



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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What's new from The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

LEE COUNTY, Fla. (U.S.A.) – As visitors begin to plan long-awaited vacations, The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel continues to provide lots of space for social distancing while having fun.

In addition to great, year-round weather, shell-drenched beaches, wildlife and the sparkling Gulf of Mexico, the destination offers lots of new experiences for return guests and first-time visitors. For the latest vacation information, visit FortMyers-Sanibel.com

Plan ahead and save the dates! 7th annual Island Hopper Songwriter Fest

The countdown has started! Returning Sept. 17-26, 2021, the award-winning event will include new artists and events along with favorites from previous shows. The festival takes place over 10 days and offers a range of star-studded performances by some of country music's greatest singer-songwriters from Nashville and beyond. It kicks off on Captiva Island Sept. 17-19; moves to downtown Fort Myers Sept. 20-23; and closes at Fort Myers Beach Sept. 24-26.

Visitors can enjoy more than 80 artists, 100 shows, most of which are free and in small, intimate venues. The event is presented by iHeart Media, Cat Country 107.1, BMI, and The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel. Check out the latest details and begin making plans at island-hopper.fortmyers-sanibel.com

Accommodations news

Luminary Hotel & Co. opens in downtown Fort Myers

On Sept. 23, 2020, the waterfront Luminary Hotel & Co. opened its doors, soaring 12 stories above downtown Fort Myers, Florida, as the area's first hotel in the prestigious Autograph Collection® of Marriott International. The 243-room boutique hotel is home to the signature Silver King Ocean Brasserie and Lobby Bar; Beacon Social Drinkery rooftop lounge; Ella Mae's Diner; Dean Street Coffee Roaster & Retail; The Workshop culinary theater; an indoor and outdoor fitness facility; and a spacious pool area on the fourth floor featuring an event deck overlooking the Caloosahatchee River. Luminary offers 10,000 square feet of adaptable indoor and outdoor function space ideal for a variety of events and meetings and is adjacent to the neighboring Caloosa Sound Convention Center. The hotel also offers convenient access to the

Sanibel & Captiva Islands Fort Myers Beach Fort Myers Bonita Springs Estero Cape Coral Pine Island Boca Grande & Outer Islands North Fort Myers Lehigh Acres

new riverfront Oxbow Bar & Grill, Oxbow Retail & Rentals, and Caloosa Sound Amphitheater, all located on the Caloosahatchee and scheduled to open in 2021. LuminaryHotel.com

More new accommodations

The opening of the 243-room Luminary Hotel & Co. in the River District led the way for a resurgence in area lodging. Other new hotels include a 100-room SpringHill Suites Fort Myers Estero, a 118-suite Home2 Suites by Hilton Fort Myers and an 80-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites Fort Myers Beach-Sanibel Gateway.

Seven more hotels – a total of 789 rooms – throughout Lee County are under construction with plans to open this month through April 2021.

Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village

The \$15 million room renovation at Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village is planned for completion by February 2021. It will include increased room inventory and a new design taking inspiration from the concept of biophilia, a belief that people have an innate need to connect with nature. Each room includes natural materials locally sourced from Florida with soothing fluid patterns related to water and vibrant accents evoking a peaceful ambiance, complementing waterfront views from each guest room. marriott.com/hotels/travel/rswwi-the-westin-cape-coral-resort-at-marina-village

Flight news from Southwest Florida International Airport

For the first time, Alaska Airlines now offers flights to Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW). This opens the West Coast as a new market for the destination with four weekly nonstop flights each to RSW from Los Angeles International and Seattle-Tacoma International.

And for those who want to escape this winter, RSW's other new daily flights by airline, include:

- United - Boston, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, New York-LaGuardia and Pittsburgh
- JetBlue - Cleveland, New York-LaGuardia, Philadelphia and Raleigh/Durham
- Southwest - Houston-Hobby, Louisville and Orlando
- Sun County Airlines - St. Louis and Madison

flylcpa.com

Shellcast podcast celebrates what's special about Southwest Florida

Think of Shellcast as a beach break for your ears. The Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau's new podcast gives listeners a chance to soak up some virtual sun and learn more about our slice of paradise. By downloading the podcast, listeners anywhere in the world can enjoy the sounds of the destination's beaches, nature and interviews with local experts.

The first three Shellcast episodes include some interesting adventures with wildlife: a boat trip and interview with Capt. Brian Holaway of Captain Brian on the Water in search of all things wild; a visit to the 2020 Burrowing Owl Festival and interviews with Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife members; and a walk on a Sanibel beach with the former executive director of The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum.

