



FLORIDA WITHOUT THE MASSES

WE call these pig fish, says a gravelly voice behind me as I inspect the small silver creature, not much bigger than the hook, dangling in front of me. "If you get 'em big enough they make some good eating, but you'd need a couple hundred of those for a main course."

I have to agree, this little fella would get lost in a prawn cocktail.

"Y'hear that? It's grunting at yer. Pig fish." He's right, it is grunting. "Thank you," I say, turning round to face a bearded man, perhaps in his 60s but aged by a life spent in the sun, wearing a battered baseball cap and nursing a bottle of Michelob in one hand, and a fat, hand-rolled cigarette in the other.

He had been sitting on a rickety stairway running up the back of the wooden building perched at the end of the Rod 'n Reel Pier, on Anna Maria Island's eastern shore. But now he's right behind me, surveying my catch a little closer. "Oh I don't fish myself," he adds in response to an inquiry about how I might locate a bigger one, "just sit out here and talk to strangers."

Just at that moment my wife appears with my daughter and mother-in-law on the narrow walkway that runs around the restaurant and bar, the former a cosy room chock-full of loyal diners, balanced on top of the latter, a no-frills drinking den with spectacular views. Inside a small number of regulars nurse glasses of beer and watch the Monday night game on TV.

"Look," I say, holding up the furiously belching creature for them all to see, "pig fish".

"That's lovely Mike, is it just for our tea or are we having guests?"

I am used to this sort of sarcastic assessment of my attempts at hunting and gathering, however justified they are based on past experience. It would be fair to say we have both learned not to plan our meals around my returns from fishing.

We — that is myself and my father-in-law who has also been permitted an afternoon on the pier — are not alone in failing to locate any giants of the deep, none of our fellow shrimp-drowners have hauled anything worthy of the frying pan on to the rickety structure. Perhaps that is why they provide such a convenient restaurant.

We negotiate another hour's stay, during which we catch a few more pig fish, and I hook into perhaps the ugliest creature either of us has ever



seen. Sadly, our wise friend has retired to the bar, so its real name remains a mystery. We decide on Ugly Fish, and toss it back into the rising tide, its mood worsening by the gathering clouds which convince us to cut short the hunt and phone for a lift.

The beauty of Anna Maria Island, or rather one of its beauties, lies in the fact that nowhere is too far from anywhere. At just seven miles long and not particularly wide at its widest part, this haven of peace and tranquility halfway up the gulf coast of Florida is small enough to have stayed off the radar of mass tourism.

We could always have caught the free bus home, which runs the length of the island and back again from 6am until late. The locals call it the trolley, which conjures a slightly different image for us, but it is a bus in all but name. It's the sort of generous tourist concession few larger resorts would offer but sums up Anna Maria's friendly nature.

We just reach home as the heavens open, the giant raindrops drumming out a monotonous tune on our rooftop balcony. We are staying in a beautiful, Spanish-style villa, one of the exclusive rental properties maintained by Anna Maria Vacations. The company was set up by an English husband and wife, who came here more than 20 years ago and fell in love with the island. Since then they have brought thousands of visitors here, many of whom return year after year.

While it made for a nice, if brief, change from constant sunshine, rain doesn't feature too heavily in the Florida tourist brochure. But then there is something about this place which sets it apart from the rest of the Sunshine State. There are no high-rise condo blocks here (in fact there is one, and its completion brought about instant changes in the building regulations), no fast food joints, and no giant mice.

I know a lot of people love that sort of thing, but I have never trusted a fixed smile, certainly not one worn by an eight-foot rodent. Disney attracts millions of visitors each year, and good luck to them. In fact, from where I'm sitting, I am glad they all go to Orlando, planning their days around beating queues and getting to the buffet first, before trying to remember where they left the car once the sun goes down. That way they won't come here and disturb us.

Instead of Burger King, Wendy's and KFC, here there are independent burgers joints, like the quite splendid Skinny's, a shack next to the road serving double-handed burgers with curly fries, and Duffy's Tavern, which prides itself on providing the coldest beer in town. There are quirky, traditional diners, such as Minnie's, where the menu doubles as a place mat upon which will be placed simple, delicious — and enormous — plates of food. And there are plenty of other interesting places to eat and drink, the more expensive of which sit on the sand and entice passers-by with the promise of sunset dining.

