

Sarasota, Florida

[www.allwaystraveller.com](http://www.allwaystraveller.com)

# Culture and coastline comes together in Sarasota

**The City of Sarasota is located around Sarasota Bay in Southwest Florida.**

With 40 miles of Gulf of Mexico coastline, it also takes in the three keys (islands) of Longboat Key, Lido Key and Siesta Key.

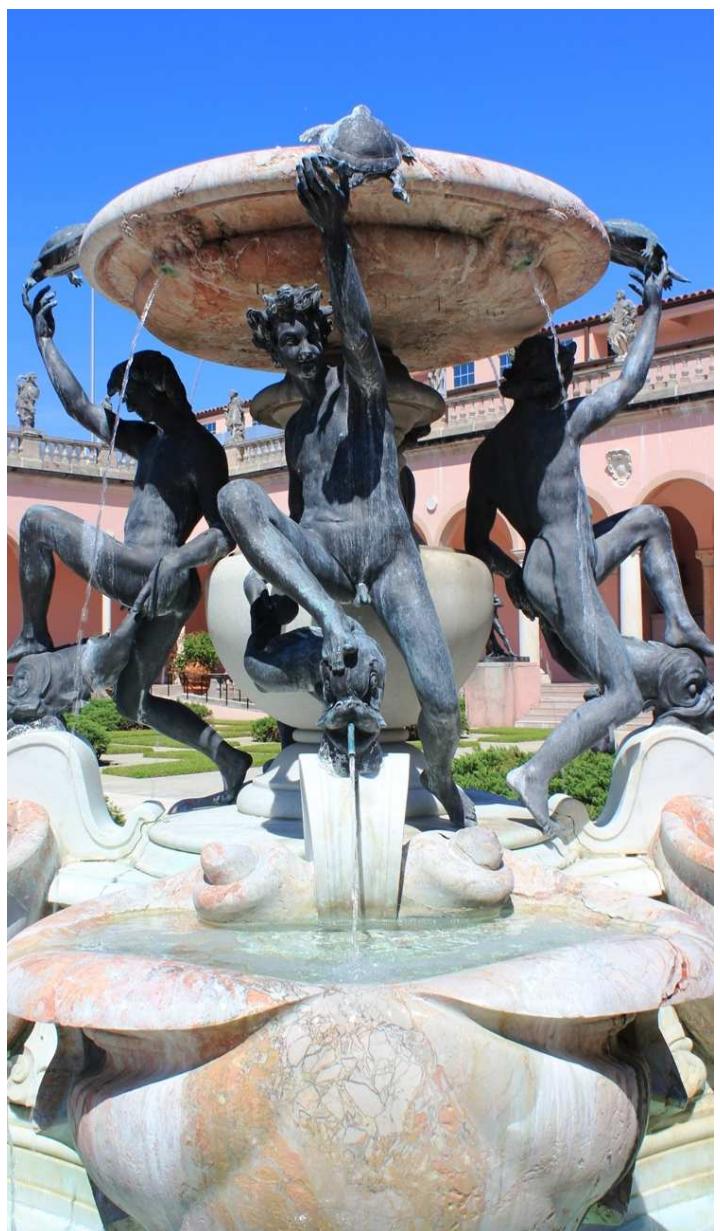
Sarasota is the cultural centre of west central Florida with an opera and ballet companies, a symphony orchestra and theatre companies all based here.

The highlight of any visit is going to be the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, which celebrates the family behind America's most famous circus.

Downtown Sarasota itself is a vibrant, rejuvenated area of residences, shops and restaurants.

The nearby small town of Venice has a traditional Floridian main street and 1920's homes leading onto the Gulf at the spectacular Venice Beach.

**Ashley Gibbins**  
Managing editor  
**AllWays traveller**



# A personal view of Sarasota



## Once been here never forgotten

By Ashley Gibbins

**Sarasota. It's a name that rang a bell with most of those who heard I was headed there.**

But as to actually where it is proved more of a problem. And in some cases confusion reigned.

