

A Hidden Island (That's Easy to Find)

Anna Maria on Florida's West Coast promises a sunny escape for the winter weary.

By **Suzanne Loudermilk**

Definitely come here for the sunsets, but plan to stay for the sunrises, too. Anna Maria Island—a wisp of a seven-mile island along Florida's West Coast—is a place that revels in the end of day. As the sun slips spectacularly past the horizon, bongos clang, music plays, cameras click, and viewers try to guess the exact time of daylight's finale. Yes, it's a nightly celebration not to be missed, but come morning, visitors still will find plenty to do until the evening ritual starts anew.

Just an hour's drive from Tampa, the mostly unknown strip of paradise beckons to those who want to relax and hide out—as many celebs do. You're likely to see Stephen King, Jerry Springer, tennis diva Maria Sharapova, Moody Blues' Graeme Edge, or Jimmy Van Zandt strolling along the beach or in one of the shops or restaurants. But for the rest of us who don't have to worry about the paparazzi, the island offers laid-back, luxurious accommodations and sensuous beaches in a tropical setting.

For those lucky enough to be heading to this year's Super Bowl on Feb. 1 in Tampa, a visit to the island—made up of three towns: Bradenton Beach, Holmes Beach, and Anna Maria—can provide a respite from the screaming fans, T-shirt hawkers, and dueling teams. Or, for those simply seeking a diversion from Baltimore's grey skies and leafless trees, it's a direct, 2 1/4-hour flight from BWI (look for special deals from Southwest and Air Tran) to the Tampa or Sarasota/Bradenton airports to soak up azure waters, sunny skies, and a profusion of swaying palm trees and exotic flowers.

You're not just locked into beach life here, either. There are myriad activities in the Tampa Bay area—from state parks to museums to luxe shopping—within easy driving distance. But if setting up the beach chair turns out to be the most strenuous exercise you do, don't feel guilty. It means you've succumbed to island life—just like the locals have been doing since Spanish explorers discovered the spot around 1530. You can't fight history here.

When it's time to eat

Why is it that a day spent lounging on the beach creates such a hunger? There are several places on the island to sate your appetite. Dress is super beach casual, except at the upscale Beach Bistro, where the exquisite food is worth the fuss of wearing your good Hawaiian shirt or sundress.



Beach House Restaurant, 200 Gulf Dr. N., Bradenton Beach, 941-779-2222.

There's nothing fancy about this sprawling eatery that serves flavorful food, giant portions, and a ringside seat to sunset. The grouper is always fat and fresh, and the crispy conch fritters with spicy cocktail sauce are so Key West.

Insider's tip: Skip dessert here and head across the street to Big Olaf Ice Cream Shop for a mango-sorbet cone or cup of Dutch peanut-butter fudge. Settle into an outdoor Adirondack chair and listen to the sensuous beats seeping from next door's Banana Cabana Caribbean Grill, which offers authentic Jamaican-style cuisine and where Denzel Washington ate when he was filming Out of Time (2003) on the island.

Gulf Drive Cafe, 900 Gulf Dr. N., Bradenton Beach, 941-778-1919.

This is the go-to place on the island for breakfast. (It's also open for lunch and dinner.) The line of hungry morning risers often stretches around the building on weekends, seeking a seat on the outdoor, covered terrace overlooking The Gulf. It's worth the wait for fluffy omelets (there's even a red-snapper one) with grits, plump waffles with berries, or fresh-from-the-oven muffins. The cheerful servers constantly refill your coffee without even a thirsty nod from you.

Insider's tip: Head inside the restaurant, where most of the locals know they'll get a table quicker and be able to savor air conditioning. You might not have the view, but you'll have the rest of the day to stare dreamily at the turquoise water.

Sandbar, 100 Spring Ave., Anna Maria, 941-778-0444.

It's a great spot for lunch or dinner, but this food shanty on the northern tip of the island is also the perfect place for happy hour (which, actually, is all day long around here). Grab a table in the sand and let your bare feet dig into the granules with pleasure. The Gulf view is wonderfully restorative.

Insider's tip: Order the spinach-artichoke dip and peel-and-eat shrimp along with a bitingly cold Red Stripe, and you'll truly never want to go home again.

Beach Bistro, 6600 Gulf Dr., Holmes Beach, 941-778-6444.

Think of the award-winning Beach Bistro as the West Coast's answer to Baltimore's Charleston restaurant. Owner Sean Murphy works as tirelessly as Cindy Wolf and Tony Foreman to promote this 23-year-old beach mainstay for elegant parties and celebrations. And it's a winner with an emphasis on local, seasonal foods and a masterful combination of ingredients—from the lobstercargots to rack of domestic lamb. Of course, there's a dining room with a breathtaking view of The Gulf. Gourmet magazine calls it one of the most romantic restaurants in America.

Insider's tip: If you want to skip the pageantry of fine dining, head to the bar and be treated to a deluxe burger or grouper sandwich and the ministrations of knowledgeable mixologists. Locals love it here.

When it's time to sleep

What's nice about Anna Maria Island is that zoning regs have kept building heights low, encouraging the ambiance of an old-time seaside resort. That applies to hotels, too. But unlike the beach places of yore, these lodgings provide elaborate amenities found at the most upscale, high-rise chains.

Bridge Walk, 100 Bridge St., Bradenton Beach, 941-779-2545.

