

## Get Some Sand In Your Shoes: Sanibel and Captiva Islands

by Kimberly Brock, PassPorter Guest Contributor

It doesn't matter if it's for the first time or the thousandth, crossing the causeway onto Florida's Sanibel and Captiva Islands brings a sense of peace.

With brilliant sun spotlighting breezy palms and lazy waves, the scenery never fails to be spectacular. Birds hover overhead and dolphins break the water's surface while on shore, fishermen cast into the Gulf. Allow yourself to slow down ... breathe the salty air and feel yourself relaxing, your worries slipping away ... now you're ready to truly experience Sanibel and Captiva Islands.

These barrier islands are unique and tranquil. Sitting in the Gulf of Mexico just off the Florida coast, Sanibel is known for its unspoiled beauty, an abundance of seashells and the huge variety of wildlife that calls this island home. It is a beautiful place that is determined to remain that way. Development is strictly controlled - you'll find no high-rises, no stoplights or honking horns, and no fast-food joints here. Wildlife lives at every turn and Sanibel makes a powerful statement by setting aside over 67 percent of the island as protected lands and wildlife preserve. Don't be surprised when traffic stops to let a tortoise cross the street or to watch Bald Eagles soaring overhead.

With its rare east-west orientation, Sanibel is considered to be among the top ten shelling beaches in the world and many people spend their days on the beach. Life may be laid back, but that doesn't mean there is a lack of things to do. Those who like adventure have plenty of opportunity to experience sailing, fishing, kayaking, wave runners, and parasailing. Tennis and golf are other very popular activities. Bring your equipment and you'll have no problem finding a game. Prefer something more sedate? Live theater and music festivals, cultural events, craft fairs and art exhibits are all possibilities ... and don't forget to sample some of the fabulous fresh seafood at one of the many island restaurants.

Connected to Sanibel by a small bridge is Captiva Island, one of the most exclusive islands in North America. So narrow in spots that you can see from the Gulf to the back Bay at the same time, tiny Captiva retains its small-town feel, even amidst enormous wealth and some world-famous residents. Quirky, upscale, charming, and exclusive -- all of these words have been used to describe Captiva, and all are correct.

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A few things define Captiva; the Village area, the ability to walk most everywhere, and amazing sunsets. The Village is a quaint mix of restaurants, shops and homes. It is the heart of the island and a lively place to see and be seen. Services are limited and shops are small, but the basics are available in an upgraded form. You're never more than a five-minute walk to the bay, the beach or a great meal. The island is blessed with several great restaurants ranging from funky family favorites to romantic bistros. All of Captiva's beaches face west. The views as the sun sinks slowly into the Gulf are unforgettable and never fail to draw a crowd. Like Sanibel, water sports here are almost limitless. Nighttime entertainment may mean driving to Sanibel for some events, but there is always live music at the island's restaurants, bistros and lounges, much of it outdoors while diners enjoy an al fresco meal.

For many who visit and live here though, the true nightlife is the symphony of nature -- percussion by the grunt of tree frogs and backbeat courtesy of the waves. It is the sea turtles that labor ashore on warm summer nights to lay their eggs, and the excitement and energy that bursts from those nests a few months later as baby turtles scramble towards the sea. And it's the dazzling sky, untainted by city lights. On a clear night, the moon paints a shimmering path across the Gulf and stars are so thick you can actually see them in layers.

Sanibel and Captiva's wide beaches may be renowned, but they are just the beginning. Here, river otters play, bobcats prowl among the forest trees and manatees poke along bays and into the Gulf. One island gem not to be missed is the J.N. "Ding" Darling Wildlife Refuge, on Sanibel. It is the perfect way to indulge in the nature of the islands. The Refuge, world-famous for its bird-watching opportunities, is more than 6,000 acres of wild lands and waters used by nearly 300 species of birds, more than 50 reptile and amphibian species and more than 30 kinds of mammals. Your chances of catching a glimpse of any number of these animals along the four-mile Wildlife Drive or along various hiking and biking trails are excellent. Visiting during the early morning hours or just before dusk further increase your chances. Before you start down the trail of your choice, spend some time in the Center to learn which animals you are likely to see and where.

The islands offer all of the above and so much more. Follow the paths once walked by Teddy Roosevelt and discover the cottage where Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh lived and where Anne wrote her best-selling book; "Gifts from the Sea". Visit a working lighthouse or a historic village or laugh and join in the fun and antics at the NASCRAB races. Adventure and discovery await you on these inlands.

It is often said, that "Once you get our Island sand in your shoes you'll

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always come back." So what are you waiting for? Sanibel and Captiva Islands; easy to find, and impossible to forget.

*About The Author:* Kimberly Brock has been fortunate enough to be a part of the Islands for over 30 years and they are the only place, other than Disney World, that she would like to be. Kim is actively involved in the web site [BestofSanibelCaptiva.com](http://BestofSanibelCaptiva.com) and its associated Message Board. She would be happy answer any questions about the islands that you may have.

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