

BeachHunter's Access Guide to

FLORIDA GULF BEACHES

Six of the Best

1. Best Overall
2. Best Family Beach
3. Most Romantic
4. Best Snorkeling
5. Best Party Beach
6. Best Camping Beach

Includes maps, photographs, and detailed reviews.

David McRee

Author of **Florida Beaches: Finding Your Paradise on the Lower Gulf Coast**
An Access Guide to 96 Florida beaches from Dunedin to Marco Island.

Are you planning your Florida Vacation? Do you live here and are looking for some new beaches to try? About 10 years ago I decided to visit EVERY beach on the Florida Gulf coast from the St. Petersburg area south to Marco Island. I was surprised at the tremendous differences in what each beach had to offer.

I was unable to find a book to help me explore the beaches, so I decided to write one. This FREE ebook contains excerpts, and often the full text, maps, and photos of six of what I would consider the “best” of what the lower Gulf coast has to offer.

It’s really hard to pick “the best.” Every year someone comes out with a list of the “best” beaches in the USA or whatever. Did you ever notice that each year the top beach is different? What do you suppose happened to knock it out of first place? Well, it’s all about promotion and advertising. I’ve tried really hard (actually it’s not that hard) to be honest and tell it like it is. Every beach has a down side as well as positive points. Honestly, if it was such a great beach last year, it’s a great beach this year too.

I’ve been to every beach more than once. Most of them I’ve been to MANY times. I grew up on the Anna Maria Beaches. Everyone likes something different in a beach. Some like crowds and beach bars while some like quiet beaches with few people. I tell you what to expect. I don’t gloss over the negatives. If the sand is brown and shelly and hard to walk in, I’m not going to leave that out. If there is a sharp drop-off that makes it unsafe for kids to swim, I tell you that as well.

In this free ebook, I’ve tried to pick 6 beaches that offer something unique that many people find appealing. If you like what’s here and find it useful and informative, please consider purchasing my book: Florida Beaches: Finding Your Paradise on the Lower Gulf Coast. It covers MORE than 96 beaches, starting with Honeymoon Island off the coast of Dunedin (north of St. Petersburg), and ending with Marco Island (near the Everglades). It literally covers every Gulf beach in that region and focuses on the beaches, not on hotels and attractions.

If you have comments about any of the beaches here, feel free to email me at beachhunter@beachhunter.net.

The entire book is available online at <http://www.beachhunter.net/book.htm>

Feel free to email this free eBook to any of your friends, or send them to my website to download it. You can even offer it for download on YOUR website for free as long as you don't change it in **any** way. All information must remain exactly as I've written it in the book. You may not sell copies of this eBook either in electronic or printed form.

You can also print out copies if you like (again, please don't try to sell them).

As a gentle reminder, this is copyrighted material.

Copyright © 2005 by David B. McRee. All rights reserved.

Here are my picks for **6 of the best beaches** on the lower Gulf Coast of Florida:

- **Best Overall Beach** – Siesta Key Public Beach
- **Best Snorkeling Beach** – Crescent Beach on Siesta Key
- **Best Family Beach** – Manatee County Public Beach on Anna Maria Island
- **Most Romantic Beach** – Blind Pass Beach on Sanibel/Captiva
- **Best Party Beach** – Fort Myers Beach
- **Best Camping Beach** – Cayo Costa Island State Park

Reviews, photos, and maps start on the next page-→

Note that the beaches are numbered. The numbers correspond to the beaches as numbered on the maps. My printed book reviews more than 96 beaches! This eBook just covers 6 beaches.



Photo: Crescent Beach and Point-of-Rocks, some of the best snorkeling on the Gulf coast peninsula. Note the flat limestone rock in the foreground.

The Beaches of **Siesta Key**

Interstate 75 Exit: 210 (Fruitville Road), 207 (Bee Ridge Road), 205 (Clark Rd / SR 72)