### Unconditional surrender



If few people could accurately place Sarasota, no one knew what I was talking about when I mentioned

*Unconditional surrender.*

Well do you?

It is, in fact, the statue of an American sailor kissing his sweetheart in a passionate, if somewhat theatrical embrace.

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

The *Big Smooch*, as it is known locally, seems to be admired or abhorred in equal measure.

I think it is tremendous.

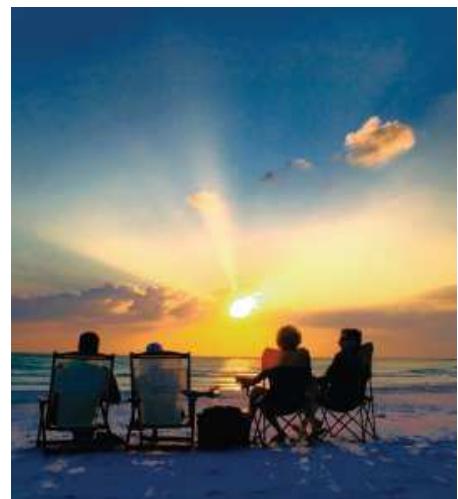
Sarasota is the cultural hub of this part of Florida and offers the visitor a wealth of opportunities in both arts and performance in music and dance.

As is invariably the case, there is always more to do than there is time to do it.

With just three days in the Sarasota area we decided to place our priority on visits to Ringling and the Mary Selby Botanical Gardens.

This would also give us time to visit the nearby community of Venice and its beach, one of the best around.

## While in the area



### Downtown Sarasota



Sarasota is home to a professional symphony, ballet and opera, with more 10 theatres and some 30 art galleries are located in Sarasota.

Main Street in downtown Sarasota is a vibrant mix of shops, restaurants and nightclubs, and it plays host to many special events throughout the year including live music, art festivals, motorcycle shows and parades.

There is the independent Burns Court Cinema and a string of shops and art galleries along Palm Avenue.

[www.sarasotadowntown.com](http://www.sarasotadowntown.com)

### South Florida Museum

The South Florida Museum focuses on some of the first reptiles and mammals who roamed the Sarasota area.

The largest natural and cultural history museum on Florida's Gulf coast, the museum interprets the area's history from the Pleistocene to the present.

[www.southfloridamuseum.org](http://www.southfloridamuseum.org)

# Come to the circus



## The Ringling

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

John and Mable, a couple from a humble mid-western background, became highly successful, extremely wealthy, circus owners at a time when the circus was an American institution.

Many thousands of people and animals were involved in this spectacular, roving extravaganza that toured the country by rail.

Travelling from town to town through the spring and summer months, its arrival would be the annual highlight for each community lucky enough to be on its route.

People crowded into town to marvel at the grand parade along main street before flocking to the circus site to marvel at the spectacular acts, wild animals, clowning and music. And to willingly hand over hard earned cash.

With riches galore, from the circus, the Ringling's purchased property in Sarasota in 1911 and five years later established winter quarters for the Ringling Bros Circus and the equally well known Barnum and Bailey Circus.

Ringling then built Ca' d'Zan, as the family's winter home, and a museum to house and display his major art collection.

On John's death, in 1936, this estate was bequeathed to first the State of Florida and then the Florida State University.

This kept everything intact and enabled an expansion of the complex.

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.

Pride of place goes to the Howard Bros Circus model, a stunning reconstruction of the travelling circus in its heyday, with 44,000 intricate figures of circus folk and their animals, tents, trucks and trailers.

## Siesta Key



Siesta Key is an eight mile long, crescent-shaped barrier island reached over one of two bridges connecting it to the Sarasota mainland.

The Key offers three beaches in Siesta Beach, Crescent Beach, Turtle Beach and Siesta Key village

The mostly pedestrian Key Village has bars, restaurants, boutiques and beach accessory and souvenir shops.

[www.siestakeychamber.com](http://www.siestakeychamber.com)

## Lido Key/ St. Armands



Lido Key is a barrier island featuring three sandy beaches and woodland hiking/kayaking trails.