What we really like at this property is its proximity to restaurants and shops, plus the enormous rooms, each with a welcome screened porch in buggy Florida. There's enough variety of places to eat that you never even have to get in the car. Also, each suite has a well-equipped mini kitchen if you want to have breakfast or lunch at the large dining table. There are also townhouses, which have full kitchens and even fireplaces. Some also have panoramic views of the Intracoastal Waterway and The Gulf.

Always a plus: The hotel provides free sand chairs and umbrellas for the short walk across Gulf Drive to the beach. The pool here isn't very big, but it's fine for taking a quick dip.

The tariff: Prices vary, according to the season. Studios go from \$154-216 a night; townhouses, \$238-283. Other room types are available, too.

Tortuga Inn Beach Resort, 1325 Gulf Dr. N., Bradenton Beach, 941-778-6611.

This popular hotel is actually a "condotel." Individual owners allow their stunningly decorated apartment-style homes to be rented to guests in the multi-building complex. A management team oversees the lush, well-manicured grounds, setting up reservations, helping visitors, and maintaining the property. Many of the larger homes have granite kitchens, fireplaces, and elegant tile baths that assure you experience a life of luxury while you're here.

Always a plus: This place is a vacation hot spot because it has its own private beach across the street with complimentary chairs, towels, and umbrellas. Other amenities include heated pools, lovely gardens, fishing docks, boat slips, and outdoor barbecues.

The tariff: Rates vary seasonally from \$135-195 a night for a studio to \$280-355 for a top-of-the-line, two-bedroom condo.

Harrington House Beachfront Bed & Breakfast, 5626 Gulf Dr., Holmes Beach, 941-778-5444.

This family-run B&B (recently chosen "Best on the Beach" winner in the annual Best of BedandBreakfast.com Awards) is all about pampering its guests—from serving gourmet breakfasts like orange waffles and pancake sundaes to providing a basket of popcorn or home-baked cookies for watching the glorious sunsets. The restored main inn, built in 1925, exudes Victorian charm in a tropical, postcard setting. Guests often gather at the large swimming pool facing The Gulf or in front of the massive fireplace in the living room, forming friendships that bring them back year after year, says Patti Davis, who runs the business with her husband, Mark.

Always a plus: Each beautifully decorated room has its own private bath. There are also three other buildings, offering a variety of rooms. The updated, 1940 Carriage House is often the honeymoon cottage for the many couples who tie the knot in the romantic garden.

The tariff: Rooms vary, depending on the time of year, from \$169 a night for a room to \$529 for a grand villa.

When it's time to play

If a few days on the powdery beaches are all the serenity you can tolerate, other activities abound. Head north or south to discover what the area has to offer. Be prepared, though, to find packs of slow-driving snowbirds in battleship-size vehicles claiming the roads this time of year. But don't let the poky oldsters deter you. After all, you're not supposed to be in a hurry here.

South Florida Museum and Aquarium, 201 10th St. W., Bradenton, 941-746-4131.

What's here: A cultural history museum with area fossils and archaeological artifacts from thousands of years ago to the present; Bishop planetarium, a state-of-the art domed theater with programs for children and adults; and Parker Manatee Aquarium.

Don't miss: Snooty, who, at 60 years old, is the world's oldest living manatee in captivity. He's quite the "sea cow" charmer and clearly is boss of the two girl manatees who live there.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 5401 Bay Shore Rd., Sarasota, 941-359-5700.

What's here: Twenty-one galleries of European paintings as well as Cypriot antiquities, Asian Art, American paintings, and contemporary art plus a wing for traveling exhibits; a grand home; and a circus museum. Yes, the property belonged to those Ringlings.

Don't miss: Cà d'Zan, the elegant, pink, palatial home of John and Mable, completed in 1926. It's not every day you see a Gothic Venetian mansion with manicured gardens amid Florida's scrub brush.

St. Armands Circle, Lido Key, Sarasota, across the Sarasota Bay bridge, 941-388-1554.

What's here: More than 130 European-style shops and gourmet restaurants surrounding a traffic circle and its offshoot streets in an island setting. You'll find some of the most elegant and interesting buys in the area from stores like Décor de France, Yves Delorme, Lilly Pulitzer, Crazy Shirts, and more.

Don't miss: Columbia Restaurant, a spinoff of its historic namesake in Tampa that opened in 1905 and had tapas before anyone knew what they were. Angle for an outdoor table here (411 St. Armands Circle, 941-388-3987) and savor albondigas (meatballs in spicy tomato sauce) and shrimp al ajillo in garlicky olive oil and chili peppers.

Myakka River State Park, 13208 State Road 72, Sarasota, 941-361-6511.

What's here: An untamed river that snakes through 57 square miles of scenic wetlands, prairies, and woodlands. This is the place to fish, hike, camp, and watch wildlife. It's worth the drive just to see Florida's rugged side.

Don't miss: Taking a ride on an airboat for an up-close view of nature, including huge gators that bob their gnarly heads from the river and bald eagles perched majestically in trees with their young-uns.

Salvador Dalí Museum, 1000 Third St. S., St. Petersburg, 727-823-3767.

What's here: A gallery space solely dedicated to quirky surrealist painter Salvador Dalí. It has one of the most comprehensive collections of the Spanish artist's works in the world. (This is where locals take visitors when it's raining or they tire of the sun.)

Don't miss: A docent tour. These hour-long explorations give incredible insight into the often bizarre life of the man who created such noted works as The Persistence of Memory and The Hallucinogenic Toreador.