

Anna Maria Island, Florida

www.allwaystraveller.com

Island life with real laid back charm

Anna Maria Island is a seven mile long barrier island on the Gulf of Mexico, between Tampa Bay and Sarasota, in Florida's Manatee County.

With the adjoining Longboat Key it forms the Bradenton Gulf Islands.

Long a destination cherished by those Floridians aware of its laid back charms, Anna Maria Island is now becoming a sought after retreat for discerning travellers from far wider afield.

Key to its lure are the beaches of white powdery sand, which is made up of ground quartz, naturally abraded from the Appalachian Mountains and washed down into the Gulf of Mexico.

Dolphins are regular visitors to the clear Gulf waters here and there is also the chance to spot sea turtles, eagle rays and an abundance of sea birds.

Manatees, also known as sea cows, are found in the Manatee river, opening to the north east side of the island.

The piers found at either end of the island are excellent places to savour stunning sunsets.

In keeping with its rustic charm, accommodation is focussed on a number of delightful inns and guesthouses.

Ashley Gibbins

Managing editor
AllWays traveller



A personal view of Anna Maria Island



Putting this paradise on the map

By Ashley Gibbins

I am not a great lover of tourist maps. They are all too often style over substance, enticing at first glance but lacking cohesion. A confusing, frustrating read.

A good tourist map should let me know what's where and how to get there.

Not so the Anna Maria island tourist map peeled off a pad by my - oh so helpful -receptionist at the Tortuga Inn.

This map is a real gem and fully justifies the three million that have been printed to date.

Three please

I asked for three in fact. One which was marked with where the Inn was and where we should go to eat that evening, and one to use as a route planner for our stay.

The third was carefully rolled up and packed away and is now framed and on my office wall. A reminder of a great stay in a wonderful island destination in the Sunshine State.

The first thing my map showed was that Anna Maria Island is long, seven miles long in fact, and thin, particularly at its southern end.

The whole seven miles of the island that faces the Gulf of Mexico comprises the Bradenton, Holmes and Anna Maria beaches which are to all intents and purposes, one glorious stretch of sand.



These are coloured a light, golden white on the map and the reality is almost identical.

The eastern side of the island sits on the Intra-coastal Waterway, which starts in Florida and runs for over a thousand miles into Texas.

Access to the island is via the Manatee Avenue or the Cortez Road bridges.

While in the area



Longboat Key



Longboat Key, another barrier island which lies between Anna Maria Island and downtown Sarasota, has been voted one of North America's top islands by Conde Nast Traveler's readers.

This is more a residential island that encourages visitors to enjoy its beaches and parks.

Whitney Beach

Whitney Beach, which is a quarter mile long and located at the north end of Longboat Key is a beautiful and fascinating place.

Long ago some trees were downed along the beach but, instead of cleaning up the debris, locals took a liking to the beach's distinct look.

Now the trees and their roots remain sprawled along the beach, creating a deserted island feel.



Getting around the island

Being on a small island, and with no desire to go inland during our short stay, the first imperative is to find out how to get around.

This could not be easier.

On foot

Exploring the island on foot is the first and most obvious option, particularly along the Gulf side of the island.

Strolling in bare feet along the white sand or in the warm clear waters is the epitome of chilled out joy.

And although a trip from top to bottom is likely to take most of a day, that's absolutely fine.

Take the trolley

Another great way to get around is to utilise the free trolley service that travels the entire island between 6.30am and 10pm daily from Coquina Beach to the Public Pier on the North side of Anna Maria.

Trolley Stops are two to four blocks apart along the route with three main stops at Anna Maria City Pier and the Manatee and Coquina Beaches.

A trolley arrives every 15 to 20 minutes with the volunteer drivers all excellent ambassadors for the island and always willing to make recommendations and tell stories of island life.

The Monkey Bus



And then there are the Anna Maria Beach Monkeys, a fleet of golf cart limos, mini-buses and a karaoke-equipped vehicle.

This great, funky, service can be called upon to provide a tour of the island or a lift to and back from the shops or from a dinner date.

The Monkey Bus service is not limited to the Island and it will go to Siesta Key, Cortez, Downtown Bradenton the Ellenton Outlet mall.

All of drivers are island residents who have a wealth of insider information. And finally the service is free with drivers working for tips only!

www.islandbeachmonkeys.com

Finally, bike, segway and golf cart hire is also available.