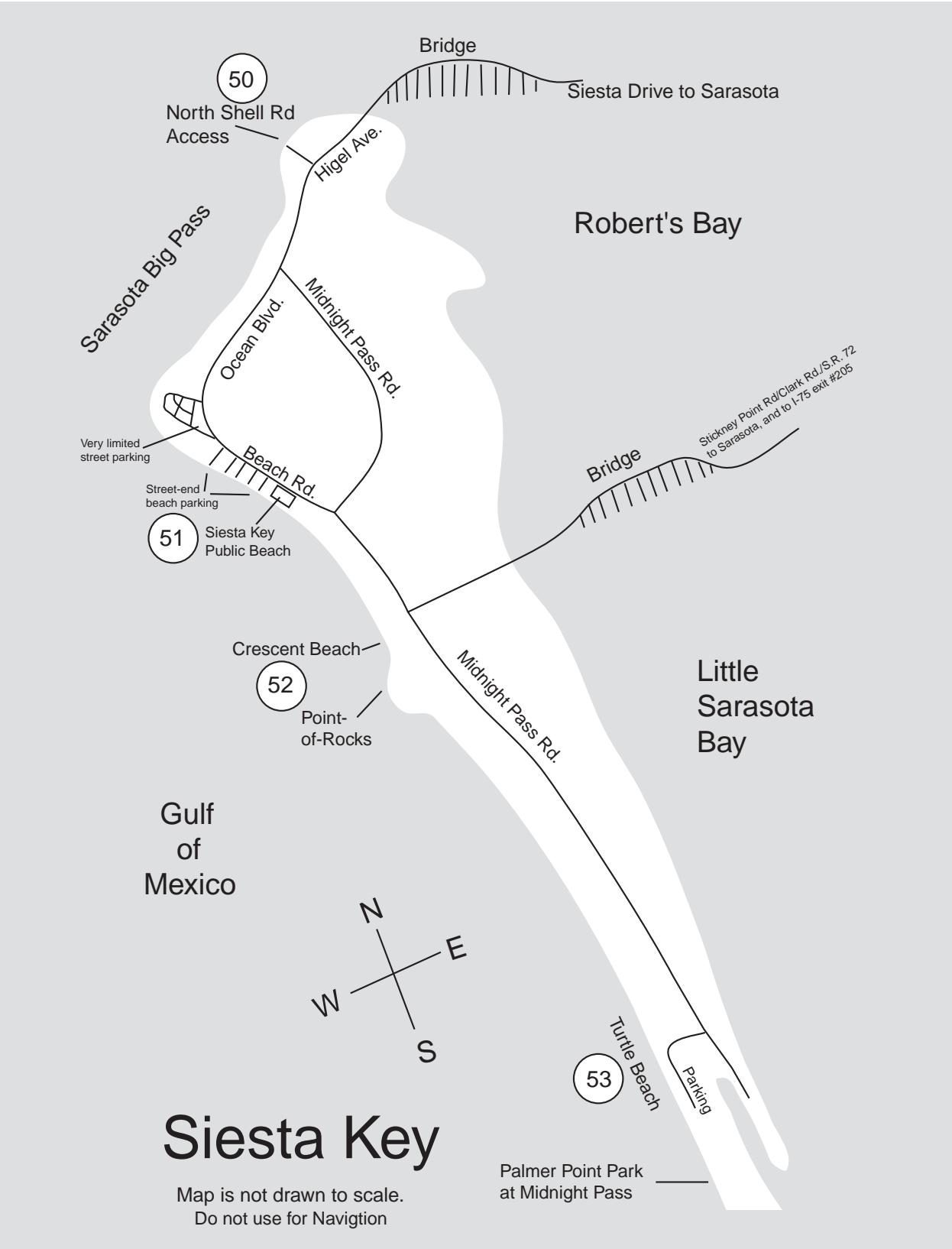
Nearest mainland city: Sarasota

Major access roads: Fruitville Road, Bee Ridge Road, Clark Rd / Stickney Point Rd, US 41 (Tamiami Trail).

Directions:

Siesta Key is in Sarasota County, just south of Lido Key, but there is no bridge from Lido Key to Siesta Key. In fact, there is no bridge connecting Siesta Key to any other island. You have to access Siesta Key from mainland Sarasota. You can use any of the Sarasota exits off of I-75 to reach US 41. From US 41 you can take either Siesta Drive to the northern part of the key, or Stickney Point Road to the southern part of the Key. If you are coming from I-75, take the Clark Road (S.R. 72) exit, # 205 and go west. When you cross US 41, Clark Road becomes Stickney Point Road and takes you directly to Siesta Key.

Like Lido Key, Siesta Key is partly residential, partly overtaken by resorts and condos, and partly left alone. The northern part of the Key is largely residential. And some fine residences indeed grace the sand here. Large tropical shade trees, rambling tropical flowers and foliage, and spreading palm trees obscure the private and luxurious homes that one can only glimpse through gates, fences, and thick greenery. Private shell driveways disappear into tropical landscapes, leading to homes that I can only imagine.



Siesta Key

Map is not drawn to scale.
Do not use for Navigation

The middle portion of the island is dominated by beach resorts and condominiums. One could easily mistake this part of the island for Longboat Key, except that on Siesta Key there is less space devoted to lawn and landscape. The largest condos are mostly confined to the area just south of Siesta Public Beach.

The southern part of the island is much narrower than the northern part, and is devoted to residences, some of which are quite palatial. The Key ends at Turtle Beach and Palmer Point Park North. A few condominiums have been squeezed in there as well.

51: SIESTA PUBLIC BEACH **Best Overall Beach**

Just follow the signs to Siesta Public Beach. If you're coming from the north, you will drive through Siesta Key Village, a small shopping and restaurant district on Ocean Blvd. Just south of

The Village, on Beach Road, there are several beach accesses, which hold 15 or so cars each. If you arrive very early you can park there and avoid the crowded main parking lot at the public beach. At the public beach there is also parallel parking along the street in addition to a large paved parking lot (which fills up quickly). On this 40-acre public beach there is a food concession, restroom facilities, tennis courts, and a large shaded picnic area with tables just south of the concession. There are lots of volleyball nets and playground equipment for kids. The beach here is very wide and has the whitest and finest sand in the world, according to the results of the 1987 International Sand Contest. The sand is mineral quartz and is so pure that it squeaks when you walk on it. Imagine yourself walking on a beach covered with sugar and you'll have the picture. This is also true of the beaches on Longboat Key and Anna Maria, but when renourishment projects pump broken shell onto the beach, the quality of the fine sand is temporarily hidden. Anyway, Siesta Key residents will tell you their sand is the whitest, and it would be hard to prove them wrong.

Siesta Public Beach truly is a magnificent beach. The sand near the waters edge is packed hard enough to make walking or jogging long distances a pleasure. I've even seen baby carriages being pushed up the beach. The shoreline to the north of the public beach has a very wide beach and no condominiums for quite a distance. Although there are vacation homes along the shore, they are set back a considerable distance.

Siesta Public Beach is where the beautiful people go to the beach. So it is one of the best beaches in the state for people watching.

Immediately south of the public beach the condominiums rise out of the sand behind the wide sandy beach. The monoliths stretch for two miles or so before giving way to a more eye-pleasing coastline of greenery and hidden beach houses. This is a very popular jogging and strolling beach.

52: CRESCENT BEACH & POINT OF ROCKS **Best Snorkeling**

This is a beach you could easily miss. How unfortunate for you that would be. Crescent Beach is located about two miles south of Siesta Public Beach, where Old Stickney Point Road intersects with Midnight Pass Road. The problem is finding a place to park. Crescent Shopping Center is located here, but be warned about using it for beach parking. A designated parking area and beach access #12 is sandwiched in between the Sea Shell resort and the Siesta Breakers. It's just a narrow alley, so don't try to park an RV here. There is probably space for 30 cars or so. Get here early. That means by 9:30 am on weekends.

Once you've secured a parking spot you have it made. It's a short walk to the wide, white powdery beach. You'll be sharing the beach here with the vacationers in all of the resorts along the coast here, but there's plenty of room. The water is beautiful here and the swimming is fantastic. Here at Crescent Beach you are within a five-minute walk of the best snorkeling to be found in this area of the state. The south end of Crescent Beach is called Point of Rocks, and has an unusual feature for a coastline characteristically defined by white sand. Limestone rock shelves lie under the water here and provide a place for the bright Red Boring Sponge (often mistaken for coral), sea plants, and a very interesting fish population. The water here is very shallow--three to six feet--and there are acres of rocks and crevices to explore. On one visit I swam through schools of mullet, and a school of over 100 snook. I saw mangrove snapper, sheepshead, pompano, yellowtail jack, a large and very shy grouper, and numerous fish unfamiliar to me. There are literally acres of rocks to explore. The visibility underwater is probably best during May and June, before the summer rains begin. On a good day, visibility is about twenty feet, which is fine when you're in only three to six feet of water. After heavy rains or during turbulent weather visibility may be reduced to two feet because of sediment suspended in the water.

