

WORTH THE TRIP

Anna Maria Island: fun, funky and full of flavor

BY PATRICIA HORWELL

Town Chronicle Correspondent

An island as beautiful as its name suggests, Anna Maria is the perfect day trip destination.

Only about an hour from south Sarasota County, Anna Maria has it all — a rich history, beautiful beaches, panoramic views, fishing, water sports, shopping, theater, restaurants and more. And if you decide to stay longer than a day, the island offers a wide variety of motels, hotels and inns.

Its name comes from Ponce de Leon during his search for the Fountain of Youth. He named it Ana-Maria-Cay in honor of the Virgin Mary and her mother, Anne.

Hollywood visited more than 75 years ago when the 1948 movie, “On an Island with You” — starring Hollywood greats Esther Williams, Cyd Charisse, Peter Lawford and Ricardo Montalban — was filmed here.

Anna Maria is home to three cities: Bradenton Beach, Holmes Beach and Anna Maria, each with its own personality. A free trolley runs the length of the island from 6 a.m.-10:30 p.m. at 20- to 30-minute intervals. Load the myStop app onto your smartphone to access real-time schedules.

All three cities feature recreational and baby supply (highchairs, car seats, cribs, etc.) rentals.

The island is also home to several museums.

The Anna Maria Island Historical Society Museum, 402 Pine Ave., is an old icehouse, built in 1920. In its past lives, it also has been an automotive garage, a sea turtle hatchery and a public administration building. In 1992, the city of Anna Maria leased the building to the historical society for use as a museum.

Learn about the first settlers and the Island’s fishing and baseball history.

Visit the society’s Belle Haven cottage, which was originally built on the City Pier in 1920. It fell into the bay six years later and was pulled from the water to become a family home for almost 50 years. (Waste not, want not.) In 2001, it was moved to the museum grounds to save it from demolition. The cottage is furnished with heirlooms and antiques demonstrating early island life.

Bradenton Beach

Bradenton Beach is home to Coquina Beach, which has a host of services, including a full-service concession stand, plenty of parking, barbecue pits, picnic facilities, a playground, beach volleyball nets, restrooms, showers and lifeguards. The beach is open from 6 a.m.-midnight.

Funky and fun, this colorful community is home to a variety of restaurants, shops and places to stay. The historic Bridge Street Pier is a favorite of locals and visitors. It is at the site of the old wooden bridge that was built in 1921.

The pier is a haven for fishing enthusiasts. And because of the fishing, the pier has plenty of bird visitors.

Several shops line Bridge Street and Anna Maria Oyster Bay is also located there.

Old Florida cottages (many of them painted in pastel colors) mingle with modern architecture, all with a coastal vibe.

Holmes Beach

Holmes Beach is in the middle of the island. It was homesteaded in 1896 by Sam and Anna Cobb. It received its current name after World War II when a

developer named Holmes built the 600-acre community that exists today.

Manatee Public Beach is a popular spot. There’s a playground for the kids, picnic tables and grills, and restrooms and showers. Parasailing, boat and jet ski rentals are available. Anna Maria Island Beach Café, famous for its all-you-can-eat breakfast, features tables right on the beach. It’s open from 8 a.m.-7:30 p.m. and offers a full, casual menu. Grab a burger or a grouper sandwich, a margarita or another alcoholic (or non-alcoholic) beverage, and watch the sunset over the Gulf while listening to live music. It doesn’t get much better than that. Chair and umbrella rentals are also available.

Holmes Beach is home to a variety of restaurants ranging from the casual to the elegant. Art galleries and shops selling souvenirs, jewelry and beachwear dot the area.

It is the largest community on Anna Maria Island with about 5,000 residents.

The city of Anna Maria

Anna Maria city is at the north end of the island. This small city is home to about 2,000 residents. Like the other AMI communities, the city is famous for its beaches, restaurants, hotels and water sports. If you decide not to use the free trolley, consider renting a golf cart from one of the many rental establishments.

The city is home to two Old Florida piers — the Anna Maria City Pier and the Rod and Reel Pier.

The city pier was first used to drop off visitors coming by steamboat from St. Pete and the mainland. Admission is free and there is plenty of parking along South Bay Boulevard.

Visitors can fish, watch the wildlife, view the Sunshine Skyway Bridge in the distance and grab a bite to eat at the pier’s grill. Enjoy live music from 4:30 p.m.

New on the pier is the recently opened Mote Marine Science Education & Outreach Center. Open every day from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., admission is free. Check out the touch tank, aquariums full of fish and hands-on learning activities for both young and old. This is a great place to bring the family.

The Rod and Reel Pier on North Shore Drive, on the far north end of Anna Maria, has been serving local favorites and fish specials since 1947. The newly renovated pier and restaurant is a favorite with tourists and locals. Open from 8 a.m.-9 p.m., the restaurant prepares breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Don’t forget to bring your fishing pole and fish off the pier for a small fee. The pier is worth visiting if only for the spectacular views of the Gulf of Mexico and the Sunshine Skyway Bridge.

You might like to dine in a historic 1920s cottage at The Waterfront Restaurant, across the street from the city pier. It was one of the original homes on Anna Maria Island. The main room is paneled with wood recovered from the inside of an old ship, and has a fireplace made of stone and brick.

Before it was a restaurant, the home was converted into an art gallery in the 1970s. It then became an ice cream parlor until it morphed into a Polynesian-style restaurant serving breakfast and lunch. It has been known as the Waterfront Restaurant since 1999. The restaurant serves lunch and dinner indoors as well as on its open verandas. They’ll even cook up your catch.

Finally, after spending your day ex-



JEANNE SMITH / COURTESY PHOTO

Anna Maria City Pier.



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LEFT: Black grouper sandwich at the Waterfront Restaurant. BELOW LEFT: Felicia Manning, manager, and Erica Echegaray, operations associate, Mote Marine Science Education & Outreach Center. BELOW RIGHT: Replica of a loggerhead skull at Mote Outreach Center.



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Sunset on Anna Maria.

ploring the island, the Anna Maria Bayfront Park, just north of the city pier, is a good place to just relax and take in the views of Tampa Bay, the Skyway and Egmont Key. Grills, a pavilion, restrooms and showers are open to the public. 🍷

Links for more information

- www.thewaterfrontrestaurant.net
- www.amih.org
- www.annamariaisland.com
- www.annamariaislandchamber.org
- www.visitflorida.com/places-to-go/southwest/anna-maria-island
- www.mote.org