Quick Point Nature Reserve



Located on the southeast end of Longboat Key these healthy wetlands and mangroves provide a number of essential benefits to Sarasota Bay.

They provide food and shelter to bay life, filter pollutants and help to prevent shoreline erosion.

Over the past 50 years, development has caused a decline in the quantity and quality of Sarasota Bay's wetlands and the public acquisition and restoration of Quick Point is an example of what can be done to protect and re-establish this unique and vital habitat.

Four different mangrove species found throughout the Preserve.

Robinson Preserve



Pelicans, seagulls and sometimes eagles – there's a reason they all pick Robinson Preserve to fly around all day long.

Get in a kayak with your camera around your neck to get some of the best pictures in the Bradenton Area.

Robinson Preserve is a 600+-acre coastal preserve in the north western Bradenton area.

A salt marsh now home to jumping mullet and hundreds of other species of fish and marine life.

The interior of the preserve features hiking paths, kayak and canoe waterways, bridges, picnic spots, a primitive campground, mangrove forests and a 53-foot-tall tower with a wide-open view of the Tampa Bay area.

The 120-year-old Valentine House, moved to the preserve by boat, is near the entrance.

www.robinsonpreserve.com



An island excursion from North to South

Back to our Anna Maria Island map as a reference, we decided to take in the island from north (the top end of the island as we looked at it) to south.

The trolley will get you to the Anna Maria City Pier and from here one can easily walk to Bean Point Beach.

We walked this beach in early morning.

Exhilarating



It is one of the most peaceful, pristine along the entire Gulf coast and, with access via relatively discrete pathways, it less crowded than other beaches on the island. Island residents like to consider it their own.

As I get older my eyes get weaker and I have long ago lost the need to wear sunglasses to cut down on glare.

Not on the beach at Bean Point. The sand was so white from the morning sun I was blinking within seconds and just had to don a pair of shades.

Anna Maria City



Anna Maria itself is a short stroll from Bean Point, with Pine Avenue the heart of this community.

The Avenue was a bustling thoroughfare, in the early days of Florida's tourist boom.

Wealthy vacationers would arrive at the island by boat and disembarked from the City pier, which is located at one end.

A gradual downturn in tourism saw the city decline and fall into disrepair.

A fundamental renaissance of the area, in more recent times, has seen the reconstruction of buildings and sidewalks in traditional materials.

One of a kind craft, clothing and general stores have opened with inviting planked front porches furnished with wooden benches and rocking chairs.

And many of the first floor areas have been turned into much sought after, self-catering accommodation.

Emerson Point Reserve



Emerson Point, which is located at the mouth of the Manatee River where it meets Lower Tampa Bay, is a 365 acre preserve located at the tip of Snead Island in western Palmetto.

The Portavant Temple Mound, is southwest Florida's largest Native American Temple Mound and observation tower offers the best views in the preserve.

The preserves trails and boardwalks are aligned so that the natural habitat is protected.

A canoe/kayak launch allows access to the tidal canals and Terra Ceia Bay.

The Powell Crosley Reserve

The Powel Crosley Estate, which was built in 1929 for Powel Crosley's wife, Gwendolyn, is a bay-front reminder of the Mediterranean Revival style and the elegance of days gone by.

The property is on the National Register of Historic Places

www.powelcrosleymuseum.com



The Donut Experience

Breakfast on Pine Avenue is an oh so enjoyable experience in itself if one likes doughnuts.

And what is there not like when they are made to order in front of you and flavoured with your choice from dozens of icings and toppings.

From early morning until lunchtime, when the place closes, there is a steady flow of locals ordering their favourites to take away.

Visitors will take a lot longer to make that choice as time is limited and the options endless.

We opted for chocolate icing with peanut butter topping and vanilla with coconut.

I was alerted to *The Donut Experiment*, while in London some two months before our Florida trip. It was the first 'to do' item on our list and thank goodness.

www.annamariadonuts.com

Anna Maria City Pier

Strolling to the end of the Anna Maria City Pier, which juts into the waters of the Intra Coastal Waterway is one of those things one does that is more enjoyable to do than to talk about.

The waters lapping against the pier posts, heron looking for a place to rest and a couple of anglers fishing for grouper.

