



A great beach and much more beside

Longboat Key, an affluent Gulf Coast community located between Sarasota Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, forms the Bradenton Gulf Islands with the adjoining Anna Maria Island.

For the traveller, Longboat Key's attraction is its 12 miles of wonderful white sand beach and string of fine dining restaurants and elegant waterfront resorts.

While Longboat Key offers a serene and relaxed retreat, there is much within very easy reach.

This includes the livelier beachside community on Anna Maria Island and upscale dining, retail and entertainment at St Armands Circle.

Sarasota is the cultural centre of west central Florida and where one finds the resplendent Marie Selby Botanical Gardens and the genuinely world renown John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

Ashley Gibbins
Commissioning Editor
AllWays traveller



Serene isolation and exquisite pleasure



By Ashley Gibbins

The Gulf of Mexico offers up some of the world's finest beaches, with white sand, shimmering clear blue sea and the glorious weather in the aptly named Sunshine State.

What sets the beach at Longboat Key apart is that this is a predominantly affluent residential community.

Many of the beachside properties here are private residences, and there is little by way of tourist concessions.

These can be found in abundance on neighbouring Anna Maria Island.

Those opting for a stay on Longboat Key will be looking for the more relaxing experience to be found at one of the Key's large resorts or luxury hotels.

The Resort at The Resort at Longboat Key Club, where we stayed, was perfect in this respect (as Ann explains below).

Visit out of season, when the weather is wonderful, plan the day and one will have this pristine beach almost to oneself.

The trick, for us, is to devote early morning and sunset to the beach with the middle part of the day given to going out.

With the *The Resort at Longboat Key Club* standing right on the beach, there was no problem in being up and out at sunrise - although we tended to be among the very few to do so.

The perfectly tepid waters of the Gulf lap the shore and wading knee high through it is an exquisite pleasure - particularly for Ann who finds the experience almost mesmeric.

Meandering needlefish and the jellyfish shuffle

While needlefish meander by unperturbed, and crabs scuttle out of the way, one need adopt the jelly fish shuffle.

This scraping of the feet through the water alerts these potentially poisonous creatures to approaching danger and they make good their escape.

On the shoreline sand dippers relentlessly go about their foraging and pelicans glide effortlessly just inches from the waves.

It makes for truly sublime moments.

Our real life dolphin encounter

On our sunrise on the beach at Longboat Key was one of the most memorable.

It is not unusual to see dolphin swimming off the shore here but we spotted a pod of about eight, including young ones, no more than a hundred feet away.

They were heading in one direction and we another so, naturally we turned around.

For the next 30 minutes we followed their path along the coastline and were convinced the pod was aware of and interested in us.

The connection was real and, parting ways, sadly, at the headland was a genuinely emotional moment.

At sunset we would return to the beach for sunset, which along the Gulf coast can be spectacular.

But even when cloud cover prevents this performance the silent encroaching of nightfall provides an especially reflective time, and one to be savoured - on 'our' beach at Longboat Key.

A great deal to do but don't get carried away

Plan your time here with care

When on a short break we find it advisable not to attempt to take in too much.

Choose four or five places or activities and this should still leave time to make the most of the beach and to relax around the pool.

For our stay on Longboat Key a day was given to Anna Maria Island and we also decided the Ringling was a must.

We also took in botanical gardens and made a quick stop at *The Big Smooch*.

For an 'evening out' it was upscale dining and entertainment at St Armand Circle.



Anna Maria Island



Anna Maria Island, the other Bradenton Gulf Island, is linked with Longboat Key via a small causeway bridge.

And while both share the same Gulf Coast shoreline, with all its natural beauty, they offer perceptibly different vacation experiences.

While Longboat Key is relaxed sophistication, Anna Maria Island is altogether more livelier and family orientated.

See :

AllWays Traveller to Anna Maria Island

The Ringling



The Ringling is the legacy to Circus owner, art collector and financier John Ringling and his wife Mabel.

The couple, from a humble mid-western background, became hugely successful and wealthy, circus owners during the turn of the 19th and into the 20th centuries, a time when the circus was a mammoth American institution.

