

Natural, Healthy Beaches

Beaches here are renowned for their long history of preservation by indigenous peoples and settlers from afar. Visitors reap the benefits as natural beaches provide a home and food sources for native flora and fauna.

By Juliette Reynolds

The **beaches** along The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel have played host to **conservationists** throughout the ages. The area's first known inhabitants, the Calusa Indians, lived in harmony with the earth along the lacy coastline, taking their sustenance from the fruits of land and sea.

A History of Stewardship

In the early part of the last century, eco-minded folks took to the unspoiled landscape, and one person in particular, noted political cartoonist **J.N. "Ding" Darling**, www.fws.gov/dingdarling/

spearheaded the effort by helping to create the wildlife sanctuary on Sanibel Island that bears his name.

These pioneers of preservation have an assist today from local and state governments, as well as a **population that has taken stewardship** of the area's natural assets. Unlike many beaches in Florida, most on The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel are left **ungroomed**.

One result is the naming of Lee County's beaches as **healthy** by the National Healthy Beaches Campaign, headed up by Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, a.k.a. **Dr. Beach**. Beaches are evaluated based on 35 environmental and service-based criteria, including water quality, public services, litter control and proactive environmental management stances. Lee County's beaches are monitored monthly.



Shells line the coast

Natural Beaches Best

Shelling the Islands

Novice and serious collectors alike can find a treasure trove of shells on a visit to the Outer Islands. Warm Gulf waters, white sandy beaches, knowledgeable charter guides and an incredible 400 species of shells make this the ideal destination for shell seekers.

By Juliette Reynolds

It was certainly desire and a little mystery that lured us on our first shell-seeking trip.

Reminiscent of the unhurried pace of childhood pleasures, the idea of spending the better part of a day collecting beautiful pieces of sculpture created by nature and nurtured by the sea enchanted us. This enchantment coupled with the mystery of the unknown – How many **shells** would we find? What assortment would the sea yield that day? Where were we going to find our treasures? – led us to **Captiva Cruises** www.captivacruises.com

at the end of Andy Rosse Lane on **Captiva Island**.

Captiva Cruises

About a dozen feeding ospreys swoop on the cool morning breeze as we wait on the long wooden dock for the large pontoon boat to pick us up. Eager with anticipation, we, along with about 20 other shelling enthusiasts of varying degree, board Captiva Cruises for the 25-minute journey. As we travel across **Pine Island Sound**, our informative guide, Capt. Brian, gives a short history of the area and points out landmarks along the way. We also get a lesson in the sound's eco-system and are assured of the abundance of dolphins and manatees to be found there.



Collecting shells is something the whole family can enjoy.



Atlantic Calico Scallop

Our destination is **North (or Upper) Captiva**, formed when a series of hurricanes in the 1920s created Redfish Pass and cut the then 12-mile-long island of Captiva in two. We idle through the pass in deference to the marine mammals that use it as their underwater "highway." It's an area so narrow we can imagine when the two islands were one. A few idyllic, large beach cottages are scattered at the southern tip of North Captiva, which is only accessible by boat. As we approach the shore, we are treated to an unspoiled vista – a wide, **white sandy beach** behind which stands wind-buffeted vegetation.

Indoor Fun for Families

Need a break from the sun (or occasional rain)? Take your family on an adventure to see treasure recovered from shipwrecks, walk through a simulated thunderstorm, visit the home of an inventor or view a shell collection with more than 30,000 varieties from all over the world.

By Chelle Koster Walton, member of the Society of American Travel Writers

Here on the Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, residents often welcome rainy days because they are so rare. And because they give us an opportunity to take the kids to those **indoor museums** and **attractions** they've been asking to visit. These suggestions also work for days when you're ready to get out of the sun.



Ford Motor Cars

Estates and Shopping Malls

Meet Lee County's most famous forefathers at the **Edison & Ford Winter Estates** www.efwefla.org complex, where re-enactors sometimes dress the part and a museum holds many of Edison's 1,000 patented inventions, along with the Model T his friend and neighbor gave him.

The afternoon calls for shopping, either at the inventor's namesake **Edison Mall**, <http://www.simon.com/mall/default.aspx?ID=129> indoors with some 150 stores, OR at the fun and funky **Shell Factory**, www.shellfactory.com where stuffed African animals and a video arcade rank high on the kid barometer.

Museums

Downtown Fort Myers' Imaginarium Hands-On Museum

<http://www.cityftmyers.com/imaginariu/index.html> gives free reign to children's natural curiosity. Whether they're walking through a thunderstorm or looking at a house inside out, they're learning and loving it.