There's also the chance of a cold beer or snack in the restaurant at the pier head.



The city pier

The Waterfront

The Waterfront Restaurant, which overlooks the Anna Maria City Pier, is a fine example of laid-back waterfront dining.

Popular at lunchtime and during the evening if offers an extensive range of fresh seafood caught by the local fishermen.

www.thewaterfrontrestaurant.net

The Rod and Reel Pier

Just up from the City Pier, on Shore Drive, is the Rod and Reel Pier whose restaurant has been serving breakfast, lunch and dinner since 1947.

They say this is one of the best places to catch the sunset although, from an island perspective, it is one of so many.

www.rodreelpier.com

The Gamble Plantation Historic State Park



The Gamble Plantation Historic State Park is an antebellum-era mansion that was home to Major Robert Gamble and was the headquarters of a sugar plantation.

It is the only surviving plantation house in South Florida.

In 1925, the house and 16 acres were saved by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and donated to the state.

It is furnished in the style of a successful mid-19th century plantation.

www.stateparks.com/gamble_plantation_historic

Lakewood Ranch



Lakewood Ranch is 7,000-acre master-planned community that attracts visitors to its upscale boutiques, fine dining restaurants, hotels, championship golf courses and miles of recreational trails.

Main Street has a range of dining options from Parisian cafes to a Scottish pub and there is small movie theatre, farmer's market and regular festivals and concerts.

www.lakewoodranch.com

Gulf Drive

To get to the other end of Anna Maria Island it was back on the trolley and along Gulf Drive and the beaches that form the whole of the island on Gulf of Mexico.

There is any number of opportunities to hop of to hit the sand and sea or refreshments in the beachside bars, cafes and restaurants.

Historic Bridge Street



A focal point for the southern end of the island is Historic Bridge Street, which leads to its own fishing pier with restaurant.

The end of the island

Go any further and one will leave Anna Maria Island and cross over the bridge into Longboat Key, a destination in its own right – and maybe the subject of a future feature.

With a cluster bars and restaurants, many with live music of an evening, this is the islands downtown entertainment district.

Ellenton Premium Outlets

The Ellenton Premium Outlets mall is the largest on the west coast of Florida.

It features more than 125 premiere brands, including J. Crew, Calvin Klein, Banana Republic and Kate Spade.

www.premiumoutlets.com

More information



www.bradentongulfislands.com

Searenity – Beach Spa and Eco Boutique

By Ann Mealor

Nothing sounds more soothing and relaxing than a sunset massage on a beautiful Florida beach in a quaint, palm roofed, wooden floored tiki hut.

When I had the opportunity to try out Searenity Spa's 'tiki-tastic' early evening massage on the white Bradenton sands I jumped at the chance.



Bradenton Beach on Anna Maria Island is stunning. Miles of white, powdery sand with crystal clear waters lapping the shore line.

At around 7pm, the sun sets, streaking the bright blue sky burnt orange followed by blushing rose.

A pink glow is cast across the water and the last of the beachcombers.



I met Amanda Escobio, Searenity Spa owner and qualified massage therapist at the tiki hut.

Amanda specialised in massage and had trained in Florida, the first US state to regulate the massage industry.

After asking if I had any injuries or problem areas, Amanda offered me a choice of massage oils.

I went for the tropical sounding coconut and vanilla, which had a wonderful fragrance.

Before starting, Amanda massaged white flower oil into my neck and feet, which she explained had the same effects as a linament and was a natural pain reliever.

It created a lovely, warming sensation, helping my muscles to relax.

As I lay listening to the sound of the sea, Amanda got to work expertly kneading, pressing and pummelling.

Amanda tailors each massage to suit the client and she will focus on any problem areas around the back or neck.

During my massage she used a medium pressure and concentrated on trying to release the knots in my neck and shoulders.

The massage was relaxing but therapeutic. She also did a lot of arm, leg and neck stretching, a scalp massage and a very thorough facial massage.

At the end of my treatment, I felt very soothed and relaxed.

Amanda and her experienced therapists offer a range of massages including Light Swedish, Deep Tissue with Sports, Reflexology, Pre-Natal, Trigger Point and Energy Balancing.