But there is far more to the island than feeding your face. Here you can encounter real wildlife, not

something encouraged to perform tricks for your amusement. You might see the mysterious and elusive manatee, spot a twitcher's handbook full of birds and even witness turtles nesting in season.

And you would be just plain unlucky not to see at least a dolphin or two if you take an evening trip with one of the captains waiting to take you out. We see ours on our first excursion, a mother and baby following in our wake beneath the bridge that connects Anna Maria to the more exclusive, less enchanting, Longboat Key to the south.

Our captain, Don, beaches the craft and we all jump off to sit on our own private shoreline, watching the pelicans dive for fish as the sun slips below the distant, shimmering horizon. We gather some shells from the soft white sand, toast our good fortune at being somewhere so pleasant with a glass of white wine or two, and make our way back towards the twinkling lights of Manatee Bridge and home.

If Orlando is the epitome of well-organised craziness and carefully-managed excess, here is its antidote. No wonder so many families choose to split their visit to Florida between there and here. After all that yang you would need a bit of yin.

Anna Maria is one of those places that seems to have a rhythm all its own. There is a strict 25mph speed limit on the roads — they still drive monster trucks around, mind, just because they can — and no-one seems in any particular hurry.

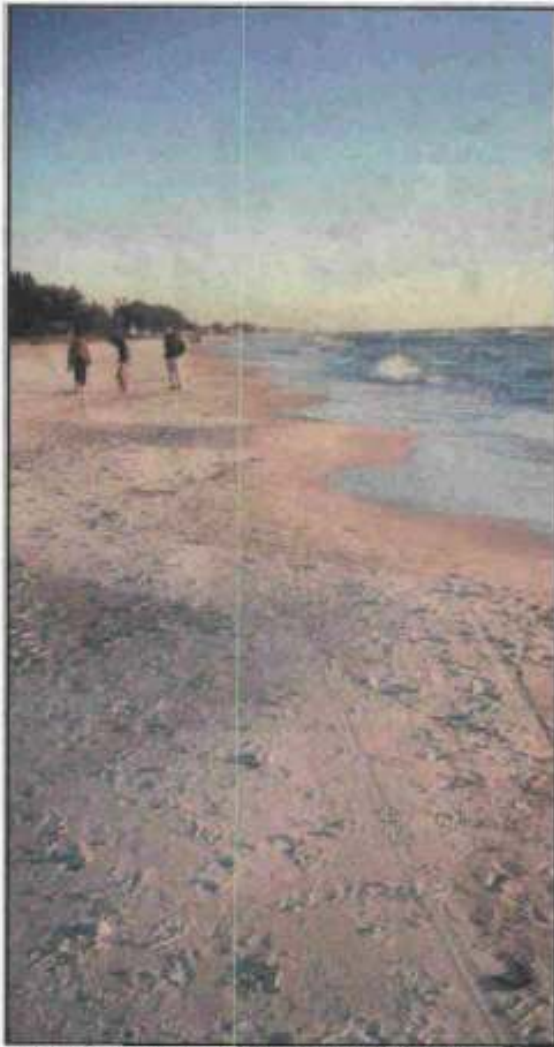
The island is dominated by its sandy shoreline, both spiritually and geographically, which stretches the entire length of its western shore and is rarely packed, even in high season.

Each night of our stay we wander over to its clean, soft sand and watch the sun set, as up and down the beach we are joined in the same ritual by others; some locals, some visitors like us. It's the sort of event not even the theme parks could recreate, if only for the fact that here on the gulf coast is the only place in Florida you can see day turning to night quite so beautifully.

It's not as if no-one knows Anna Maria is here, far from it. Hundreds of couples get married on its beaches each year, it came top of an internet poll of America's most popular 'secret' destinations in 2007, and it has been a firm favourite among native travellers for many years before that. And yet it remains an enigma, detached from the rest of Florida in more ways than one. It may be an island less than a mile from the mainland but it is worlds apart — and that suits Anna Maria just fine.

Here you can do as much or as little as you want and not feel guilty about it. There are few places like this left in the States and even fewer in Florida, so you might want to experience it while you still can. It's only a matter of time before someone blows the lid on Anna Maria Island, so, er, I won't tell anyone if you won't.

