



FORT MYERS AND SANIBEL ISLAND, FLORIDA

By Diana Ballon

With Sanibel Island on the Gulf Coast of Southwest Florida deemed to be one of the top three places in the world for shell collecting, visitors flock here and to the neighbouring Captiva Island for the casual laid-back environments that don't exist in the more touristed areas of Florida. Here on these islands, you won't find buildings higher than the tallest palm trees. There are no fast food chains (except for a lone DQ), no traffic lights and great biking. Across the three-mile Sanibel Causeway, Fort Myers, otherwise known as "the city of Palms," has a charming historic downtown district, great beaches, shopping outlets, mini golf and the Imaginarium Science Center for the kids.

WHERE TO STAY South Seas Island Resort on the northern tip of Captiva has been rated one of the top 10 beach resorts for families. Its massive 33-acre property offers accommodations ranging from villas to cottages, private homes and condos, hotel rooms – and tons of activities. They have 18 swimming pools, a water park, the Sanibel Sea School, and Skully's Family Interactive Center with everything from a turtle tot program, to kite making and an indoor arcade. southseas.com

Sanibel Harbour Marriott Resort & Spa boasts 278 rooms and 69 suites on its 85-acre property. They have a world class 40,000 sq. ft. spa, three outdoor and one indoor pool, six dining options, free bike rentals and fishing poles, complimentary aerobics classes, and organized kids' activities on special holidays and more. sanibelmarriott.com

Casa Ybel Resort was one of the first inns on Sanibel. This stunning high-end resort offers a

spectacular view of the Gulf, fabulous dining at its Thistle Lodge restaurant and an old world charm. The resort has 114 one- and two-bedroom suites, some owned, others rented to guests, an Olympic-sized pool, kids' camp and six tennis courts. casaybelresort.com

The West Wind Inn is an unpretentious resort with 103 rooms, all equipped with microwave, coffee maker and small fridge and free WiFi. They have a large heated pool, a shuffleboard court and a 500-foot long beach ideal for shelling. westwindinn.com

WHERE TO EAT Captiva Island's The Bubble Room Restaurant boasts award-winning desserts served by "Bubble scouts". Roam its three floors to check out the trippy décor, and a collection of some 3,500 toys and antiques, moving trains, a phone booth complete with a life-sized cardboard Superman, an Elf room and more. bubbleroomrestaurant.com.

Don't forget to check out The Island Cow on downtown Sanibel Island. Holy cow! This wacky and whimsical family restaurant has a huge menu (\$4.99 for kids) and big portions, a plethora of colour and "udderly great food" (their words). Check out the cow memorabilia, the frog hanging upside down from ceiling, and the moo wear in their gift shop. sanibelislandcow.com

Travel a short one-hour ride by boat from Captiva Island to the Cabbage Key Inn and Restaurant. The historic inn's restaurant walls are plastered with \$1 bills, a tradition that began in the 1940s, when a fisherman taped a dollar bill to the wall to keep for a drink on his next trip: tape up one of your own, and autograph

it, just as Julia Roberts and others have done before you. cabbagekey.com

WHAT TO DO The J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge occupies more than two-thirds of Sanibel Island. It is world famous for its bird watching. Visit the free education centre, kayak in search of manatee and green sea turtles, take a tram or bike or drive along Wildlife Drive, and use your smart phone for an interactive narration. fws.gov/dingdarling

Edison & Ford Winter Estates in Fort Myers is one of the top 10 most visited sites in the U.S. Thomas Edison and his friend, car manufacturer Henry Ford, have been immortalized here, with many historic buildings, beautiful gardens, the Edison Botanic Research Lab and Estates Museum. Marvel at the massive banyan tree in the parking lot. edisonfordwinterestates.org

The Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum on Sanibel Island is included in *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* and the only museum in the world dedicated to molluscs. There are hundreds of these invertebrates in the museum, along with a children's learning lab, live tank demonstrations and an interesting 30-minute video entitled *The Secret Lives of Seashells*. shellmuseum.org

Captiva Cruises offer a variety of excursions, from a 90-minute dolphin and wildlife adventure cruise, to a sunset cruise and tour of the Out-Islands. captivacruises.com ○

Diana Ballon is a frequent contributor to ParentsCanada and has written about travel in Arizona and Jamaica.



For more information, visit FortMyersSanibel.com