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Celebrate Valentine's Day 2012: A romantic escape to The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

LEE COUNTY, FL – The sparkling beauty of The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel has all the ingredients for a romantic Valentine's Day getaway on southwest Florida's Gulf Coast. With spectacular sunsets, perfect weather, white sand beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see, sparkling waters and unspoiled natural beauty, the area is as romantic as it gets!

Couples will have an opportunity to renew their vows, sample sweet treats with a "Love" connection, enjoy romantic sunsets on beautiful beaches, paddle the Calusa Blueway and much more in this pristine island sanctuary.

Love renewals for Valentine's Day!

Love is always in the air at **Lovers Key State Park**, but even more so on Valentine's Day. Couples are invited to come to the park for a special wedding vow renewal ceremony at the gazebo on the beach from 4:30 to 7 p.m. Each couple will receive a photo taken at sunset, champagne and sweet treats served to music as everyone enjoys the sunset and a quiet walk on the beach. Pre-registration (\$45 per couple donation) is required by Feb. 6, so that all couples will be entered into a drawing for a Valentine's night stay at nearby Lovers Key Resort (www.loversonkey.com) and a \$75 dining certificate. The drawing will be held on Feb. 7. For details, call 239-765-9482 or visit www.friendsofloversonkey.org.

-MORE-

Valentine's Day Getaways at The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel/Page 2

Lovers Key State Park has been named among the “Top 10 Romantic Retreats” by *Coastal Living* magazine and earned a spot on The Travel Channel’s “Florida’s Top 10 beaches.” Located between Fort Myers Beach and Bonita Beach, Lovers Key was only accessible by boat for many years and legend has it that lovers traveled to the island so they could enjoy its secluded beach. Today, it is one of four barrier islands that make up the state park.

With its pristine beaches and outstanding wildlife viewing, Lovers Key provides couples a true castaway experience. Visitors can ride the trolley or walk the boardwalks over tidal lagoons to a recently renourished, white sand beach. Guests can ride a bike, hike through the woods, see gentle manatees, kayak through inner waters, fish or have a picnic on the beach. With its 2.5 miles of powder white beach along the Gulf of Mexico and its scenic, secluded gazebo perched above the waters, Lovers Key is also a popular wedding destination.

According to *Coastal Living* magazine, it “is popular, but it still offers secluded nooks and stretches of beach where Valentines can get away from it all.”

At **Lovegrove Gallery & Gardens in Matlacha** couples may participate in the 5th Annual Valentine's Day Wedding Vow Renewal on Feb. 14 from at 5-9 p.m. The evening will feature live music and a light show in the tropical botanical gardens. Wedding cake, hors d'oeuvres and a champagne toast are included. Each couple will also receive a hand-painted certificate. Cost for the event is \$75 per couple. For details, visit <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Lovegrove-Gallery-Gardens/136690993041625>. Call 239 283-6453 for reservations.

A romantic Valentine's Day Paddle on the Calusa Blueway

Set out in an easy-to-use tandem kayak for a picnic on a coastal island to celebrate!

-MORE-

Valentine's Day Getaways at The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel/Page 3

The 190-mile Calusa Blueway provides the perfect idea for paddlers looking for a get-away. The trail is not crowded and the area's sugar-sand beaches on barrier islands, such as Sanibel and Captiva, harbor back bays loaded with isolated sandy spots and picturesque mangrove mazes. Two dozen outfitters are in business in Lee County, so it is easy to find a boat that suits your needs and/or hire a guide. For details:

www.calusablueway.com.

Valentine kisses made with "love"

For a "love" connection this holiday, Norman Love Confections in Fort Myers specializes in handmade, all-natural confections that dazzle both the eye and the palate. This year's Valentine delights, the *Love and Kisses collection*, include Blushing Kiss (white chocolate confection with a ganache of cherry, almond and white chocolate), Bubbly Kiss (white chocolate filled with strawberries and champagne), Dreamy Love (milk chocolate shell with peanut butter, marshmallow and milk chocolate filling) and Fiery Love (dark chocolate filled with a Chipotle and dark chocolate ganache).

Don't wait too long for these tempting treats. They are available through Feb. 14 at the Chocolate Salon or may be ordered online. For details: 239-561-7215 or visit www.normanloveconfections.com.

Sweetheart Express

A strolling violinist completes a romantic evening of dinner, show and ride aboard the Murder Mystery Dinner Train in Fort Myers. Celebrate on two romantic nights: Feb 13 and 14 at 6 p.m. Tickets: \$76. For reservations and information, call 239-275-8487, or visit www.semgulf.com

Think romance with a tropical twist

Go island hopping. Kick back. Relax. Fall asleep in a hammock to the rhythm of

-MORE-

Valentine's Day Getaways at The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel/Page 4

island breezes. Indulge in a sunset cocktail. Count the dolphins. Escape to a deserted island. Rent a kayak. Book a romantic dinner cruise. Browse charming boutiques and galleries. Walk on shell covered beaches. Sleep late. Do nothing.

Couples' getaways and vacation packages are available for all interests. Check out a few ways to escape for a romantic vacation:

Leave all your cares behind

Start a shell collection. Relax away the hours. Watch exotic wildlife. Learn why Anne Morrow Lindbergh was inspired to write her best-selling book, *Gift from the Sea*, while visiting **Captiva Island**.

