

Sand, shells and city: Two vacations in one Florida Gulf Coast destination



• The Sundial Beach Resort & Spa overlooks a mile of Gulf of Mexico beach on Sanibel Island, Fla. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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When the Sanibel Stoop begins to make your back ache or you've basked in too much sun, step away from the sand for the urban attractions of Florida's Lee County. Enjoy a two-for-one combo of beach vacation and city getaway in a cluster of communities called The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel.

Poking a bent arm into the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Southwest Florida, the barrier islands of Sanibel and Captiva are noted for abundant opportunities for shelling. And, instead of crowded beaches and high-rise dotted coastlines, you'll find a quiet retreat in a lush, tropical setting. When it's time for a day away from the beach, mainland Fort Myers boasts a rich history. Tour the Edison and Ford Winter Estates where Thomas Edison and Henry Ford were the original snowbirds. At the Williams Academy Black History Museum learn the story of Black residents from the Civil War to Civil Rights.

Seclusion on Sanibel

While Fort Myers teems with city life, across the causeway the pace slows on Sanibel. No stoplights. No big chain supermarkets. An arc of sand fronts the Gulf on the fishhook-shaped island measuring 12 miles long and 3 miles wide with 25 miles of bike paths meandering down its middle. More than 60% of Sanibel, and tiny Captiva at its tip, are preserved mostly in a tangle of mangroves and web of wetlands in the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

One of the largest mangrove wildernesses in the U.S., the refuge encompasses more than 7,600 acres and provides a habitat for 32 species of mammals, 50 of reptiles and amphibians and 250 of birds, including herons, egrets, pelicans, spoonbills and cormorants. It's one of the few places you might see the rare reddish egret spreading its wings to fool fish into believing they've found a shady shelter before it spears them for its dinner.



Visitors stop at an observation tower on Wildlife Drive to scan the network of wetlands and mangroves at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Florida's Sanibel Island. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

A political cartoonist for Iowa's Des Moines Register, Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling was an avid conservationist appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to head what became the U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Service. In 1945, he was instrumental in the creation of the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge renamed for him in 1967.

Admission to the Visitor Center, with the Education Center temporarily closed by COVID-19, is free as is the Learning Lavatories named America's Best Restroom in a 2018 social media poll. A wildlife-theme mural decorates the corridor outside the men's and women's rooms where the ceiling depicts an underwater view of an alligator swimming overhead and a bird diving for a fish. The theme continues inside where stall doors are wrapped in professional photographs of birds.

Once you've taken care of business, you can pay \$10 to motor down four-mile Wildlife Drive or \$1 to hike or bike the route winding between mangroves and wetlands. For a deeper experience, the official refuge concessionaire Tarpon Bay Explorers offers a narrated 90-minute tram ride. You also can book kayak tours through mangroves, paddleboard and pontoon boat cruises on the bay.



Intricate shell mosaics called sailors' valentines are displayed at the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum on Florida's Sanibel Island. - **Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier**

Searching for seashells

Stroll Sanibel's coastline and you'll likely see wildlife of a different type, beachgoers bent at the waist traipsing through the surf like a flock of exotic birds. The Sanibel Stoop is the pose adopted by seashell enthusiasts hunting for treasure in what is widely known as the Shelling Capital of the World.

Most barrier islands parallel the Florida coast, but Sanibel extends perpendicularly from the mainland. Currents cause shells to pile up, particularly before and after low tide, especially after a storm. Some of the best shelling can be had May through September on beaches at the ends of

the island, such as Lighthouse Beach Park and Blind Pass Park. Be on the lookout for a fighting conch, a lightning welk or the rare junonia. If you find a critter still attached to its home, put it back. Live shelling is a big no-no.

Need help joining the hunt? The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum offers one-hour beach walks with a shelling expert most mornings and has an app to identify finds. The only museum in the U.S. devoted solely to shells and the living mollusks that create them, the museum has more than 30 exhibits, including touch pools, aquariums and the Great Hall of Shells with more than 500,000 specimens. It houses some of the world's largest and rarest shells. Exhibits also explain how shells became currency among Native Americans and were used to make buttons and inlay designs on furniture. A wall displays sailors' valentines, intricate mosaics crafted by Caribbean women and sold to seamen to take home to their sweethearts.