Follow it up with a history lesson at nearby **Southwest Florida Museum of History**, <http://www.cityftmyers.com/museum/index.html> where baseball, cowboys and Indians and saber teeth will pique their interest in the past.



Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum

Proceed to the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum

<http://www.shellmuseum.org/>, where a special hands-on room appeals to youngsters and older ones can look at **shells** from around the world – more than 30,000 species in all.

Aquariums & Skating

Explore the marine heritage of shrimping town **Fort Myers Beach** at **Ostego Bay Marine Science Center** <http://www.ostegobay.org/>

. Here kids can peer into aquariums, touch a shark's skin, and learn about endangered manatees and loggerhead turtles. Stop at one of the many family-friendly, inexpensive restaurants where fresh local shrimp is the specialty.

For fun in the afternoon, head south to **Estero** for a cool time at **Germain Arena's** www.floridaeverblades.com ice-skating rink. There's also a roller rink, and in season (October through April), professional hockey at night.

Sun Splash Family Waterpark



400 Santa Barbara Blvd., Cape Coral, FL 33991
239-574-0558

www.sunsplashwaterpark.com

Spend a day zooming, fluming and floating at one of the largest waterparks between Tampa and Miami. The park offers more than 24 attractions for family fun and excitement.

Directions: 400 Santa Barbara Blvd., 2.5 mi. N. of Veterans Parkway in Cape Coral. I-75, turn W. at Exit 136 and cross the Midpoint Memorial Bridge.

Specific Admission Rates: Resident Adults and children 48" and taller \$12.95, Additional Fee applies for Non-Residents

Payment Options: American Express, Discover, MasterCard, Visa, Cash, Travelers Checks

Discounts: Group Discount, Senior Citizen Discount

About the Shell Factory and Nature Park

[\(Directions To Get Here\)](#) [\(Hours of Operation\)](#)



If you're in the mood to 'shop till you drop', you've certainly come to the right place! Not only does The Shell Factory have the largest collection of common and rare seashells, sponges, coral, fossils and sea life specimens in the world, it also sells sea and nautical-inspired lamps and night-lights, as well as gold jewelry. You can pick your own pearl & have it mounted in one of many styles of bands. Also sold at the Shell Factory are inlaid seashell toilet seats, accent pieces such as wood and ceramic sculptures, folk art birds, drift wood, hand-painted tables, wall hangings and a wide variety of mirrors, palm tree wine glasses, books and maps, cards and stationery, nautical-motif gifts and accent pieces, candles, magnets and key chains. There are also decorations for every holiday imaginable, including a large Christmas store.



The Shell Factory has a newly renovated **Nature Park**, which features a Petting Zoo, Environmental Education Center and a Botanical Trail and Garden. The primary focus is to provide an opportunity for the general public to experience and learn about different plants and wildlife found within the various ecosystems throughout the world. Special emphasis has been placed on those ecosystems unique to Florida. A variety of activities, exhibits and programs will, in most cases, offer individuals and groups a hands-on educational experience.



If it's fun you're seeking, you can play arcade games, miniature golf, water wars or bump into friends at the Bumper Boat lagoon. All found at our **Fun Park & Arcade**.



Don't miss The Shell Factory's **Waltzing Waters Liquid Fireworks®** extravaganza. The waters jump, twist, sway and swirl in breathtaking movements that surpass those of human dancers. The world's most elaborate water, light and music production, it's a triumph of artistry and engineering.

Meet Native Wildlife

The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel is abundant with an array of wildlife, including dolphins, manatees, sea turtles and birds. Embark on your own nature safari to spot these and other creatures.

By Laura Spinale

Anyone who has survived a Massachusetts winter understands why I moved to Florida. Besides escaping bitter northern temperatures, **animal sightings** here are frequent and easy and served up in a warm climate. While abundant array than The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel. From the entire state is rife with wildlife, perhaps no region offers a more the West Indian **manatee** to loggerhead **sea turtles** to a seemingly infinite variety of **birds**, this place houses as many creatures as Eden. To spot them, take organized tours, plan a hike or simply plop yourself in a county park and keep your eyes peeled.



West Indian manatee

Marvelous Manatees

The January I visited, Florida enjoyed an unbridled streak of warm weather. Daytime highs in the 80s have left me worried about my trip to Fort Myers' **Manatee Park** www.leeparks.org .

The manatee is drawn to this 17-acre swath because its canal contains the warm-water discharge of a nearby power plant. If the water in the canal's feeder – the Orange River – hovers above 68 degrees, there's no reason for the manatees to swim into the park to warm themselves. (Warm water is necessary for the animals' digestion.) But I get lucky: The temperature dips considerably the night before my trip.