Episode four asks and answers the question: What would Thomas Edison think about podcasts? Enjoy a visit to Edison and Ford Winter Estates with Mike Cosden, executive vice president of the 20-acre estate located along the scenic Caloosahatchee River. Cosden tells us how Edison's passion for this Southwest Florida city made it a destination for snowbirds and visitors worldwide.

Episodes five through seven take listeners birdwatching with Ranger Toni Westland at Sanibel Island's J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge; a walk on the four-mile, shell covered Indigo Trail; and a preview of WoW (Wildlife on Wheels), the mobile education facility at the Refuge.

Episode 8 offers a look at Everglades Wonder Gardens, an old Florida, original roadside attraction in downtown Bonita Springs. It's a hidden gem. Located on Old 41, it was a popular stop for travelers making their way from Tampa to Miami when it opened in 1936. Eighty-five years later it welcomes about 75,000 visitors annually, still keeping its kitschy-cool vibe.

Shellcast is available on fortmyers-sanibel.com, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, iHeartRadio, Google Podcasts and wherever fine podcasts are downloaded. Follow Shellcast on Instagram [@shellcastthepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/shellcastthepodcast).

Have fun and save with Fort Myers Sun Saver Passport

Sunshine is just one of many reasons to visit Southwest Florida. Use your mobile phone to access exclusive deals and savings on experiences and find yourself exploring everything under the sun here. The Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB) has launched a free mobile savings passport that is available to Lee County locals and visitors. Users have access to exclusive deals on attractions, restaurants and experiences throughout the destination.

To participate:

- Sign up at <https://explore.fortmyers-sanibel.com>
- The pass will be delivered to your mobile phone via text
- Redeem it on your mobile phone at participating businesses

Visit the website for a complete list of attractions, restaurants and experiences.

Current and upcoming events

ArtFest Fort Myers

In its 21st year, ArtFest Fort Myers is scheduled for Feb. 6-7 on the downtown Fort Myers riverfront. It's one of the area's most popular art events with made-in-the-USA originals, including ceramics, jewelry, glass, unique paintings, wearable art and more by 170 artists. Also: visit and shop the artists virtually on ArtFest@Home right from the art festival's main website at ArtFestFortMyers.com

J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge lecture series

The No. 1 spot for birding in America, the refuge is home to more than 245 different species. It's where visitors go to feel close to nature and search for roseate spoonbills. Take a bike, car or

tram ride on Wildlife Drive, a four-mile paved road within the 6,400-acre refuge. It's also home to endangered and threatened mammals, reptiles and plants.

The upcoming season's "Ding" Darling Friday Lecture Series is observing distance protocols by moving to the larger venue of the Sanibel Community House at 2173 Periwinkle Way. The free lectures will occur on five select days throughout the season with one 10 a.m. lecture per day. The 17th annual "Ding" Darling Friday Lecture Series, which runs through March 19, features photographers Clyde and Niki Butcher, Kirk W. Johnson, author of "The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century," and eminent authorities on water conservation, eagles and owls. Check out the full schedule at www.dingdarlingsociety.org/articles/lecture-and-film-series

The shell show must go on!

Presented by the Sanibel-Captiva Shell Club, the 2021 Sanibel Shell Show will be virtual this year. Taking place on the club's YouTube channel from noon to 3 p.m. on March 5-6, the show will feature videos, photo contests, door prizes and more. Check out all the details at sanibelshellclub.com/virtual-2021-sanibel-shell-show

Attractions

Working waterfront tours, Fort Myers Beach

The Ostego Bay Foundation offers three-hour guided, working waterfront tours each Wednesday with a look at the shrimp industry of San Carlos Island, Florida's oldest and largest pink shrimp fishing fleet. The Ostego Bay Foundation has earned the 2020 Trip Advisor's Travelers' Choice Award, representing the top 10 percent of attractions worldwide. Learn about Florida's "Pink Gold" the oldest and largest pink shrimp fishing fleet in Florida. The tour includes a 90-minute guided visit at the foundation's Marine Science Center Museum which contains numerous hands-on exhibits, touch tank, beach exhibit and estuarine aquariums. ostegobay.org/waterfront-tours

Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum opens 'Beyond Shells' on Sanibel Island

Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum's new \$6 million expansion, "Beyond Shells: The Mysterious World of Mollusks," transforms the visitor's experience. It connects them to the little-known live animals that contribute to the ocean's stunning shells and educates visitors about the important role these animals play in our ecosystem.

The bright new space gives visitors the chance to rediscover the museum with 11 aquariums that showcase cold and warm water species, like octopuses, squid and nautilus. Visitors duck into a pop-up bubble for a 360-degree look at mollusks and fish, and immerse their hands in two engaging 15-foot touch-pool experiences.

