

# Old Florida Charm & Fun Still Exists

## ON ANNA MARIA ISLAND

By Carol Muse Evans

If you've dreamed of taking your children to the "old Florida" you remember visiting as a child, it still exists - on Anna Maria Island.

Life is really laid back on the island, located about an hour southwest of Tampa, Florida. It is like a hidden jewel and a step back in time in Florida history and tourism, and though tourists abound, it doesn't feel "touristy." As one restaurant owner put it, "What we're selling here is relaxation." And relax, you can.

Families who just want a great beach trip will find everything they need here, and very affordably priced. Beaches are just steps from resorts and condos that dot the beach line, and very little walking and steps are involved. You've still got the beautiful, white sand of the Florida Gulf Coast here, but the sand's a little finer, and crushed shells are also part of the mix. In fact, there's a multitude of shells here, if your family likes shelling. Surf's up a little higher here, and the water is crystal clear, blue-green. >>

Photo by Carol Muse Evans

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PHOTO BY CAROL MUSE EVANS

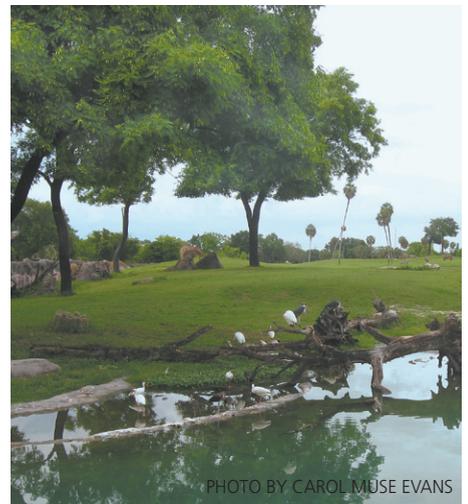


PHOTO BY CAROL MUSE EVANS



PHOTO BY CAPTAIN SCOTT, BEACH BUMS

**Above:** Food and fun are fantastic at The Sun House Restaurant & Bar. Be sure to be there when the sun goes down to help sing “You Are My Sunshine” and toast the sunset.

**Top right:** Animals abound at Busch Gardens Tampa. If you take a side trip there, be sure to take in all the animal wildlife.

**Bottom right:** Beach Bums in Anna Maria Island, Florida, offer great Kayaking tours. Pictured are Carol and Keith Evans.

You’ll still find recreational rentals along the beach, such as sailboats, parasailing, wave runners and the like, but the beaches aren’t full - so you feel like your vacation is a little more private and a lot less commercial. Many resorts provide the beach chairs, umbrellas, and even floats and beach and pool toys- you certainly don’t feel like you are nicked and dimed here, which is a nice treat.

There are grocery stores, markets and great local restaurants here, but you won’t find a fast food or chain restaurant on the island -you’ll have to go into Bradenton or Sarasota for that. You’re on an island, originally claimed for the Spanish by Hernando DeSoto, which wasn’t accessible except by boat until 1921, when the first bridge connecting it to Bradenton was built, according to local Chamber of Commerce records.

If you came by plane or simply don’t want to drive your car, there’s the Anna Maria Island Trolley, FREE, and available every 20 minutes from designated stops along Anna Maria Island. No one’s in a hurry here. And you can feel very safe - crime is very minimal.

But why would you want to miss the true flavor of Florida here - like Ginny and Jane’s delicious pastries, pancakes, quiches and more in their quirky, charming antique and gift shop? Or great seafood for dinner at The SunHouse Restaurant, where they ring the gong at sunset every night and diners sing, “You are sunshine” as patrons drink a mysterious green flash shooter (non-alcoholic ones are provided for those who don’t imbibe and children).

There are plenty of great places to eat. Mr. Bones BBQ is a break from seafood, with their specialty, BBQ ribs and Indian and vegetarian foods. This place is quirky, too - the restaurant is lined with masks and beer is served from a coffin.

The Gulf Drive Café is great for a yummy breakfast with homemade home fries and any kind of pancake you can imagine. Mattison’s Riverside offers Mediterranean food with a hint of Asian flavor. Eat at the Beach-house Restaurant, and you can eat right on the beach! Enjoy all their seafood specialties. And Feeling Swell Surf Bar and Family Restaurant offers burgers, wings, salads, special chili and more. Don’t miss the fried

## SIDE TOUR: BUSCH GARDENS, TAMPA

[www.buschgardens.com](http://www.buschgardens.com)

**Just gotta see a little excitement on your trip to Anna Maria?** Take a one-hour drive northeast to Busch Gardens Tampa for thrill rides, amazing roller coasters, a great children's area with rides, animal wildlife, great shows and more.

