

It's the closest thing to Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville" on the Gulf Coast. But it's not only known for being laid-back, it's also been called "The Beach Wedding Capital of Florida."



ROMANTIC AND RUSTIC ANNA MARIA ISLAND

I had been to Anna Maria Island before, but always just for meals. I had never spent much time there. But the opportunity arose to spend a weekend on the western edge of Manatee County—and I came away with new appreciation of a tight-knit beach community.

We stayed at a beautiful rejuvenated classic 1930's island-style resort on the main road, Gulf Drive. Gayle Luper is the long-time owner of the Bungalow Beach Resort. Gayle's place is—like the name—a series of bungalows around the beach. Directly ON the beach. Quaint and charming, it feels like you're staying in a wealthy friend's guest house. Hard wood floors, beautifully decorated—and a sliding glass door that literally opens to the beach. What a view! (www.BungalowBeach.com.)

Gayle wants her guests to be happy—so she's not above helping make plans and giving directions. She lined up a terrific weekend for us, and that began with getting scooters. Victoria Sweeney runs Island Scooter Rentals and she was very thorough in her instructions. Good thing she stressed safety; I hadn't been on anything more exciting than a golf cart in years. This was a fun way to get around the island. Vicky also has bikes, paddle boards, body boards and kayaks. She's outgrown her name! (www.IslandScooters.com)

In the morning, Gayle suggested we walk down the beach to have breakfast at the Gulf Drive Cafe. This place has expanded several times and still fills each seat. No wonder: The open-air restaurant is on the beach. Portions were large; I had an omelet with bacon and sausage—and Tiffany had a seafood omelet. Family owned and operated for 30 years. Good way to start the day. (www.GulfDriveTiki.com.)

Sunday began with a six mile drive up Anna Maria to a marina off Bay Boulevard South where we met up with charter boat captain Ed Hartung of Spice Sailing Charters. Ed's an easy-going guy with a great personality for taking tourists out on cruises. He has a 30' Catalina named "Zig Zag" and he took the time to teach us the basics about sailing. He let me guide the sailboat into Tampa Bay up to the brink of Egmont Key, an island with a lot of history dating back to the Spanish American War in the late 1800's. Captain Ed has specialized in sunset cruises since 1988. (www.Charters2.Tripod.com)

Our Sunday afternoon climaxed with a para-sailing adventure with Daryl Konecy at AMI Parasail. We boarded his boat next to the historic Bridge Street Pier and went out into the Gulf for a 15 minute flight high above Anna Maria Island. I've discovered I've gotten more chicken, not less chicken, over the years. I held on tight and was afraid to look around too much for fear I'd rock the sail too much while Tiffany was flashing them two thumbs up. It was an exhilarating way to see the area, and wind down the weekend. (www.AMIParasail.com.)

After placing my life in Daryl's hands, I felt I owed him at least a cold beer—so along with his right-hand man, John, and Daryl's wife Becky, we sat down at the Bridgetender Inn's Dockside Bar and laughed about my white-knuckles grip on the para-sail straps. The owner of the Bridgetender Inn, Fred Bartizal, a retired physician from Wisconsin joined us for our impromptu Happy Hour. I even called Gayle from the resort to come out and round out the group. The six of us had a wonderful time toasting our successful visit to Anna Maria Island. It was a perfect end to our weekend. (www.BridgeTenderInn.com.)

Having lived on the Gulf Coast for most of my adult life, I was glad to finally absorb the true beauty of this old Florida tight-knit community. I recommend Anna Maria Island for wedding parties—or for anyone looking for a fun vacation! RAY COLLINS