The expansion comes as the museum celebrates its 25th anniversary on Nov. 18, having welcomed more than 1 million visitors to date. The museum is an integral part of Sanibel Island, which is home to more than 400 species of shells.

To learn more about the shells from our beaches, download the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum app (\$1.99). Snap a photo of your shell and learn what kind it is and all the details about it. shellmuseum.org

Snack House nostalgia at IMAG History and Science Center in Fort Myers

The Snack House, an iconic downtown Fort Myers diner from 1949 to 1993, is back with a nostalgic twist at IMAG History and Science Center in Fort Myers, formerly known as the Imaginarium.

In an effort to recapture the nostalgia, mystique, and excitement of the Snack House, the IMAG, working with [@CarbonPress](#) of Fort Myers, refurbished the original 1950s Snack House sign (which is on permanent display in the museum) and also developed a larger-than-life mural of the Snack House diner counter from an original 1960s photograph of its interior. Bringing back the history of this golden age of dining, the IMAG also features an exhibit of Snack House memorabilia including original menus, news clippings, matchbooks and photographs for our appreciation and reminiscence. theimag.org

Take a ride on a 1927 carousel in North Fort Myers

After a total refurbishment, this 1927 beauty has found a new home and popularity at the **Shell Factory and Nature Park in North Fort Myers**. For \$1 per person, take a ride and enjoy a nostalgic trip to a past era and then go for a bite at Capt'n Fishbone's. shellfactory.com

The Bubble Room Emporium on Captiva Island

Antique exhibits at the Emporium include a working, cast iron shooting gallery from the Oceanside Pier in California from the early 20th century, plus a wooden carousel board hanging above. Visitors to the shop will discover a 1919 fortune teller machine that still works. Highlight: the gas-powered, tether racing car originally purchased for Shirley Temple for her birthday. She drove the vehicle around 20th Century Fox's lot, which a book on display explains. bubbleroomrestaurant.com

Lovers Key State Park

Construction is underway for a Welcome and Discovery Center that is expected to open in spring 2021 and will include an exhibit hall, picnic area and outdoor discovery areas. Set on the banks of an inland waterway, the design pays homage to this beautiful backdrop, with columns designed to model mangrove roots and glass walls that open to large observation decks. It is the perfect setting for listening to music, attending a lecture or to just enjoy the natural beauty of Lovers Key State Park. www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/lovers-key-state-park

Awards

Golden Spoon awards include five area restaurants

We are pleased to see that Florida Trend magazine's best places to dine include six from our area: Angelina's Ristorante in Bonita Springs (Italian), Azure in Fort Myers (French), BLANC in Fort Myers (Contemporary), Ember Korean Steakhouse in Fort Myers (Korean), Harold's Restaurant in Fort Myers, (Continental) and Sweet Melissa's Café on Sanibel Island (Seafood and American).

The Golden Spoon recognizes outstanding fine dining restaurants that have demonstrated consistency in high standards and longevity, usually earned after three years in business or more. www.floridatrend.com/golden-spoons

Forbes magazine names local entrepreneur

Michelle Herrmann of Forbes magazine named Deanna Wallin's Naples Soap Company to its "Holiday Gift Guide 2020: Travel products made by women." The article cites Wallin, a nurse-turned-entrepreneur for her compelling story of making soaps to find a solution for her child's skin condition. The result: a full-line of all-natural bath and body care, all made in the U.S. The shops are located in downtown Fort Myers, Sanibel Island and at Coconut Point.

www.forbes.com/sites/micheleherrmann/2020/11/29/holiday-gift-guide-2020-travel-products-made-by-women/?sh=5fb2a12eda29

Island Hopper and ArtFest named winners

Two Lee County events were named winners in the Florida Festivals & Events Association (FFEA) 2020 SUNsational Awards. The organization recognizes Florida's best and brightest for innovation, individuality and creative collaboration for event production.

Island Hopper Songwriter Fest, received four awards, including first place awards for banners, mobile app and radio coverage. It earned second place for its volunteer program that utilizes hundreds of locals to support this mostly free event each fall. The event returns Sept. 17-26, 2021 on Captiva Island, downtown Fort Myers and Fort Myers Beach. Check out all of the exciting details at island-hopper.fortmyers-sanibel.com

ArtFest Fort Myers won three awards that included crisis communication plan, green program and social media advertising campaign. In its 21st year, ArtFest Fort Myers is scheduled for Feb. 6-7 on the downtown Fort Myers riverfront. It's one of the area's most popular art events with made-in-the-USA originals, including ceramics, jewelry, glass, unique paintings, wearable art and more by 170 artists. Also: visit and shop the artists virtually on ArtFest@Home right from the art festival's main website at ArtFestFortMyers.com

Wine Spectator recognizes 11 area restaurants

Wine Spectator's Restaurant Awards recognize restaurants whose wine lists offer interesting selections, are appropriate to their cuisine and appeal to a wide range of wine lovers. A total of 11 restaurants have been recognized in two prestigious categories.

