

Island Road Trip

When I began this trip I thought I was going to be visiting an old retirement tourist trap my parents dragged me and my siblings to some 30 years ago. However, as I approached Sanibel Island from the toll bridge I was caught off guard by the charm and real sense of island community that greeted me.

I was sure I had never been to the Lee County Coast until my mom pulled out the black and white photos to prove it-there I was, a babe in my mother's arms along with my five brothers and sisters and the family station wagon. Now some 30-plus years later here I am on Father's Day with my own family.

A brief history/geology lesson is needed to understand the islands known as Sanibel-Captiva Islands. The areas known as Sanibel-Captiva are actually three island masses off the southwest coast of Florida in Lee County: Sanibel, Captiva, and North Captiva. Some 82 years ago a hurricane blew in and divided Captiva into two islands with North Captiva being accessible only by boat.

Typically, barrier islands tend to run parallel with the main land. However Sanibel and Captiva create a scoop shape at the southern end of a string of barrier islands that run along the west coast of Florida. This geological position as been said to create the effect of a scoop grabbing treasures given up by the Gulf of Mexico. Shells and lots of them! On Sanibel the Bailey-Mathews Shell Museum houses one of the most extensive shell collections in the world and celebrates Sanibel-Captiva's designation as one of the world's top shelling destinations. The exhibits not only allow you to view some of the most beautiful artifacts created by nature but you also gain and understanding of the ecological aspect of shells. You often hear museum guides joke that there will be a quiz following the tour. Well in this case there may not be a guide with such a warning but trust me, when you return to the beach with your children hopefully you paid attention to the exhibit because the questions will come at you rapid fire. Such as... Now what kind of shell is this dad?, How old do you think this one is?, What kind of animal made this one?, Is this a sharks tooth?, Can we make a necklace out of this one?, And on and on. However my favorite and I almost grew out of this one: Are those really waves you hear in the shell? My answer to that one is always yes and you'll know why when you return home and your little one pulls out the shell collection and picks up the biggest one to see if he can still hear the ocean, and the look in his eyes when he hears the waves is too precious to give up to growing up.

Our trip to Sanibel-Captiva began with a visit to the Sanibel-Captiva Islands' Chamber of Commerce located just across the causeway. This is probably one of the busiest and most helpful Chambers I have ever visited. The staff speaks with pride of the community as they share information. I could have spent an afternoon talking with and learning all about Sanibel-Captiva in the comfortable, air-conditioned lobby of the Chamber. However, the boys were on a mission to find the perfect shell and not listen to Dad pick these kind folks' brains for article material.

Pedestrian traffic is well planned with defined and extensive bike and footpaths, and during high season it is encouraged, because gridlock can and does exist during certain parts of the day. However, all during my visit I never experienced anything like gridlock. What I did experience was a laid-back island attitude I thought could only be found on more remote islands. There are approximately 5,000 full-time residents on Sanibel-Captiva, and that number can swell to 15,000 during high season. The residents demonstrate a friendly and open attitude toward visitors and a very strong civic pride in their tropical island sanctuary. They have to. It is written in the vision statement of the Sanibel-Captiva Land Development Plan. "Sanibel will remain a small town community which will live in harmony with nature and each other."

Nature is key to this island's success. Sanibel has strived to maintain the natural beauty, especially since 1974 when the residents fought to become the City of Sanibel and incorporate from Greater Lee County. Now 70% of Sanibel Island is designated Wildlife refuge. This heritage of protecting the natural beauty of Sanibel is demonstrated when you visit the J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Named after the Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist and Conservationist, this 6,300 acre refuge and educational center is a must see during your visit to Sanibel-Captiva. After wandering the trails of the center and taking part in the interactive displays in the educational center you begin to realize the complex fragile nature of the barrier island ecosystem that the City of Sanibel is closely guarding. In the refuge, take the time to look for the fiddler crabs as they feed their way through the mangroves or look up to spot the blue herons, bald eagle osprey and the many more of the 230 species of birds, 50 species of reptiles and 30 species of mammals.

This effort to maintain the natural setting continues on to the beaches. If lazy days under the sun, toasting the sunset, or hunting down that perfect shell are as much planning you want to do during your visit, then Sanibel-Captiva Islands are your destination. We found uncrowded, well preserved beaches. Even if there was development along a stretch of beach, Sanibel's tough building codes have kept the footprint of development to a minimum along the beaches. At times you may not even notice the development because of the creative use of design landscaping using native vegetation.

The coastlines Gulf of Mexico typically can experience calm waters, but a small disturbance in the Gulf of Mexico had created some wave-action along the beaches. Still small enough to allow our boys to jump and dive into the surf without having to fear rip currents or undertows. When not in the water we searched for the perfect shell. We have a collection of so called "perfect" shells. Some I think are just worn pieces of oyster shell but the boys swear they are fossilized teeth of some sea creature.

Next we continued down the main road to Captiva Island. You will know you have made it onto Captiva Island when you cross Blind Pass and spot a beautiful stretch of sand called Turner Beach. On Captiva you will find quite a bit more development of private homes and estates on each side of the narrow road. There are only two public /parking/beach access on Captiva Island. Here you'll notice a small village atmosphere and quaintness so, you'll want to park the car and walk around

One of the largest resort accommodations on the islands is the South Sea **Resort** located at the North end of Captiva. This self-contained resort is complete with a full service marina **and yacht harbour**, shops and restaurants, golf and tennis, scuba diving, water sport equipment and much more. For a family tropical island get-away, South Seas Resort has so much to offer that you may need a planner to organize your activities while you're there. I had a chance to pick up their weekly planner called the South Seas Today and it was packed with information on all the activities offered their guests.

