

Lots of family fun and bargains to be found in the slower summer season

By Karen Feldman

Psssst! I'll let you in on a little secret that locals usually keep to themselves: It's a great time to visit the Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, especially if you have kids and enjoy a bargain. While the region is known for its laid-back attitude year-round, summer is even more kicked-back casual, which is a great thing when you're traveling with the younger set.

So while you're soaking up the sun and frolicking in the surf, get some value-added enjoyment with bargain rates at area hotels and some free bonuses for kids plus a few adult discounts worth toasting as well. Here's just a sampling of what's in store:

*At the Blue Coyote Supper Club (bluecoyotesupperclub.com) on Sanibel island, make a reservation for dinner and plan to arrive before sunset. Check in, and you will be served a cool beverage of your choice, then head out for a golf cart cruise of the adjoining Sanibel Island Golf Course, where you and the kids can see loads of birds and perhaps some of the four-legged island residents such as raccoons, otters, possums and perhaps an occasional gator. Once the nature tour is over, head back to the well-appointed club for dinner, where the adults can savor serious cuisine, great wines and cocktails and the kids get coloring books and can choose from items such as burgers, buttered noodles, grilled cheese and, of course, the ubiquitous chicken nuggets.

*The Blue Giraffe (bluegiraffesanibel.com) is a popular Sanibel spot for breakfast, lunch or dinner with a full bar for the adults and a boardwalk where the kids can work off some steam. The kids' menu offers French toast sticks, mini pancakes, eggs and bacon or cereal for breakfast and eight options for lunch including grilled chicken, mac and cheese, pasta and popcorn shrimp. For dessert: how about an ice cream sundae? Adults have a plethora of options including steak and eggs, chicken and biscuits, crab trap omelet and much more.

*For the family on the go, consider grabbing a kid-pleasing meal at Schnapper's Hots (schnappershots.com), where hot dogs, burgers, fries, onion rings, milkshakes and 40 kinds of ice cream have been delighting kids of all ages for close to 20 years.

*The Bubble Room (bubbleroomrestaurant) on Captiva is always a hit with kids. There's a train that runs around the place and the rooms are loaded with kitsch that will keep their attention along with the kids' menu, which offers smaller portions (at mercifully lower prices) and pictures for them to color. The adult menu contains gargantuan servings of whatever you order but make sure to save room for a large piece of red velvet or orange crunch cake which can be packed to go and is big enough to share).

*Bennett's Fresh Roast (bennettsfreshroast) in downtown Fort Myers not only offers freshly roasted coffee and daily made-from-scratch doughnuts (get there early for the best selection), but kids who come in with a parent and read a book (lots of choices supplied at the café) while they are there receive a free doughnut. (One per day while supplies last.) Other options here include strata, breakfast sandwiches, oatmeal, lunch salads, lobster roll, Bennett's doughnut dog, panini, croissant and more.

*Fine Folk Pizza in south Fort Myers features a dizzying array of artisan pizzas of varying sizes. The kid angle here is that pizza acrobats come to your table while you wait for your food and teach the kids how to make a pizza dough.

*Jason's Deli (jasonsdeli.com), with locations in Fort Myers, Cape Coral and Estero, has a wealth of food choices, including multiple soups, a salad bar and a choice of soup and half a sandwich for smaller appetites. Kids love the free soft-serve ice cream. This is an ultra-casual spot where you order at the counter and food is quickly delivered to your table.

For adults only

You might not want to include the kids for every meal. So area restaurants offer some off-season treats for adults, too.

*Harold's Restaurant (haroldscuisine.com), an intimate and excellent farm-to-table in south Fort Myers, has an ever-changing menu because chef/owner Harold Balink relies on seasonal and sustainably sourced ingredients. Hogfish and lionfish can sometimes be found on the menu, along with Jackman Ranch beef, scallops, Buffalo style cauliflower and other inventive fare. The bargains come from the well-chosen wine list, on which bottles are discounted 50 percent during the summer.

*At Bistro 41 (bistro41.com), the popular lunch and dinner spot at Bell Tower Shops in south Fort Myers, bottles of wine priced at \$150 or less are also discounted 50 percent. The restaurant offers salads, soups, sandwiches and meatloaf for lunch, and a broader selection of items, such as paella, diver sea scallops, Caribbean jerk chicken and other international favorites for dinner.

*Angelina's Ristorante has drawn food and wine lovers to Bonita Springs for several years with its superb food – including house-made pasta – and its extensive wine list. Through Sept. 30, all bottles priced at \$175 or lower are 50 percent off, an excellent deal when paired with dinner at this elegant establishment.

*Palladio Trattoria (palladiotrattoria.com), a relative newcomer to the Bonita dining scene, is also an Italian restaurant, offering 50 percent off bottles on its summer wine list on Tuesdays and \$10 off bottles every Wednesday (\$2 off glasses). Chef/owner Emma is also conducting periodic cooking classes. Check the website for the time and topic of the next one.

*At Matanzas on the Bay (matanzasonthebay.com) on Fort Myers Beach, there's a summer prix fixe menu for \$60 per couple available 4:30-7:30 p.m. Sunday through Thursday through October. Share an appetizer (choose from four options), a small house salad for each of you, an entrée for each (from a list of six options) and a dessert to share. Also included in a bottle of Vista Point chardonnay or cabernet or take \$10 off any bottle from the wine list.