Award of Excellence went to Charley's Boat House Grill & Wine Bar, Fort Myers Beach; Ruth's Chris Steak House, Estero; Sunshine Seafood Café & Wine Bar, Captiva Island; Sweet Melissa's Café, Sanibel; A Table Apart, Bonita Springs; The Temptation Restaurant, Boca Grande; Terra Nostra Ristorante, Fort Myers; The Pink Elephant, Boca Grande; and Twisted Vine Bistro, Fort Myers. These wine lists offer at least 90 selections, feature a well-chosen assortment of quality producers, along with a thematic match to the menu in both price and style. Whether compact or extensive, focused or diverse, these lists deliver sufficient choice to satisfy discerning wine lovers.

Best of Award of Excellence went to Angelina's Ristorante, Bonita Springs; and The Gasparilla Inn Main Dining Room, Boca Grande. These wine lists display excellent breadth across multiple winegrowing regions and/or significant vertical depth of top producers, along with superior presentation. Typically offering 350 or more selections, the restaurants are destinations for

serious wine lovers, showing a deep commitment to wine, both in the cellar and through their service team. winespectator.com

In the news and accolades

The Weather Channel

On Oct. 1, the destination was featured in a morning broadcast segment with travel expert Laura Begley Bloom that provided helpful information during this time of social distancing: “One of my favorite places is Fort Myers and Sanibel, Florida. The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel are made up of hundreds of barrier and coastal islands where you find 50 miles of white sand beaches. The destination also offers a lot of quaint local cottages that are really great for social distancing. They also have islands with an unusual ordinance called no buildings higher than a palm tree which means you’ll get big open skies and amazing views of the Gulf. Also, almost three quarters of Sanibel is preserved for migrating birds, nesting turtles, and other wildlife, so that means a lot of room for visitors to social distance.” [youtube.com/watch?v=xDY6CFZvyJI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDY6CFZvyJI)

Colorful Matlacha named best small town

Tripsavvy.com gave Matlacha top billing in its list of 10 best small towns in Florida: “An artsy island community, Matlacha (pronounced “matt-la-shay”) is quirky and colorful. Funky art overflows outside the bright-hued buildings off Pine Island Road, the town’s single thoroughfare.” www.tripsavvy.com/best-small-towns-in-florida-5084355

Travel Pulse Short vacations

The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel was included in a Travel Pulse list of 15 short vacation ideas for every region of the United States. “Southwest Florida’s Sanibel Island is only a few hours from Tampa, Orlando and Miami and has something for everyone, from families with small children to couples seeking romance on the Gulf Coast. The island’s famous sunsets and shells are far from the only draw as visitors will discover inviting beachfront resorts, mouthwatering restaurants, art galleries and an array of boutique shops.”

www.travelpulse.com/gallery/destinations/short-trip-vacation-ideas-for-every-region-of-the-us.html

Downtown Fort Myers properties recognized by ConventionSouth magazine

The new Luminary Hotel & Co. and the adjoining Caloosa Sound Convention Center in downtown Fort Myers each recently received a prestigious 2021 Top New or Renovated Meeting Site Award from the publishers and editors of ConventionSouth magazine, a national multimedia resource for planning events in the South. As winners, the two properties are among a list of 59 meeting facilities located across the South to receive the recognition.

The publication says that after a lengthy review of what the two properties have to offer meeting planners and attendees, they felt the properties displayed a superior commitment to providing groups with the top-of-the-line amenities and service that they require. www.luminaryhotel.com

Most romantic places in Florida

Recent recognition of Lovers Key is from Southern Living’s “10 most romantic places in Florida.” southernliving.com/travel/florida/most-romantic-destinations-fl

Travel + Leisure

The publication named its “10 Hidden Attractions in Florida that won’t be too crowded.” On the list: Southwest Florida Ale Trail.

