

Public Paradise - the
beach at Coquina
Park

Sarasota *paradise*

Wildlife, shopping and culture create a heady blend
of attractions amid the swamplands of Florida.
Norman Wright visits Sarasota on the Gulf Coast

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

HALF-SUBMERGED among the weeds, a 12-foot alligator lazed in the afternoon heat.

A brood of babies swam around her and a couple climbed on her back to bask in the Florida sun.

Choice photographer Clive Nicholls snapped away until she flicked her tail languidly and glided away, deeper into the weeds of the stagnant watercourse.

A couple of hours later, we were in the world of alligator handbags with an invitation to a preview of the sophisticated new Saks of Fifth Avenue store in Sarasota, the day before the opening of the first new shopping mall in America since the world financial crisis.

Sun, shopping and scenery sum up perfectly the attractions of the wonderful city and its slice of Florida's Gulf Coast and swampy wildlife paradise, although you need to add in culture, too.

Stepping out on the balcony of my hotel room on the first morning of our stay was a bit like entering the set of a nature documentary. A flight of half a dozen pelicans bombed along the shoreline, silhouetted against the rosy sunrise. Down on the beach, flocks of waders poked and prodded the tideline then rose like a cloud to swoop on a new hunting ground.

By the time we got our own feet on the sand after breakfast it was warming up nicely. A few amateur fishermen, up to their waist in water to stay cool, cast their lines into the blue swell.

Patrolling the water's edge were the professional fishers in the form of Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets and Snowy Egrets, looking rather disdainfully at the efforts of their human counterparts, then unerringly darting into the shallows to return with a wriggling flash of silver in their beaks.

Our hotel was on Lido Key, one of a series of islands connected to the mainland, and each other, by causeways. On the seaward sides of the keys are the

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Clockwise: A big female alligator with baby on her back; The opening spectacular at the Ringings International Arts Festival; A Sunday morning beach stroll; Watersport with a difference; Myakka Lake in the State Park; Egrets fish the tide; “Leave it to the pros, mate” Great Blue Heron



glorious snowy-sand beaches; on the inward sides around the protected lagoons are magnificent waterfront homes as well as marinas full of impressive boats.

Patrolling the lagoons are more fishers – Ospreys lazily picking up unwary prey in their talons and flapping off to enjoy breakfast.

Driving over the causeway to Longboat

Key there were glimpses of idyllic beaches and dream homes, but just across the bridge on to Ana Maria Island we found a spot of paradise. Coquina Park gives you easy access. There's plenty of parking, shady picnic places and permanent barbecues. It was Sunday and a group was enjoying an after-church picnic in one of the larger shelters.

The real gem, though, is the beach looking across to Longboat Key. You can sit on a bench overlooking the sound between the two islands and see the

birdlife, every shade of green and blue in the waters, and watch the boats motor in and out. Some were anchoring off the flat beaches opposite and taking a picnic ashore. Others were heading more seriously out into the Gulf of Mexico with their flying bridges and rods at the ready in search of big-game fish.

With the syrupy warmth bathing my shady bench, I could have stayed there all day.

However, there's much more to see. On our way back to the mainland we called in at the Mote Marine Laboratory Aquarium



Clockwise: Big, friendly Manatee; Dining at Armand Circle; Classic sculpture at Armand Circle; Marie Selby Botanic Gardens; Cafe L'Europe started out as the property sales office



St Armands Circle on the St Armands Key. On the outside of the circle are shops and restaurants, on the inside a series of classic marble statues and bronze plaques commemorating great circus performers.

The shops are mostly individual, selling items you might not find in the big stores. The restaurants are the same.

We tried the Café L'Europe, sitting on the terrace next to the pavement of the Circle. The food was excellent, the welcome from owner Betsie Coolidge warm, and it proved a great place to enjoy the ambience and people watch the shoppers. One of them was a visitor from Manchester who offered to hop over the railing and share our bottle of red...

Shopping of a different kind is now available in Sarasota at the new Mall at University Town Centre, an 880,000 sq ft regional centre on two floors. We were there for the opening – a big deal for retailing in the whole of the USA, not just Florida. It's the first big mall built and opened in the country since the recession.

As you would expect the opening featured lots of local dignitaries and plenty of razzmatazz.

A day earlier, we were invited to a preview of one of the mall's anchor stores, Saks of Fifth Avenue. We brushed up as best we could considering we didn't know about the event before we packed, but we didn't compete very well with the Saks staff and the Florida media ladies, who looked as glamorous as the pristine store

on City Island. It's the public face of the research work their scientists do to protect the marine environment. Undoubtedly the highlight of a visit are the aquarium's manatees, Hugh and Buffet. These creatures are aquatic relatives of the elephant. Huge but gentle, they cruise around their giant pool easing up to the glass viewing panels to watch those watching them.