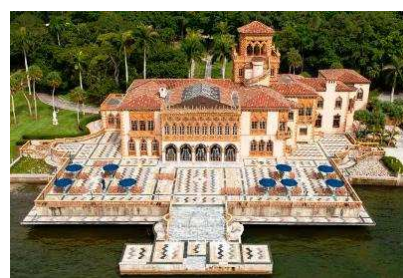
The Ringling's purchased property in Sarasota and established winter quarters for their Ringling Bros Circus and the equally well known Barnum and Bailey Circus.

Ringling also built his family home, along with a museum for his major art collection.

Visitors to Ringling today can enjoy five distinct and equally memorable experiences.

The Circus Museum

The Ringling Circus Museum was the first in the country to highlight the history of the American Circus.



It features a collection of original posters, banners, costumes, circus rolling stock and the Ringling's private railroad car.

Ca' dZan

Ca' dZan, the House of John, is a stunning Venetian Gothic style mansion on the Sarasota Bay.

The Museum of Art

The renaissance style Museum of Art was built to house Ringling's collection of European art, including masterpieces by Reubens and Gainsborough.

The Historic Asolo Theater

The Historic Asolo Theater, which was built in Asolo, Italy in 1798, was brought to Sarasota in the 1950s, restored and now stages a full season of productions.

The Bayfront Gardens

The Ringling is located within 66 acres of gardens and features hundreds of native and exotic trees, shrubs and plants including historic banyan's

www.ringling.org

Up close with the Big Smooch



Unconditional surrender, or *The Big Smooch*, as it is known locally, stands on Sarasota seafont and is the statue of an American sailor kissing his sweetheart passionately, theatrical embrace.

The version here was the first of a series of sculptures by Sarasota artist Seward Johnson that recreated a photograph of a couple kissing in Times Square on VJ day.

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens



The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, once the home of William and Marie Selby, offers 15 acres of tranquil gardens resplendent with 20,000 rare and beautiful tropical plants.

Located on Sarasota Bay the gardens have majestic banyan groves and a living collection of 6,000 orchids, many of which were collected by the Selby's on nearly 100 scientific expeditions to tropical rainforests.

www.selby.org



St Armands Key Circle

St Armand Circle is known for elegant boutique shopping, gourmet restaurants and art galleries – and ice cream parlours.

Circus magnate John Ringling bought the here fro Charles St. Armand and developed homes and a golf course with a circle of shops as its centre.

Today, 30 Italian statues from Ringling's personal collection are on display here.



Location, location, glorious location!

By Ann Mealor

The Resort at Longboat Key Club is set right on the Gulf Coast on one of the most spectacular beaches in Florida.

A stay here is all about getting outside and making the most of the wildlife, the views and walking along the miles of quiet, sandy shoreline.

There is so much to enjoy. The beauty of *The Resort at Longboat Key Club* is that the beach can only be accessed by going through the Resort, which is why this stretch of sand is so private.

I never tired of gazing out to sea and the horizon, watching the ospreys effortlessly glide on the thermals, soar up high or occasionally dive into the ocean for a fish supper.



The dolphins were the highlight

As Ashley has written, we lucky to see a small pod hunting for fish so close to the shore that I thought they were going to beach themselves.

It was such a privilege and a rare experience to see them feed in their natural habitat.

I am not a water lover, so I never do much more than paddle in the sea.

However, even I saw baby stingray swim suddenly from their sandy hideaways as I approached, shuffling noisily to alert them of my approach.

Also Needle Fish, with long narrow snouts, would serenely glide past as I waded along in the shallows.

It was here too that I found my first Sand Dollars (named after the old American dollar coin) – much prized shells that look like pale cream discs with a central star shaped pattern.

They are hard to find intact as they are usually smashed by the waves before they are found. But the sea was so shallow and gentle here, that I found a number of complete ones, ankle deep, on the sea bed – what a treasure trove!

A tranquil oasis of landscaped beauty



The Resort at Longboat Key Club and Spa itself is an oasis of tranquillity, with the grounds expansive and beautifully maintained.