Even though South Seas is a 330-acre resort with amenities to sink a ship, it still retains the overall island attitude as the rest of Captiva. 152 acres of the resort is set aside for a nature preserve and South Seas even has their own on-site Naturalist. The design and layout of the resort accommodations which range from privately owned condos for lease to the resort's new hotel, keeps the human footprint to a minimum and the natural beauty of Captiva is carefully protected for their guests to enjoy and experience. Celeste Langer, South Seas Communications Manager, lets me know, "You will encounter nature while at South Seas" and she was right. As I previewed the resort's first class Marina facilities that often accommodate boats up to 105', I was met by two playful dolphins cruising the mouth of the marina.

Some **82** years ago you would have been able to continue on north to the end of Captiva but a hurricane moved enough sand to create Redfish Pass and North Captiva Island. If a true out island escape is what you have in mind then make arrangements to catch a water taxi in the quaint town of Bokeelia where Island Girl Charters can take you to North Captiva. You'll have to leave the car behind because there are no cars allowed. North Captiva is made up of a number of privately owned beach homes, cottages and small resorts. Curt Bannister a small plane pilot and property owner on North Captiva calls the island unspoiled and pristine. "As a pilot I have all over the state of Florida, and North Captiva is tops on my list of vacation places." You would think that an island that is half made up of protected state preserve with no cars, high-rise condos and with access by boat or by way of a 2400' privately owned airstrip the amenities would be as primitive. Not so says Curt Bannister, "Excellent restaurants and amenities in this seemingly primitive setting are a pleasant surprise and readily accessible by bicycle or golf cart. Quaint roads winding through the palm trees will take you wherever you want to go." Bannister three rental properties are indicative of the accommodations you'll find on North Captiva. One, two, and three bedroom homes are reasonably priced for weekly rentals. As with Sanibel and Captiva Islands the high season requires planning well in advance. Yet Bannister has noticed an increase in the local Florida summer traffic.

As with any island adventure planning ahead allows for a more enjoyable "island time." The high season for Sanibel-Captiva Islands is from February through Easter. Plan well in advance and plan on spending top dollar for accommodations. This part of Lee county does have a summer season but not as frantic as high season. Look for summer deals and lower room rates. There are affordable guest cottages and small family owned and operated hotels to the glam world of heavy hitters where they don't even ask the price.

The Chamber is a wealth of information on all the accommodations and realtors to arrange your style of island get-away.

As I learned more about the Sanibel-Captiva Islands I began to appreciate the numerous island activities readily available to visitors. If you like to fish this is the place. Some of the best game fishing can be arranged within minutes of where you are staying. Eco tours either guided or self-guided are another popular past time. Boat/water craft rentals of every shape and size can be arranged. The boating is relatively easy with some good charts, advice from local operators, and common sense you and your family can have an enjoyable day on the waters that surround these beautiful islands.

I am afraid this may sound too hokey, but Sanibel-Captiva Islands really do have something for every "islandgoer". If it's fine dining islands boast some of the best. From the King's Crown **Dining Room**'s renowned chef Amy Visco to a cold beer and pizza you create at Island Pizza, you can get all. Or if you prefer your own, shopping for essential is very convenient. This is a great place for doing everything under the sun or nothing at all.

Getting there is as convenient as everything else. Have your own boat? Sanibel-Captiva Islands are well equipped with well-appointed full service marinas. Call or radio ahead for dockage availability. If you're staying on North Captiva and have your own plane, you can arrange to use the private airstrip located on that island. For commercial flights S.W. Florida International Airport in Fort Myers is a short ride away. And of course the family vehicle is always an option. I would recommend bringing bicycles or renting them when you arrive. You can only truly appreciate the natural beauty these islands have to offer by slowing down and getting into an island frame of mind....strolling the nature trails and strands of sand on this out island destination just a causeway away.

As we left our island destination and crossed the San Carlos Bay, we had to stop as the drawbridge that connects Sanibel to Fort Myers was raised to let a sailboat pass. There was a time previously I would view this as a real inconvenience, but we were in no hurry to leave. This pause gave our sons the opportunity to count the boats in the bay one last time and it gave me time to reflect on how this trip might have compared to the one my parents took. I can hear the fight for the window seats and the argument my brothers were sure to have had over who had counted the most boats. I wondered if my mom and dad felt as satisfied with the trip as I was feeling at this moment. Did I stay at and visit some of the same places my parents had? Maybe some of the locals I talked to were on the island when my parents had visited. Exactly how close did our paths meet? And as the drawbridge began to lower, out in the Bay two dolphins could be seen playing as they tried to share the baitfish. I imagined they were waving to us as if to say, "Thanks for stopping, Paul....we'll see you and your family soon I hope." I could hear the sound of my brothers' voices years ago while straining to get a glimpse of dolphins...and I realized that it was no long lost memory, but my own boys fussing with each other. Don't make me pull this car over!

Helpful Links;

<http://www.sanibel-captiva.org/>

<http://www.south-seas-resort.com/>

<http://www.leechamber.com/>

<http://margaritabeachrentals.com/>

Island Girl Charters 239-633-8142