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Unspoiled island sanctuary provides ideal backdrop for family vacations on The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

LEE COUNTY, FL — Endless sandy beaches filled with seashells, blue skies, warm Gulf waters, islands to explore, waterways to paddle, sandcastles to build, wildlife to view in natural habitats. This is just the beginning of a family vacation in Florida's unspoiled island sanctuary: The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel on the southwest coast.

Families are likely to run out of time before running out of things to do! Traditionally, the most popular attractions throughout the area have been its 50 miles of unspoiled beaches, award-winning state parks and wildlife preserves. In addition to observing wildlife, shells and birds along the shores of Sanibel, Captiva, Cayo Costa and other barrier islands, there is much to experience by land and water.

Recent openings

The **Healing Winds Visitor Education Center**, part of a \$2.8 million renovation project at the **Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (C.R.O.W.)** is open to the public on Sanibel Island. This extraordinary 4,800-square-foot center shows the public how injured animals are admitted, diagnosed (by western or eastern methods), how they are cared for and how they are released. Visitors also get to "Be the vet" as they follow the cases of four animals from admission to release back into the wild. C.R.O.W. veterinarians and staff treat more than 200 animal species with 4,000 patients each year. Visit www.crowclinic.org or call 239-472-3644.

Visitors surround themselves with thousands of butterflies at the new eco-attraction, **The Butterfly Estates**. Located in the downtown Fort Myers river district, the attraction includes a botanical garden and butterfly habitat with cascading waterfalls, lush tropical nectar plants and butterflies that delight guests with their astounding beauty. Visit www.thebutterflystates.com or call 239-690-2359 or 877-690-2359.

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Just a few of the most memorable family experiences that are unique to The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel include:

Start a (really great) shell collection

Wandering beautiful beaches in search of sea treasures is a favorite pastime. Before they know it, visitors are doing the “Sanibel Stoop” in search of the area’s most popular shells. Families may take a shelling cruise or charter with a captain who knows where to find the best shells. Another treasure is the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum on Sanibel Island. With ties to the Smithsonian Institution, this museum is a must for shell enthusiasts. Shells from southwest Florida are displayed along with huge and rare specimens from all over the world. The museum also has a prized collection of Sailors’ Valentines. Kids (and their parents) enjoy the popular undersea-inspired interactive children’s section. Visit www.shellmuseum.org.

Island hopping

Explore this tropical paradise by water! Treat the family to a tour of some of the area’s islands. Captiva Cruises (www.captivacruises.com) on Captiva Island takes visitors for lunch and exploring on Useppa and Cabbage Key. The Tropic Star (www.tropicstarcruises.com) on Pine Island has trips to remote Cayo Costa, recently named among the world’s best “hidden beaches” on the online home of the prestigious *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine, Concierge.com. The island is mainly a state park with wide, unspoiled white-sand beaches, rustic cabins and tent campsites, along with outstanding bird and other wildlife to watch. Water taxis are available for island tours and boats are available to rent for those who want a nautical adventure.

Learn about marine habitats

The Sanibel Sea School on Sanibel Island is dedicated to teaching children and adults about marine ecosystems using the setting of the barrier island habitats of Sanibel and Captiva as an opportunity to touch, feel and understand. Through their experience, students gain an intimate perspective of the ocean, its inhabitants and the tightly woven fabric of our global environment. The program includes all the elements of a marine ecosystem: animals, people, plants, land, ocean and weather. Contact the school for information and schedules for adult and children's programs. Visit www.sanibelseaschool.org.

