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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

Where to Find Old, Classic Florida

In Boca Grande, Apalachicola, Sanibel and Anna Maria, you can find beach bungalows, vintage hotels, fresh seafood and local character

By SARA CLEMENCE

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CASUAL COVE | A grocery store in Boca Grande Jason Myers for The Wall Street Journal

IT'S ONE OF my favorite childhood photographs: My little brother and I are squinting into bright sunshine. Behind us is a scattering of disheveled palm trees and a sandy path. The corner of a faded beach house edges into the shot.

The picture, taken in the Florida Keys some 30 years ago, conjures up a thousand sunny memories, but just two words: Old Florida.

Photos: Forgotten Florida, Found



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My nostalgia for the Sunshine State of yesteryear—before frenzied art fairs, \$35 martinis and a Wizarding World of Harry Potter theme park—isn't exceptional. Not according to travel marketing materials, at least. "A piece of Old Florida," claims the website of a fishing lodge near Fort Myers. "Experience Old Florida," urges the brochure of a Naples resort. References to "authentic" and "classic" settings abound. So do images of vacant beaches and puttering fishing boats.

Touting Old Florida, it turns out, is a relatively new phenomenon. "I don't remember hearing anybody promote it much before 9/11," said Tracy J. Revels, a historian and author of "Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism." "But some people are looking for quieter things. I think the whole search for authenticity has become more important in the 21st century."

That quest has also become more challenging. Florida has racked up record tourist numbers over the last decade. Just last week, Gov. Rick Scott announced that the state had an estimated 94.7 million visitors in 2013, an all-time high and a 3.5% jump from the prior year. The crowds aren't just suitcase toters: In December, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that Florida has come within 100,000 people of overtaking New York as the country's third most populous state.



More people means more development. Meanwhile, part of what makes a place qualify as "Old Florida" is what's not there: big-name resorts, fast-food chains, outposts of European luxury brands—basically, anything owned by a publicly traded company. Old Florida is distinguished by a sense of place and soul, with mom-and-pop shops, nostalgically kitschy souvenir stands and pink beach bungalows. Local "joints." Breathing room. Elbow room.



"I think of my childhood," said the novelist, columnist and native Floridian Carl Hiaasen. "But there was a generation before that, who had a whole different set of memories. My father lived in what's now downtown Fort Lauderdale; they'd sit in the backyard and shoot buzzards out of the sky. It was totally wild."

Florida still has a few places that are simpler and quainter—and don't feel like gated retirement communities. Skip the tourist hotspots. Save South Beach and Palm Beach, Disney and Daytona for another time. Here are four destinations, all on the Gulf Coast, that have enough infrastructure to make for an enjoyable vacation, but are small and placid enough to make you feel like a kid again.

THE PREPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH | **Gasparilla Island**

Don't forget to pack your pinks and greens. Gasparilla Island, about an hour's drive from Fort Myers, and nearly two hours south of Tampa, has seven miles of soft, uncrowded beaches—but the bigger draw is its real-deal blue-blood sensibility.

On Gasparilla, you'll see popped collars worn without irony; many residents (and their well-groomed dogs) get around in brightly colored golf carts. Strolling around the only town, Boca Grande, a visitor just might spot a flyer advertising a reunion concert for the Whiffenpoofs, the storied Yale a cappella group. The pale-yellow, century-old Gasparilla Inn & Club not only has an undulating Pete Dye-designed golf course and a well-regarded spa, but two croquet lawns and a dress code: During "social season," men are asked to wear jackets in the dining room.

But you don't need Standard Oil running through your veins to feel at ease; the island isn't snobbish (and the hotel will happily lend you a jacket). Book a room or cottage at the inn, where the decor includes trellis-patterned carpets, polished brass hardware and shell-encrusted mirrors. Walk a few blocks to the beach club and claim a lounge chair overlooking the Gulf. Browse for fishing gear, cashmere sweaters and hand-painted signs in Boca Grande's shops. Or, rent a bike and ride the shady railway-turned-trail that runs down the center of the island.

There's no shortage of good food in town. The Temptation is a vintage spot where fishermen and magnates mingle beneath murals that Deo Weymouth, a member of the du Pont family, painted in the 1950s. Try the scrumptious Island Favorite—bronzed grouper served over Brussels sprouts with prosciutto, roasted garlic and shallots, topped with a citrus beurre blanc. Around the corner, the Loose Caboose serves ice cream made by co-owner Blanche Boudreau; the cream she uses is so sweet, she claims, there's no need to add sugar. The rich chocolate flavor is said to have been a favorite of Katherine Hepburn, who rented a house on Gasparilla for several years. Could there be a more fitting endorsement?



GO FISH | Boats docked in Apalachicola *Sara Clemence/The Wall Street Journal*

THE SOUTH'S BEACH | **Apalachicola**

Up until recently, the sight of oystermen using long-handled rakes to harvest shellfish in Apalachicola Bay was about as common as new condos in Miami.

The local oystering industry is going through tough times; Georgia has been draining the rivers that supply oyster habitats. But a fishing-town feel remains in this Panhandle spot—as does the Southern vibe that results from being closer to Alabama than Orlando. And though the old French consulate now houses a shop where you can buy woven belts and vintage sterling-silver teaspoons, Apalachicola hasn't been totally taken over by tourists—yet.

Opt for an elegant bed-and-breakfast: Coombs House Inn, a 1905 mansion with polished wood paneling, oriental rugs and four-poster beds. The shops, galleries and restaurants of downtown, where much of the architecture is from the same era, are just a few blocks away.