At Point of Rocks there is a sea wall about eight feet high along the shore with a beautiful mural about 50 feet long painted on it. Walk, or swim around the sea wall and you will find a rather rough and narrow, but very quiet beach extending for half a mile or so. There are homes along the beach here, but they are perched on a bluff, which is about twelve or more feet above the beach. Wooden steps lead from each home, hidden behind foliage, down to the beach. In the distance to the south, you can see Turtle Beach.



Photo: Looking south from Manatee Public Beach Pier.

The Beaches of Anna Maria Island

City of Anna Maria
Holmes Beach
Bradenton Beach

Interstate 75 Exit: #220B

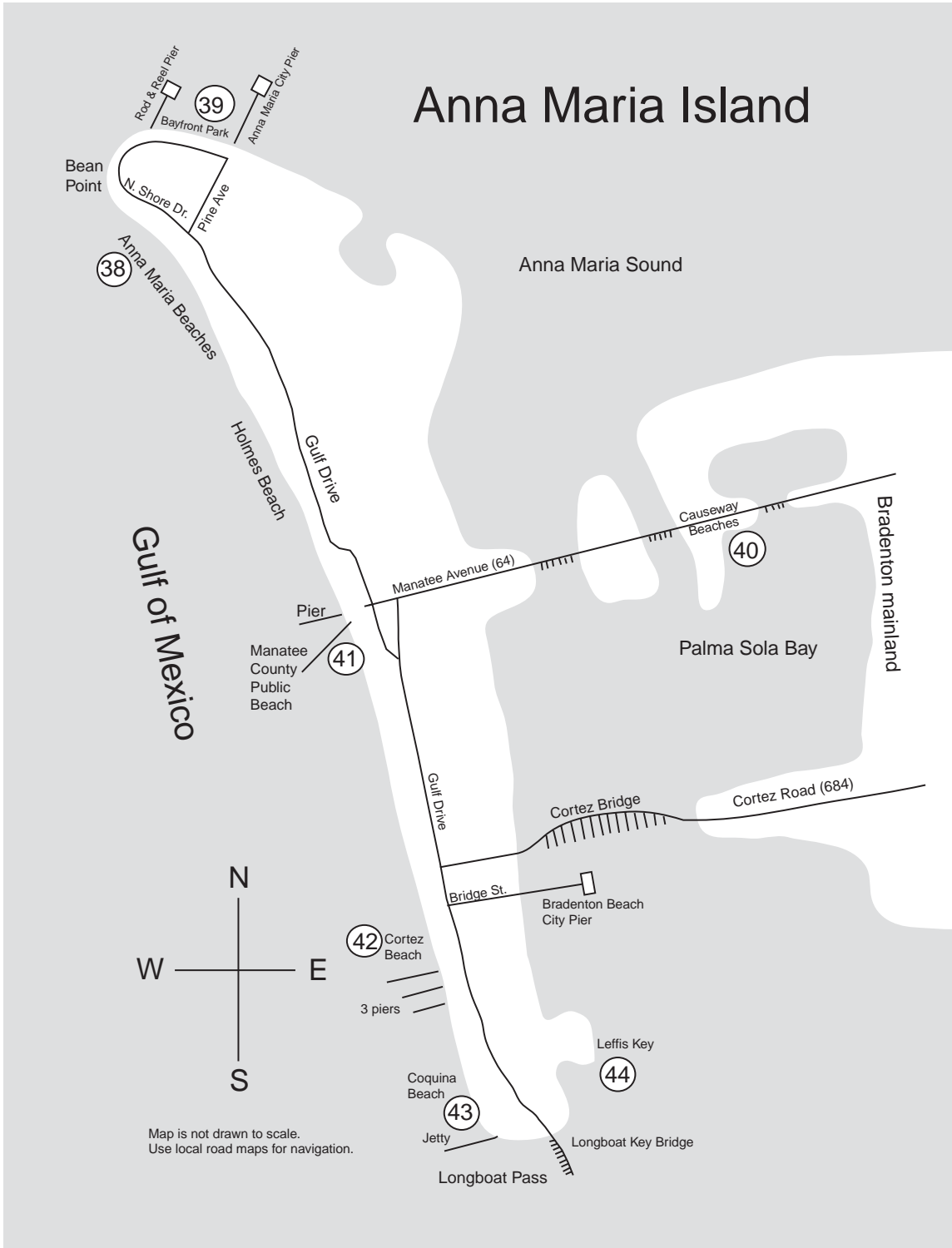
Nearest mainland city: Bradenton

Major access roads: Manatee Avenue (Highway 64); Cortez Road (684); Gulf Drive (789)

Anna Maria Island is world famous for its white sandy beaches. Visitors come here from all over the world to relax and enjoy the beauty and friendliness of the island. It's easy to find the beaches, and there are generally enough parking spaces at the public beaches.

Three roads will take you to the island. Manatee Avenue (Highway 64), Cortez Road (684), or Gulf Drive (789) via Longboat Key. Highway 64 is accessible from Interstate 75 at exit 220B. Both Manatee Avenue and Cortez Road lead over two-lane draw bridges which become dreadfully snarled with traffic on sunny spring weekends. The traffic is not usually as bad during summer, fall, and winter. A larger, fixed-span bridge to replace the Cortez Road bridge has been under discussion for years. It may be years more before anything gets underway. For years Cortez Road was in a state of perpetual construction, but all that seems to be behind us now.

Anna Maria Island



The island is home to three cities: Anna Maria in the north; Bradenton Beach in the south; and Holmes Beach sandwiched in between. Each city has its own distinct flavor. Anna Maria occupies the northern third or so of the island and is largely residential. The northern tip of the island, known as Bean Point, is very quiet--the prevailing sound is that of the wind blowing through the tops of the Australian pine trees. Bean Point overlooks the confluence of 4 bodies of water: the Manatee River, Anna Maria Sound, Tampa Bay, and the Gulf of Mexico.

The ambiance on Anna Maria Island is not one of tropical languor shaded by coconut palms and crystal clear waters. The winters here are a bit too cold for coconut palms to thrive and the water usually has a light green color, becoming darker farther out. For the coconut palm atmosphere one has to travel south to the Fort Myers area, and for the crystal clear waters one has to travel farther south still, to the Keys. The dominant foliage along the beach is the Australian pine, the sea grape, the beach morning glory, and sea oats, a tall, grass-like plant that grows on the small dunes above the high tide line.

41: MANATEE COUNTY PUBLIC BEACH **Best Family Beach**

Without a doubt, this is the easiest beach access in the city of Holmes Beach. Just drive as far west as you can on Manatee Avenue and you're there. Usually there is enough parking, but I would strongly advise getting here by 10 am on weekends and holidays.

