



AllWays Traveller

Matlacha and Pine Island, Florida

www.allwaystraveller.com

A brace of reasons why Florida never fails to surprise and delight

While Florida is one of the world's most popular traveller destinations, most of the tourist traffic flows into Orlando.

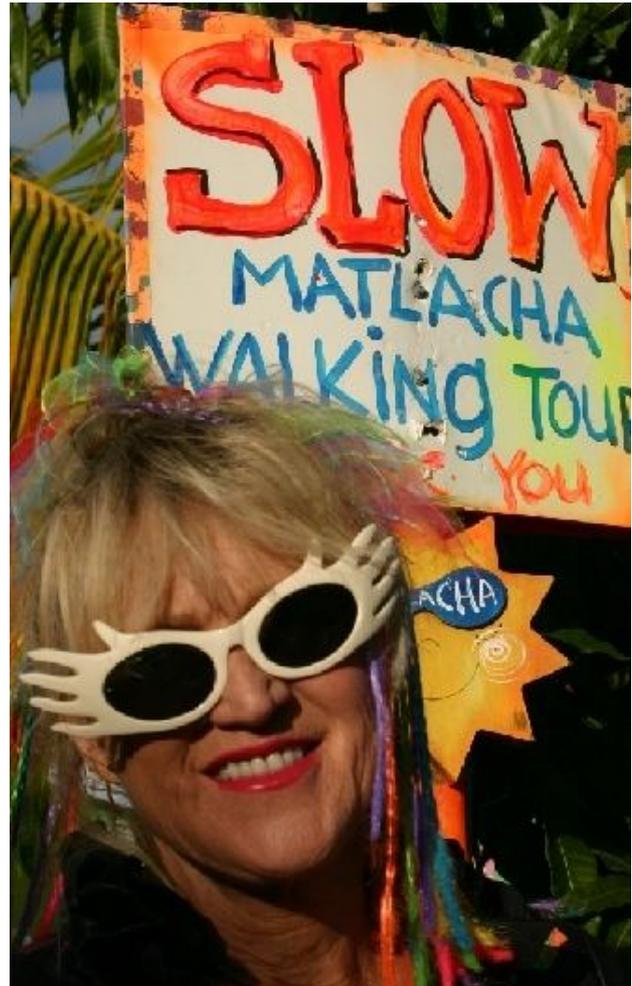
For those who have done - or don't feel like doing - the theme park experience, Florida offers any number of relatively undiscovered nuggets to pan.

Matlacha and Pine Island, are two adjoining, but very different, communities on the Gulf coast of southwest Florida.

A short drive from Fort Myers, they offer a totally different take on the attraction of the Sunshine State.

Ashley Gibbins

Managing editor
AllWays traveller



www.fortmyers-sanibel.com

Matlacha and Pine Island

Matlacha is an old waterfront fishing village that has become an artists community full of colour and character.

The adjoining Pine Island is relaxed and refined and where you will find 'old Floridian' hospitality in abundance amid stunning natural beauty.



Trust me on this one



By Ashley Gibbins

As a travel writer I am fortunate enough to get to go to places that may not, as yet, be the most well trodden of tourist trails.

And yet by doing so I can maybe, just maybe, persuade you to do the same.

This time let me urge you to consider Matlacha and Pine Island.

Although totally different in culture and character these two adjoining places are veritable identical twins in the welcome they extend to the visitor.

For those of you who might be able to spend time in this part of Florida, a two or three night stay on Pine Island sandwiched between time spent in Matlacha comes very highly recommended.

Matlacha - an explosion of colour



You know Matlacha is going to be something special when the explosion of colour hits you on entering the place.

This one time strip of ramshackle fishing shacks is now home to a community of artists and musicians.



Once established the temptation to create something special with the place was just too great.

As a result, everything here is decorated - shops, homes, telegraph poles - you name it.

In an octupuses garden with Leoma

First stop, has to be the Lovegrove Gallery to meet the stunningly flamboyant and outrageously talented Leoma Lovegrove.

With an undoubted, undying love of the Beatles, Leona has turned her waterfront garden into an amazing emporium that plays homage to the Fab Four - with heavy emphasis on their psychedelic period.

In Matlacha

The Perfect Cup

If you are arriving early or before moving out, there is one ritual to enjoy - breakfast at the Perfect Cup, a Matlacha institution.

The place is no frills and does not stand on ceremony. But it roasts its own beans to produce great coffee and the breakfasts are just wonderful.

The crabby big daddy is an omelette with lump blue crab, asparagus and provolone cheese. Say no more.

