

Anna Maria Island Retains 'Old Florida' Feel

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THE BEACHES on Anna Maria Island, like this one on Holmes Beach, facing the Gulf of Mexico, are all open to the public, and there are signs everywhere offering you access to them. (JULIE FLETCHER / ORLANDO SENTINEL / June 24, 2004)

ANNA MARIA ISLAND, Fla. — - Can you find old Florida in new Florida?

Is there any place that isn't filled with high-rise condos or gated golf communities, a spot where you can walk uncrowded beaches in the late afternoon or ride a bike fearlessly? Where restaurants totter at the end of fish piers and serve fresh grouper? Where you find luscious key lime pie with a meringue topping in an old cottage painted aqua and pink?

Well, you can, here on this 7-mile-long barrier island west of Bradenton and directly north of Longboat Key.

Longboat is high-rise, upscale and gated. Anna Maria Island is low-key, low-rise and open.

Here we found broad, white-sand beaches that stretch the western length of the island along the Gulf of Mexico (and are open to all, whether you're on a public beach with facilities or not), lots of original one-story bungalows and cottages, abundant tropical greenery and even a little Spanish moss.

Just what we hoped for when we planned a family's winter get-together. We found Anna Maria had everything a little kid or a tired schoolteacher could want.

So how come we'd never heard of it? After all, [Esther Williams](#) starred with Peter Lawford in a 1948 movie, "On an Island With You," that was filmed here.

Jason Sato, who with his mother, Barbara, owns Sato Real Estate, admitted that Anna Maria may be off the radar for New Englanders, even though it's connected by bridges to the mainland and to Longboat Key, and is but a 30-minute drive from Sarasota. Visitors are mostly Midwesterners.

Yet Ginny Dutton, in blue baseball cap and khaki cutoffs this morning, came from Providence to Anna Maria Island with her husband 15 years ago. Now she's the co-owner, with her sister, Jane Joyce, of Ginny and Jane E's, a funky retail shop and café in a former IGA store on the northern end of the island. She describes Anna Maria as "old Florida."

That phrase is used a lot. Residents say it means plentiful greenery, a slow pace, a sense of community. Twenty-five-mph speed limits. Beach walking and bike riding. Those vintage Florida houses and mom and pop stores. (Head to the mainland for [McDonald's](#) or [Burger King](#).)

The island's large community center, in the northernmost town of Anna Maria, offers a staggering variety of classes from Irish dance to yoga to pickleball (pickleball?). Most classes are open to drop-ins for anywhere from \$2 (duplicate bridge) to \$25.

Except for two six-story buildings on the gulf, which caused a local furor some years back, construction is limited to 37 feet. That's three stories, with the first floor available only for garages or parking (because of potential storm damage). Not that there aren't lovely homes. Some are on canals with docks. But none is gargantuan.

Dutton, whose busy store is a place to meet, greet, eat and get e-mail, says she even loves the "lazy and wonderful" summers when tourists are "local Floridians and Europeans" — mostly the British. It's hot, she says, but there's always a breeze. At its widest, the island is about 1 1/2 miles.

To a first-time visitor, Anna Maria Island feels more than welcoming. People wave as they bike past the three-bedroom house we are renting on the east side of the island, just across the street from Tampa Bay. They nod or say hello as we stroll the beach. One woman tells us she's feeding a great blue heron every day and we see him waiting outside her little house on the bay.

While the gulf beach is gorgeous, this bayside one isn't shabby. Its shallow water make it perfect for a 5-year-old. We switch between the two.

Everywhere there are signs offering beach access — inviting us to enjoy the sand and the sea.

The beaches are so attractive that beach weddings are becoming popular. One restaurant, the Sandbar — owned by Ed Chiles, the son of a former Florida governor — specializes in them. The Sandbar also sets some of its outdoor chairs in the sand and is the traditional local place for a sunset cocktail.

Realtor Sato says that while snowbirds still come to the island in winter for a month or more, the demographics are changing. One-week stays by younger families are by far the most popular, and single family homes with pools near the gulf are favored. Rental numbers are up even in this economic downturn, he insists, and prices — while softened — are steady at the 2003-04 level.

There's but one bed and breakfast and it's a beauty. Harrington House on the gulf has six buildings and a pool.

Several small motels — no chains — are scattered from the northern tip of the island to the southernmost town, Bradenton Beach. In the center is Holmes Beach, the commercial heart of the island. The city of Anna Maria in the north, where we are, is mostly residential.

After a day of biking, beaching, gallery-hopping (the art scene is vibrant) or shopping in small, mid-priced boutiques, people eat early. We arrive with my brother and sister-in-law at 5 p.m. at the Rod & Reel Pier, which sticks out into Tampa Bay. We wait about 45 minutes for a table, packed into the lower-level bar where wine is served in plastic cups. We love it.

There are fancier eateries, but nothing pretentious.

Golfers go off island if they want to play a round. The one island golf course is private and a par-3.

Who named the island? No one knows for sure. A publication by the Anna Maria Historical Society, "The Early Days: 1893-1940," suggests that the original Spanish explorers (circa 1530) may have named it for Mary, the mother of Christ, and her mother, Anne.

George Emerson Bean, the first settler, arrived in 1893 and started development. Eventually there was a hotel for day-trippers who were brought in by boat from St. Petersburg and Tampa to a pier built in 1911. That pier, the City Fish Pier, still stands, attracting anglers and offering a casual restaurant at the far end.

Check out island history at the well-run Anna Maria Island Historical Society, where you'll also see a renovated early cottage, Belle Haven. And go to Bean Point for a view of wind-swept dunes and turquoise sea at the northern tip of the island.

While Anna Maria has always attracted tourists, residents are fiercely protective. They like it the way it is and vote to keep it that way. As one former Minnesotan told us: "I used to love to play golf but I stopped. I don't like to go off the island."