Paddler’s paradise

The Great Calusa Blueway, with nearly 190 miles of clearly marked waterways and trails, provides a chance to explore the area's back bays and estuaries. Here, visitors experience wildlife viewing at its best. Guided tours are available or paddlers may explore on their own as they go through aquatic reserves, wildlife refuges, creeks, bayous, rivers and mangrove forests. Many of the trails follow the course charted some 2,000 years ago by the area's earliest residents, the Calusa Indians. Recognized as among the best U.S. kayaking destinations by both *Paddler* and *Canoe & Kayak* magazines, the waterway provides outings that last a few hours to week-long adventures. To enhance the paddling experience, the trail utilizes Global Positioning

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System (GPS) coordinates. Key points are marked along the trail to aid in navigation and detailed maps are available. Paddlers may stay in a resort along the way or camp at the Koreshan State Historic site, Cayo Costa State Park or Caloosahatchee State park. Bring your own craft or rent from local outfitters. For information, detailed maps and GPS coordinates, visit www.calusablueway.com.

J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge

One of the most popular canoe trails is located at the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island. The more than 6,300-acre refuge was listed among the nation's Top 10 bird watching spots by Dick Hutto, host of the PBS series BirdWatch. Besides exotic birds, other wildlife species may be seen throughout the refuge. Visitors can explore the refuge on foot or bicycle, or by car or canoe. The refuge is open 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Saturday through Thursday, and closed Fridays (to give the wildlife a rest!). Visit www.fws.gov/dingdarling.

Take time for turtles

For visitors lucky enough to be in the area from May to October, there is an opportunity to witness 300-pound nesting loggerhead sea turtles lay about 100 eggs each. The two-inch long hatchlings will make the dangerous journey from their protected underground nests to the Gulf of Mexico. For information on viewing these fascinating and endangered creatures visit www.turtletime.org

Take a tour back in time

Take a step back in time at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates. Tour the 20-acre riverfront estate, complete with laboratory, experimental gardens, rare antique automobiles and other memorabilia from the genius inventor. A delightful blend of scientific fact and personal anecdotes will fascinate children and adults alike. Next door, Henry Ford's winter estate features several antique vehicles on display. Visit www.efwefla.org.

The ultimate sandcastle

The intricate sculptures at the 24th Annual American Sandsculpting Championship Festival in early November, take "playing in the sand" to a whole new level. From nothing more than a beach of sand and 300 gallons of water, about 20 master sculptors erect monuments of elaborate complexity. This popular event attracts more than 65,000 visitors each year and the public is invited to stroll the beach free-of-charge to view this open-air gallery of sand creations that bear little resemblance to those you created as a kid! Visit www.sandsculptingfestival.com.

Helpful tip: Assistance on planning a family vacation may be found at www.fortmyerssanibel.com. Visit "Book Your Trip" to design and reserve your own customized package with flights, lodging, attractions, and rental car or book one of the packages listed. Also check out "Package Offers" for the best rates and values on themed

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packages including seasonal deals. More reasons for families to visit The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel include the following:

Sanibel Island

- The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation offers more than 1,800 acres of wildlife habitat and freshwater wetlands. The facility includes 4-1/2 miles of nature trails, along with a native plant nursery, nature center and gift shop. Visit www.sccf.org.
- The Children's Learning Lab at the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum is a major attraction for visitors of all ages. Features of the learning lab include a variety of touch activities and interactive displays, educational puzzles and games and a live shell tank. Each day on the hour, the museum shows a 30-minute slide program that explores the world of mollusks, discussing their habits and habitats. Visit www.shellmuseum.org.

Captiva Island

- Take a cruise to an island or meet wildlife up close! Captiva Cruises trips to Cabbage Key (think “Cheeseburger in Paradise”), Useppa Island, Boca Grande and Cayo Costa State Park. Special dolphin, wildlife, sunset, shelling and sailing tours are also available. Visit www.captivacruises.com.

Fort Myers Beach

- Eco-attractions on Estero Island include Matanzas Pass Wilderness Preserve with 56 acres of unspoiled live oak hammock and 4,000 feet of mangrove shoreline along Estero Bay, as well as an elevated boardwalk, a canoe landing and viewing deck. The archaeologically significant Mound Key in Estero Bay is accessible only by boat. Visit www.floridastateparks.org.
- Just south of Fort Myers Beach, Lovers Key State Park is one of the area’s most pristine parks. For the price of admission, a beautiful beach, scenic boardwalk, tram tour and picnic areas are available to visitors. The Travel Channel ranked this beautiful park fourth in the state of Florida. Visit www.leeparks.org.
- Ostego Bay Marine Science Center features a touch tank, aquariums and other exhibits that teach the importance of protecting marine ecosystems. Visit www.osteogobay.org.