The Old Fish House



As for lunch or dinner it has to be the Old Fish House run by Lisa Dence.

Old, in this respect, refers to the fishing shack that now houses the restaurant and is littered with seafaring artefacts hanging from the ceilings or nailed to the walls.

The fish it serves to diners, and sells to other restaurants in the area or over the counter, could not be fresher - or finer tasting.

It is caught early morning each day by the crew of a fishing smack that is then docked beside the Old Fish House.

The fresh grouper, snapper, blue and stone crab and mullet is so good, and to the accompaniment of a local fiddle, guitar and banjo combo - is an experience long remembered with great pleasure.

www.oldfishhousemarina.com

A flag waving ambassador



Leoma is also Matlacha's finest flag waving ambassador and its town tour guide.

Her hour long walking tours start with refreshments in the wild, outdoor installation that is her garden.

From then on, it has to be said, there is not a great deal to see in - or indeed to talk about - Matlacha beyond 'artists row'.



There is a small civic park, a waterfront fishing pier, the live bait shop where you can look into tanks of live fishing bait and the fish processing plant at the back of Barnhills seafood store.

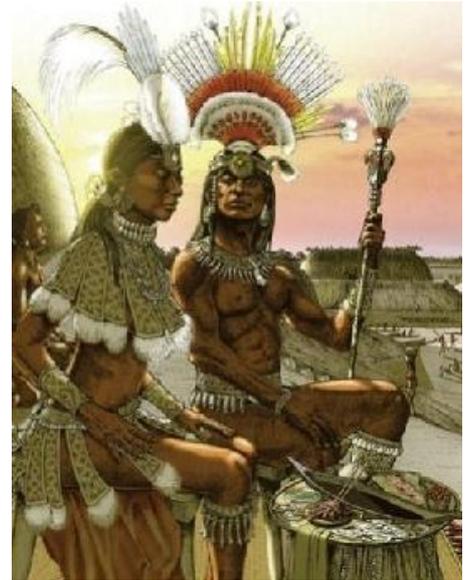
But Leoma turns everything into a veritable fringe theatre performance.



And mere mention of having been on the tour gets you a discount in the dozen or so art galleries, shoe stores and gift shops, which are going to be next on the list.

On Pine Island

The Randal Research Centre



The Randell Research Center is located near several shell mounds which are the remains of a Calusa Indian village that survived here for over 1500 years.

Although little if anything remains of the Calusa people, they are thought to have inhabited Pine Island since about 300AD and had their cultural 'capital' at a mound-site now known as Pineland.

The research center and its visitor facility is dedicated to learning and teaching the archeology, history, and ecology of Southwest Florida and the Calusa people.

There is also a peaceful, and quite poignant, heritage trail.

www.flmnh.ufl.edu/rrc/



On the water

Being surrounded by water on all sides, the calm waters of the Matlacha Pass and Pine Island Sound are just great for all kinds of fishing, boating and nature pursuits.

It is also possible to rent sailboats, motorboats and jet skis for outings in the area.

Pine Island



Pine Island, which is a very short drive away, is different altogether.



This is a long-standing, close knit, island community where everyone knows everyone and where everyone cares about everyone.

That goes for visitors as well. You are made to feel special as soon as you arrive.

Even the local supermarket, a Winn Dixie, gives its produce to the less fortunate as soon as the sell by date passes.

Pine Island residents take pride in living here without fuss - or traffic lights or fast food outlets for that matter.

What Pine Island does have is the chance to get onto the water and explore the many dozens of small mangrove islands in Pine Island Sound and the larger inhabited islands across the Intercoastal Highway.



Fishing, particularly for tarpon, is also real big in the area during the season.

Anglers looking for some saltwater fishing will find barracuda, blacktip sharks, cobia, grouper, redfish, snapper, sea trout and sea bass.

One good thing, the photographs of fishermen and women standing next to hanging carcasses of these magnificent six foot fish are all from many years ago.

Tarpon fishing today, even during the national competitions, is humane with these majestic fish released without being taken from the water.

Sea Kayaking



The area is very popular with sea kayakers and it is possible to rent from the marina or to join a tour that takes in places of interest.

Bird Watching



Pine Island is home to almost 20 nesting sites for the bald eagle, making sighting these birds a fairly frequent occurrence.

Pine Island's relatively remote location makes it a wonderful place to enjoy natural Florida.

Other island birds include the osprey, heron, roseate spoonbill, endangered wood stork, egret, brown and white pelicans, pileated woodpecker, ibis plus the usual array of hawks, owls and songbirds.

And, of course, all manner of sea bird.

