



By ISL_Chris at 06/09/2008 - 18:36

I'm fresh back from a very relaxing, if too short, weekend getaway to Florida's Gulf Islands -- Anna Maria and Longboat Key, just off the coast of Bradenton. The trip was to help research the annual ISLANDS Romantic Retreats issue, out this January. I was looking for an affordable island escape that my wife and I could enjoy without getting on a plane. And Anna Maria, one of the most quirkily charming islands anywhere, was where we honeymooned once upon a time. So the new [Gulf Coast Renewal travel package](#) seemed to be a budget-friendly second honeymoon (though I'm still not off the hook for Tahiti on the next big anniversary year).

I'll post my trip video and map soon, but in the meantime, here's my itinerary, if anyone would like to enjoy this same trip.

We stayed at the [Tortuga Inn](#), a mini-resort nestled between Anna Maria Sound and the Gulf of Mexico. Our fresh, new two-bedroom, two-bath unit was like having our own beach condo that was immaculately clean (the innkeepers have a secret to that cleanliness, but I had to close my notebook when they told me). We walked across the tiny two-lane Gulf Drive to reach the Gulf beach, with provided towels tucked under our arms and beach chairs waiting for us on the sand. For real privacy, Tortuga has two detached cottages right on the Sound shore, offering a quiet view plus a gated pool and hot tub.

The day's meals must start off with a visit to [Ginny's & Jane E's at the Old IGA](#). It's an island antique store mixed with a community café and a gift shop and a flower stand. Speaking of inspired mashups, I have four beautiful words for you: crème brulee French toast. That's the house speciality, and it's bigger and sweeter than even what you're imagining right now. On the opposite end of that spectrum is the veggie frittata with spinach and zucchini but, alas, no crème. The French toast, bagels, quiches and frittatas are all baked right there in, yep, an old landmark grocery store. You don't have to be a travel writer to be able to ask for Ginny as soon as you walk in the door.

Lunch was at the [Sandbar Restaurant](#), where the beach and the dining area blend together. We ordered the two most popular salads: the crab pasta salad, beefed up with whitefish and billed as an old Anna Maria Island favorite, and the coconut shrimp salad, with fresh mango and passion fruit dressing. Can't go wrong, but my vote is for the latter. (I just wish my wife would have shared more of it.)

Dinner became a long, luxurious evening at [Euphemia Haye](#), the famous restaurant down Gulf Drive on Longboat Key. It was the only time we left Anna Maria. We ordered off a special tasting menu usually only available in the Haye Loft, the lighter fare/dessert lounge upstairs. As the centerpiece flambé station kept the scene lively in the intimate, 10-tables-or-so dining room, we enjoyed the signature Caesar salad and a generous portion of pate, made from scratch with veal and duck. The entrees were duckling and jumbo Gulf shrimp, followed up with the Southern pecan pie and apple walnut crumble. But the real highlight was sitting down with the wife of Chef Raymond Arpke, Darcy, for a nightcap of St. Germain elderflower liqueur as we pored over Ray's You Don't Have to Be Crazy, But It Helps cookbook. In it, he reveals the recipes for his Caesar salad, that famous roast duckling and more.

One of the last things we did was a visit to the [Acqua Aveda Salon & Spa](#). The first 15 minutes of my massage, I was still having the knots of day-to-day life rubbed out of me. Minutes later, my body and mind were fully on island time amid the scents of grapefruit and ylang ylang oil. When the masseuse said, We're all done, I never ever wanted to move again.

- [ISL_Chris's blog](#)