Massages can take place in the beach tiki or at the Searenity Spa.

www.searenityspa.com

A place to stay on Anna Maria Island : the Tortuga Inn



Accommodation on Anna Maria Island tends to be relatively small, family owned boutique inns and guesthouses.

These provide a stay that is very much in keeping with the 'Old Florida' charm that is so prevalent here.

The Tortuga Beach Resort is a wonderful example of this.

It offers a range of self-catering rooms, studios and large, stylish suites the size of luxury apartments.

Many have Gulf or Bay views, and most come with private lanais, patios or walled gardens.

With a tropical feel to the décor one feels at ease as soon as the cases have been stowed.

A home from home

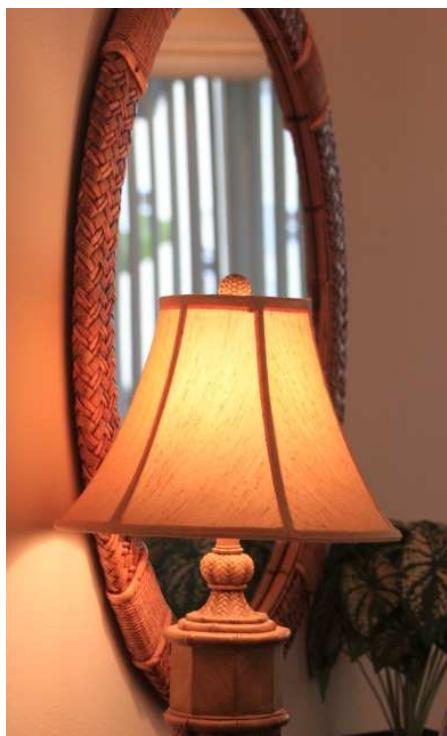
It was my ideal of a holiday home.

And it was almost a pity that the wonderful Florida weather kept us out of doors for so much of our time on Anna Maria Island.

Had we had a tropical shower or two we would have happily have taken the opportunity to relax with a good book.

The inn has heated pools, a boat dock and its own private pagoda area of Gulf beech just across the road.

It does not have dining facilities but this is no hardship whatsoever as there is a choice of beach bars and restaurants and fine dining along Historic Bridge Street all within a ten or fifteen minute stroll.



Alternatively the kitchen facilities and dining area would have made eating in a pleasure.

The reception team at the Tortuga were all one could have wanted.

Warm, welcoming and efficient on arrival and helpful and 'in the know' throughout the stay, which at three nights was just not long enough.

www.tortugainn.com

AllWays somewhere to dine on Anna Maria Island

The Beach House

By Ann Mealor

In Perfectly situated on beautiful Bradenton Beach, The Beach House restaurant has glorious views of sand and sea and is a great place to eat and relax.

1993, Ed Chiles purchased the old Harbor House, remodelled it and changed its name to the Beach House.

With some tables set directly on the sand, the restaurant has a one of the largest covered deck areas in Florida so diners can take full advantage of the wonderful scenery.

The Beach House offers fine dining 'Florida style' with much fresh sea food on the menu including tilapia, tuna, shrimp, scallops, scampi, grouper and red fish.



Locally sourced produce

All ingredients, including meat and fish, are sourced as locally as possible by culinary director, Chef Erick.

The restaurant even has its own 26 acre farm.

As well as traditional American favourites such as coconut shrimp, grouper sandwich and a steak burger with all the trimmings, more exotic fare for those a bit more adventurous is also offered.

These dishes include:

- Hog Thai, local wild boar (yes, they have wild boar in Florida!) with pineapple, red onion, tomato and Thai peanut sauce
- Pine Island Sun Ray Clams steamed in chicken stock, white wine, thyme, garlic butter and Bob Wood's Tennessee chipotle sausage
- Seafood Focaccia with lump crab, chopped shrimp, garlic butter, cheese and balsamic glaze and Cobia Chimichurri served with an Argentine pesto.

All were delicious, my favourites being the tangy Asian style Hog Thai served on lettuce leaves and the Seafood focaccia which was wonderfully light with a great mix of flavours.

Home made hush puppies

Another surprise were the delicious home made Hush Puppies – warm deep fried corn and jalapeño balls served with a local honey butter.

I have tried Hush Puppies before and never taken to them, considering them to be a local delicacy.

However, these were different and absolutely delicious as was the warm pineapple and coconut bread that came at the start of the meal.