Manatees

The waterways around Pine Island also attract manatees, sea otters, sea turtles and dolphins.

www.calusalandtrust.org

A place to stay : Tarpon Lodge

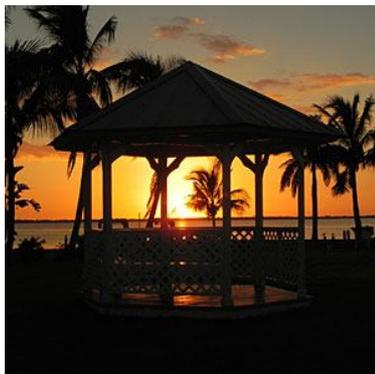


Talking of Tarpon, it's the lodge of the same name that's the place to stay here.

The 1926 property sits at the front of a large area of lawn that drifts gently to the dockside and waterfront. Accommodation can be in the lodge itself or in the adjoining boathouse or cottage.

It is difficult to convey the pleasure of sitting, on a sunny morning, watching an aninga drying its spreading wings a top a nearby mooring post.

A serene experience, with the gentle splash of jumping mullet the only sound to break the silence



Late afternoon and the location provides a ringside seat for those blazing Floridian sunsets.

The restaurant serves excellent lunches, best eaten on the porch, and dinners to Lodge guests, island residents and those arriving to dine by boat.

This combination encourages conversation, particularly during pre or après dinner drinks or coffee at the bar.



Finally, the Lodge is a hub for much of the island's social activity and, if you are lucky enough to coincide a visit with a community gathering there, take the chance to get to know the wonderful residents of Pine Island.

Tarpon Lodge is owned by the Wells family, with eldest son Rob as manager, and they treat guests as friends.

Younger brother Ken manages the family's historic inn and restaurant at Cabbage Key island just 20 minutes by boat. Many visitors split their time between the two.

www.tarponlodge.com and www.cabbagekey.com

Little Pine Island

The uninhabited, 4,700 acre, Little Pine Island is the focus of a major wetland restoration project.

This is removing "exotic" non-native trees such as the Australian pines, the melaleuca (paper trees) and the Brazilian pepper, which have forced out the original native mix of flora and fauna.

The Pine Island Eagle

As a journalist I, perhaps naturally, advise travellers to check out the local newspaper in the areas they visit.

Apart from offering advice on where to go and what's on it also gives a real flavour of the place.

The Pine Island Eagle is a wonderful example of a local newspaper making nothing happening sound really interesting.

www.pineisland-eagle.com

More information

www.fortmyers-sanibel.com

Read also

AllWays Sanibel and Captiva, Florida

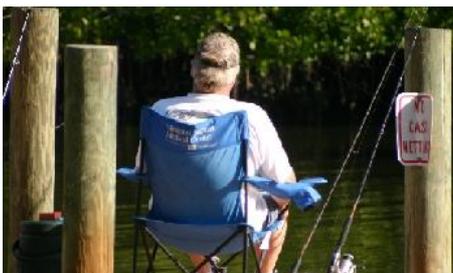
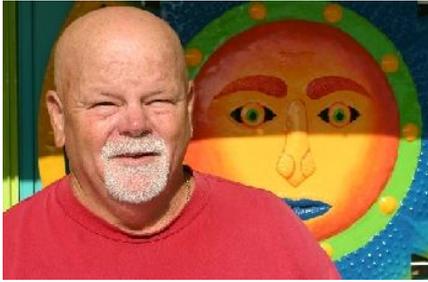
The screenshot shows a travel article layout. At the top is the 'AllWays Traveller' logo. Below it is the title 'Sanibel and Captiva, Florida' and the main headline 'Wave goodbye to the world for a while'. The article text describes a visit to Sanibel and Captiva, mentioning an osprey, cormorants, and gulls. There are several small images: a bicycle parked on a porch, a person sitting on a beach, and a person sitting on a boat. The author's name, Ashley Gibbins, and contact information are listed at the bottom.

As I drove across the causeway from Fort Myers to Sanibel, an osprey soared in front of me, cormorants and gulls were plunging into the waters on either side of me and a more hectic way of life was drifting away.

I was warned I would be 'waving good bye to the world for a while.

www.allwaystraveller.com/AllWaysTravel/index.html

A snapshot of Matlacha and Pine Island



AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance

Ashley Gibbins



AllWays

www.allwaystraveller.com

AllWays traveller provides independent travellers with a view of the world from the journalists in the International Travel Writers Alliance.



The International Travel Writers Alliance

www.itwalliance.com

The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.



Ashley is Chief Executive of the International Travel Writers Alliance and Managing Editor of AllWays traveller