

When you think of Siesta Key, you think about the wide beach, the white sand and the eclectic village. But we found a way to have a memorable weekend on...

The Other End of Siesta Key

The timing of our visit was actually fortuitous. It was a windy and chilly weekend, which was actually a good thing as we were determined to prove you could have a great time without even relying on the beach itself.

For locals, the “south bridge”—or Stickney Point Bridge—is a mental line of demarcation on the key. Most tourists gravitate to the north. But while most turn right, we turned left. Poet Robert Frost said something about taking the path less traveled making all the difference.

Erin and I checked in to a resort that was exactly the midway point, a mile and a half, between the south bridge and the southern tip of the key. “Siesta Key Bungalows” is the best-kept secret on the south end of the key. It’s quietly situated on Heron Lagoon, midway between Siesta Key Beach and Turtle Beach. It has a tropical feel, sea shells coat the parking lot, with 10 one-bedroom bungalows around a lush courtyard. Kayaks await on the dock adjacent to the sparkling lagoon. There’s also a heated pool and access to free bikes.

The rooms aren’t really rooms at all—but rather apartments, complete with a living room, dining area and full kitchen. Very spacious. (The owner has a very similar establishment on Anna Maria Island that is smack dab on the Gulf of Mexico. It’s called the Bungalow Beach Resort and is equally charming.)

After a lazy day exploring the southern end of the key on foot, we cleaned up and drove another mile and a half south to one of the nicest restaurants anywhere in Sarasota or Manatee Counties. “Ophelia’s on the Bay” rightfully calls itself Sarasota’s premier waterfront dining facility. We had a beautiful two-top table facing tranquil Sarasota Bay. It was a chilly weekend, so no one was sitting along the outdoor tables that are right on the water. Certainly a nice option in warmer weather.

The restaurant is a local institution, entering its 28th year—and a favorite of people celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, etc. The Executive Chef, Daniel Olson, has earned a top-notch reputation over his 15 years in the kitchen. Erin and I both had lobster—which was served off the shell in a cream sauce with mushrooms and spinach. Sensory overload! (We also requested gluten-free considerations, which Chef Dan was happy to accommodate.)

“Ophelia’s on the Bay” also has Happy Hour from 4-5pm with small plates between \$5-\$10. Plus they have a Champagne Jazz brunch buffet every Sunday from 11-2pm. They’re also open every holiday with seasonal/traditional specials. Absolutely a first-class place that’s earned a stellar reputation among local residents and vacationers.

After dinner we went for a nightcap that turned into much more at “Captain Curt’s” karaoke bar. We watched dozens of people take to the stage and sing lots of obscure songs—so we finally figured, “hey, we’re on vacation—let’s do it!” After years of wanting to sing karaoke but lacking the courage, Erin and I supported each other through a spirited duet of “Summer Nights” from Grease. We made it out alive—no one threw tomatoes, and no one heckled us (as far as we know)—so it was a great way to cap off a fun day.

The next morning, we crossed over to the village area for what’s become one of the most popular brunch spots on Siesta Key. The “Sun Garden Cafe” isn’t like any other breakfast or lunch restaurant. It’s an eclectic place with a menu that includes items called “Baba O’Riley” (broccoli, spinach, turkey & boursin cheese omelet with avocado and basil pesto), “Elvis’ Fried Chicken Plate,” and “Grateful Bread Pudding” with lemon and blueberries.

It's family-owned and operated by Rick and Suzanne Munroe and has won many "Best" awards from local critics and readers. True to its name, it includes a sun garden area to dine outside—and is pet friendly. The only thing as good as the food is the service.

If you live in the area and want to try a unique stay-cation, follow our lead here. You'll have a memorable time in paradise!
RAY COLLINS



Another Part of Paradise

Beautiful Lake Manatee State Park

I never really liked hiking, but since I like jogging even less, my doctor encouraged me to learn to love getting out in nature and getting some cardio activity. So, I punched up "hiking trails" and went to the closest one.

But the state park is MUCH more than just hiking. The 6.5-miles of trails can also be used for horseback riding and bicycling. There's also fishing, boating, and swimming. Camping is also quite popular. The park has dozens of "mini cul de sacs" campers can claim as their own. (Details at FloridaStateParks.org.)

Lake Manatee State Park touts itself as "America's first two-time national gold medal winner for state parks." Pretty impressive. It's 9 miles east of I-75, exit 220, on State Road 64 (20007 E. State Road 64).

The park extends along three miles of the south shore of Lake Manatee. It covers 549-acres, and in short, has something for everybody.

So next time you have a wide-open day or weekend, think about spreading your wings and trying something new at Lake Manatee State Park!
RAY COLLINS

