

# IslandNews

## Hundreds say 'I do' to festival

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Last Sunday was a great day to think about weddings on an Island that is billing itself as the wedding capital of the world.

The streets were filled with people who had weddings on their mind, whether as future participants or as wedding providers, in the inaugural Anna Maria Island Wedding Festival hosted by the Anna Maria Island Wedding Merchants and the Island Chamber of Commerce.

Caryn Hodge, marketing director of the Chiles Group, estimated as many as 400 people strolled and drove among the 14 different locations in all three cities. More than 40 merchants participated.

"It was way beyond my expectations," said Ed Chiles, head of The Chiles Group and a big backer of the event. "The Wedding Merchants Association is a very strong group of people."

The festival was organized to perpetuate the reputation for being a perfect setting for weddings that Anna Maria Island has earned over the years. Many couples have exchanged their vows on the beach with receptions at an Island restaurant. The wedding merchants have been promoting the Island as the "wedding capital of the world."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CARYN HODGE  
Samantha Rudek won the grand prize, the Island Dream Wedding Package with all the amenities to plan her Island dream wedding.

"Everyone I talked to was very happy," Hodge said. "It was unique in that it was all about the senses. They could smell the flowers, see the locations and touch the fabrics."

Chiles said that the participating merchants were happy.

"Many of them said they made some sales," he said. "We booked several weddings during the festival."

The festival included sample wedding cakes, a fashion show and a mock wedding. It concluded with a sunset celebration at the Sandbar restaurant where a winner was chosen for a free wedding package and other prizes worth a total of \$15,000.

"We had people come from as far away as the United Kingdom, but most came from Manatee and Sarasota counties and the Tampa Bay area," Hodge said.



A highlight of the Island Wedding festival was a mock wedding at the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce showing everything needed for that special day.