

It's Only Natural

The Sandpiper Inn on Longboat Key

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Photography by Hookey Hamilton and Patrick Fowler



Nestled amid the glitzy high-rises on Longboat Key lies Forgotten Florida; The Sandpiper Inn. An anachronistic single-story resort perched on the Gulf, the intimate enclave is a step back in time... to when innocence prevailed and nature ruled.

I have a passion for wildlife, but also for domesticated creatures. Which is a key reason my husband and I chose this property for a “family” weekend getaway. It’s not only a naturalist’s wonderland, but it’s also pet-friendly. So we packed up the dogs, the coolers filled with food, some casual clothes and stole away for a few magical, stress-free days.



All or Nothing

Since we live in Sarasota, just south of the Key, we frequent St. Armands Circle – an international shopping mecca lined with outdoor cafes – and as nature lovers, we’ve often toured Mote Marine Aquarium and The Pelican Man’s Bird Sanctuary. Foodies that we are, we’ve attended a cooking class at the acclaimed Euphemia Haye restaurant just across the street from The Sandpiper Inn. Chef Ray Arpke holds a series, in season, of imaginative, educational and entertaining sessions. Ours was entitled, “Little Italy” and featured a sumptuous menu of cannellini bean salad on bruschetta; Italian manicotti/crepes stuffed with homemade ricotta; chicken and veal cannelloni and tiramisu

cake, all paired with wines from Southern Wine and Spirits. A tasty experience and a must-do while on the Key.

Out-of-town visitors and locals shouldn't miss any of this, all minutes from the Inn. But alas, we were here for the area's biggest attraction: the beach. A laid-back vacation with our dogs, Sadie and Mimi and an attempt at actually doing... nothing.

Where better to accomplish this monumental task than at the beach? And these private sun-kissed strands were ours alone. Sea oats performed a graceful dance in the soft sea breeze. All we could hear were laughing gulls, lapping waves and pelicans as they splashed down for a fresh catch. The water was crystal clear and soothingly warm.



Dogs, by law, are not allowed on the beach, so our girls waited in our room for our return. Upon which, the four of us took a leisurely stroll along Gulf of Mexico Drive to Joan M. Durante Park – just steps from the resort to this shady pet-



welcoming place laden with tropical flora... red hibiscus, golden trumpets, blue plumbago, roses of all variety and a tranquil lake punctuated by a gushing fountain. On the way there and back we encountered rollerbladers, bicyclists, and families walking with strollers in tow.

A Room with a Hue

For our first evening, we chose to avail ourselves of the barbeque grills on-property, my chef-husband cooking filet mignon to perfection. We dined al fresco on our sprawling tiled patio, which afforded a panorama of azure Gulf waters framed by sea grape trees and palms. There are just 11 units at The Sandpiper Inn, strung like pearls along a paved path leading straight to the beach. Most face the well-tended gardens, cascading waterfall and lily pond.



Two of units are right on the beach, and ours was one. All the rooms are immaculate, well laid-out and include fully-equipped kitchens.

As the sun set, the skies turned dark. We were here during turtle nesting season, which means, lights out. Baby sea turtles can easily stray to danger – and demise – by following artificial light on shore at night mistaken for moonlight on the

water. So, evenings were pitch black. Perfect for midnight swims.

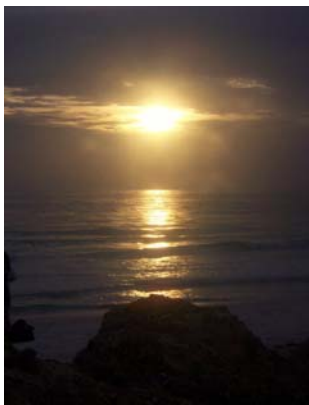
Next morning we were greeted with a plethora of brilliant butterflies fluttering outside our door. The Inn's thoughtfully landscaped gardens are comprised of colorful, fragrant flowers that attract these winged marvels of nature. We spent the day decadently chilling; reading, sunning and swimming, intermittently re-visiting the park with our kids. Bicycle riding along the key is a favorite pastime for visitors and locals alike. As is fishing. Were we so inclined, we could have easily booked a fishing excursion from here with Captain Mark Gore, an expert in trolling these fish-fertile waters.



Dinner this evening would be at The Beach House just down the road. I am ashamed to admit that we have lived in this area for more than 10 years, yet we had not experienced this gulf-side eatery complete with spectacular sunset. The menu is bright fusion of seafood, pasta, steaks and chicken. We shared crunchy conch fritters, calamari and shrimp and crab ceviche, one of this night's many specials.



Be sure to request a table at the water's edge. It affords an unobstructed view of the golden orb slowly melting into the horizon.



Our second day here was much the same as the first; the exception being meeting the new arrivals at the Inn. Thomas and his family were visiting from Lakeland, Florida. They had planned to spend a night here; then move on to Fort Myers beach. But one day at The Sandpiper Inn turned into two, three and more. And plans to leave were abandoned in light of the discovery of what Thomas called, "Paradise, this is truly IT!" Then there was the three-generation family from Tampa, Florida. Gleeful grandkids seemed mesmerized by their aqueous surroundings while parents and grandparents just chilled.

One in a Million

There's a special secret about summer here that only Floridians know. It's when crowds are diminished, rates are at their lowest, and afternoon rains cool and refresh. The beaches are desolate. It's one of the very best times to be in the Sunshine State, and especially at the gem that is The Sandpiper Inn. Most of your neighbors here will likely be white herons, seagulls, songbirds, geckos, butterflies, and of course, sandpipers.

Our last evening was spent at Mar Vista Dockside Restaurant and Pub on the bay; an historic institution built in 1912 and a popular watering hole since 1950.



Fresh seafood is a specialty, along with steamer pots featuring snow crabs, shrimp, clams, mussels and lobster, though landlubbers will also find plenty to choose from. We savored chilled raw oysters and middle neck clams sautéed

with garlic butter and white wine.



Chances are you'll be drawn to the outside dining area, as we were, with centuries-old trees, flaming tiki torches and a gorgeous view of the bay. But be sure to peruse inside the restaurant... read the history and see the hundreds of signed dollar bills and, perhaps leave your own.

Mar Vista has been named one of the top places to meet a millionaire. In fact, Longboat Key boasts a boatful. I don't lay claim to millions, nor to a millionaire. But I can tell you, unequivocally, that our time at The Sandpiper Inn on Longboat Key was priceless.



For more information about the Sandpiper Inn, call 941-383-2552 or visit www.sandpiperinn.com/FL/; to learn more about the Chiles restaurant group, including The Beach House, Mar Vista Dockside Restaurant & Pub and The Sandbar Restaurant call 941-778-1696 or visit www.groupersandwich.com. For information about Longboat Key, call 941-929-7177 or visit www.floridasgulfislands.com.

To see videos of this adventure and others, visit <http://lisacodiannefowlerblog.blogspot.com> or www.codiannefower.com