

In One Hour

RETREAT MIND, BODY & SOUL

Story by Leslie Joy Ickowitz

In one hour, which is how long it takes to get to Anna Maria Island by car from Tampa, we cross water eight times. Eight times! And one of those times is a breezy excursion over the soaring Sunshine Skyway. Flanked by a squadron of pelicans and with a stellar display of islands spread out before us, we inch closer to our destination.

At once it seems you have arrived in a different place in time. The slow pace beckons you to slip into serenity and leave your cares behind. What's missing is high-rise hotels, car horns, traffic jams, billboards and other ugly distractions reminding us of the grind. Instead you'll find warm, island hospitality and a charming choice of sleepy retreats from cozy cottages to stilt homes. Sensory overload is replaced by sensory seduction. The sights, the sounds, the flavor and fragrance surround you. Suddenly, you get the feeling you can stay here forever. But no matter how long you visit, this trip is packed with the stuff inspiration is made of, and you can get here whenever you want—in one hour.

Pull up a front row seat to your definition of bliss. Get in on the action with water sports. Or not. Play beach volleyball. Or not. Rock out to your iPod. Shop 'til you drop. Curl up with a good book. Catch a sunset. Dangle a fishing line in the water. Watch the world go by.

After a sunset stroll, a long day of pure island indulgence comes to a close. Consumed with the complicated question of which flip-flops to wear, you head out for a night on the town. Anna Maria







Island's dining scene is abundant with choices. A foodie-festival of casual beach fare and gourmet cuisine is served with a side of scenery. Homemade Amish ice cream at Big Olaf and some of the best pizza south of New York at Oma's are among the island's rather unexpected treats. The slow drive south on Gulf Drive leads to Longboat Key before continuing to Sarasota's St. Armands Circle, delivering a generous dollop of delicious dining choices and the only dose of nightlife you'll find in the area.

Whether you rise with the sun or prefer to sleep in, the Big French Breakfast is by far the most decadent way to start the day. Five dollars and eighty cents buys you the equivalent of heaven-on-a-plate at Island Creperie on Bridge Street. Two luscious strawberry-filled crepes, a freshly-baked, buttery croissant and one divine chunk of French Baguette French Toast ALL covered in powdered sugar is undeniably swoon worthy.

In one hour you can find yourself hanging out amidst coconut palms. Coconuts, you may notice, are absent from the palm trees lining our local streets and neighborhoods. No wonder it feels like a million miles away.

Anna Maria, Holmes Beach and Bradenton Beach comprise Anna Maria Island, which is easily traversed via the free trolley. Linger on island time at beachfront bars and eateries or poised above the clear turquoise water on your choice of piers. Leave the driving up to someone with a care in the world.

Bean Point, on the island's northern tip is one of those spots where you feel like you can slip off the end of the earth and float carelessly on a breeze to Neverland, or at least to the next land mass. In Bradenton Beach, at one of Anna Maria Island's narrowest points, Sarasota Bay and the glittering Gulf of Mexico are mere steps apart. Ospreys and great blue herons fish along the bay's shorelines while seagulls, sandpipers and terns patrol the foamy coast. Gentle sea turtles nest in the soft sand from May to October and without regard for season, dolphins frolic parallel to beautiful blue horizon.

In one hour, you can transport mind, body and soul. Getting there is easy as 1-2-3. Step 1: Hop in the car. Step 2: Set the GPS. Step 3: Accelerate. When you emerge from Anna Maria Island's cocoon of tranquility, you will once again be ready to take on the world.

Anna Maria Island
Aerial View courtesy
of Bradenton Area
Convention &
Visitors Bureau

Dunes at Bean Point
on Anna Maria Island
courtesy of Bradenton
Area Convention
& Visitors Bureau

Rod & Reel Pier on
Anna Maria Island
courtesy of Bradenton
Area Convention
& Visitors Bureau

Terns & Hanging
Flowers photos by
Leslie Joy Ickowitz