It is linked with bridges to the mainland of Sarasota and to Longboat Key.

Bikers can ride the shoreline or through park-like settings and tropical side streets.

North Lido Beach is a half-mile stretch of shoreline with Australian pines. This expansive location extends behind a residential community and is the least populated of the three beaches and perfect for shelling, walking and birding.

There are also wooden walkways, trails and Kayaking opportunities at South Lido Park.

Evening entertainment is to be found at St Armands where sophisticated restaurants, nightclubs, shops and boutiques rim a circular park dedicated to the memory of John Ringling.

[www.exploringlidockey.com](http://www.exploringlidockey.com)



## Ca' dZan



Ca' dZan, the *House of John*, is a stunning mansion on the Sarasota Bay. Inspired by, and designed in, the Venetian Gothic style of the palazzos that ring the Venice canals, this dazzling mansion captures the splendour of the Italy so beloved of the Ringling family. Individual and guided tours of the mansion are available.

## 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

## The Museum of Art



The renaissance style Museum of Art was built for Ringling's extraordinary collection of European art.

Among its many displays are masterpieces by Reubens and Gainsborough.

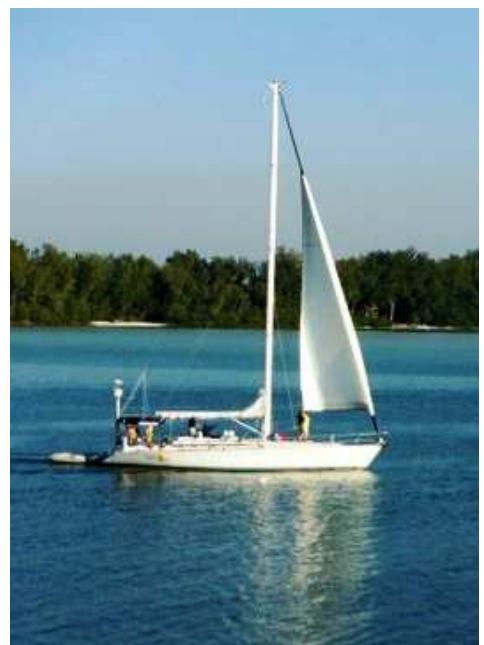
## The Bayfront Gardens

First built in Asolo, Italy in 1798, the Historic Asolo Theater was originally brought to Sarasota in the early 1950s and painstakingly restored in 2006 after falling into disrepair.

An annual programme of productions are staged in the theatre, which is also open daily.

[www.ringling.org](http://www.ringling.org)

## Longboat Key



Longboat Key is a barrier island community surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico on the west and Sarasota Bay on the east.

Manicured and pristine, this long, narrow key has exclusive homes and resorts.

The Resort at Longboat Key Club is recognized internationally for its tennis facilities, challenging golf courses, dining and waterfront oasis.

[www.longboatkey.org](http://www.longboatkey.org)

## Annual festivals and celebrations

Visiting a destination during a festival or celebration can really enhance the trip.

Sarasota has a number of annual events that are well worth checking out :

### Forks & Corks Food and Wine Festival

Forks & Corks Food and Wine Festival in January is a multi-day annual event presented by the Sarasota-Manatee Originals.

The festival includes interactive food and wine seminars at various restaurants and a Grand Tasting at The Ringling Museum.

[www.dineoriginal.com/forksandcorks](http://www.dineoriginal.com/forksandcorks)

### Whiskey Obsession Festival

Whiskey Obsession Festival in March offers 200 spirits to taste.

[www.whiskeyobsessionfestival.com](http://www.whiskeyobsessionfestival.com)

## Peace and serenity in bloom



### The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens

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

The heart of the gardens are its majestic banyan groves while there is also a living collection of more than 6,000 orchids, many of which were collected by the Selby's on nearly 100 scientific expeditions to tropical rainforests.

In addition there are greenhouses, mangrove walks, a fern garden and koi pond and a tropical conservatory.

We visited during the morning and had a wonderfully peaceful three hours.

