

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau

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What's new from The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

2nd Annual Island Hopper Songwriter Fest, accolades, attractions news, nationally-recognized festivals and more!

LEE COUNTY, FL – In addition to great, year-round weather, shell-drenched beaches and the sparkling Gulf of Mexico, The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in southwest Florida continues to provide new experiences for visitors to Florida's unspoiled island destination. For vacation-planning information, please visit www.FortMyersSanibel.com.

Save the date for this island hopping experience!

Don't miss the 2nd Annual Island Hopper Songwriter Fest, which kicks off Sept. 17-20 on Captiva Island and wraps up Sept. 25-27 on Fort Myers Beach. The 2015 free festival returns for 10 consecutive days on the area's most beautiful barrier islands with a range of star-studded performers. Songwriters who have penned No. 1 hits for such artists as Garth Brooks, Brad Paisley, Lee Ann Womack, will perform at multiple venues. Some of those venues include 'Tween Water's Crow's Nest, Key Lime Bistro and Doc Ford's at South Seas Island Resort on Captiva; as well as Nervous Nellie's, The Beached Whale and Matanzas on the Bay on Fort Myers Beach. New to the festival: historic downtown Fort Myers will feature mid-week performances. The event is presented by The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel; BMI, the largest music rights organization in the U.S.; along with partners iHeartRadio, and Cat Country 107.1. Watch for details: www.islandhopperfest.com.

Kudos

Tops for family beach vacations

U.S. News & World Report ranked Sanibel Island #4 for best family beach vacations. Noteworthy: Sanibel rose to the top in 2015 above Fort Lauderdale, Hilton Head, Honolulu, and U.S. Virgin Islands. Factors cited included safe waters, kid-friendly attractions and dining, spacious accommodations, multi-generational appeal and overall accessibility.

Best beach

Lovers Key State Park was named one of 10 Florida "best beaches" by readers of *USA Today* and *10Best*. www.10best.com/awards/travel/best-florida-beach/

Vacation rental destination

Sanibel Island has been named one of the top 20 vacation rental destinations in the United States, according to *TripAdvisor* traveler reviews in 2014. In a study comparing average review scores for vacation rentals by U.S. region, Sanibel Island was one of six Florida destinations to make the list with a score of 4.70 out of a possible five, equivalent to 94 percent. "Sanibel Island's bayside homes and pet-friendly condos hold numerous TripAdvisor Certificate of

Excellence awards, owing to their stellar review scores,” TripAdvisor stated in the announcement.

Dog-friendly

Sanibel Island was ranked among the top 10 dog friendly vacations in the United States by *bringfido.com*. The island offers pet friendly hotels, events, restaurants and parks and beaches for dogs to enjoy. www.bringfido.com/destination/

Attractions

The Historic Koreshan home in Estero has completed the cottage rehab where one of the "Final Four" Koreshans lived. The home of German-born Conrad Schlender, the tiny wood-frame building was likely built around 1900, then moved to the Utopian communal settlement in the 1930s. The \$50,000 restoration included leveling the foundation, repairing siding, windows and door and installing a new metal roof. A clattering stand of giant bamboo shades the little building on the grounds of the Koreshan State Historic Site, which offers visitors a glimpse of the lives the idealistic pioneers carved out of the subtropical scrub around the turn of the 20th century. Led by the charismatic Cyrus Teed, who renamed himself Cyrus (Hebrew for shepherd), the group planned to create the New Jerusalem. The Koreshan State Historic Site is located at Corkscrew Road and U.S. 41 in Estero. For details: Call 239-992-0311 or visit floridastateparks.org/koreshan

The Edison Botanical Laboratory became the first site in Florida to be designated by the American Chemical Society as a National Historic Chemical Landmark. The American Chemical Society established the National Historic Chemical Landmarks program in 1992 to recognize important achievements in the history of the chemical sciences. Achievements recognized through this program have included the discovery and development of penicillin and the work of historical figures such as George Washington Carver and Rachel Carson.