The Public Beach is a regular beach scene every day of the week. Everyone mixes and mingles here: northern retirees, families, and teenagers. A concession/restaurant/gift shop serves food and drink, lifeguards are on duty, and the volleyball crowd is in action. The restaurant is called "Cafe on the Beach" and opens daily at 6am. It's a very popular spot for breakfast. On weekend nights there is often live music. Seating is outdoors and is a great way to watch the sun set while you eat and listen to music. If you want to bring your own food there are shaded picnic tables overlooking the beach.

This is a very popular beach for taking long morning or evening strolls, or for jogging. One may walk for 3 or 4 miles north without running out of beach. The beach to the north and south of Manatee Public Beach is known as Holmes Beach, which stretches for several miles, all the way to Anna Maria. It's all one big beach.

A concrete pier built for erosion control extends for 150 feet or so into the Gulf. When I was a teenager, we carried our surfboards out to the end of the pier, threw them into the water and then leaped in and climbed on. It saved us the arduous paddle through

the surf. Fishermen could always be found trying their luck or skill from the pier, day and night. Times change though. The pier has been rebuilt after storm damage. Now it has railings and warning signs. Jumping off the pier is no longer tolerated. Progress.

One of the best things about Anna Maria Island is that over the last 20 years, while some other islands have been building tall condominiums as fast as they can, Anna Maria has not. The Anna Maria / Holmes Beach / Bradenton Beach shoreline looks much the same as it did 20 years ago. In fact, since there have been no major storms to hit the island in my lifetime (at least none like hurricane Charlie or Katrina), the foliage is even more lush and beautiful than it has ever been. Sure, there has been a lot of remodeling and general upgrading of most homes and businesses, but this has only served to make the island more beautiful. Bradenton Beach, in particular, has improved its appearance a great deal, and Bridge Street is looking really good.

My best friend Alex lived on Anna Maria until about 1979. If he came back today to visit, he would feel right at home. Not that much has changed. If you've lived for long in Florida, you'll understand how unusual that is.



Photo: Bowman's Beach on Sanibel Island.

The Beaches of Sanibel and Captiva Islands

Interstate 75 Exit: 131 (Daniel's Parkway)

Nearest mainland city: Fort Myers

Major access roads: Daniel's Parkway, Six-mile Cypress, Summerlin Road

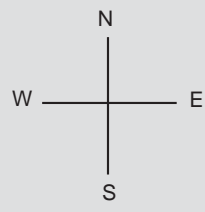
Directions:

The easiest way to get to Sanibel Island by car is to take the Daniel's Parkway exit #131 near Ft. Myers off Interstate 75. Drive west and follow the signs pointing the way to Sanibel and Captiva. The way is clearly marked. Follow Daniel's Parkway to Ben C. Pratt/Six-mile Cypress; continue for several miles to Summerlin Road. Turn left on Summerlin Road (869) which will take you all the way to Sanibel.

To cross the bay to get to Sanibel you first have to pay a toll, which is now \$6.00 for cars. You will then drive across three bridges which hopscotch across San Carlos Bay, and which are now in the process of being replaced by larger spans. As you approach the toll plaza you will notice signs advising you that public beach access is limited on Sanibel. They aren't kidding. Still, if you arrive early enough, you can find some choice parking spots (it's worth it), or if you know where to go (that's why you bought this book!) you can find a spot without wasting your precious time driving around looking like a tourist.

Sanibel and Captiva Islands

(Map is not drawn to scale)
(Do not use for navigation)



As of this writing, the beach parking fees on Sanibel Island and Captiva Island have increased to a whopping \$2.00 per hour, up from the previous 75 cents per hour. I really winced when I discovered this—OUCH! Unfortunately, such is the overall trend with beach parking prices. As far as I can tell, people are just going to pay the money and park anyway. So there should be big increases in parking fee revenue, which I'm sure will be spent on beach maintenance and renourishment. The invisible side effect will be on the types of people who can afford to go to Sanibel and enjoy the beaches. Probably a lot of people from Ft. Myers and the surrounding areas who used to go to Sanibel will no longer make the trip. So the people with more disposable income will pay the money and fill the spaces. And for those out-of-town visitors, the increased parking fees will probably not have much effect. After all, when people are on vacation they spend money more freely than when they are just driving an hour to go to the beach on the weekend. Without passing judgment on those who maintain the beaches on Sanibel and do their best to manage traffic and maintain the beaches in the best interest of the island, it really is a shame that a lot of people will be effectively priced out of enjoying what is really public property. The issue is really more complicated than this I think. The beaches on Sanibel have suffered rather badly from erosion, and beach renourishment is expensive. And now Sanibel and Captiva have the hurricane cleanup to pay for as well. Most likely much of the increased fees will be budgeted for renourishment. It is true that those who use the beaches should help pay for their upkeep. However, other positions can be supported as well. This is not an issue to be debated in this book, so I'll move on.

On certain streets and in certain parking areas you will see signs referring to "A" parking permits, "B" permits, and "C" permits. "A" permits are for residents only. "B" and "C" permits can be purchased at the Sanibel Police Department by non-residents for \$80.00. A holder of a "B" permit can park at certain "permit only" beaches and can also park at some of the public pay lots without having to pay. A "C" permit allows you to park at Algiers Beach/Gulfside City Park, at the boat ramp on the south side of the causeway, or the lot on the north side of the causeway without paying the hourly fees. If you are going to be on Sanibel for a while, a permit might be worth considering. Roadside parking is not allowed on Sanibel or Captiva, except in designated parking areas. Overnight parking is prohibited in all residential or restricted parking areas. Oversized vehicles may park in designated areas at the Tarpon Bay Road beach and at Bowman's beach. Parking on Sanibel is clearly an issue and the Police do enforce the parking rules. Parking on Captiva is even more difficult.

Sanibel and Captiva are the most picturesque islands on the southwest coast of Florida. Their tropical lushness is unequaled on any other barrier island accessible by car. Sanibel, like its neighbor to the north, Pine Island, is a large island--over 15 miles long. It's also rather wide, and its northern coastline facing Pine Island Sound and San Carlos Bay encompasses a vast area of mangrove forest and estuary known as Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge comprises nearly a third of the island.

Sanibel is world-famous for its shells. Why is it any better for finding shells than other Florida beaches? It has to do with Sanibel's physical orientation. Look at the map and notice that most barrier islands on Florida's Gulf Coast have a north-south alignment. Sanibel extends out into the Gulf with an east-west alignment and is the drop off point for shells carried northward by currents. Off the south-facing shore of Sanibel the Gulf floor slopes very gently for many miles out into deeper water, allowing the shells to roll gently onto the beaches, minimizing wear and tear on the shells. Sanibel's beaches have been subject to heavy erosion, so they are constantly monitored, and renourished with new sand when necessary.

