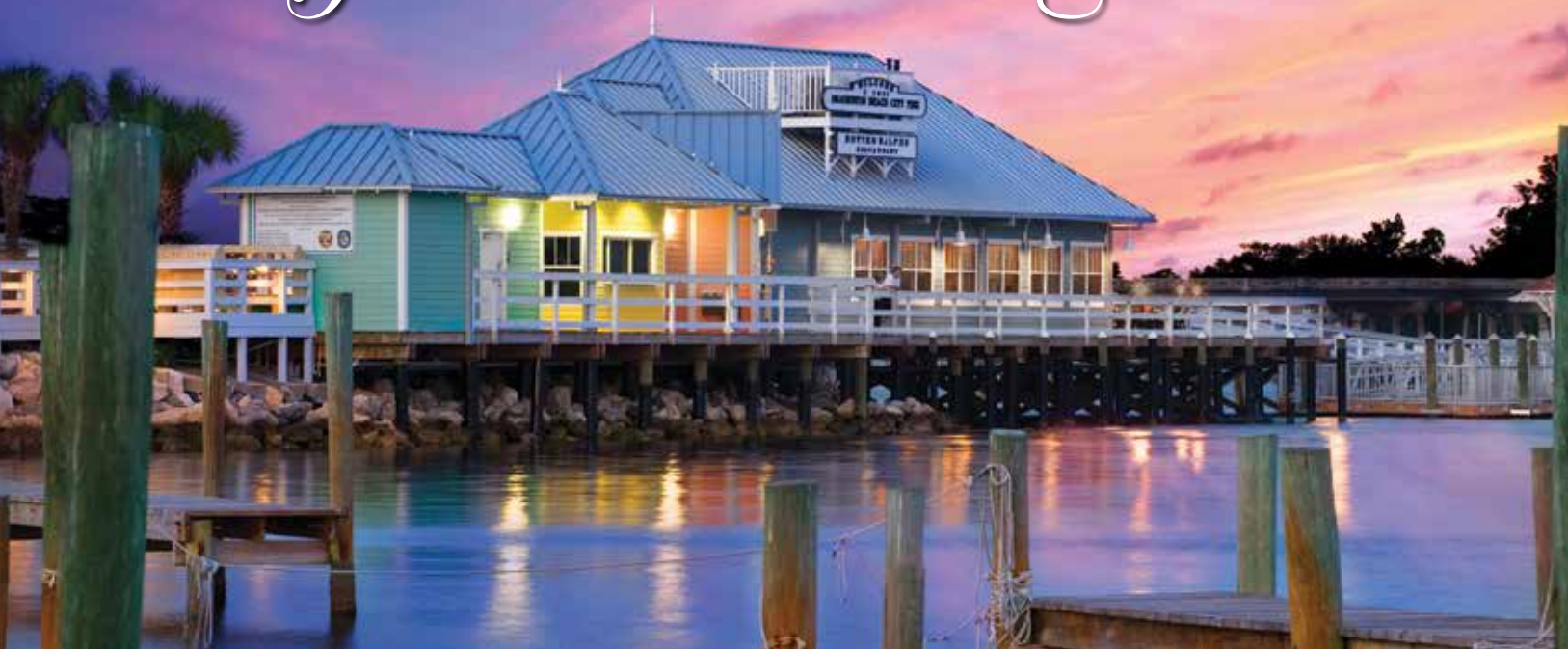


# Stay-cation on Historic Bridge Street



**IT'S THE KIND OF FEELING** where you drive half an hour—but feel like you're hours away from home. It helps that everyone around you has spent thousands of dollars to be there on their vacation.

Each time I've driven through Historic Bridge Street in Bradenton Beach, I've thought, "Someday I want to spend more time getting to know this area." Living in downtown Sarasota, our usual default is to head to Siesta Key Beach and Siesta Key Village.

Erin and I stayed at the landmark "BridgeWalk" resort that takes up about half a city block. We checked into a third floor room that overlooks the Gulf of Mexico AND the intracoastal, not to mention Bridge Street below.

The room was so spacious, mostly because a second bed neatly folds up

into a wall piece—so it's either a perfect place for a family, or a romantic place for a couple that wants a dance floor in their room.

There is also a very spacious screened-in la nai that offers beautiful views in three directions.

With our base established, we set out to have some fun.

Feet away from the hotel, we stumbled onto "Adventure Away Rental Center." Julie Kirkwood has it covered—jet skis, golf carts, paddle boards, parasailing, Segway scooters and bikes.

Erin and I rented a couple of bikes and followed a route Julie prescribed for us. It took us on a paved path along Bradenton Beach, all the way north to the bridge to Longboat Key. It was a perfect way to go to the beach without getting off our bikes. Exercise, sun and

sightseeing. Perfect way to start our stay-cation!

Building up an appetite, we visited the popular new restaurant smack-dab on the pier, Anna Maria Oyster Bar. John Horne has several branches in the area, and this is his newest success story. The pier has struggled in the past to find the right fit for this space—and they finally found it in this flexible restaurant—that can be a quick bite on the go, or a very comfortable and relaxing night out on the town.

Erin and I sat at the bar and met a lot of other vacationers. We both had shrimp & scallops. We try not to get the exact same thing, so she got hers blackened.(!) Fun place, great food (breakfast, lunch and dinner), can't miss.

Time to have a little more fun, so we crossed the adjacent Cortez Bridge and



rented jet skis from Cortez Water Sports. Danny Nemeth may be one of the nicest guys I've ever met—and not just because he let it slip that he lets the "Big Brothers Big Sisters" program take out boats for free to help their young friends.

Danny has pontoon boats and jet skis. You can rent by the hour, by the half day, or full day. We took out a jet ski for an hour and sped back and forth along Sarasota Bay. Like a motorcycle on the water! Felt like a kid again.

It was convenient to head back to our hotel in the center of it all, change, and enjoy dinner right across the street. We had a wonderful time at a six-year old restaurant called the Blue Marlin (which we hope to review in an upcoming issue). Afterward, we walked up and down Bridge Street and were pleasantly surprised by the active nightlife. After a long day, we were glad to leave it all behind in our room high above it all.

The weekend was capped off perfectly with a Sunday brunch at Gulf Drive Cafe. This place is huge and is as famous for brunch as it is for lunch and dinner. It also has a large tiki bar which is larger than most bars I've been in.

We both had omelets, mine with bacon and sausage, Erin's with asparagus and ham. Oh, did I mention the place is right on the beach and your view is of the Gulf of Mexico? Little tid-bit I thought I'd throw it. Fast and friendly service, and more food that you can eat.

We went back to our resort, packed our car and headed back south for our short drive back to Sarasota—but couldn't help but feel we had been worlds away! – Ray Collins