You do need a car to take full advantage of everything on offer. We rented from (www.FloridaCarHire.com). Prices start

from just £16 per day; the company is UK-based with access to more than 100 locations throughout Florida.

All car sizes are available, from economy vehicles to 15-seater minivans and everything in between. All rentals are fully inclusive of all taxes and insurances, with nothing else to pay for locally.

The Marie Selby Botanic Gardens overlook the calm inner waters of Sarasota Bay. There are delightful walks through shady glades of exotic plants, a tropical rainforest conservatory, a walkway in the

treetops and a typical mangrove bayou. Sarasota is the spiritual home of The Greatest Show On Earth – the Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Circus.

Five Ringling brothers founded their circus in 1884 and in 1907 acquired Barnum and Bailey, finally merging the two in 1919.

John Ringling and his wife Mable Burton spent their winters in Sarasota from 1909. They eventually built a magnificent 30-room mansion inspired by the Venetian Gothic palaces. The couple

acquired a huge collection of Baroque art which they eventually housed in a museum at the mansion.

The art helped the Ringlings survive the Wall Street Crash and in the late Twenties the remaining two brothers, John and Charles, acquired all the rest of the US travelling circuses including Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

They moved the Ringlings winter circus quarters to Sarasota in 1926 and played a big part in developing the city.

After his death in 1936, John

bequeathed the mansion and art collection to the state of Florida. As well as the art collection, there is also a museum of the circus at the site.

We were in Sarasota in October at the same time as the annual Ringling International Arts Festival, which opened with a fabulous music and dance spectacular in the central gardens of the mansion and ended in a fireworks display.

Ringling's mark is all over Sarasota with many buildings and streets carrying the name. One of the most famous is the



The Sarasota Opera prepares for a production. Right: Sarasota Classic Car Museum



Passport to Sarasota

Getting there

■ America As You Like It offers a seven-night holiday to Sarasota, including return flights on British Airways from Gatwick to Tampa and seven nights' room-only accommodation at the Lido Beach Resort, from £1060 per person. Tel: 020 8742 8299, website: (www.americaasyoulikeit.com)

■ Sarasota has its own airport with connections from hubs like Atlanta, but more flights use Tampa just 40 miles up the coast.

Find out more

■ Contact details and information about all the places mentioned are available on the tourist information website: (www.visitsarasota.org)

■ Car rental: (www.FloridaCarHire.com), tel: 0845 680 7479, Twitter: (@DriveFlorida).

and the designer gear on show. The mall adds a new dimension to the shopping offering of Sarasota. There's a good selection of shops in the downtown area of the city, too.

The arts and culture feature strongly in the city. Music and drama are a big draw, including a film festival, as well as ballet, opera and visual arts.

The Sarasota Opera is an internationally renowned company and is based in the city centre at the beautifully restored opera house, which was formerly the Edwards Theatre, a vaudeville venue and cinema.

While the coastal scenery at Sarasota and its seven keys – and further down the coast at Osprey and Venice in Sarasota County – is superb, no one should miss the Florida internal wild areas.

Myakka River State Park is a short drive out of the city. The park is 58 square miles of diverse habitat including wetlands, rare dry Florida prairie, two shallow-water lakes, pine forests and shady oak-palm hammocks.

There's a seven-mile scenic drive with stopping places on the way. We spotted a superbly marked red-shouldered hawk perched on a branch at the side of the road and were able to pull over and watch it up close.

There are bike paths and walking trails. Two air boats operate tours on the largest of the two Myakka Lakes. The boats are flat-bottomed with no propeller in the water so they can skim over shallows and weeds, and get in close. The ranger guide explains the natural sights and always tries to find an alligator or two to observe.

There's also a tram ride out around the woodlands so you don't need to be a hiker to see much of the park.

After our boat ride, one of the Rangers told us where we might find a big alligator. It was only a few hundred yards down a disused railway route – and there she was.

In the park you would think you were a million miles from civilisation rather than just 20.

Back in the city, the choice of music, eating or a spot of shopping were all possibilities.

We opted for a stroll along the white sand of Lido Key joining visitors and locals and a few hundred waders, gulls and pelicans to watch a spectacular sunset then a glass of red on the balcony. Paradise.



Red-Shouldered Hawk at the Myakka River State Park

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