Captiva Island, a truly enchanting place, is separated from Sanibel by Blind Pass, which no longer has water flowing through it except during very high tides and storms. The two islands are connected by a bridge. You must drive the length of Sanibel to reach Captiva.

78: TURNER'S BEACH AND BLIND PASS BEACH

Most Romantic Beach

Past Bowman's Beach, about two-and-a-half miles further north on Sanibel-Captiva Road, you will find a small island village and its beach, Turner's Beach. It's located on the south side of Blind Pass. Across the bridge, on the north side of the pass, the beach is called Blind Pass Beach, which is technically on Captiva Island, since Blind Pass is what separates the two islands, or used to separate them. Now the pass has filled in with sand and there is no longer water in the pass. So it's all one beach now. Although there is a pay-and-park lot on each side of the bridge, parking is a problem. There simply isn't nearly enough parking for all who want to come here. So get here very early or you will have to go back to Bowman's beach. Public restrooms are located in the parking lot on the north side of the bridge. The Blind Pass area has an eclectic arrangement of shops, restaurants, and colorful beach cottages on the south side of the pass. No matter where you are in this little village it feels like you're on the beach. Everything is bright and clean and the foliage is green and very tropical. I've heard that some years ago Conde Nast travel magazine rated this as one

of the most romantic beaches. This is true if you are staying in one of the beach cottages. Otherwise, it's a bit of a pain to find parking, and that could get in the way of romance. Still, the fact that this is a little village unto itself, and that there are wonderful beach cottages and no tall condos on the beach, plus you are only a 5 minute drive from Captiva Village, means this is a perfect place for a romantic getaway. As a bonus, one of Sanibel's favorite restaurants, The Lazy Flamingo, is located right at Blind Pass. You could walk from the beach to any restaurant here in 3 minutes.

There is a rock jetty sticking out into the Gulf on the north side of what used to be the pass. On a recent visit, during October, I overheard a man shouting into his cell phone in the parking lot telling someone about the large redfish, Spanish mackerel, and snook he had landed off the jetty that day. So you might want to bring your fishing gear. And don't forget to get a Florida saltwater fishing license.



Photo: Lynn Hall Memorial Park—view from Ft. Myers fishing pier.

The Beaches of
Fort Myers (Best Party Beach)
(Estero Island)

Interstate 75 Exit: 131 (Daniel's Parkway)

Nearest mainland city: Fort Myers

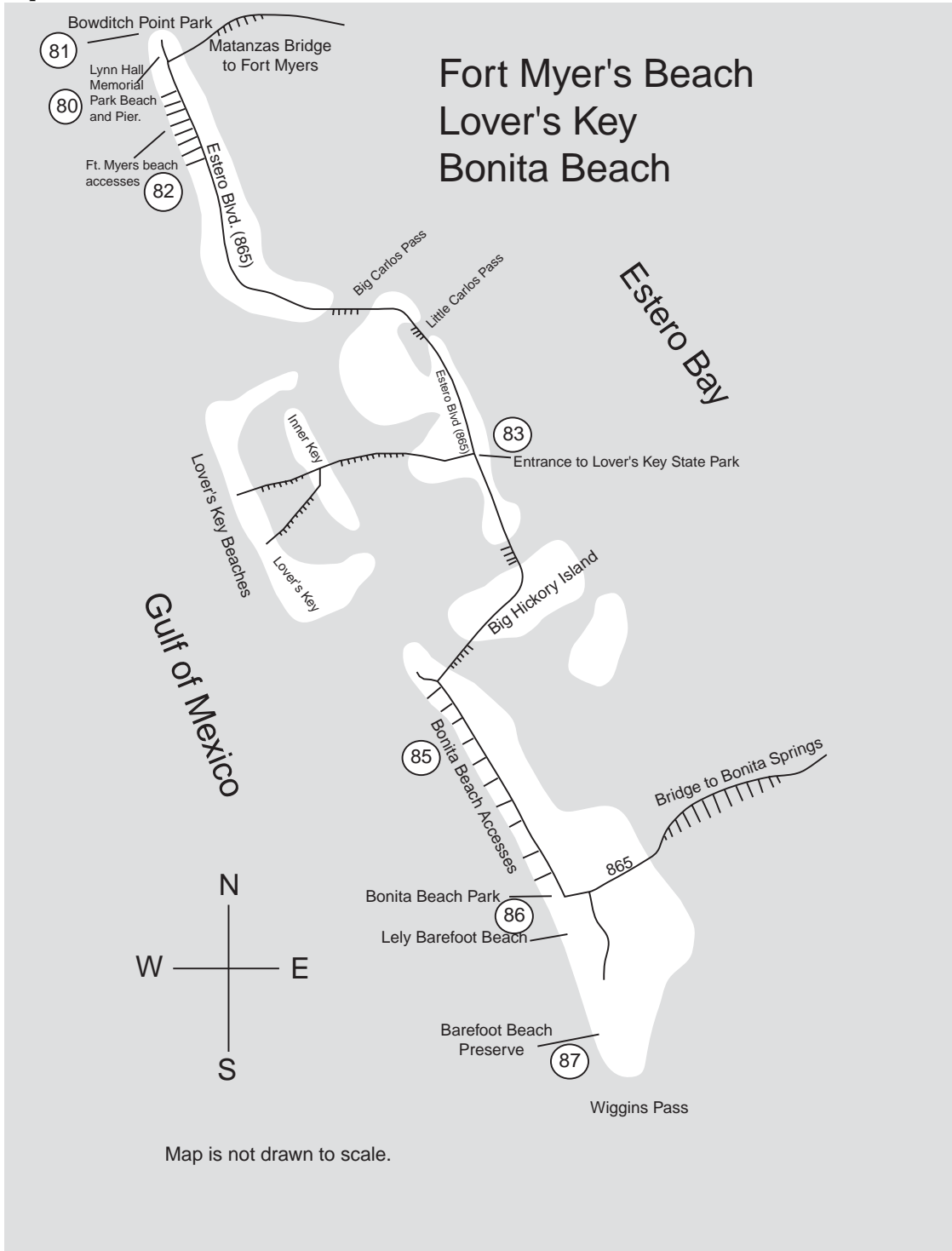
Major access roads: Daniel's Parkway, Six-mile Cypress, Summerlin Road

Directions:

Ft. Myers beach is on Estero Island, a highly developed and overpopulated barrier island to the west of Ft. Myers. To get there from Interstate 75, take exit 131 onto Daniel's Parkway. Follow the signs to Ft. Myers beach. From Daniels Parkway you will turn south on Six-Mile Cypress and follow that to Summerlin Road. Summerlin Road is also the way to Sanibel/Captiva. To get to Ft. Myers Beach on Estero Island, turn left on San Carlos Blvd. After a ten minute drive through a commercial area you will cross the Matanzas Bridge and enter Estero Island.