There is a free shuttle service that will take you anywhere on site, including the Opal Spa and a range of casual and fine-dining restaurants.

Drivers (who are very helpful and, in some cases, entertaining – ours sang us a number from *Phantom of the Opera*) will also drop you off at local hot spots such as the bustling St Arnaud's Circus.

Green credentials

The Resort's 'green' credentials are top notch too.

It has received Florida's official 'Green Certificate', recognising it as one of the most environmentally conscientious lodgings in the state.

Our room

Our room, a junior suite was spacious and well furnished with everything needed for a short stay – including a well equipped kitchen with a microwave, dishwasher, washing machine, dryer and fridge.

There was a table and chairs on the balcony which had a lovely view of the gardens and then onto the sea.

We enjoyed a delicious cheese plate and glass of wine here each evening whilst watching the sun go down.



Dining at the resort

Whatever your taste and style, you will find a restaurant to suit you at *The Resort at Longboat Key Club* – there are eight to choose from.

We chose the *Portofino Ristorante & L'Ancora Bar*, specialising in classic Northern Italian cuisine.

Overlooking *The Resort at Longboat Key Club* marina, it specialises in seafood, wood fired pizzas and handmade pastas.

On entering for our evening meal, candles flickered on the wooden tables creating a very cosy and warm atmosphere.

We started with a selection of home made breads with olive oil and herbs, which went very well with hot garlic mussel starter.

Ashley chose the prawns which were plump and juicy.

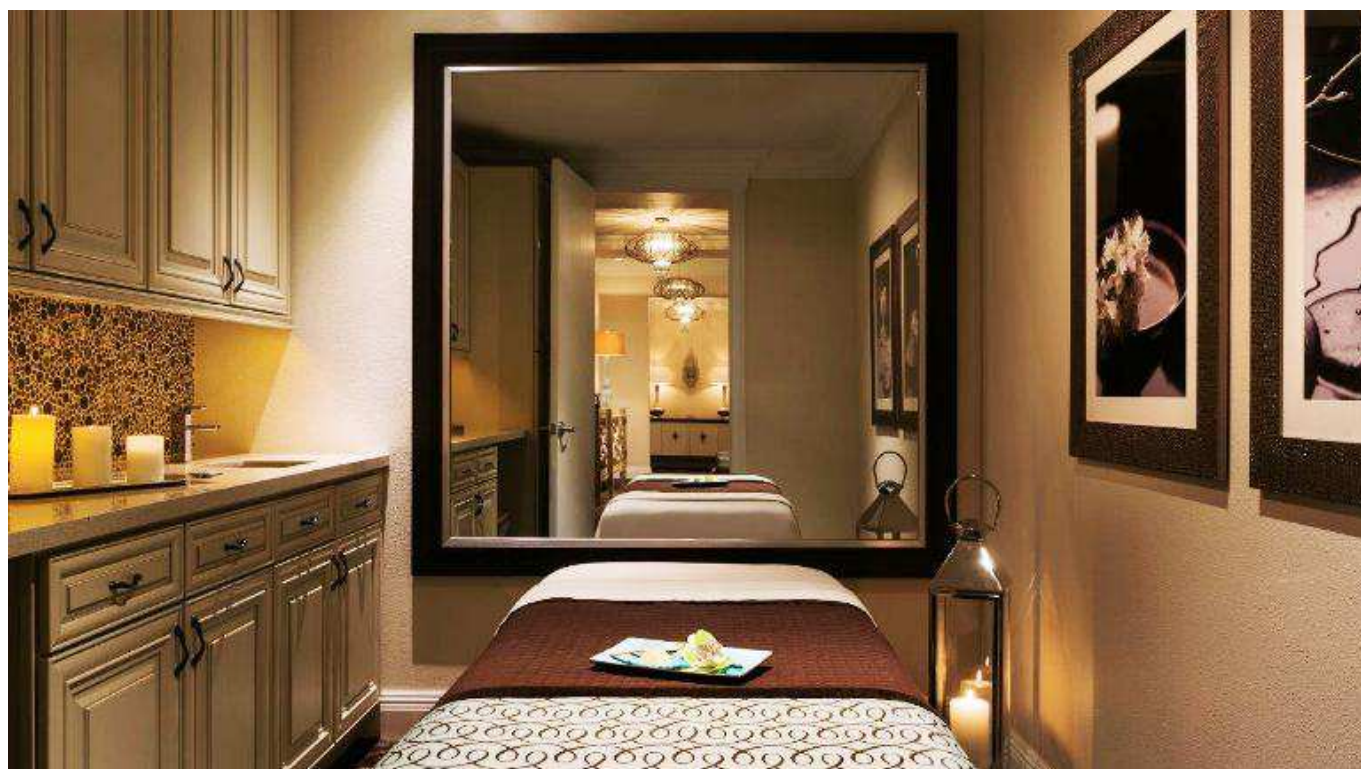
For mains, Ashley went for the fish stew which was warming, spicy and packed with seafood.