The publication says: “Oregon and Vermont receive a lot of praise as the country’s best destinations for beer lovers, but did you know that there’s a brewery trail in Florida? The Southwest Florida Ale Trail connects breweries across four Florida counties, and it even offers a passport you can have stamped at the 19 participating breweries to win prizes. Many of these breweries are just a short distance from the coast, too, making for a great day of beach and beer.”
travandleisure.com/attractions/top-florida-attractions

Business Insider India, Australia, MSN and News Break

In the article “19 Gorgeous Islands in the U.S. that you can drive to,” the publications included Sanibel Island to the list saying:

“Sanibel Island is quaint, quiet, and serene, as much of it is protected for conservation – it’s home to the 5,200-acre J.N. (“Ding”) Darling National Wildlife Refuge. It’s probably most famous for being one of the best spots in the world for gathering seashells. The barrier island on Florida’s southern Gulf has golf courses and spas galore, as well as beautiful beaches, hiking, and kayaking, like the Great Calusa Blueway, a 190-mile-long canoe and kayak trail.”
businessinsider.in/thelife/news/19-gorgeous-islands-in-the-us-that-you-can-drive-to/slidelist/77694591.cms#slideid=77694662

National Geographic, 10 books that whisk you away to paradise

“Gift from the Sea,” by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, 1955.

“Shells plucked from the beach on Florida’s Captiva Island inspired Lindbergh’s poetic musings on marriage, motherhood, and the simpler living the seaside brings. “I must remember to see with island eyes,” writes the author/aviator (and wife of Charles Lindbergh) while packing her bags to return to real life. This book, celebrating its 65th anniversary this year, is short enough to breeze through in an afternoon. This slim book will transport you to Captiva and island life.
nationalgeographic.com/travel/lists/10-island-adventure-books

Martha Stewart Living

In listing popular dog beaches from all over the U.S., the publication mentions our Dog Beach Park, a Lee County Parks & Recreation site located in Fort Myers Beach. The article says: “Pups can run free from 7 a.m. to dusk at Fort Myers' Dog Beach, in Florida, where you can wash off sandy paws at the doggy showers.”
marthastewart.com/7972217/dog-friendly-beaches-in-united-states

The arts

Art In Flight at Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW)

For the last 15 years, the Alliance for the Arts, a nonprofit visual and performing arts center in the heart of Fort Myers, and the Lee County Port Authority have partnered on *Art In Flight*, which brings art to the public spaces and the millions of travelers at Southwest Florida International Airport.

The current exhibit, Pop of Color, features a diverse collection of 29 artworks that use line, shape, texture and color to amaze the senses. With a varied collection of styles and media, artists on display demonstrate the wide possibilities of abstract art from clean and crisp edges to wild and energetic strokes of paint. Various materials and their textures are explored as well with everything from found objects to sculptural, low relief mixed media. Pop of Color will exhibit now through May 2021. artinlee.org/experience/exhibits/art-in-flight

Alliance ArtsPark, Fort Myers

Alliance for the Arts ArtsPark offers a community hub for discovery and creativity, education and a place where people, art and imagination meet. The project connects neighbors with a new sidewalk, regenerates the land with a beautiful thriving pocket of Florida flowers and at the center of it all, stands a recently installed towering piece of public art, the Caloosahatchee Water Wall, by internationally acclaimed artist Michael Singer.

A depiction of the Caloosahatchee River, the 25-foot sculpture illuminates blooming native vines that climb the Water Wall's textured, gray lattice. With the Caloosahatchee River just ¼ mile away, it's only fitting that art and nature harmoniously coincide. As an outdoor classroom, the Alliance ArtsPark and Water Wall are free and open to the public to explore. The project champions the course of Florida's unique, ecological memoir while celebrating the warmth and energy of the local neighborhood. artinlee.org/experience/artspark

Florida Green Lodging commitment to conservation

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection designates and recognizes lodging facilities that make a commitment to conserve and protect Florida's natural resources through the Florida *Green Lodging* Program. The program's environmental guidelines allow the hospitality industry to evaluate its operations, set goals and take specific actions to continuously improve environmental performance.

The 13 Lee County properties in the program include: Homewood Suites Fort Myers Airport-FGCU, Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village, Holiday Inn Fort Myers Airport at Town Center, Homewood Suites Fort Myers Bell Tower Shops, Mango Street Inn, Cayo Costa State Park, Diamondhead Beach Resort and Spa, Ocean's Reach Condominiums, Sanibel Harbour Marriott Resort and Spa, Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort and Spa and Hyatt Residence Club, Pink Shell Beach Resort & Spa, Crown Plaza Fort Myers at Bell Tower Shops.

floridadep.gov/osi/green-lodging

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Editor's note: The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in Southwest Florida includes Sanibel Island, Captiva Island, Fort Myers Beach, Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Estero, Cape Coral, Pine Island, Boca Grande & Outer Islands, North Fort Myers and Lehigh Acres. For media assistance, visit www.fortmyers-sanibel.com/media-central