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Fort Myers

- Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve is a 2,000-acre wetland ecosystem featuring a mile-long boardwalk. Naturalist-led walks and self-guided tours are offered throughout the year. Visit www.leeparks.org/sixmile.
- Manatee Park features three observation decks for viewing the endangered West Indian Manatee in their non-captive aquatic habitat when the Gulf water dips below 70° F, typically from November through March. Visitors also enjoy a butterfly garden, facilities for year-round picnicking, fishing, canoeing and kayaking. Visit www.leeparks.org.
- Manatee and River Tours makes learning about the endangered West Indian Manatee entertaining. Narrated boat tours enable visitors to observe manatees, along with alligators and other wildlife. Check in advance for reservations, as tour times and hours of operation vary. Visit www.manateeandrivertours.com.
- The Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium features three miles of hiking trails and nature exhibits with 100 species ranging from eagles to rattlesnakes. In addition, the facility offers educational programs, lectures, laser light shows, field trips and guided tours throughout the year. Visit www.calusanature.com.
- Baseball is another family favorite in southwest Florida, which hosts spring training for two professional teams March 3-April 2. In Fort Myers, the Minnesota Twins make their home at the Lee County Sports Complex while the Boston Red Sox reside at City of Palms Park. Each spring, fans watch them play in as many as 14 games per stadium. Ticket information is available by calling: 877-RED-SOXX/ www.redsox.com. For Twins' tickets, call 800-33-TWINS/ www.twinsbaseball.com.
- Imaginarium Hands-on Museum and Aquarium is a fun-filled, interactive learning center that encourages visitors of all ages to explore the principles of science, the mysteries of the humanities and the geographical region. Visitors may experience a hurricane-simulator, fossil dig, puppet theatre and a marine touch tank. Visit www.cityftmyers.com/imaginarium.

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North Fort Myers

- Take a ride on the wild side at Babcock Wilderness Adventures. Visitors experience the Telegraph Cypress Swamp and scenic woods on a 90-minute swamp buggy tour. View native wildlife, including panthers, alligators, deer, wild turkey, Florida cracker cattle and boars. Learn about native flora and fauna. Daily tours are available by reservation only. Visit www.babcockwildnesness.com.
- The Shell Factory and Nature Park has something for everyone, including more than 5 million shells and shell-related gifts. Billed as the world's largest collection of rare shells, corals, sponges and fossils, this unique attraction also features an aviary, miniature golf, a video arcade, food court, bumper boats and cars, and souvenirs galore. Visit www.shellfactory.com.

Bonita Springs

- Everglades Wonder Gardens was established in 1936 and is one of the state's earliest wildlife attractions. Highlights are lush tropical tree gardens, wildlife shows, a swinging bridge, exhibits, a natural history museum and gift shop. Native residents include giant alligators, deer, snakes, otters, hawks and bobcats. For details, call 239-992-2591.
- Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary (southeast of Bonita Springs offers an 11,000-acre ancient forest with a 2-1/4-mile boardwalk that meanders through mammoth 500-year-old cypress trees, alligator holes and lakes where colorful wading birds feed. Visit www.corkscrew.audubon.org .

For kids only!

Many area resorts have developed creative programs that let mom and dad schedule play time with and without the kids. Programs provide daytime and evening activities led by qualified counselors that give parents time alone for adult activities. The area has even been recognized as "#1 Beach in the South" in *FamilyFun* magazine's Family-Friendly Travel Awards.