I decided on the butternut squash spaghetti in a light, smooth, creamy sauce.

The wine was very reasonable here too. We went for the perfectly acceptable house white sauvignon for \$28 a litre.

We shared a delicious dessert, Warm Apple Bread pudding, so good we could have eaten it twice.

There will be no sharing next time!



The spa

As soon as you walk into the serene and spacious OPAL Spa you start to relax.

The scent of aromatherapy oils fills the air and the subtle soothing tones of classical music gently helps body and mind unwind.

There is a range of massages and facials to choose from and these can be personalised to your own specific needs.

The therapists are knowledgeable and experienced and will advise on the treatment they think will suit you best.

I went for the 50 minute Swedish Massage designed to relax and renew the body. Benefits included increased blood and lymph circulation, eased tension and energetic revitalisation.

Once I had changed into warm fluffy bathrobe and slippers, Lisa, my therapist gave me a choice of oils and asked if I had any areas I would like her to focus on.

Working at a computer for hours means my back and shoulders are always knotted and tight.

Hot stones were placed on my back to help relax my muscles, which was very pleasant as well as soothing.

Lisa then applied more pressure across my back and shoulders which definitely helped ease muscle tension.

Following my massage, I sat and sipped herbal tea and water in the relaxation room to help flush out any toxins.

It was a very enjoyable first time OPAL Spa experience. I hope it won't be my last.

Other activities

There is plenty to do here – golf and tennis (it has been named as one of the top tennis resorts in the world), wellness and exercise classes in the *Mind & Motion Studio* and fishing excursions on the Gulf of Mexico.

Sunset cruises can also be arranged on picturesque Sarasota Bay.

There are water sports too including kayaking, a favourite of mine, and paddle boarding – this takes some practice!

Of course, you can just take time out to relax on one of the beach loungers under an umbrella and stare out to sea, watch nature or read a good book.

Meanwhile, children (5-12yrs) are kept fully entertained with a fun-filled schedule of activities at Camp Loggerhead.