The Matanzas Bridge is very high to allow large boats to pass under without requiring a draw bridge. The view from the top of the bridge gives you a great opportunity to check out the lay of the land. There is a pedestrian lane on the south side of the bridge, and I highly recommend that you take a stroll to the highest point on the bridge and have a

look around. It's a great place to take a photo. Signs on the bridge warn drivers that they are entering a "congested area." They aren't kidding. On a sunny weekend "congested" is a euphemism. This area at the foot of the Matanzas



Bridge is known as the Times Square area and it is EXTREMELY congested with traffic. People are everywhere; they are shopping, looking for something to eat or drink, going to the beach, or just seeing the sights. Parking is a big problem here. By 9 am on the weekend many of the parking lots are full. The overflow has to park on the mainland under the Matanzas Bridge. From there you can take the trolley to the island, or you can walk over the bridge. It isn't that far, perhaps three-quarters of a mile. If you like walking and don't have too much beach gear, I recommend walking over the bridge and maybe taking the trolley back. The traffic congestion problem causes so much consternation for the local island residents that great effort is being made to reduce the number of visitors bringing cars onto the island. Visitors will be encouraged to park off-island and ride the trolley. So you can expect parking fees to go up considerably during the winter season and on holidays and weekends. To further their chances of succeeding, there will be more trolleys and more publicity in an effort to make the trolley system more convenient to the needs of visitors. I understand there will soon be a place on the trolleys to store beach umbrellas and coolers, and possibly a real-time electronic schedule will be located at the trolley stops so riders will know exactly when the trolley will show up. We can also expect some changes in the way traffic flows through the Times Square area, which currently has to be the most inefficient and road-rage inducing arrangement possible. I can tell you from personal experience that unless you arrive very early on Fort Myers beach, you will definitely spend a lot of time looking for parking, and it probably won't be anywhere near your intended beach destination. Consider parking off-island and using the trolley. Just follow the signs directing you to FREE parking.

Once you are on the island you can walk from the beach to any one of a number of restaurants, many with open air seating, in about one minute. Some of the restaurants near the pier have loud music blaring and a raucous party atmosphere, particularly during the afternoon and evening. Walking along the beach at sunset recently I heard all kinds of music emanating from the many beach bars: Jimmy Buffet, Bobby Darin, Sister Sledge, the theme from Ghostbusters, country, rock, anything goes. If you are in the party mood, this is the place. You can drink till you fall down and few people will notice. While alcohol is not normally allowed on Florida beaches, on Estero Island alcoholic beverages are allowed on the beach in front of hotels that sell alcohol. One evening as I was sitting on the beach taking photos of the sun setting behind the pier, I saw a man in shorts, bare feet, and no shirt, stumbling out of a beach bar onto the sand with a lot of help from his girl. But she was unable to keep the drunken fellow from falling flat on his back in the sand. Finally two more people came out of the bar to assist. He was so trashed that the three of them couldn't hold

him up. All they could do was pick him up out of the sand and let him take a few more steps before falling down again. Fortunately his hotel was only a hundred feet away.

A short distance south of the pier is a large green hotel with an open air bar on the ground floor facing the beach. On a Saturday evening the hotel was full of young people well lubricated with tanning lotion and alcohol. They were on the roof. They were on the balconies. They were in the hallways. They were on the beach. It looked like a frat house party. The movie "Animal House" came to mind. I discovered later that it was the Quality Inn. All I can say is I'm glad I didn't have a room there that night. It wasn't even during spring break for college students. I'll take the quiet tranquil life, thank you. Further south, away from the pier and the commercial district, the beach takes on a personality more to my taste. On a more positive note, the rest of Ft. Myers beach, outside of this party district, is full of sober friendly people with a wide mix of ages and backgrounds. It is not the sterilized rarified air of an exclusive resort island for the rich and not-so-famous, nor is it undeveloped solitude. It is the most thoroughly used and enjoyed island I've seen. It is one of the most affordable islands, and everyone is welcome. I always enjoy coming back here.

About a half-mile south of the pier, Ft. Myers beach has some really beautiful stands of coconut palms. Most of the homes on the beach, until you get to the southern third of the island, are small, older beach cottages. Further south, the condominiums take over and beach access is very difficult unless you are staying in one of the condos. An interesting arrangement can be seen at the Red Coconut RV Resort. It's the only RV resort in southwest Florida to be situated right on the beach. What a great way to spend your vacation at the beach!

An important point I want to make you aware of is that Ft. Myers beach is not really a Gulf beach. It is on San Carlos Bay, which is a very large bay that is open to the Gulf waters. So, you won't be doing any surfing here. The water is too shallow and sheltered to admit swells from the gulf. Also, the bay waters generally do not have the clarity or the beautiful green color of the Gulf beach waters. The beach is very flat, and down near the water the sand is firm enough to ride a bike on. Actually, this is a great beach to go for a bike ride, especially at low tide when a large flat area of sand is exposed.



Photo: A tranquil and scenic crescent shaped beach on northern La Costa Island.

The Beaches of
La Costa Island
(Cayo Costa Island State Park)
Best Camping Beach

Interstate 75 Exit: 161 (Jones Loop Road) or exit 143 (Pine Island Road, SR 78)

Nearest mainland city: Cape Coral

Major access roads: Pine Island Road (SR 78), Stringfellow Road.

