

Life at the Sensational Seaside

Leisurely Living at the Beach and Beyond

From sea breezes to superior shopping, the greater Sarasota area's location and attractions draw tourists as well as those searching for a life of ease.

Sarasota is not just a coastal county, but a land of world-class beaches. In 2011, Dr. Stephen Leatherman (frequently called "Dr. Beach") named Siesta Key Beach No. 1 on his annual "America's Best Beach" list. Beating out iconic locations in Oahu, the Outer Banks of North Carolina and California, Siesta Key Beach offers the "finest and whitest sand in the world," according to Dr. Beach's website.

"Sarasota County has a variety of beaches, especially since we have a lot of barrier islands, but each one is known for something different," says Erin Duggan, director of communications for Visit Sarasota County. "Siesta Key Beach is our most popular, [with] sugar-white and baby powder-fine sand, which is also 99

percent quartz and always cool to the touch. It would never burn the bottom of your feet."

While the sand is the main draw, the park at Siesta Key Beach features showers, bathrooms, snack bars and large parking areas. The beach is also a smoking-free area, earning it extra points



Photo courtesy of Visit Sarasota

Families have fun in the surf and sun.



Photo courtesy of Visit Sarasota

Kids play on Siesta Key Beach, named the No. 1 beach in the country by Dr. Beach. in terms of cleanliness and environmental management.

Two other excellent beaches in the region, both perhaps below the radar in terms of crowds, are Venice Municipal Beach and Caspersen Beach. They are perfect places to search for pre-



Photo by Rob Welling/Bluescape Creative

Bridges span the Sarasota region, connecting residential and commercial areas with beaches and the gulf.


historic sharks' teeth and other fossilized materials. Venice Beach, particularly, is also known for the snorkeling and diving at its incredible coral reef a quarter mile offshore.

Nearby Lido Beach not only has its own version of white


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Brian D Kolba, LUTCF
941-341-9229
 7259 Bee Ridge Road
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sands and clear waters, it is also the gateway to St. Armands Circle. Located on a small island, the shopping megaplex is removed from the bustle of the mainland by two bridges and comes complete with more than 130 stores and restaurants.

St. Armands Circle's history is directly tied to circus magnate John Ringling, who originally designed the circular layout of residential lots and the shopping center. In 1925, Ringling used circus elephants to haul timbers for the construction of the first bridge and causeway to the island.

"St. Armands is our little Rodeo Drive," says Duggan. "My favorite thing to do there is simply window shop."

From chain stores to mom-and-pop shops, from pizza-by-the-slice to gourmet five-course dinners, the district evokes a European-style shopping experience.

The Sarasota region should not be overlooked as a great

family getaway. It was recently named the No. 1 destination for a family spring break vacation by *Livability.com*. The city and its environs offered the widest range of indoor and outdoor activities for people of all ages, according to members of the Society of American Travel Writers, who made the selections for the website.

"In Sarasota County, we're unique in that we have no toll roads, no toll bridges and no pay-to-park, so everything is accessible," says Duggan. "And what lends us to be a top family-friendly destination is that, yes we have beaches, but we have so much more, from an incredible culinary scene to unique shopping districts."

Whether the goal of anyone's vacation is utter relaxation or constant stimulation, Sarasota offers these and everything in between. ■ *By Ryan Newhouse*



Photo by Rob Welling/Bluescape Creative

With the temperate regional climate, visitors and residents can dine al fresco virtually year-round.