Accompanied by a rich and flavourful local chardonnay, Lola, from winemaker Seth Cripe, our evening at The Beach House was rounded off nicely with a generous portion of coconut cake, a local favourite.

With the sound of the waves, the touch of the sea breeze, the hum of the music and the distinctive Florida fare, there can be no better way to spend an evening on Anna Maria Island.

www.beachhouse-restaurant.com



AllWays more Bradenton and the Gulf Islands



Bradenton

Bradenton, is a very attractive city and the largest in Manatee County.

Bordered on the north by the Manatee River, it is separated from the outer barrier islands of Anna Maria Island and Longboat Key by the Intracoastal Waterway.

Old Main Street

Old Main Street, the heart of downtown, has a number of fine historic buildings with many of these housing a range of alluring coffee shops, bars and diners.

Twin Dolphin Marina



Bradenton Marina has Pier 22, as its focus.

Twin Dolphin Marina, which is adjacent to Downtown, sits on Manatee River.

The historic Bradenton Pier, centrally located within the marina is host to Pier 22 Restaurant, Patio, and Ballroom.

The Riverwalk

The Bradenton Riverwalk (above) is a shining example of how to develop a city waterfront area to fit the needs residents and visitors alike.

Trailing alongside the Manatee River, the Riverwalk includes a family area with a splash fountain and playgrounds, a large lawn for picnics and a day dock for boaters.

There is also a botanical walk and a fishing pier for catching Manatee River-native fish like snook, redfish and trout.

The Tidal Discovery Zone offers observation of the ecosystems along the river's edge.

The Riverwalk also features nineteen pieces of art created specifically to add 'another dimension of discovery to the experience'.

Village of the Arts



Near to Downtown, the Village of the Arts is a community of local artists who open their studios and galleries to those wanting to view – and buy their work.

The Village is an eclectic collection of colourful historic cottages that also houses restaurants, arts and crafts shops and bakeries.

www.villageofthearts.com

The South Florida Museum

The South Florida Museum includes fossil evidence of Florida's earliest mammals and marine species and the Montague Tallant collection of prehistoric and early post-contact archeological artifacts.

Its Environmental Wing focuses on Florida's ecology and bio-diversity in the Pine Uplands and Riverine Galleries.

Spanish Plaza has full-scale replicas of a 16th-century manor house, chapel and conquistador Hernando DeSoto's birthplace.

Snoopy is the star



The museum's star, however, is Snoopy who, at 65, is the world's oldest known manatee.

His home in the museum's Parker Manatee Aquarium, holds nearly 60,000 gallons of water and offers deep and shallow water, allowing the manatees to maintain natural feeding behaviors.

While Snoopy is a permanent resident he is happily joined by other rescued and recuperating manatees before their release back into the wild.

www.southfloridamuseum.org

A snapshot of Anna Maria Island



AllWays consider : Doing the airport in style with the executive lounge



How often have you heard it said that it is the airport that is the worst part of flying.

The time it takes to get through security, the panic at the thought of checking in late and missing the flight and then the wait in crowded departure areas.

So is the best approach to spend as little time there as possible?

Get there early

No. To avoid the stress and pressure of flying, get to the airport three hours earlier than necessary, check in and clear security in a leisurely 'no sweat' fashion and then head to one of the airport lounges to relax or work in style.



This costs a little more but, with all that lounges offer to make guests comfortable, it is money very well spent

All you need

Comfortable chairs and a good view of the aircraft; Wi-Fi access and power points; a complimentary choice of hot and soft drinks and a selection of fine food and a wide range of newspapers and magazines (for reading there and on the plane).



This makes the airport experience a pleasure rather than a pain.

Nº1 TRAVELLER

Passengers flying out of London (as I tend to do) should opt for the premium lounges by *No.1 Traveller*.

No.1 Traveller offers 'pay-as-you-go' airport lounges at Heathrow Terminal 3, Gatwick North and South Terminals, Stansted and also at Birmingham.

Other services

In addition to its premium lounges, *No.1 Traveller* also offers chauffeur-driven airport transfers for 'driveway to runway', as well as travel spas and bedrooms.

You can then look forward to enjoying the flight in a fit state.



www.No1Traveller.com

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www.allwaystraveller.com



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The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

www.itwalliance.com



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