The project to restore the 1928 Edison Botanical Laboratory was led by Edison Ford staff and consultants, which included a very diverse group of university professors, scientists, industrial engineers and retired trade workers from the industrial machine shops of the past. The three-year restoration with overall funding of more than \$1 million provided building stabilization, restoration of exterior siding, windows and roof, state-of-the-art fire suppression and alarm systems, and new building access. Historical documents and photographs were used by the Edison & Ford Winter Estates research team to correctly place items in the laboratory. Behind-the-scene tours with a historian are available at 10:30 a.m. each Tuesday and Friday. Visit here for details and tour information.

The historic Everglades Wonder Gardens has reopened in Bonita Springs following a change in ownership and a renovation. Opening in 1936, the gardens offer a piece of Florida history to visitors who may tour one of Florida's original roadside attractions. Wander the newly-created paths, see pink flamingos, alligators, a swinging bridge and a butterfly garden. The park also includes landscape photography in John Brady's Everglades Gallery and a picnic area. The park, located at 27180 Old U.S. 41 in Bonita Springs, is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Call 239-992-2591 or visit www.evergladeswondergardens.com.

The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum on Sanibel Island hosts a weekly beach walk with a marine naturalist each Tuesday at 10 a.m. Cost is \$10 per person and includes half-price admission to the museum. Reservations are required. Details: www.shellmuseum.org.

The 500,000-square-foot HeadPinz bowling center plans a mid-June opening in Fort Myers. The entertainment attraction includes a two-story laser tag arena, a suspended aerial ropes course and an arcade area. Of its 28 bowling lanes, eight are set in a boutique area with a bar and four vintage-style lanes with pin setting by hand. The center will also feature indoor/outdoor lounge areas, conference, meeting and party rooms. Nemo's Sports Bar will serve breakfast, lunch and dinner with a bar and large screen TV's.

Alico Family Golf, a new 30-acre golf center, opened in Fort Myers. Designed for all ages, it offers programs for golfers new to serious. The lighted facility features a 5,000-square-foot clubhouse, a sports cafe, 18 holes of miniature golf, a PGA teaching school, 72 grass tee boxes, shaded practice areas, nine holes of novice-friendly golf, youth camps, and clinics for all ages. 239-334-GOLF or www.alicofamilygolf.com.

Accommodations

Sundial Beach Resort on Sanibel Island has completed a multi-million dollar renovation that includes refreshing of accommodations, new fitness center, HydroGrid tennis courts, a campus of the Sanibel Sea School, a Kay Casperson Lifestyle Spa and Boutique, a satellite operation of Sanibel's Bailey's Marketplace. Visit www.sundialresort.com.

The historic Gasparilla Inn on Boca Grande added five new estate homes, offering accommodations for friends or multi-generational travelers. Preserving the same old Florida charm the 101-year-old inn is known for, the homes include three-and four-bedroom options, featuring a kitchen, dining and living areas with an open layout and amenities. A member of Historic Hotels of America and listed on The National Register of Historic Places, the resort offers 142 accommodations in a pristine environment in the heart of Boca Grande, located on Gasparilla Island. Visit www.gasparillainn.com.

TripAdvisor named Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort and Spa in Bonita Springs for the second consecutive year as a Gold Level GreenLeader. The program helps travelers plan greener trips by identifying environmentally-friendly accommodations across the United States. In more news, the resort's Calusa ballroom has been refurbished with a \$2.4 million new look that includes LED lighting, neutral wall coverings, digital signage, dramatic glass light fixtures, contemporary furnishings and artwork. www.coconutpoint.hyatt.com.

Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina on Fort Myers Beach has employed naturalist Vince McGrath to offer resort guests morning wildlife walking and kayaking expeditions to explore the eco-zones of the local marine environment. Guests are able to observe numerous flora and fauna, from what's under the sea to the shoreline, tide pools and upland habitats of the dunes. McGrath also is available to guests to answer questions about creatures they find during their own beach exploration. Visit www.pinkshell.com.

Casa Ybel Resort on Sanibel Island has been ranked by Travel and Leisure Family magazine as one of North America's Top 20 Family Resorts. www.casaybelresort.com.

Food and Dining

Cabbage Key was named by USA Today Travel as one of 10 restaurants not reachable by car. Visit www.cabbagekey.com.

