

TOP 7 ECOTOURISM ATTRACTIONS ON SANIBEL ISLAND

A Modern City With So Much History

BY BRET LOVE

PHOTOS BY BRET LOVE & MARY GABBETT

WE'VE BEEN PROGRAMMED TO THINK that we have to travel far away from home to "get away from it all." But for nearly 20 years now I've been spending a week every year on Sanibel Island, an ecotourism haven off the coast of Ft Myers, Florida (an 8-hour drive from Atlanta, or an hour-long flight). With 2/3 of its total area devoted to wildlife preserves, Sanibel has become a Mecca for birdwatchers, wildlife enthusiasts, kayakers, hikers, seashell collectors and fishermen alike. With Island Vacations of Sanibel & Captiva (www.sanibelislandvacations.com) graciously providing a condo at Villa Sanibel with a spectacular ocean view, we set out this year to explore the coolest activities the island has to offer. Here are a few favorites:

EXPLORE THE J.N. DING DARLING NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

One of the things we love most about Sanibel Island is the fact that over a third of its land is set aside for the J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge (www.fws.gov/dingdarling). The refuge can often get a little hot and crowded during the day, but its five mile road makes for a gorgeous sunset drive, walk or bike ride, filled with all manner of raccoons, lizards, alligators, butterflies, turtles and crabs. The refuge's mangrove estuary also provides a safe haven for a vast array of shorebirds and birds of prey, including great blue herons, snowy egrets, white ibis, pelicans, osprey and, our favorite, the roseate spoonbill. Time it just right and you can catch them feeding in the shallows at the golden hour, as the sunset reflected on the water and the silhouettes of palm trees against the multi-hued sky creates a picture postcard-worthy view. Word to the wise: Wear bug spray!

GO ON A DOLPHIN CRUISE

We love dolphins, and one of our favorite things about Sanibel Island is how frequently you can spot Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins there. Many days you can see them swimming just off the shore, feeding on schools of fish in the glistening light of the early morning sun. But one of our favorite activities is taking the sunset Dolphin Cruise offered by Captiva Cruises (www.captivacruises.com), which never fails to provide entertaining views of our fine-flipped friends in the wild (they have a 95% success rate). Our latest trip produced some of our best video footage to date, as a small pod of dolphins swam and leapt in the wake of our boat for nearly five minutes. No matter how cool you think you are, the sight of dolphins frolicking in the waves is sure to reduce you to child-like "Oooohs!" and "Aaaaahs!"

KAYAK TARPON BAY

It's very rare that we visit Sanibel and do not rent a canoe or kayak from Tarpon Bay Explorers (www.tarponbayexplorers.com) to explore the tranquil waters around Ding Darling. Paddling through the mangrove forests along the Commodore Creek water trail, you'll understand immediately why Sanibel has been named one of the Top 10 Kayaking Locations in North America by Paddler and Canoe & Kayak magazines. Anhingas, herons, cormorants, ibis, egrets and roseate spoonbills can often be found sunning themselves in the mangroves as osprey hunt for meals from above. Dolphins and even the occasional manatee have been spotted in the bay at high tide, and the still waters make for amazing photographs of the mangrove reflections. Due to the extreme midday heat, we find morning excursions to be the best.

LEARN ABOUT WILDLIFE AT THE SANIBEL-CAPTIVA CONSERVATION FOUNDATION NATURE CENTER

One of the largest and oldest organizations involved in the

preservation of the island's precious natural resources, the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (www.sccf.org) owns approximately 1,800 acres that have been set aside as wildlife preserves, including a recently-purchased 28.3-acre homestead formerly owned by island legend Francis Bailey. Their Nature Center encompasses 260 acres, on which visitors can walk 4.5 miles of hiking trails, climb an observation tower, see a beautiful butterfly exhibit and get hands-on with a live marine touch tank. The Foundation is heavily focused on estuarine research, and offers guided trail tours, shoreline discovery walks (where you can see the protected sea turtle and snowy plover nesting grounds) and other highly interactive educational programs as well.

STUDY MARINE CONSERVATION WITH SANIBEL SEA SCHOOL

Sanibel Sea School (www.sanibelseaschool.org) is a relatively new organization devoted to teaching kids and adults alike about marine conservation. Founded by J. Bruce Neill, who has a PhD in conservation biology, and his wife Evelyn, the school offers excellent half-day, full-day and week-long programs that give visitors an immersive, interactive exploration of Sanibel's abundant marine life. My daughter Alexandra had a blast, learning why the island is one of the world's best shelling beaches and getting up close 'n' personal with some of its most intriguing inhabitants, including the endangered snowy plover, sand dollars, bivalves, fighting conchs and a broad variety of fish. It was definitely one of our favorite experiences during our trip to Sanibel.

TALK TO (AND ABOUT) THE ANIMALS AT C.R.O.W.

In the nearly 20 years I've been going to Sanibel Island, I've seen the Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (www.crowclinic.org) grow from a quaint little rehab facility into a multi-million dollar tourist attraction. Originally founded by a small group of volunteers in 1968, in recent years CROW has expanded to include the state of the art 4800-square foot Healing Winds Visitor Education Center, a 4800-square foot veterinary hospital and a 3700-square foot George E. Batchelor Student Housing Complex to accommodate its growing staff of student volunteers. The facility treats over 4,000 injured animals representing more than 200 different species every year, from raccoons and otters to shore birds and sea turtles. On our recent visit to the island, we were fortunate to get a behind-the-scenes tour with Executive Director Steve Greenstein, who got us up close 'n' personal with CROW's exceptional staff and a few of their adorable patients, including orphaned rabbits, injured turtles and the cutest baby raccoon you've ever seen.

VISIT THE OUTER ISLANDS

As much as we love Sanibel, we also enjoy the more remote islands off the coast of Ft. Myers, especially Cayo Costa State Park (www.floridastateparks.org/cayocosta). Various companies offer private guides and group tours to the 2,426-acre park, but this year we treated ourselves with a ½-day boat rental and headed out to Cayo Costa on our own. The 30-minute ride to the barrier island is perfectly picturesque, passing North Captiva Island and Pine Island, with over a dozen dolphins swimming and diving in our wake along the way. Sanibel is ranked among the world's top shelling beaches, but Cayo Costa is arguably even better, with spectacular fighting conchs, olive shells, sand dollars and more. But be sure to wear water shoes (I can tell you from experience that stepping on the business end of a lightning whelk is no fun), and under no circumstances should you ever take any live shell from the water, as it is illegal and comes with a \$500 fine. Fortunately, there are millions of perfectly legal shells just waiting for lucky collectors to find them!

