

Tarpon Lodge and Cabbage Key



BY RAY COLLINS



Islands in the Sun- 80 Miles and A World Away from Sarasota

Over the past 10 years and dozens of articles, this weekend staycation was among the most memorable. It's not for what it had, it's more about what it didn't have. It's about a weekend that got better by the hour—but not for the usual reasons.

We drove south from Sarasota on Interstate 75 and began angling toward the coast just after Punta Gorda, arriving about an hour later. We checked into a place called Tarpon Lodge, a quaint Old Florida resort on the banks of Pine Island Sound.

Directly across the street is the Calusa Heritage Trail. Erin and I went for a hike and learned all about what's been uncovered, learned and preserved at the site which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

We showered and relaxed on our 2nd story balcony, in time to watch the sun setting over the water. There are only 12 rooms in the "main house" and several more cottages scattered throughout the grounds. You'll want to ask for one of the six rooms facing west in order to catch Mother Nature's nightly show.

It was so decadent to walk downstairs to enjoy one of the nicest restaurants in Southwest Florida. The restaurant and bar are classy yet comfortable. Erin had the New York Strip Steak and I had the Filet Mignon. We were both very pleased with our choices. Both the maitre d' and the waitress, Donna, were very personable yet professional. After a peaceful night's sleep our trip was about to get even better. You see, the Wells family not only owns Tarpon Lodge, they also own most of Cabbage Key including the Island Inn, bar and restaurant—and it's only accessible by boat.

We got a guided tour of all the islands between Sanibel/Captiva to the south and Boca Grande to the north from the boat captain on board one of the Island Girl Charters. The water taxi service takes off and returns from Pineland Marina, adjacent to Tarpon Lodge.

Fifteen minutes later, we were transported to another era: Cabbage Key is the island Jimmy Buffet reputedly wrote about when he penned "Cheeseburger in Paradise." Several places claim that distinction, but 24 hours in this area makes you realize he must have been talking about this place.

We walked off the dock and up the steps to this tropical escape—which is both historic and downright charming. We were stunned at the location of our beautiful room: A door in the dining room led to a short hallway with our room at the end. Talk about convenient!

Despite the proximity to all the diners, it was never loud. We didn't have a TV set to drown out any noise—as the rooms don't have any electronics. You come to Cabbage Key to unplug and unwind. There aren't even any keys for the rooms.

(Yes, they lock from the inside—and there is a security guard on the premises quietly making sure of order.)



Our waitress, Debbie, lives on Cabbage Key with other workers goes back home to the Ft. Myers area on her days off. Erin had one of the famous cheeseburgers while I went for the mahi special with beans and rice. Debbie also talked us into splitting a slice of ice cream cake with an Oreo crust. It didn't take much arm-twisting. Great lunch and idyllic atmosphere.

After walking off our lunch on an adjacent nature trail--and climbing the observation tower--we sat on two Adirondack by the dock and watched the parade of boaters arriving and leaving from the key. Turtles and ducks walked among the people. Everyone seemed to be having a good time due to the tone set by the friendly staff in the restaurant.

Late in the afternoon, that tone began to change. The number of boaters coming and going dwindled and the Inn took on a more intimate feel.

After a nap and shower, we walked ten steps out to the dining room and encountered a dim fine-dining restaurant--a stark contrast to the active boater bar a few hours earlier. Active, crowded and fun was replaced by comfortable, stately and high-end.

We were fortunately to meet Mr. Robert Wells, who bought Cabbage Key in 1976. We sat with him at the bar and talked for an hour, while meeting other guests who were also staying overnight. We wound up eating with a lovely couple from Winter Haven, Mike & Sue, here to mark their 29th wedding anniversary. Our waitress from lunch hadn't forgotten us and greeted us by name--as we introduced Debbie to our new friends from Central Florida.

Erin and I each enjoyed Stone Crab Claws, followed by more ice cream cake and coffee.



After dinner we walked a few short steps back to our room and enjoyed the absolute peace of staying on a tiny island with few other people.

But it was the next morning that sealed the experience for me.

I went out to the dining room just before 7am and saw the security guard at a table in the bar by himself, keeping watch on the property. He helped me find cream for my coffee before he staff began to arrive.

Another guest—from an adjacent room, also just steps away—emerged. Jesse, a financial advisor from Bradenton, sat with me at a large table. Together sipping our coffee, getting acquainted while watching a rainstorm come and go—and then the sun coming up before our eyes.

“Hi Ray,” Sue (our waitress from the day before) casually said as she arrived for work. Not long after, Mr. Wells walked in. I introduced him to my new friend Jesse, and the three of us enjoyed a nice quiet conversation on this peaceful Sunday morning. Jessie was later replaced by Pete who was here with his family from Naples.

It wasn’t much effort to bring a hot coffee to Erin, since our room was only a few steps away. By the time she came out, we were able to order a nice breakfast of bacon and eggs. As we left the dining room, she was amazed at all the friends I had met in the pre-dawn hours. I introduced her to Jesse from Bradenton, Pete from Naples—and of course she already knew Mr. Wells and of course Debbie.

I will never forget how that day began—peaceful, serene and unspoiled. Bonding among other guests of the lodge. And a feeling of family from the staff—and the owner. Make no mistake, I love staying at sparkling new high-end resorts, but they don’t have the quaint charm of the Cabbage Key Inn.

We boarded the Island Girl Water Taxi back to the Tarpon Lodge area where our weekend began 36 hours earlier, a weekend that went from good to great to unforgettable when we least expected it.

RAY COLLINS