Mainland museums

Established as a fort during the Seminole Indian Wars, Fort Myers played a role in one of the last battles of the Civil War when U.S. Colored Troops, the USCT, held off the Confederate soldiers. Their story and that of early Black settlers are told at the Williams Academy Black History Museum housed in part of the city's first Black public school. The building was moved to Roberto Clemente Park, named for the baseball star who played nearby during spring training, and is open by appointment. Exhibits explain Fort Myers became increasingly segregated in the early 1900s prompting most Black residents to move across railroad tracks to Safety Hill where they had to return after dark. The area eventually became the Dunbar neighborhood incorporated into Fort Myers, now about 22% Black.

In Fort Myer's early history, though, Blacks and whites lived peaceably side-by-side. The children of the first Black settler, Nelson Tillis, often played with those of his white neighbor, Thomas Edison.

Already acclaimed for his many inventions, Edison came to Fort Myers in 1885, arriving by boat on the Caloosahatchee River. Train service had yet to arrive at the settlement of fewer than 500 inhabitants where the main thoroughfare was a dirt cattle path. Edison bought 13.5 acres for \$2,750 and returned the following year to honeymoon with his second wife, Mina, at what became their winter estate. Some 30 years later, friend and fellow tinkerer Henry Ford bought the house next door as his winter residence.

Stories about the brainstorming duo abound at the Edison and Ford Winter Estates, a museum comprising both homes, a 15,000-square-foot Inventions Museum, more than 20 acres of gardens including a banyan tree with a canopy covering an acre, and a botanical laboratory where Edison, Ford and auto tire manufacturer Harvey Firestone experimented with plants in a quest for natural rubber. The trio, along with naturalist John Burroughs, often set off in Ford's Model T to explore Southwest Florida, venturing as far as the Everglades.



The Edison and Ford Winter Estates showcases the homes of friends and fellow snowbirds, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford in Fort Myers, Fla. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

After Edison's death, Mina deeded the Edison estate, including the main house, guesthouse and all furnishings to the City of Fort Myers for \$1. The estate was restored to its appearance in 1929. More than 220,000 visitors a year take self-guided tours of both estates as well as limited guided tours of the gardens, inside the homes and the lab.

You can peer through windows at well-appointed rooms where Edison's inventions stand out: a phonograph and incandescent light bulbs in 13 brass "electrolier" fixtures. In the dining room, notable guests gathered around a table set with Mina's china, trying to engage their host in conversation. Edison was 80% to 90% deaf, however, so formal dinners made him uncomfortable. He often would excuse himself early in the meal, or Mina would fix him a plate to take to his study while she entertained her husband's admirers.

Oh, how the famous inventor would have relished the seclusion of Sanibel had his boat landed a little farther west.

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If you go

The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel: fortmyers-sanibel.com/

J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge: fws.gov/refuge/jn_ding_darling/

Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum: shellmuseum.org/

Williams Academy Black History Museum: leecountyblackhistorysociety.org/

Edison and Ford Winter Estates: edisonfordwinterstates.org/

Lodging

Sundial Beach Resort & Spa: Furnished condos from studio to three-bedroom on one mile of beach, tennis and pickleball courts, kids club, activities program, five swimming pools, restaurants, bikes, kayaks and paddleboards; sundialresort.com/



Fun is on the menu, along with Orange Crunch Cake, at the Bubble Room on Captiva Island, Fla. - **Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier**

Dining

The Bubble Room, Captiva Island: quirky, kitsch-filled restaurant with antique toys, strings of Christmas bubble lights and notable menu items such as If You Like Pina Coladas ... served in a hollowed-out pineapple, Mahi Brando mahi-mahi, gigantic cuts of Prime Rib Weissmuller, and thick wedges of Orange Crunch Cake; bubbleroomrestaurant.com/home

Oxbow Bar & Grill, Fort Myers: New riverfront restaurant in a city-owned pier building with a menu heavy on seafood and steaks; oxbowfortmyers.com/about/

- Information for this article was gathered during a writer's conference sponsored by The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel.

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