

# CELEBRATING SANIBEL

— BY RAY COLLINS



BEAUTY AND ACTION PACKED FUN



From the moment you start to cross over the causeway from Ft. Myers to Sanibel, you know you're heading someplace special. It reminds me of the vista as you cross the Ringling Causeway in Sarasota, or the Sunshine Skyway from St. Petersburg to Bradenton. (You also figure Sanibel must be a nice place if there's a \$6 cover charge to get in!)

After the 2-hour drive from Sarasota, we were ready to stop for lunch—and “Cheeburger Cheeburger” sounded like a decadent way to start our weekend staycation in Southwest Florida. They have different size burgers, and I went light and got the Semi-Serious. That's what it is called! Even that was too big for my mouth—so I had to remove a layer of tomatoes and onions to get down to business.

My much prettier half, Erin, got a Grilled Chicken Salad that she thought was quite large and very good. Already in a vacation mode, we treated ourselves to milkshakes, which come in many flavors. Erin got peanut butter and I got coffee flavored.

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Before we got to the resort, we stopped to pick up a tandem bike at Billy's Bike Rentals. The manager, Ryan, has a wide variety of bikes for all ages and abilities. He also has wave-boards. There are two Billy's branches—and Ryan is at the one in the Bailey's plaza at 2437 Periwinkle Way. Talk about customer service. I rode the bike and Erin drove ahead in the car to our resort, Casa Ybel. It was our first time visiting. A friend of mine has been the tennis pro here for years, and she suggested we check it out. In fact, since we got there before 3pm check-in and there were no rooms available, we wound up making tennis our first activity. Kerry Kendrick learned from Hall of Famer Nick Bollettieri, played college tennis in San Diego and has a brother who played pro tennis for years. We had a nice hit on one of the resorts hard courts. She gave me a great tip on getting my racquet head below the ball on the backhand, something I had gotten away from. She arranges tennis—and pickleball—matches clinics. You can rent a racquet and tennis balls. (They also have a recreation center, library and area to rent bikes!)

By the time we finished with Kerry the front desk called to tell us our room was ready. This was funny: When we entered, I saw a nice living room—but my first thought was, “Where do we sleep? Pull-out couch?” Turns out Casa Ybel has all suites--and all facing the Gulf of Mexico!

Besides the living room, dining area and kitchen with full appliances, it also has a spacious bedroom and L-shaped bathroom with separate entrances and separate sinks. Well laid-out when you have guests.







Once we unpacked, we had the kind of afternoon scheduled that you only dream of: Private yoga class followed by individual spa treatments—plural, as in two each. And both places were located nearly side by side. We hopped on the tandem and rode a mile to Rabbit Road. Charming name.

Our first stop was the Sanibel Health Club, a large facility with new equipment. Alyssa gave us a private yoga class in the clean, brightly lit studio. Her smile and demeanor were as sunny as the room as she guided us from child's pose to shavasana—which I jokingly call 'the closing nap.'

Even though Erin is a yoga teacher and I'm a beginner—Alyssa was able to lead us both in a wonderful class that combined deep stretching and a cardio work out. Best of both worlds. We feel like we made a new friend with our sweet yoga instructor. After that we walked next door for our spa treatments!

Sanibel Skin Spa may be the best kept secret on the island. A husband and wife team, Joel and Holly Torres, relocated to Southwest Florida after establishing themselves in the Hamptons. Talk about a double-threat: Holly gave me a facial, while Joel gave Erin a massage—and then we switched.

I hadn't had a facial in years, but after 30 years of putting on make-up each weekday as a TV newscaster chances are I could use a deep scrub. Sure enough—when Holly was done with me, my face never felt cleaner.

Then Joel not only worked out my stiff upper back, but he also gave me an athletic massage—lifting each leg up in the air to stretch my hamstrings farther than I thought they could go. He was one of the best massage therapists I ever had. I told him I wished they would move to Sarasota!

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We rode back to the resort, showered and dressed for dinner at Casa Ybel. We enjoyed a picturesque walk in view of the sun setting on the Gulf of Mexico. We saw a wedding wrapping up on the beach. This would be an ideal place for a wedding.



We had no idea what to expect at the resort restaurant—but we were in for the biggest surprise of the weekend. The Thistle Lodge is in a quaint two-story building overlooking the Gulf. We knew it was something special when a helpful passing server asked our name, I said, "Collins," and she said, "Ray?" Morgan later told me she makes a point to check the reservation book and memorize the arriving guests' names!

Michael Williams is the Food & Beverage Manager. He shook our hands and guided us to a well-placed table, looking out at the sunset and the dining room as well. The restaurant is known for the creamy lobster bisque, an extensive wine list -- and entertaining piano player. Erin chose New York strip steak while I had twin lobster tails, potatoes and broccoli. We have gluten-allergies and Jose was kind to find bread we could eat. We ended the night with coffee and a dish of vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce. Rosie was an ideal server. She previously worked in Sarasota.

Make no mistake, this restaurant—tucked away in a resort—is a 5-star place. The service, the food and the ambiance are all top-notch. Even if you don't stay at Casa Ybel, you need to check out this gem of a restaurant.

We wound up staying for a nightcap when it turned out I actually knew the piano player, Dan Tudor, from 30-years earlier when I was starting out in the TV business in Ft. Myers. (I tried taking piano lessons 2-3 times, but my lack of patience got the best of me.) It was a treat to see Dan after all these years.

After a morning walk on the beach, we returned to The Thistle Lodge for Sunday brunch. We were lucky enough to have Morgan as a server, who greeted us by name as we walked in. She helped us get a gluten-free version of their tasty eggs benedict. It was one of ten options on the menu. I'm in awe of that restaurant! Combine that with the perfect secluded location on the island, the beautiful beach view from the suite and the lush tropical landscaping throughout the entire resort property and you've got a perfect resort.

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It was our final morning, so we returned the bike to Ryan at Billy's Bike Rentals and he was kind enough to drive us back to the resort. Talk about customer service! We reluctantly checked out of Casa Ybel and decided to head north on the island to Captiva to spend the afternoon romping around on the other end of this beautiful barrier islands. Erin shopped while I took pictures of the lush scenery. Where else can you see a sign that says, "Beware of low-flying owls." Before heading back home, we met up with our tennis pro friend, Kerry, for a final meal at a popular restaurant near the causeway. I have a gluten-free app that I like to use on the road—and it guided us directly to "Matzaluna: The Italian Kitchen."

The prices were reasonable, the atmosphere was fun, and we were there for hours. They have Italian specialties but also seafood, plus craft beer and wine. By the time we left, it was just the staff sitting around together enjoying each other's company which I thought was noteworthy as well.

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I've been fortunate enough to write for Family Beautiful for nearly ten years and over a hundred articles—from Hawaii to Cape Cod. But this little weekend getaway will go down as one of our favorites. We hit the jackpot from start to finish—from the resort, to the restaurants, to the various services we received. Everybody was so helpful, and that's not always the case!

Feel free to use this article as a guide when you visit Sanibel. You won't be sorry!

RAY COLLINS