Sleep on an uninhabited island

Book a really rustic cabin or pitch a tent at **Cayo Costa State Park**. Sleep under the stars and walk on unspoiled shell-lined beaches along this deserted island.

Another romantic beach

Many are enthralled by the charms of this area each year and it is no wonder. **Captiva Island** has been ranked as one of the most romantic beaches in the country. Relax in the sun, watch dolphins frolic, and enjoy award-winning sunsets!

Dine in a Victorian mansion

Watch the sun set surrounded by the historic elegance of the award-winning **Thistle Lodge Restaurant** on **Sanibel Island**.

Escape all ties to the mainland!

Let **Captiva Cruises** whisk you away to an outer island for lunch on **Cabbage Key** or **Useppa Island**. Sunset serenade cruises are also available to capture the beautiful Gulf of Mexico sunsets!

For a really romantic evening...

Take a starlight dinner cruise on the 100-foot luxury yacht, the **Sanibel Princess** at **Sanibel Harbour Marriott Resort & Spa**.

Watch the best sunset view

The Mucky Duck at the north end of **Captiva Island** is a favorite with visitors and locals who claim it has the best sunset views in the area. Aside from British dishes like steak and sausage pie and fish 'n' chips, the menu also boasts Florida favorites including grouper sandwiches and Key lime pie.

-MORE-

Valentine's Day Getaways at The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel/Page 5

Paddle on the wild side

Meander through a lush mangrove forest. See white pelicans, roseate spoonbills, manatees, wood storks, bald eagles, ospreys, herons...all in their natural habitat. Many endangered species call this area home.

See the sunrise by kayak

Follow in the wake of early explorers. Take a sunrise paddle. Tunnel through mangroves. Travel through the heart of **Buck Island**, site of an early Calusa Indian fishing village. Watch dolphins play and experience the beauty of natural Florida as your day begins.

It's just silly!

But great fun! Don't miss a dinner at the **Bubble Room** on **Captiva Island**. Electric trains run amok, there are miles of Christmas lights and a tree, 2,000 movie star photos, Superman in a phone booth. Waiters and waitresses are dressed as bubble scouts. There is more, but it has to be seen to be believed. Super-sized portions and huge desserts are legendary.

Indulge

Give yourselves a treat and book a spa package at **Sanibel Harbour Marriott Resort & Spa**. For some real romance, try the **Caloosa Experience**, a couple's favorite.

Mingle with the Vanderbilts

From **Jensens's Marina** on **Captiva Island**, take a water shuttle to picture perfect **Boca Grande**. Pedal down Banyan Street and visit the old **Gasparilla Inn**, a favorite from the Vanderbilts to the Bush family. Have a waterside lunch at **Harpers**. Be sure to visit the historic lighthouse.

Paddle the trails of the Great Calusa Blueway

The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel offer hundreds of paddling opportunities for beginners and experts alike. **The Great Calusa Blueway Paddling Trail** is comprised of 190 miles of marked waterways and trails along the Gulf of Mexico coast. Explore calm waters. See spectacular birding. Experience dolphin in the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve. Take in Mound Key State Archaeological Site, believed to have been the capital of the Calusa Indian nation some 2,000 years ago.

Peek inside two of the area's famous estate homes

Visit the beautiful homes (**Edison & Ford Winter Estates**) of famous next-door neighbors, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. Located on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River in Fort Myers, tour botanical gardens, Edison's laboratory and a museum with the

-MORE-

Valentine's Day Getaways at The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel/Page 6

world's largest collection of his inventions and memorabilia. The Estates are also a popular site for memorable weddings.

Mail a coconut (yes...mail!) with a message back home from the **Lovegrove Gallery & Gardens on Pine Island**. Pick out your favorite message: "We are never coming home!"

Push some pedals!

Rent bikes and explore 23 miles of paved bike paths on **Sanibel Island**. There are even bikes for two! Meander through shopping areas, past beautiful gulf homes, tour through diverse parts of the island. Quaint shops and restaurants provide fun rest stops. Wheelchair bikes are available.

What is a romantic getaway without some shopping?

Stroll along **Captiva's** picture-perfect **Andy Rosse Lane** and its eclectic galleries. Nearby is **Jungle Drums**, "The Ultimate Wildlife Gallery," which showcases works in bronze, glass, clay, mixed media, resin, wood and others. Be sure to check out the hand-painted Adirondack chairs - they'd make a great reminder of Captiva's laid-back lifestyle. And if you seek something unusual, visit the colorful galleries of **Matlacha** and **Pine Island**.

Share a 'Cheeseburger in Paradise'

Head for this beautiful tropical island and leave a dollar at **Cabbage Key's** historic restaurant and inn, where the walls are covered with thousands of signed dollar bills (a tradition that began when a thirsty fisherman left a bill taped to the wall to make sure he would have a cold drink during his next visit). Built atop a Calusa Indian shell mound, the island has cottages for rent, but don't look for telephones or TVs!

For more information on planning a romantic vacation to Florida's unspoiled island sanctuary, visit www.FortMyersSanibel.com.

Editor's Note: Related images are available upon request.