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- **Casa Ybel Resort, Sanibel Island**

Travel and Leisure Family magazine has rated Casa Ybel one of North America's Top 20 Family Resorts. Enveloped by lush tropical landscaping and breathtaking views of the Gulf of Mexico, Casa Ybel Resort is perfect for an extended family vacation. Guests are steps from a 14-mile stretch of pristine, white sand shell studded beach. The beachside, Olympic-size swimming pool is the heart of the resort's year-round outdoor playground. Included among the activities are tennis, biking (23 miles of bike paths), basketball, volleyball, shuffleboard, bocce, boating, fishing, golf privileges and a kiddie pool.

The **Casa Kids Camp** is offered Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. for children ages 4-11. Lunch is included in the camp and there is a theme for each day. The cost is \$45. In addition to the Casa Kids Club, the resort offers activities and crafts for children of all ages and designed for family fun: tie-dye, jewelry making, sand dollar painting and other beach related crafts which range in price from \$5-\$20. For information and reservations, visit www.casaybelresort.com or call 239-472-3145.

- **South Seas Island Resort, Captiva Island**

Located at the northern end of Captiva Island between Pine Island Sound and the Gulf of Mexico, the resort is situated on 330 acres and two-and-a-half miles of shell-laden beaches. This unique setting allows families to experience while relaxing in one of *Parents Magazine's* Top 10 Beach Resorts for Families.

The new H2Whoa! waterslide pool provides plenty of splash with a thrilling 16-foot drop vertical slide and winding corkscrew slide. Teen kayaking and beach volleyball, the new Go! Fish program and Parrot's Games Arcade provide activities for toddlers, 'twens and teens to enjoy.

For ages 4-11, **Tiva Kids Camp** program is offered year-round from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Arts and crafts, games and scavenger hunts are hosted by South Seas' seasoned recreational staff. Cost is \$40 per child including lunch. The new Parent & Child - Art Together program at Tiva Kids Camp provides an opportunity for moms, dads and toddlers to spend time creating treasured souvenirs.

South Seas is offering a Winter Escape Package through March 29, 2010. Receive a \$50 resort credit for every two nights stayed/paid. Credit can be applied toward dining, golf, tennis, spa, water sports, kids clubs and other activities. Plus, kids 10 and under eat breakfast free.

* \$50 resort credit earned for 2-3 night stay

* \$100 resort credit earned for 4-5 night stay

* \$150 resort credit earned for 6-7 night stay

* \$200 resort credit earned for 8+ night stay

For information and reservations, visit www.southseas.com or call 239-472-5111.

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- **Pink Shell Beach Resort & Spa, Fort Myers Beach**

The Pink Shell features a broad range of recreational activities, spacious and luxurious accommodations, beach and pool side dining, meeting facilities and a specialized children's program, **Sparky's Kidds Kampp®**.

The adult-supervised children and youth program is designed to offer fun, kid-friendly activities, while providing parents with free time to enjoy spa treatments, wave runner outings or an afternoon of fishing. Children ages 4-12 are encouraged to participate in activities that include lunch, crafts, beach games, pool games, exploring and more. Kids have the opportunity to learn about the local flora and fauna and scan the shoreline for dolphins. Program is available Tuesday and Wednesday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Saturday 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Cost: \$35 per child per session. For more information and reservations call 239-463-6181 or visit www.pinkshell.com.

- **The Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa, Bonita Springs**

The 454-room, full-service resort offers amenities that allow guests to experience the distinctive surrounding such as eco-tours, fly-fishing, bird watching and a secluded beach island. The resort also features an 18-hole championship golf course, a 19,000-square-foot full-service spa, salon and fitness center, three pools including a 5,000-square-foot lagoon with a 140-foot water slide, hydro-grid tennis facilities, six restaurants and lounges.

At the resort's **Camp Coconut**, kids spend days having fun: going on a shark tooth hunt, contests in the pools, water balloon toss, arts and crafts and so much more. Kids also learn about the flora (plants), fauna (wildlife) and native Calusa Indians who lived in this part of Florida. Kids not only create special memories of their vacation, but parents get to save 50 percent on a second room just for the kids.

For prices, times and reservations, call 239-444-1234 or visit www.coconutpoint.hyatt.com.

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, Lehigh Acres. Family and child images available upon request.*