



Island ritual: Watching the sun go down is an Anna Maria tradition. At The Sandbar, whoever guesses the minute the sun sinks wins Champagne.

By Matt May for USA TODAY

The 'Old Florida' feel of Anna Maria Island

By [Kitty Bean Yancey](#), USA TODAY

ANNA MARIA ISLAND, Fla. — "Please be sweet and rinse your feet," hand-painted signs over troughs of water outside rooms at the beachfront, 23-unit Cedar Cove Resort & Cottages gently urge.

Tanned owner Eric Cairns makes his rounds in Jimmy Buffett-style tropical shirts and oversees the resort's "Queen for Your Stay" program, in which the name of a lucky woman staying a week or more is picked from a hat. She gets a crown, massage and other royal perks during her visit.

Down the 7-mile stretch of white sand on the Gulf of Mexico, waves lap and sea oats sway in the dunes. Two bridal parties and a few dozen tourists assemble by The Sandbar lounge/restaurant for Anna Maria's nightly rituals: sunset weddings and guessing which minute the red orb will drop below the horizon. The Sandbar winner typically gets a bottle of Champagne (dessert or T shirts for teetotalers).

Unlike similar sunset celebrations in Florida tourist meccas such as Key West, there are no rowdy crowds, wall-to-wall bars or panhandlers. Also absent on Anna Maria are high-rise condos and chain hotels. You'll have to drive off-island for a McDonald's or Starbucks fix.

"We've been all over Florida, but we love Anna Maria Island because it's so oldy-worldy," says Glynis Bayles of England, who is here with her husband, Robert, a retiree. Europeans and the value-minded favor this getaway, where low-rise is the rule. (Just one condo complex stands more than three stories high, and no more tall buildings are allowed.)

In the age of \$400-a-night beachfront resorts and mondo-condo high rises, it's hard to find an unassuming, wallet-friendly "Old Florida" vacation spot. Anna Maria, an easy drive from Tampa and Sarasota and just north of more developed Longboat Key, is one of few remaining. It's just 7 miles long and has about 8,000 permanent residents.

Those who own the mostly modest cottages or return to stay year after year in no-frills mom-and-pop lodgings (rates at some oceanfront ones start below \$100) include millionaires who love the laid-back, friendly atmosphere. Some live at the ritzier north end of the island, where you might see herons crossing the road undisturbed.

Residents and visitors gather for lattes at Ginny's and Jane E's, a funky cafe/store in a former IGA grocery owned by two sisters. Chatting with a stream of friends at the cash register, co-owner Ginny Dutton, 62, grins from under the brim of her pink baseball cap and explains the eclectic jumble of antiques, purses from Bali and works by local artists. "I have dreams at night about where to place things, and what (color) to paint" the whimsically hued shop.

"There's a spirit here," she says, explaining what made her exit the broadcast ad-sales rat race in New York, Boston, Chicago and L.A. and put down roots here 15 years ago. "I can run a business and look at the Gulf of Mexico and stand on my tippy-toes and see Tampa Bay."

Local historians can't say for sure how the island got its name — one theory is that it was named by a Spanish explorer — but Anna Maria was settled by a homesteader named George Emerson Bean in the late 19th century. Home sites were hacked out of jungle; residents and visitors came by boat until a bridge was built in the 1920s. In later years, communities here had more success than most in Florida in keeping out developers.

The island used to be "blue-hair, and nothing was happening," Dutton says. Now, all ages swarm in, spawning more art galleries, festivals and last year's first bridal fair, where inns, caterers and photographers displayed their wares to woo engaged couples. (The Anna Maria Chamber of Commerce is promoting it as a Florida beach wedding capital and plans another fair Jan. 25).

As for residents, Anna Maria "draws a lot of talented, intelligent people," Dutton says. "It's a very special place. It has got a blessing on it."

On this Friday, a manatee swims lazily at Leffis Key nature preserve at the island's southern tip. A sand-castle-building competition is underway in Bradenton Beach. Near the island's midpoint, a group of white-haired women sit in white plastic chairs at the Cafe on the Beach to share weekly games of contract bridge and conversation.

That night at the Bridgetender Inn and Dockside Bar, a locals' hangout in Anna Maria's Bradenton Beach — the most commercial of three incorporated communities on the island — waitresses call visitors "hon" and "dear," and the couple at the neighboring table starts a conversation while a guitarist plays a white-bread version of reggae star Bob Marley's *Stir It Up*.

"We're very proud of our area," says Barbara Trivoli, a vivacious redhead sipping a Corona Light on the terrace overlooking a marina under a full moon. "We have a very safe environment here." She and her husband, George, a finance professor, live across from the island in Cortez, Fla., and often drive over to eat.

Indeed, the dining is as good as the fishing that lures many visitors. Options range from a simple grouper sandwich for \$8.50 and a \$6.95 pitcher of beer at the old Rod & Reel Pier, where you can cast a line, to the world-class, white-tablecloth Beach Bistro, where chef/owner Sean Murphy stirs up great reviews with a locally adored plum-tomato soup with Maytag blue cheese and risotto with truffle foie gras and mushrooms. He arrived three decades ago, not planning to stay, and he and his wife brought up two kids in a place "where everybody knows your name."

The bistro's clubby lounge, where photos of star patrons such as Robert De Niro and Ed Asner line wood-paneled walls, is a version of TV's *Cheers* bar. Bartender Fred Sullivan, 59, introduces a newcomer to patrons and recommends the succulent "White Castle Slider" — foie gras and prime beef on a sweet garlic bun with Béarnaise sauce. It's an affordable (\$14) option on the \$30-plus entree menu.

Down the bar, retired St. Louis banker Terry Schaeffer, like many here, came down for a vacation, and he and his wife ended up buying a home.

"The natural beauty attracted us, and we fell in love with it," he says. "It's not the land of excitement" — there are some party bars with live bands, such as D. Coy Ducks, but the sidewalks tend to roll up early.

Those expecting vacation manses are surprised. Anna Maria doesn't look fancy. "There's a lot of money here, but it's 'quiet money,'" bartender Sullivan says.

The dearth of gated estates and streets lined with unassuming homes with carports don't signal affluence. A free trolley ferries visitors up and down Gulf Drive. You can lease digs near the beach for \$1,000 a week in high season — especially with more "for rent" signs dotting lawns this year.

At Cedar Cove, most accommodations are Old-Florida simple, clean and comfortable. The Flamingo Suite (\$139-\$220 nightly) features white wicker furniture and a pink, aqua, green and yellow color scheme. Like many Anna Maria lodgings, it has kitchenettes, so visitors save money cooking meals. The kitchen table is hand-painted in a tropical motif; a flamingo-decorated rug brightens up the white tile floor. French doors open to a terrace with a beach view.

Over at the island's upscale family-owned Harrington House B&B, the sign out front beckons: "Come as a guest, leave as a friend." Its bridal suite is decorated in pink and green, with a heart-shaped jetted tub. Harrington's adjoining condo options do include a modern three-bedroom unit with granite-countered kitchen for \$529 a night.

The island, says co-owner Mark Davis, 38, is "a well-kept secret. But "it's a secret we're trying to get out there."

Later, peacefully rocking in an old-fashioned glider on the beach at Cedar Cove watching the sun go down, it's hard to avoid the temptation to keep Anna Maria's low-key attractions under wraps.