



THE FLORIDA ALTERNATIVE

There is life after Disney World in Florida. By all means exhaust the East Coast, the Mickey Mouse bit, Epcot, Cape Canaveral, Columbia Studios and even a taste of Miami vice, but when it comes to pampered relaxing, to undeveloped beaches, to the simple life with air conditioning, head west to a stretch of the Gulf Coast which few Europeans seem to have discovered.

Lee Island County's profile is deliberately low—no big towns, no designer clothes, no status mink coats, but small boutiques, dolphins alongside the boat and pelicans in the trees, golf courses along the strand, stretches of deserted pine-fringed shell-strewn sands.

Hard to believe that this is America (since 1821 when Spain sold Florida to the US for the current price of a villa on Miami Beach). There can be few miles of coastline in that opportunist land that have escaped the beady eye of the developer. If there are any undiscovered islands, I should like to know and be the first to put my footprint in their sands. The next best thing must be a chain of barrier islands, halfway between Tampa and the Everglades. Many of the islands are accessible only by boat; some



Captiva Island: picturesfrom.com

are uninhabited; all of them have been preserved with more great respect for wildlife, animal and human.

The largest, unromantically named Sanibel, nearest to the resort of Fort Myers Beach (where there is indeed nightlife and shops) is the best known, particularly for its shells. There are more varieties (over 400) than anywhere else in the continent. No offshore reef here to break up the fragile creatures that the shallow warm trough of the gulf has encouraged to grow, before being gently deposited on the white sands in a spontaneous re-cycling programme.

Shelling becomes a fiercely competitive activity. You may have found a brown speckled Junonia but have you seen my Paper Fig? This is the land of the laidback only until the chance comes to snatch the prize specimen from the last tide's delivery; determined hunters will fix miner-type lamps to their heads so that they can be out before first light and the lie-abeds. Don't mock—it's addictive.

One third of Sanibel is taken up with a wildlife reserve, named after its founder, Ding Darling. But it seems pointless to pay \$4 entry fee for the chance of spotting a roseate spoonbill when the whole area is teeming with wildlife. You can even become blasé about alligators and sharks (but never about the clownish pelicans whose antics are a constant source of amusement).

The island that has everything is Captiva, so-called because in the 1700s the pirate José Gaspar kept a harem of women captive there. If they had any sense they would never try to escape. It centres on a resort that caters for those who like to get away from it all and take their plumbing with them. It is called the South Seas Island Resort and specialises in 'barefoot elegance'. Over two miles of private beach—more white sands, more palms, more shells—curve round the sybaritic hotel rooms whose balconies overlook the marina on Pine Island sound. I gave up counting the swimming pools, but there were enough to go round and any chance of boredom is banished by: a golf course, 22 tennis courts and you-name-it water

sports, including flotilla sailing, which, given the climate and variety of water, must compare favourably with European versions.

For those who prefer to let someone else cope with the navigation, there are numerous well-organised excursions to islands, villages and beaches. The favourite is to Cabbage Key, a small island built on an ancient Indian shell mound. Cabbage Key manages to combine the natural, a truly idyllic setting, with lush semi-tropical vegetation. There is an atmospheric ‘shack’ restaurant run by civilised hosts, who appreciate that the simple-lifers need stoking up with something more than coconuts. Victuals are unsophisticated but lavish and prime. Their hamburgers are definite eye-openers for those used to back-home apologetic versions. Their scallops come, bite-sized, from the bay outside, and the key lime pie, made from home-grown fruit, is the one by which all other key lime pies should be judged. “Never”, they say sternly, “accept a key lime pie that is green. Key limes are yellow.”

Apart from lime-picking and lotus-eating, there is not a lot to do on Cabbage Key. Next stop is neighbouring Useppe Island, whose comparative sophistication is in total contrast. Even the posts on the pier shine whiter than white with freshly applied paint. Pink paths artfully curve around ‘old Florida’ colonial-style houses and the restaurant goes in more for filet mignon than hamburgers. It is a bastion for well-heeled big game fishermen and yachties who are happy to pay to belong to this exclusive club-island (you can join by the day).

When the boat lands sun-tanned and windswept passengers back at South Seas Island Resort, it is a rush to get a table at Cap’n Al’s, one of the resort’s restaurants overlooking the yacht harbour. Darkness falls suddenly and early in these parts, but the air is still velvet-warm and bare shoulders and knees are de rigueur. Lights bob on the water. The ice in the pifia colada and the yachts’ halyards clink in happy unison. The comely young waitresses chant, “Have a nice evening”. It is hard not to.

Lee Island Count’s capital, Fort Myers, is a pleasant town, complete with user-friendly shopping malls, 15 miles of lofty pine avenues and a marina full of expensive yachts. From here you can take a boat along the Caloosahatchee River right across the state to the Atlantic Ocean, or a morning cruise round the bay. It boasts two unique museums of unusual interest, the Henry Ford House which should fascinate anyone remotely interested in automobiles and the Edison Museum, where the original light bulb is still working.

Dining out is best in nearby Fort Myers Beach, a lively resort on a spit of sand some five miles long. You can eat at any number of animated seafood restaurants, with or without sea or river views, like Snug Harbour and the Mucky Duck, before driving back to the peace and seclusion of Captiva.



Cabbage Key: adventurewindsurfing.blogspot.com

Getting There: Access to Lee Country is by BA direct flights to Miami and an easy (if rather boring) drive across the state, or to Tampa, three hours drive to the north. The area is easily combined with a Disney World visit by flying to Orlando and then to Fort Myers.

Further information from the Lee County Visitors and Convention Bureau. <http://www.leevcb.com> or Gatehouse North, Lydhurst, The Street, Warninglid, West Sussex RH17 5TR. Email: infoUK@lee.gov.uk

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