

# A Hidden Island (That's Easy to Find)

*Anna Maria on Florida's West Coast promises a sunny escape for the winter weary.*

**By Suzanne Loudermilk | Baltimore Magazine**

Definitely come here for the sunsets, but plan to stay for the sunrises, too. Anna Maria Island—a wisp of a seven-mile island along Florida's West Coast—is a place that revels in the end of day. As the sun slips spectacularly past the horizon, bongos clang, music plays, cameras click, and viewers try to guess the exact time of daylight's finale. Yes, it's a nightly celebration not to be missed, but come morning, visitors still will find plenty to do until the evening ritual starts anew.

Just an hour's drive from Tampa, the mostly unknown strip of paradise beckons to those who want to relax and hide out—as many celebs do. You're likely to see Stephen King, Jerry Springer, tennis diva Maria Sharapova, Moody Blues' Graeme Edge, or Jimmy Van Zandt strolling along the beach or in one of the shops or restaurants. But for the rest of us who don't have to worry about the paparazzi, the island offers laid-back, luxurious accommodations and sensuous beaches in a tropical setting.

For those lucky enough to be heading to this year's Super Bowl on Feb. 1 in Tampa, a visit to the island—made up of three towns: Bradenton Beach, Holmes Beach, and Anna Maria—can provide a respite from the screaming fans, T-shirt hawkers, and dueling teams. Or, for those simply seeking a diversion from Baltimore's grey skies and leafless trees, it's a direct, 2 1/4-hour flight from BWI (look for special deals from Southwest and Air Tran) to the Tampa or Sarasota/Bradenton airports to soak up azure waters, sunny skies, and a profusion of swaying palm trees and exotic flowers.

You're not just locked into beach life here, either. There are myriad activities in the Tampa Bay area—from state parks to museums to luxe shopping—within easy driving distance. But if setting up the beach chair turns out to be the most strenuous exercise you do, don't feel guilty. It means you've succumbed to island life—just like the locals have been doing since Spanish explorers discovered the spot around 1530. You can't fight history here.

## **When it's time to eat**

Why is it that a day spent lounging on the beach creates such a hunger? There are several places on the island to sate your appetite. Dress is super beach casual, except at the upscale Beach Bistro, where the exquisite food is worth the fuss of wearing your good Hawaiian shirt or sundress.

### **Beach Bistro, 6600 Gulf Dr., Holmes Beach, 941-778-6444.**

Think of the award-winning Beach Bistro as the West Coast's answer to Baltimore's Charleston restaurant. Owner Sean Murphy works as tirelessly as Cindy Wolf and Tony Foreman to promote this 23-year-old beach mainstay for elegant parties and celebrations. And it's a winner with an emphasis on local, seasonal foods and a masterful combination of ingredients—from the lobstercargots to rack of domestic lamb. Of course, there's a dining room with a breathtaking view of The Gulf. Gourmet magazine calls it one of the most romantic restaurants in America.

*Insider's tip: If you want to skip the pageantry of fine dining, head to the bar and be treated to a deluxe burger or grouper sandwich and the ministrations of knowledgeable mixologists. Locals love it here.*

### **Gulf Drive Cafe, 900 Gulf Dr. N., Bradenton Beach, 941-778-1919.**

This is the go-to place on the island for breakfast. (It's also open for lunch and dinner.) The line of hungry morning risers often stretches around the building on weekends, seeking a seat on the outdoor, covered terrace overlooking The Gulf. It's worth the wait for fluffy omelets (there's even a red-snapper one) with grits, plump waffles with berries, or fresh-from-the-oven muffins. The cheerful servers constantly refill your coffee without even a thirsty nod from you.

*Insider's tip: Head inside the restaurant, where most of the locals know they'll get a table quicker and be able to savor air conditioning. You might not have the view, but you'll have the rest of the day to stare dreamily at the turquoise water.*

### **Sandbar, 100 Spring Ave., Anna Maria, 941-778-0444.**

It's a great spot for lunch or dinner, but this food shanty on the northern tip of the island is also the perfect place for happy hour (which, actually, is all day long around here). Grab a table in the sand and let your bare feet dig into the granules with pleasure. The Gulf view is wonderfully restorative.

*Insider's tip: Order the spinach-artichoke dip and peel-and-eat shrimp along with a biting cold Red Stripe, and you'll truly never want to go home again.*