MIKE BAKER



GLOBOUS BEACHES: An evening stroll on the beach at Anna Maria Island

Mike Baker H210109_H604_02

FACTfile

WHERE: Anna Maria Island is located on the west coast of Florida in Manatee County, about an hour's drive from Tampa airport, and just over two from Orlando International. The nearest town is Bradenton, home of the famous Nick Bollettieri tennis academy, and Miami can be reached in about four hours by car.

HOW: Flights to Orlando have dropped dramatically in price to try and attract tourists to Florida amid the current global financial crisis. Virgin Atlantic is currently offering return flights to Orlando International from £309 (www.virgin-atlantic.com), while American Airlines flights start at £300 (www.americanairlines.co.uk)

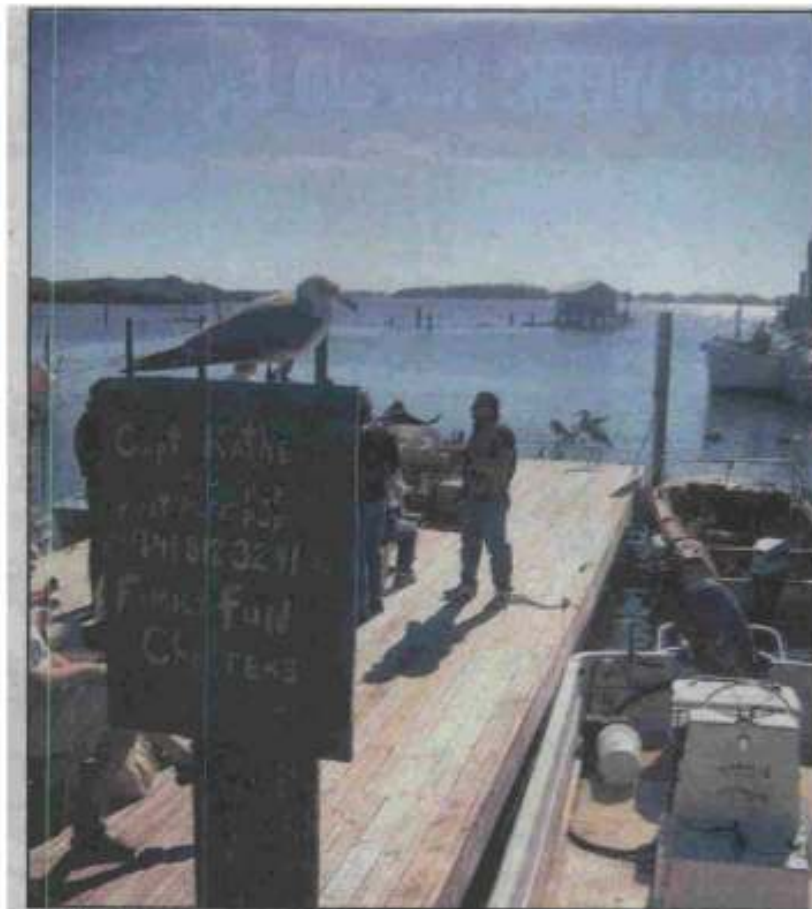
ACCOMMODATION: Mike and his family stayed in a private rental home, Villa Serena, in Holmes Beach, let by Anna Maria Vacations, which has been welcoming visitors to Anna Maria for more than 20 years. They market 32 exclusive properties on the island, from two-bed condominiums overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, to large family homes which sleep up to 12 comfortably. There are special online discounts and large out-of-season savings for our summertime. For more information log on to www.annamaria.com

WANT TO KNOW MORE? For information about the island visit www.annamaria.net, which has lots of useful sections for the overseas visitor.

The Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce also has some useful information about what to do when you visit the island. Log on to www.amichamber.com

Finally, with its special vacation editions and useful free map of the island, don't forget to pick up your copy of The Islander, one of Anna Maria Island's two free weekly newspapers. Log on to their website at www.islander.org





SUNSHINE STATE: Anna Maria Island Mike Baker H#210109_H#04_06



SUNSET: The gulf coast is the only place in Florida you can see day turning to night quite so beautifully

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