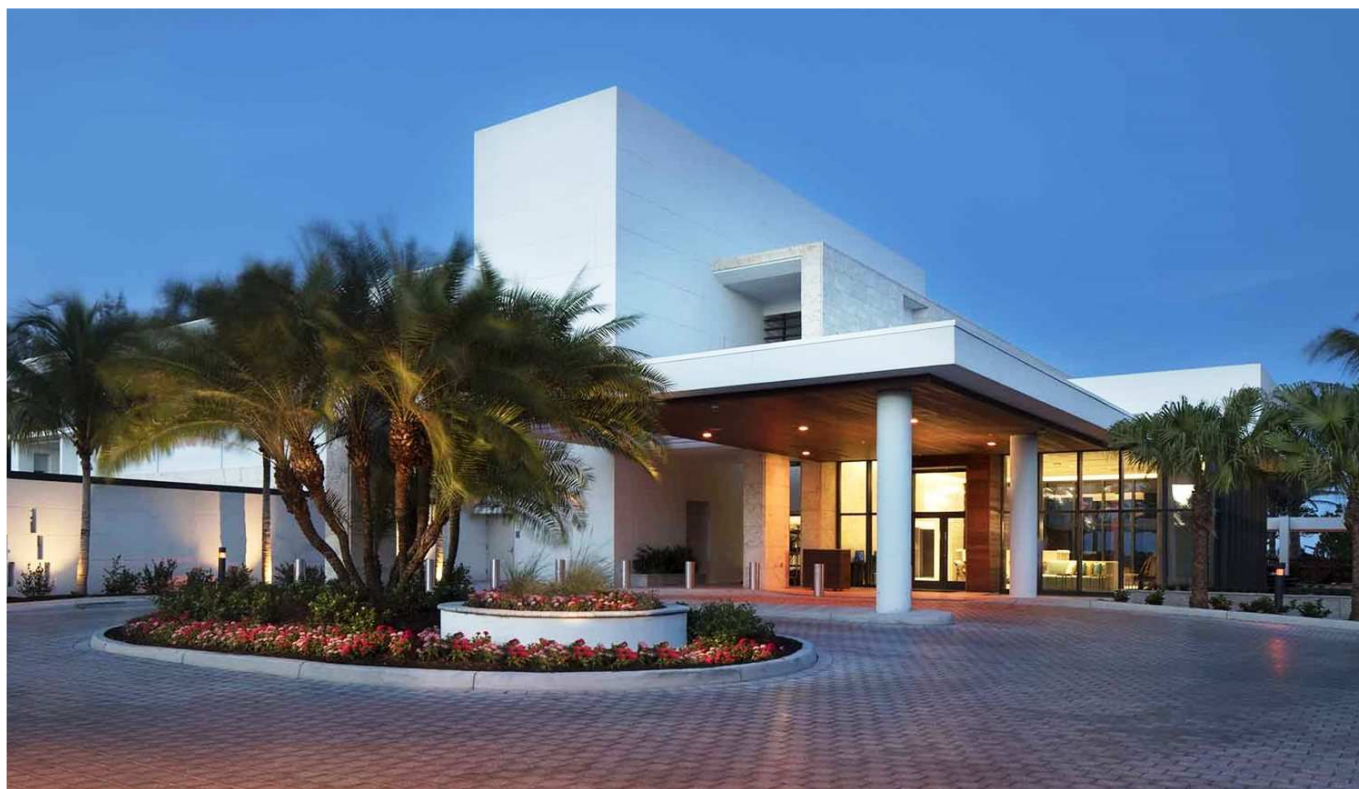
Of course there is also the hot tub, pool and a fully equipped fitness centre where personalised training programmes can be designed for you.

If you are feeling adventurous and want to explore, then use pedal power and cycle around the island.



More information

www.longboatkeyclub.com



The Zolta Beach Resort

The Zolta Beach Resort, a sister property to *The Longboat Key Resort and Spa*, is the Key's newest luxury hotel.

The property stylishly modern to reflect the relaxed ambiance of Florida's West Coast and make most of the sunlight.

Zara Zolta

Spanish explorers spotted the white sands on the barrier island from a distance and were reminded of the Sahara Desert.

The native origin of the word *Zota* is blue waters, thus the area became known as *Zara Zota*, the Sahara by the blue waters.

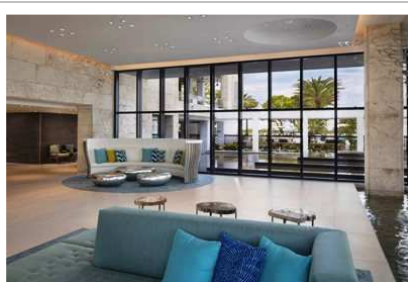
Over time the name evolved to become what is known today as Sarasota.

Viento Kitchen

Led by Executive Chef Jason Pellett, *Viento Kitchen + Bar* provides guests with an open-air lounge featuring hand-crafted cocktails while a dramatic, floating wine wall and sleek fireplace anchor the restaurant.

And the best fish sandwich I have had.

www.zotabeachresort.com



A snapshot of the Grange



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