Directions:

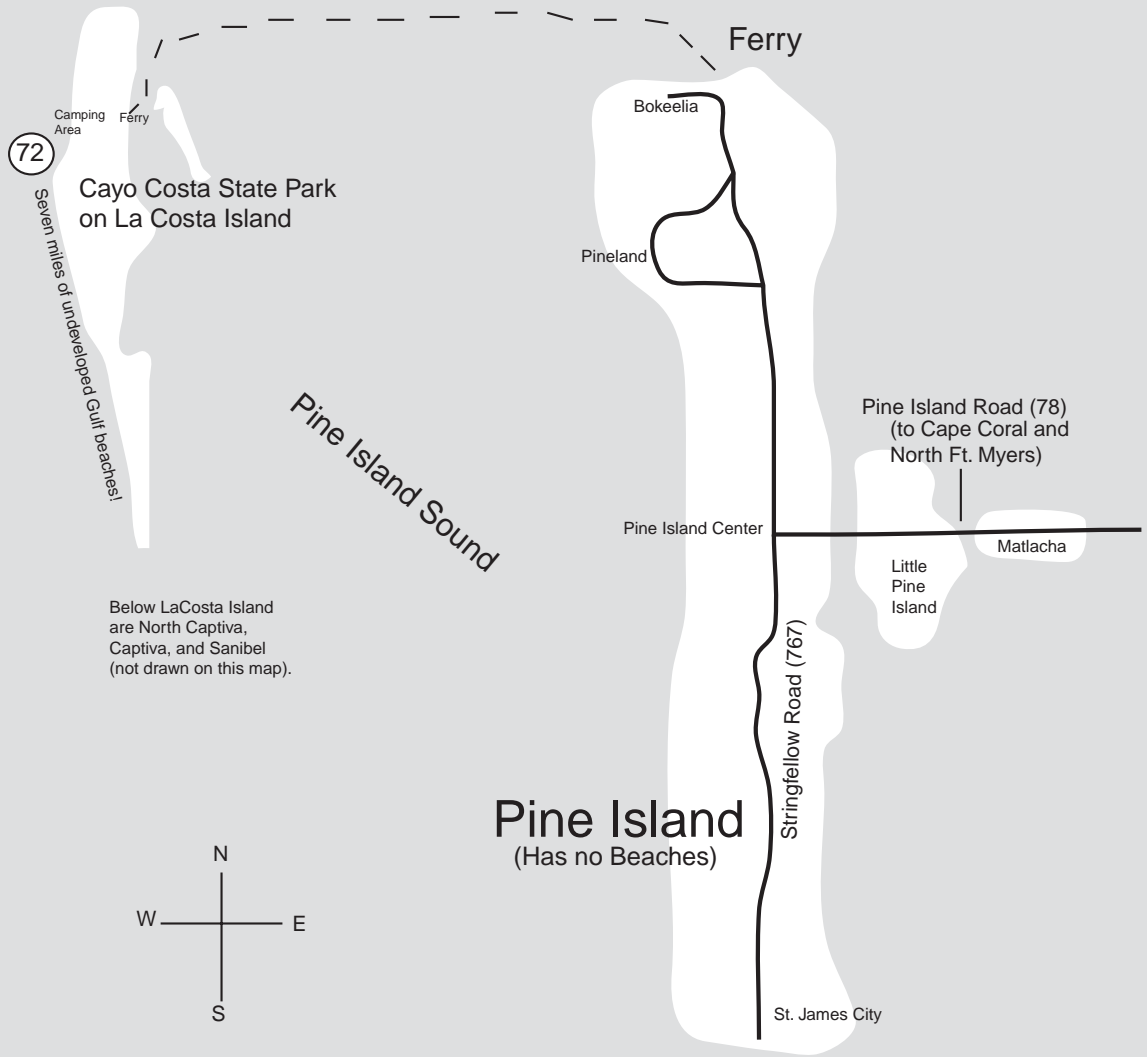
From I-75, take exit 161, North Jones Loop Road, west. Keep driving west and after several miles you will cross railroad tracks, then you will cross US Highway 41 (Tamiami Trail). After you cross US 41, N. Jones Loop Road becomes Burnt Store Road. Follow Burnt Store Road about 20 miles to Pine Island Road (SR 78). Turn right onto Pine Island Road and drive several miles to Pine Island. At the four-way stop turn right onto Stringfellow Road and drive to the marina where the Tropic Star is docked (you'll have to call them to find out 239-283-0015). The Tropic Star will take you to Cayo Costa (more information below). From I-75 you could also take exit 143, Pine Island Road (SR 78), but you have to drive

through more congestion and traffic lights. Using Burnt Store Road will save you about half-an-hour, until the area becomes more developed (and it is well on its way).

La Costa Island (Cayo Costa Island State Park)

Boca Grande Pass

Charlotte Harbor



Cayo Costa State Park
on La Costa Island

72

Seven miles of undeveloped Gulf beaches!

Pine Island Sound

Below La Costa Island
are North Captiva,
Captiva, and Sanibel
(not drawn on this map).

Pine Island
(Has no Beaches)

St. James City

This map not drawn to scale.
Do not use for navigation.

Cayo Costa Island State Park is on La Costa Island, an undeveloped barrier island about seven miles long and one mile wide at its widest point. La Costa Island is between Gasparilla Island and North Captiva Island, and is eight or nine miles west of Pine Island. The only way to reach the island is by boat. If you don't have a boat, there are several services that will take you to Cayo Costa. I have always used Tropic Star Cruises (www.tropicstarcruises.com). They are very friendly, always helpful, and their prices are reasonable. They don't always seem to be very good about keeping their website up-to-date, so be sure to call to verify prices, times, and departure locations. The Tropic Star is the official concessionaire for Cayo Costa State Park, making several trips every day to bring day visitors or campers to the island. They will haul your camping gear and even your kayak to the island and bring you back when you're ready to come home. The Tropic Star was docked at the Pineland Marina until Hurricane Charlie destroyed the Marina. As of this writing they are using the Jug Creek Marina. You will have to call the Tropic Star at 239-283-0015 to make a reservation. Leave a message on their answering machine and they will call you back, usually the following day.

You could also kayak to Cayo Costa from either Pine Island or Gasparilla Island. From Pine Island it would be at least a six-mile trip with plenty of open water. From Gasparilla Island you could launch your kayak at Lighthouse Park on Boca Grande Pass and paddle half-a-mile across the pass to the north tip of Cayo Costa (Quarantine Point).

Upon arrival on the island you have to pay a one dollar per person entry fee per day. If you've arrived at the dock on the bay side of the island, a tractor-drawn tram will carry you and your beach gear about one mile across the island to the Gulf beaches. You will ride through a beautiful oak-palm hammock on your way to the beach. The island today is very much the way it was a hundred years ago. Although it took a fairly heavy beating from Hurricane Charlie in August 2004, it is well on its way to a full recovery. Most of the Australian pines were either blown over or severely damaged. But the State was already in the process of removing exotic plants species from the park, restoring it to its native state. So Charlie helped to expedite the job. Unfortunately, with the Australian pines gone there is not much in the way of shade near the beach, so if you are visiting during warm weather be sure to bring your own shade, such as a large beach umbrella, tarp, or tent. Otherwise it will be one very long and hot day with a guaranteed case of sunburn and dehydration or worse. Do not underestimate the Florida sun.

