

Sanibel and Captiva Islands, Florida

A family-friendly beach-lover's paradise.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

SANIBEL ISLAND, Fla. (Money Magazine) - Suggesting Florida for the family's winter getaway probably won't garner you a reputation as a discriminating traveler -- until, that is, you mention the islands of Sanibel and Captiva.

Located on the Gulf Coast, just 45 minutes from Fort Myers airport via a narrow three-mile causeway, Sanibel and its smaller sister are not unknown -- the islands have long been considered one of the best places in the world for shelling -- but news of their tranquil beauty, pristine white sand beaches and laid-back charm has spread primarily by word of mouth.

Sanibel and Captiva are a beach lover's paradise. And thanks to visionary land-use regulations -- no building along Sanibel's coast can be taller than a palm tree, and half of the land is a federal wildlife reserve -- it might just stay that way.



Together the islands offer 17 miles of public beaches and an endless array of activities. Among the most popular: cruising Sanibel's 26 miles of paved bike paths and J.N. "Ding" Darlings' Wildlife Drive (\$1 per bike, \$5 per car), a five-mile loop that winds through the refuge's 7,000 acres of mangrove forest. You can see more than 50 species of birds in the winter. And there's a new \$3.3 million wildlife education center with interactive exhibits that all but ensures your kids will enjoy learning about what they see.

The islands are also dotted with art galleries and studios that lend themselves to browsing. If you're more interested in trying a new sport, go windsurfing at Causeway Beach, where plenty of shops will rent you a board and provide a quick lesson. Or go deep-sea fishing. Given the variety of packages (available from half-day to whole day, from snapper to tarpon) we recommend you check with the chamber of commerce for a list of operators that will best suit your needs.

Of course, getting on a boat doesn't necessarily mean a fishing expedition. It's also the only way you



can get to Barnacle Phil's, a popular dockside eatery known for delicious conch fritters, fried to perfection. And whatever you do when the sun is high, you'll want to end the day at the Mucky Duck, a favorite for its tropical drinks and first-rate sunset view.

Lodging on the islands runs the gamut from the small, secluded Sea Horse Cottages on Sanibel (three units, from \$145 a night plus tax to \$230), to the South Seas Resort on Captiva (over 600 units, from \$350 a night for a Harborside unit for two to \$1,125 for a Lands End condo for 6, plus 18 tennis courts, four restaurants, 18 pools, two delis and a nine-hole golf course). Tween Waters Inn, also on Captiva, has 20 cottages and 137 units (the Bayside Suites, \$345 a night for a family of four, have full kitchens and screened balconies). If you rent a place with a kitchen, as most visitors do, stop at Jerry's, just over the causeway on Sanibel. Folks in the know say it's the best place to stock up on groceries. ■

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