Café con Leche, a coffee shop across from the waterfront, serves up wicked pastries, like strawberry scones and sour cream-cardamom-walnut coffee cake. Next door, Forgotten Coast Books specializes in used and out-of-print titles focusing on Florida. Around the corner, Bowery Art Gallery & Studio features works by local and regional artists.

Walk to the western end of Market Street, where shrimping boats dock and there's an enormous pile of spent oyster shells. (You may be more likely to see oyster skiffs tied up in gritty Eastpoint, on the far side of the causeway.) Take an estuary tour by motorboat or kayak to spot wildlife and learn about local ecology; there are several outfitters in the area.

Head to Up the Creek Raw Bar in time for sunset. Its high-ceilinged dining room, adorned with nets and stuffed fish, overlooks the tawny grasses of the bay. It goes beyond the usual fish-house fare—blackened mahi-mahi comes with fried green tomatoes—and, of course, it serves oysters.

The pristine beaches of narrow St. George Island are just a 15-minute drive away. Even in peak season, the sand is barely crowded at its state park.

If you come or go via U.S. Route 98 to the east, you'll pass some barbecue joints with smokers going out front. Stop at one. Or try the Fisherman's Wife in Carabelle. The décor is simple, and the shrimp taste so good because the owners' own boats pull them out of the Gulf.



SHORE BET | A view toward the water from Casa Ybel Resort Jason Myers for *The Wall Street Journal*

SEASHELL WORLD | Sanibel Island

Sanibel isn't exactly "undiscovered"—it has its own rush hour, and on weekend nights, the wait for a table at popular restaurants can easily be more than an hour. But the island has managed to remain low-key and connected to nature. Much of the beachfront lodging is of the modest cottage-with-kitchenette sort; 22 miles of paths make it bike-friendly. After sunset, the streets are unlit, thanks to the island's eco-friendly dark-skies mandate.

The island's classic feel is stronger on the eastern end, a.k.a., Old Town Sanibel. The Lighthouse Cafe, whose walls are crammed with framed prints of beacons, claims to have the world's best breakfast; malted hot cakes made with waffle flour and eggs benedict with Key lime hollandaise do little to upend that claim. Next door, Tuttle's Sea Horse Shell Shop has been selling souvenirs since 1973—and looks it, but in a good way. Swing by the lighthouse itself, which first shone in 1884.



Wares at Tuttle's Sea Horse Shell Shop Sara Clemence/*The Wall Street Journal*

Sanibel's beaches are famously shell-studded; common finds include tiny coquina clams, small conchs and sand dollars. As dusk approaches, locals flock to the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, to turn their binoculars and telephoto lenses on snowy egrets, roseate spoonbills and other feathered fauna. Ding Darling isn't just notable for taking up a big chunk of Sanibel, but for the fact that you drive one-way through the reserve, stopping wherever seems appealing along the way.

Get to the quirky Island Cow on the early side to beat the lunch crowd. Pull up a pastel-painted chair and order a fried grouper sandwich. Many other Sanibel restaurants are large and noisy, but tasty. At Traders Café, seared scallops might come with a spicy sauce, the fish crusted with panko or nuts. The Timbers Restaurant & Fish Market offers more traditional seafood dishes like stuffed shrimp.

The beachfront Casa Ybel Resort has 114 one- and two-bedroom suites; what they lack in character they make up for in comfort, with screened patios, premium linens and full kitchens. Bring your own umbrella, or let a beach attendant set one up.



WISH YOU WERE THERE | A view of the beach on Anna Maria Island on Florida's Gulf Coast. *Jason Myers for The Wall Street Journal*

THE SPARE KEY | **Anna Maria**

This town on a slim barrier island about an hour south of Tampa has no grand-dame hotel, no sprawling wildlife preserve, no historic waterfront. And that's part of what makes it appealing. Anna Maria is nice but not glitzy, quiet yet not desolate, with just enough quirk to keep things interesting.

Anna Maria occupies the northern cap of the island that bears the same name, and is dominated by palm trees and low, pastel beach cottages. Renting one of these charmers is the way to go, lodging-wise—for a couple of hundred dollars a night, you can have two or three bedrooms, stainless-steel appliances, a pool and the foliage-fringed beach a five-minute walk away.

The implausibly named Ginny's and Jane E's Bakery Café and Island Coastal Store is a local institution, a former IGA grocery store that now houses a maze of mismatched tables, books and beach "collectibles." An egg sandwich is the sensible choice at breakfast; to indulge, opt for a freshly baked cinnamon roll blanketed with glaze. Anna Maria's commercial stretch, dotted with upscale mom-and-pop shops, is a couple of blocks away. The Island Cabana stocks Lilly Pulitzer clothing, colorful accessories and housewares. The Olive Oil Outpost sources oils from around the world; you can fill your own bottles from their stainless-steel tanks. For more DIY action, head down the street to Anna Maria Donuts, where customers pick the icing and topping for their made-on-the-spot treats. Tiny Hometown Desserts makes Key lime pie in regular and gluten-free versions.

There are a few options for waterfront dining in Anna Maria. Rod & Reel Pier, at the end of a weather-worn dock near the very tip of the island, recently reopened after being damaged in a September fire. It's once again serving up generous helpings of fried oysters, grouper and shrimp. On the island's other flank, the Sandbar has seating right on the sand, and a nightly tradition: The table that correctly guesses the exact time of the sunset wins a bottle of Champagne.

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