72: Beaches of La Costa Island Best Camping Beach

There are no specific named beaches on La Costa Island like you would find on most islands. The beach is accessible the entire seven mile length of the island. Unless you have a boat, or are camping and have several days to explore, there is a lot more beach here than you will be able to see in one day. But don't worry; the beach where the tram drops you off is an absolutely gorgeous crescent shaped mile of nearly deserted sand and clean water. As I mentioned, there is no real shade on the beach, but if you walk north for half-a-mile, toward Boca Grande Pass, there are several places where the native cabbage palms provide shady spots above the beach. The beach is steeper than the average Gulf coast beach and the water gets deep fairly quickly. The water here in the spring months is absolutely gorgeous and clear. You just have to see it to appreciate it. The sand is a nice mix of quartz and crushed shell and is has a slightly grey color and is easy to walk on. The island has a reputation for having excellent shelling, but the day I visited few shells were in sight, other than piles of mangled shell refuse. Raccoon tracks are everywhere on the beach and we saw a large hawk perched on a dead tree overlooking the beach. There are feral hogs on the island and alligators in some areas. About mid island, a quarter mile south of the camping area, there is an enclosed shallow salt-water lagoon created by a sand bar or shoal. There is a sign warning against swimming in the lagoon because of alligators. I have also heard that saltwater crocodiles are sometimes seen in the Pine Island area. With that in mind I would be inclined to limit my swimming activities to the Gulf and avoid swimming in the inland ponds and backwaters. Check with a ranger if you are concerned, but don't let it prevent you from coming to enjoy Cayo Costa. Remember that nearly every golf course in Florida has a pond with alligators in it and it doesn't stop the golfers.

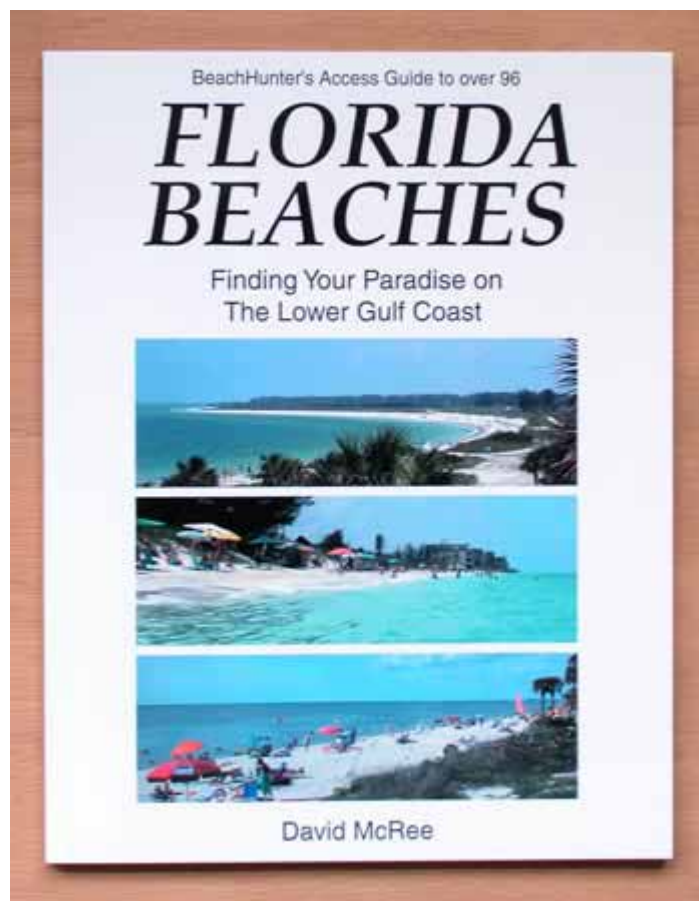
In summary, La Costa Island is the largest undeveloped island on the peninsular Florida Gulf Coast. It has a colorful history, abundant wildlife, great fishing, nature trails for hiking and biking, gorgeous beaches, clean, clear water, and has the best beach camping on the Florida Gulf Coast.



Photo: Primitive beach cabins are for rent in Cayo Costa State Park. Reservations required.

Finding Your Favorite Beaches

Ask anyone who has ever visited the Florida Gulf Coast what his or her favorite beach is, and you'll get as many different answers as there are people. There are so many different beaches on the Florida Gulf Coast that it can be difficult to know which is best for you and your family. Finding a place to park your car and access the beach is another challenge. My book, "Florida Beaches—Finding Your Paradise on the Lower Gulf Coast" provides you with all the information you'll need to find your perfect beach.



I'm a third-generation Florida native and I've visited EVERY Gulf beach from Dunedin to Marco Island. In my 176 page printed book, I've written detailed descriptions of 96 named beaches and have located and identified many hard-to-find beach access points. The book is filled with details on beach access locations and fees, hours of operation, descriptions of facilities, types of sand and other

natural and manmade features, where to swim and where not to swim, where to find a quiet secluded beach, and which beaches have free parking. Even lifelong Florida residents are surprised at the great variety of beaches on the Gulf Coast as they discover new beaches to enjoy.

I also give my opinion on the best beaches for swimming, walking, shelling, birding, camping, finding solitude, people-watching, and snorkeling. 48 black-and-white photographs and 25 maps make locating new beaches simple and easy.

The book is available online at <http://www.beachhunter.net/book.htm>. Ordering only takes a few clicks of the mouse and credit cards are accepted. Secure ordering is provided by PayPal. You do not need a PayPal account to use your credit card.

The price is \$15.00. Priority mail shipping is \$4.05.

The law requires that I add 7% sales tax to books shipped to a Florida address.

This is the most detailed and up-to-date beach guide available for the central and southwest Gulf Coast of Florida.

The book covers the following area beaches:

Honeymoon Island, Caladesi Island, Clearwater Beach, Sand Key, Belleair Beach, Belleair Shore, Indian Rocks Beach, Indian Shores, Redington Shores, N. Redington Beach, Redington Beach, Madeira Beach, Treasure Island, St. Pete Beach, Shell Key, Ft. Desoto Park, Egmont Key, Skyway causeway, Anna Maria, Longboat Key, Lido Key, Siesta Key, Casey Key, Venice, Manasota Key, Little Gasparilla (Palm Island), Gasparilla Island (Boca Grande), LaCosta Island, Sanibel, Captiva, Estero Island (Ft. Myers Beaches), Bonita Beach, Naples, Marco Island.

As you've probably discovered, you can view color photos of the beaches and islands in this book by visiting me on the web at <http://www.beachhunter.net>.

HAPPY BEACHHUNTING!

David McRee