[www.selby.org](http://www.selby.org)

### Venice



Just south of Sarasota, Venice offers a real contrast.

It is designated a *Florida Main Street City* and has downtown northern Italian style architecture, city plans of 1925.

Landscaped boulevards that conform to the original Venice Avenue itself has a range of interesting art, craft and gift shops and some really nice cafes and restaurants

Venice is also a designated *Bicycle Friendly Community* with the *Legacy Trail*, a 10-mile long rails-to-trails route starting here.

The 14 mile strip of Venice beach runs from Casey Key to Manasota Key and is the place for swimming, sunbathing, fishing and boating.

Shelling is also a favourite pastime with fossilized shark's teeth found by sifting through the sand.

A stroll along the pier at sunset is one of those seminal Floridian memories.

[www.sarasotalegacytrail.com](http://www.sarasotalegacytrail.com)  
[www.venice-fla.com](http://www.venice-fla.com)

### The Sarasota Film Festival

The Sarasota Film Festival in April and hosts more than 200 national and international films along with special events, talk-backs and panels featuring some of the leading voices in film.

[www.sarasotafilmfestival.com](http://www.sarasotafilmfestival.com)

### Suncoast BBQ & Bluegrass Bash



Suncoast BBQ & Bluegrass Bash in April brings award-winning pit-masters and bluegrass music to Venice.

[www.suncoastbbqbash.com](http://www.suncoastbbqbash.com)

### The Shark's Tooth Festival

The Shark's Tooth Festival in Venice each April attracts fossil collectors who hunt for the sharks' teeth and other fossils that line the shore.

[www.sharkstoothfest.com](http://www.sharkstoothfest.com)

### Sarasota Restaurant Week

The Savor Sarasota Restaurant Week, held the first two weeks of June, has more than 40 restaurants offering special offer 3-course pre-fixe lunch and dinner menus.

[www.savorsarasota.com](http://www.savorsarasota.com)

### The Ringling International Arts Festival

The Ringling International Arts Festival is a multi-day festival of theater, visual art, music and dance held each October at The Ringling Museum.

[www.ringling.org](http://www.ringling.org)

### The Crystal Classic Sand Sculpting Contest

The Crystal Classic Sand Sculpting Contest held each November sees competitors gathering at Siesta Key for a 24-hour battle that results in museum-quality works of sand art.

[www.siestakeycrystalclassic.com](http://www.siestakeycrystalclassic.com)

### Ecofest and the Water Festival

Ecofest every winter in Sarasota and North Port and the Sarasota Bay Water Festival in the fall are two festivals celebrating Sarasota's natural attractions.

[www.ecofestsrq.com](http://www.ecofestsrq.com)

[www.sarasotabaywaterfestival.org](http://www.sarasotabaywaterfestival.org)

## A place to stay in Sarasota



### The Hampton Inn & Suites Bayside Venice

**This was our first time at a Hampton Inn and, if the experience is 'par for the course', we will be delighted to do so again.**

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A no frills establishment, the Hampton Inn & Suites Bayside Venice, offers everything one could want from a short stay in budget range accommodation.

Most important of all the receptionists, who have to fill any number of roles from check-in to tourist information and do so with a warm professionalism, are a credit to the hotel.



The rooms are large, clean and very comfortable with wi-fi and there is a pleasant pool area. The complimentary continental breakfast and newspapers are a real bonus as is the free parking.

And this Hampton Inn is conveniently situated to Sarasota and Venice and the many places of interest in between.

Yes a very enjoyable stay.

[www.hamptoninnvenice.com](http://www.hamptoninnvenice.com)

## AllWays somewhere to dine : Sharkey's

For casual, al fresco, dining on Venice Beach you will almost certainly end up at Sharkey's, which is located at the pier.

Everyone else does.

Live music, cold beer, good food with the sun going down is just how it should be.

Having found Sharkey's, and on a limited stay in the area, we were reluctant to go elsewhere.

[www.sharkysonthepier.com](http://www.sharkysonthepier.com)



## A snapshot of Sarasota



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

[www.itwalliance.com](http://www.itwalliance.com)



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