Charles Mereday, chef-owner of Naples' Mereday's Fine Dining and Alto Live Jazz Kitchen, has taken his signature style to Estero with the European-style Mereday's Brasserie. The restaurant is located in Estero's Coconut Point retail center. Guests enjoy a casual ambiance but with white tablecloths, fresh flowers and original French art. The 8,000-square foot, wood-paneled restaurant has curved banquette seating, an outdoor bar and patio dining, and seats 250 diners. The menu, designed by Mereday, is ingredient-driven and presented and will change daily. The a la carte selections will include starters, salads and sandwiches, main courses and desserts. For information: 239-949-9466.

Doc Ford's opened its third local restaurant on Captiva Island at the entrance to South Seas Island Resort. The 300-seat restaurant serves the same cuisine and libations inspired by murder-mystery protagonist Doc Ford during his travels through Florida, the Caribbean, and Central and South America in novels by Sanibel author Randy Wayne White. www.docfords.com.

Bennett's Fresh Roast, recently opened a second location on Sanibel Island, serving breakfast and lunch daily 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. near the causeway. www.bennettsfreshroast.com.

Norman Love Confections has a new location at the Miromar Outlets in Estero. A gelato and chocolate salon includes waffles and crepes, located on the east side of the mall near Ford's Garage and Naples Flatbread. The European-chic scheme of the shop also features chocolates, pastries and other bakery goods. www.normanloveconfections.com.

Arts and Walks

Art Walk in the River District, Downtown Fort Myers, takes place the first Friday of each month, 6-10 p.m. An opportunity for art buyers and art enthusiasts to meet artists at their galleries during show openings, the events end with an after party. www.fortmyersartwalk.com.

Upcoming special events and festivals

33rd World's Richest Tarpon Tournament, Boca Grande

June 4-5, 2015

www.worldsrichesttarpon.com

941-964-0568

From April through August, Boca Grande Pass is home of the world's largest tarpon population. Encouraging conservation, education and sportsmanship, this two-day tournament offers anglers the opportunity to compete for thousands in cash and prizes. Winners will be determined by the highest total number of tarpon successfully released. While competition heats up in Boca Grande Pass and the Gulf of Mexico, there will be plenty of family-friendly fun in downtown Boca Grande, including a wide variety of art vendors, live music performances, the

Mote Mobile Aquarium and educational lectures by some of today's leading fishery experts and scientists.

MangoMania, Pine Island

July 18-19, 2015

239-283-0888

www.mangomaniafl.net/

The mango is the star attraction for two days each summer on Pine Island. Go wild for fruit as you sample locally-grown delicacies at this annual affair, an unusual celebration of all the tropical fruit grown on the island, which includes lychee, carambola, longan, papaya, and "chocolate pudding fruit." Fruit, exotic fruit trees, and fruit-related products are available for purchase. The 2015 festival will take place at the Pineland Marina. This fun, family event celebrates Pine Island's mangoes and other tropical fruits. In addition to mango food and beverages, the event features live music, art and craft vendors, food and recipe contests, activities area for kids and a chance to meet the Mango Queen!

3rd Annual Surf & Turf Experience, Captiva Island

Oct. 16-18, 2015

239-433-7189

www.dvic.us

Sports enthusiasts and outdoorsmen will enjoy the Surf & Turf Experience Oct. 16-18 at South Seas Island Resort on Captiva Island. Proceeds from the event help support the mission of Disabled Veterans Insurance Careers Inc. to create employment opportunities within the insurance industry for disabled veterans. The event is a three-day, two-night sportsman's weekend. The competition includes fishing and golfing components.

29th Annual Oktoberfest, Cape Coral

Oct. 16-18 and 23-25, 2015

German-American Club

239-283-1400

www.capecoraloktoberfest.com

Hosted by the German-American Club, this huge celebration includes German culture, food, music and dancing. Highlights include authentic live entertainment with large musical groups from Germany, along with enough German food and beer to make anyone do the "Chicken Dance." There is also a carnival area for kids. Call or check website for schedule and ticket information.