You can take a safari on the Serengeti Plain, go face to face with exotic animals, or ride one of the exciting roller coasters including SheKira, the floorless roller coaster with a 200-foot, 90-degree drop. There's something for the whole family at Busch Gardens Tampa. And take an extra day to enjoy Busch Gardens' waterpark, Adventure Island, just across the street.

Admission for one park for \$74.95 adults and for \$64.95 children, with an online special that's \$64.95 for all, or purchase a ticket that includes both parks for \$89.79 for adults and \$77.79 for children or the online one-price for \$79.95. See website for hours of operation for each park.

gator, dill pickles or the yummy fried macaroni and cheese (Paula Deen, eat your heart out - they fry everything here, too!).

Even the atmosphere is delicious to your senses. The old Florida feel is evident in the less modern buildings, though most have been updated with modern conveniences. It still has the historic Florida feel, with few high rises - nothing more than four or five stories, brightly-colored and pastel buildings, and lush, tropical foliage that looks like it's been there since before the bridge was built and has been cared for lovingly for years.

For fun, you have, of course, the beach. And while you don't really NEED anything else, there are some great things you can do if you want a little break. Beach Bums, a great rental store right in the heart of Anna Maria, offers bike rentals, golf cart rentals, beach supplies, gifts and toys, baby supplies, and even kayak rental. Or better yet, get Beach Bums' Captain Scott, a retired marine biologist, to take you on an eco-kayak tour through the wildlife-rich Robinson Preserve. If you've never kayaked before, he will teach you how, as well as give you a custom tour of the area and its fascinating wildlife. Appropriate for about five years old and older.

Get up early in the morning (by 7 a.m.), and you can learn about sea turtles, their nesting habits and the efforts to help and preserve them and their habitat with Suzi Fox and her group at Island Turtle Watch. Then take a tour of the South Florida Museum and visit 62-year-old Snooty, the oldest manatee living in captivity. The museum also offers shows at the Bishop Planetarium. The museum's other exhibits include ancient artifacts, artistry, dioramas and more - a great educational side tour, especially for homeschoolers.

You can also join naturalist guide and marine botanist Shawn Carper of Around the Bend Nature Tours to catch critters in the grass flats of Sarasota bay, see the "nursery of the sea," and more. Appropriate for ages 6 and older, but you must have packed closed toed shoes to participate!

Whatever you choose to do on Anna Maria Island, don't forget its number one draw - the beautiful beaches and Gulf of Mexico. And don't forget to allow some time to relax.

*Carol Muse Evans is publisher/editor of Birmingham Parent, and she and her teenage son loved Anna Maria Island and want to return soon.*

### IF YOU GO:

[www.annamariaislandchamber.org](http://www.annamariaislandchamber.org)

### WHERE TO STAY:

#### Tortuga Inn Beach Resort

877-867-8842

[www.tortugainn.com](http://www.tortugainn.com)

*Offers all styles of accommodations from hotel rooms, to studios and apartments with kitchens, to a few penthouses. Laundry room on site. Great pool. Beach umbrellas, chairs and toys provided free of charge.*

### WHERE TO EAT:

#### Mr. Bones BBQ

941-778-6614

[www.mrbonesbbq.com](http://www.mrbonesbbq.com)

*Delicious BBQ ribs, salads and Indian food. Casual, fun atmosphere.*

#### Ginny and Jane E's

941-778-7370

[www.annamariacafe.com](http://www.annamariacafe.com)

#### The Sun House Restaurant & Bar

941-782-1122

[www.thesunhouserestaurant.com](http://www.thesunhouserestaurant.com)

#### Feeling Swell Surfbar and Café

941-896-7879

[www.feelingswellsurfbar.com](http://www.feelingswellsurfbar.com)

#### The Beachhouse Restaurant

941-779-2222

[www.beachhouse-restaurant.com](http://www.beachhouse-restaurant.com)

#### Gulf Drive Café

941-778-1919

[www.gulfdrivetiki.com](http://www.gulfdrivetiki.com)

#### Mattison's Riverside

941-748-8087

[www.mattisons.com/riverside.cfm](http://www.mattisons.com/riverside.cfm)

### FUN THINGS TO DO:

#### Beach Bums

941-778-3316

[www.beachbumsami.com](http://www.beachbumsami.com)

*Kayaking tours, bike rentals, golf cart rentals, kayak rentals and more.*

#### Dip Net Tours

Shawn Carper and Around the Bend Nature Tours

941-914-0642

[www.aroundbend.com](http://www.aroundbend.com)

#### Island Turtle Watch

[www.islandturtles.com](http://www.islandturtles.com)

#### South Florida Museum

941-778-1919

[www.southfloridamuseum.org](http://www.southfloridamuseum.org)