy, but it's "the Old World transplanted to the New World," Tobias says. "You can see a diver bring up sponges the old-fashioned way." There's Greek food, natch, and a cathedral with gorgeous stained-glass windows. 727-938-3711; ci.tarpon-springs.fl.us.

Pine Island: Self-dubbed "Florida's best-kept secret," this island near better-known Sanibel in Southwest Florida has no traffic and lots of mangroves and mangroves. pineislandfl.com

Homosassa: The riverside community in Central Florida is "an old fishing village with artists' studios," Tobias says. Nearby Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park has manatees and an underwater viewing area. 800-587-6667; visitsarasota.com.

For more info on off-the-beaten-track Florida, go to visitflorida.com.

where photos of star patrons such as Robert De Niro and Ed Asner line wood-paneled walls, is a version of TV's *Cheers* bar. Bartender Fred Sullivan, 59, introduces a newcomer to patrons and recommends the succulent "White Castle Slider" — foie gras and prime beef on a sweet garlic bun with Béarnaise sauce. It's an affordable (\$14) option on the \$30-plus entree menu.

Down the bar, retired St. Louis banker Terry Schaeffer, like many here, came down for a vacation, and he and his wife ended up buying a home.

"The natural beauty attracted us, and we fell in love with it," he says. "It's not the land of excitement" — there are some party bars with live bands, such as D. Coy Ducks, but the sidewalks tend to roll up early.

Those expecting vacation manses are surprised. Anna Maria doesn't look fancy. "There's a lot of money here, but it's quiet money," bartender Sullivan says.

The dearth of gated estates and streets lined with unassuming homes with carports don't signal affluence. A free trolley ferries visitors up and down Gulf Drive. You can lease digs near the beach for \$1,000 a week in high season especially with more "for rent"

signs dotting lawns this year.

At Cedar Cove, most accommodations are Old-Florida simple, clean and comfortable. The Flamingo Suite (\$139-\$220 nightly) features white wicker furniture and a pink, aqua, green and yellow color scheme. Like many Anna Maria lodgings, it has kitchenettes, so visitors save money cooking meals. The kitchen table is hand-painted in a tropical motif; a flamingo-decorated rug brightens up the white tile floor. French doors open to a terrace with a beach view.

Over at the island's upscale family-owned Harrington House B&B, the sign out front beckons: "Come as a guest, leave as a friend." Its bridal suite is decorated in pink and green, with a heart-shaped jettied tub. Harrington's adjoining condo options do include a modern three-bedroom unit with granite-countered kitchen for \$529 a night.

The island, says co-owner Mark Davis, 38, is "a well-kept secret. But 'it's a secret we're trying to get out there.'"

Later, peacefully rocking in an old-fashioned glider on the beach at Cedar Cove watching the sun go down, it's hard to avoid the temptation to keep Anna Maria's low key attractions under wraps.