26th Annual J.N. "Ding" Darling Days, Sanibel Island

Oct. 18-24, 2015

239-472-1100

www.dingdarlingdays.com

"Ding" Darling Days include a week of eco-activities with free refuge tram tours, live wildlife presentations, birding, kayaking tours, environmental speakers, a Federal Duck Stamp artist presentation and more. The festival celebrates the birthday of the refuge's namesake, conservationist and Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist, Jay N. "Ding" Darling.

Cape Coral CoCoNut Festival, Cape Coral

Nov. 12-15, 2015

239-573-3121

www.cocofest.com

Sun Splash Family Water Park

The Cape Coral CoCoNut Festival celebrates Cape Coral's reputation for coconuts, multi-cultural food, boating, fishing and wildlife. The festival will feature a national musical act, gymnastic entertainment, carnival rides, water-ski shows, tropical food, contests, coconut crafts, fireworks.

10th Annual Sanibel Island Writers Conference

November 5-8, 2015

239-590-7421

www.fgcu.edu/siwc/

BIG Arts and the Sanibel Island Public Library

This intimate writers' conference draws acclaimed authors and songwriters, award-winning poets and screenplay writers. This talented group holds small workshops for all levels of aspiring writers who want to follow in their creative footsteps. Participants also enjoy nightly readings and concerts, which are open to the public. The conference welcomes any aspiring writer who wants to create new work or refine a project in progress. Keynote speaker: Haitian-American author, Edwidge Danticat. For details and reservations, visit website.

29th Annual American Sand Sculpting Championship, Fort Myers Beach

November 20-29, 2015

239-454-7500

www.fmbandsculpting.com

Come and join the fun on Fort Myers Beach for the 29th Annual American Sand Sculpting Championship and Beach Festival. Sponsored by the Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce, this fun-filled event will include world-class master sand sculptors, a state championship contest, an amateur contest, sand sculpting demonstrations and lessons, and much more. USA Today listed the event as one of the 10 best sand sculpting competitions and the Southeastern Tourism Society recognized the American Sand Sculpting Championship as a top 20 event.

40th Annual Holiday Nights at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers

End of November 2015 through New Year's 2016 (Event is closed Dec. 24 & 25)

239-334-7419

www.edisonfordwinterstates.org

Edison Ford Holiday Nights reflect the many contributions of Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and their families. It was chosen by the editors of USA Today as one of the 10Best Historic Homes for the Holidays, which also included The White House, Mount Vernon, Monticello and the Biltmore in North Carolina. To view the article visit: <http://www.10best.com/interests/trip-pics/historic-homes-for-the-holidays/>.

A not-to-be-missed holiday tradition, the historic buildings and acres of gardens are decorated with lights and traditional decorations. The holiday estates offer a behind the scenes tour,

Children's Holiday Tree Trail, Santa visits in the Ford Santa Workshop, refreshments and shopping in the Holiday Cottage Shoppe, Museum Store and Garden Shoppe. For admission and details: www.edisonfordwinterstates.org/events/annual-events/holiday-nights/

Captiva Holiday Village, Captiva Island

Weekends beginning Thanksgiving weekend through mid-December 2015

www.captivaholidayvillage.com

Beginning with a tree-lighting and fireworks, this popular southwest Florida barrier island transforms into a Holiday Village with events every weekend through December. This themed, fun-filled holiday extravaganza is set against the backdrop of the shimmering Gulf of Mexico and breathtaking sunsets. Visitors to Captiva Island during Captiva Holiday Village weekends enjoy a Mullet Band parade, lighted boat parade, South Seas holiday strolls, a Junkanoo Parade, a carol sing at the Chapel by the Sea, sunset arias, a holiday golf cart parade and much more.

Don't miss: The 31st Annual Christmas Luminary Trail and Open House, Sanibel (Dec. 4) and Captiva (Dec. 5) islands. This event draws visitors from all over the world as they join local residents to celebrate the season with three miles of luminary candles and events. For more information visit www.sanibel-captiva.org.

For information on accommodations, visit www.captivaholidayvillage.com/accommodations-getaway-vacations/

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The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in southwest Florida includes: Sanibel Island, Captiva Island, Fort Myers Beach, Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Estero, Cape Coral, Pine Island, Boca Grande & Outer Islands, North Fort Myers, Lehigh Acres. For media assistance, visit www.fortmyerssanibel.com/media.