

## AMI weddings boost tourism

by Rick Catlin

Islander Newspaper 8-12-09

Anna Maria Island's wedding industry has grown from about 50 weddings a year five years ago to nearly 1,000 in 2008.

And a large number of the members of wedding parties return to the Island as vacationers, said Caryn Hodge, marketing director for the Sandbar Restaurant in Anna Maria.

"Many of them who are visiting the Island for the first time with a wedding party say they're coming back for a vacation. This is the place they want," she said. "We also get a lot of people who visited the Island as kids and now are bringing their own kids."

Hodge said wedding party guests who become vacationers say the pluses for an Anna Maria Island vacation are seven miles of a walkable, white sand beach, a walkable community, a free trolley and peace and tranquility.

"Many people who come to the Island tell me they've been to Orlando for a vacation and it wears them out," said Hodge. "They want a place to just relax and enjoy the view, the beach, the Gulf of Mexico. That's what the Island is all about."

As the Island's wedding industry grows, so will Island tourism, said Hodge.

The February Island Wedding Festival put on by a committee of the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce attracted more than 700 visitors to the displays and events, and more are expected for the 2010 event.

Brides and grooms have discovered what The Knot magazine called West Florida's top beach wedding destination, she said.

As further evidence that word of the Island as a wedding destination is spreading, the Web site weddingwire.com wrote that a wedding on Anna Maria is "the charm of old Florida, complete with white sand beaches, pine trees and palm trees gently swaying in the breeze, gorgeous sunsets and a tropical atmosphere."

Hodge said each wedding party brings not just the bride and groom, but maids of honor, the best man, and parties for the bride and groom with varied guests.

"It's the atmosphere of Anna Maria Island," said Hodge. "This is not Orlando. This is where people can enjoy the peace and quiet of a beautiful beach wedding, and where they want to come for their own vacation."

Hodge said that advertising in wedding publications and online has done much to attract weddings, but word-of-mouth has helped considerably.

"We get so many wedding parties where the people say they heard about the Island from a friend, or a friend of a friend. They looked us up on the Internet and liked what they saw," she said.

And weddings are good business for the Island. Hodge said the average Island wedding with about 30 to 50 people in the wedding party costs about \$25,000. Those attending the wedding stay, on average, for five days and spend — exclusive of the wedding — about \$400 per person for accommodations, food, entertainment, retail purchases and attractions.

David Teitelbaum, owner of the Tortuga Inn, Tradewinds and Seaside resorts in Bradenton Beach and a member of the chamber's Wedding Festival Committee, agreed that many members of a wedding party return to the Island for a vacation. "We do a lot of repeat business and many of them tell us they first came to the Island for a wedding and fell in love. They tell their friends about the Island, and those friends tell other friends, and it snowballs," he said.

A case in point are John DeRussy and fiance Mary Brouwer, both from St. Petersburg. Brouwer is originally from Palmetto and talked John into attending the 2009 Island Wedding Festival to plan their marriage.

They were the festival grand prize winners of a week's stay at the Tortuga Inn. The couple arrived on Aug. 4 and by Aug. 7, engagement had turned to matrimony. They were married at the Tortuga Inn that evening. "So, this vacation turned into our honeymoon," said Mrs. DeRussy.

"Growing up in Palmetto, I've always known about the Island and we've told all our friends this is the place to go for your wedding or just a weekend vacation. We are definitely coming back for another vacation, another honeymoon," she said.

Other couples married here also have spread the word about Anna Maria Island. Chris and Tonya Matthewson were married on the Island in April. "Many of our guests are considering making the Island their next vacation spot, and that is saying a lot since many were from out-of-state or long distance," the couple wrote in a letter to Hodge.

And Teitelbaum said the Island's wedding industry is growing not just each year, but every month.

"We had about 300 weddings at our resorts last year and we've booked weddings all spring and summer this year and already into the fall and winter," he said. "These are people who are well behaved, have discretionary income and provide a considerable economic boost to the Island."

The 2010 Island Wedding Festival will again take place in February and the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce already has begun planning.



**Love, Island Style** John DeRussy and fiance Mary Brouwer, both from St. Petersburg, visit last week with David Teitelbaum, right, owner of the Tortuga Inn. The couple won the 2009 Island Wedding Festival grand prize of a free honeymoon at Tortuga Inn. The couple stayed at Tortuga last week and were married Aug. 7 on the beach by the resort. Photo: Rick Catlin