

2024 VISITORS GUIDE

DESTINATION

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA



INSIDE: ATTRACTIONS. LOCAL FLAVOR. SIGNATURE EVENTS.  FLORIDA WEEKLY

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Jorge has a busy life in Ave Maria. He's the club champion at Panther Run, which is the golf course in his neighborhood. And when he isn't playing over there, he's teeing it up at The National, a golf cart commute from his home. "It's wonderful for an avid golfer to have two championship courses a half mile from each other," he says. Jorge is also a cancer survivor. "It made me think about life, think about what I was doing. There's that old saying: a bad day on the golf course beats a good day at work. Thankfully, I beat the cancer. And every day's a great day at Ave Maria."

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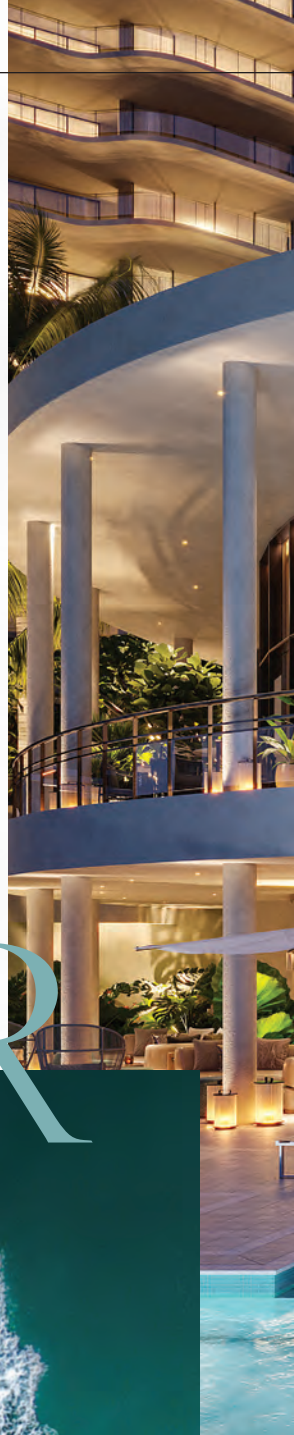
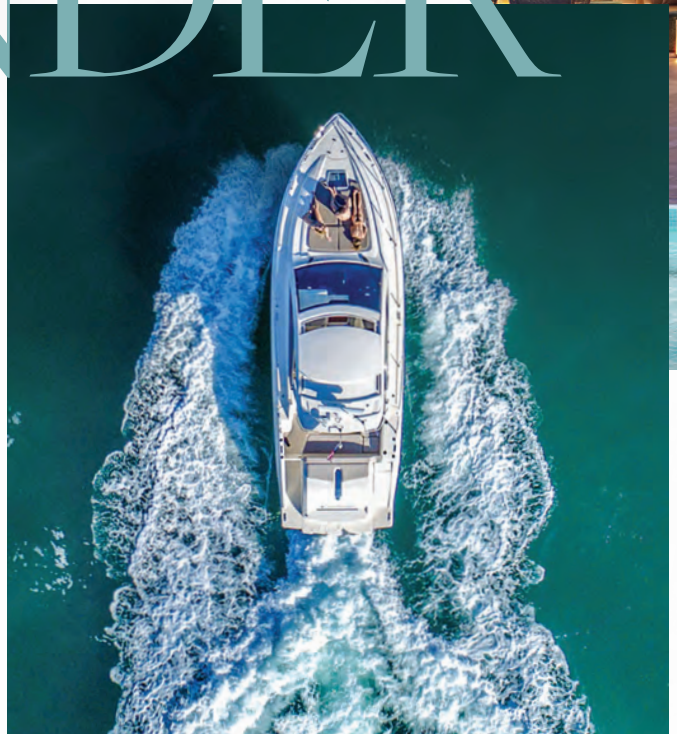


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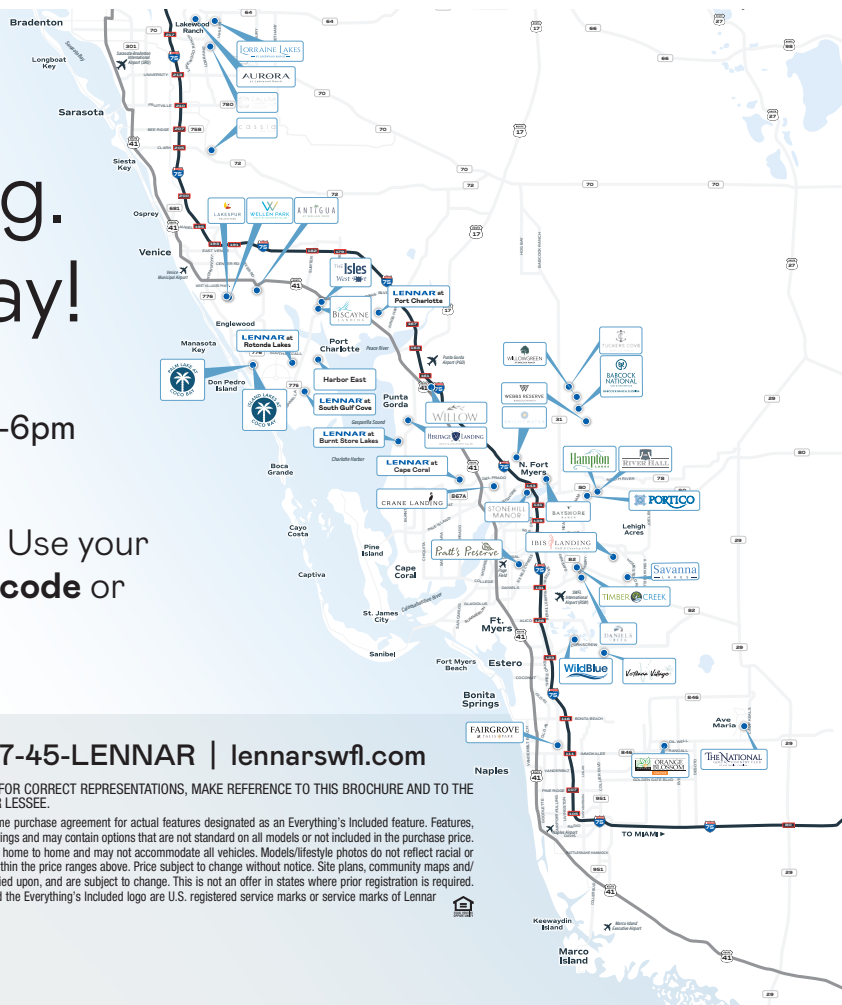


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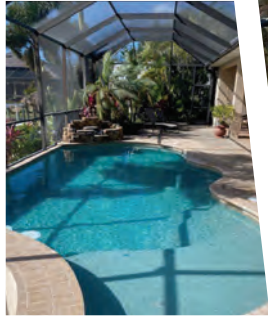
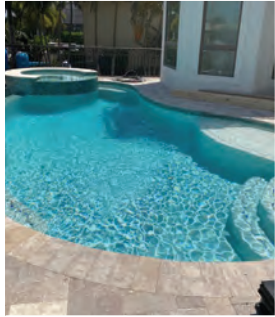
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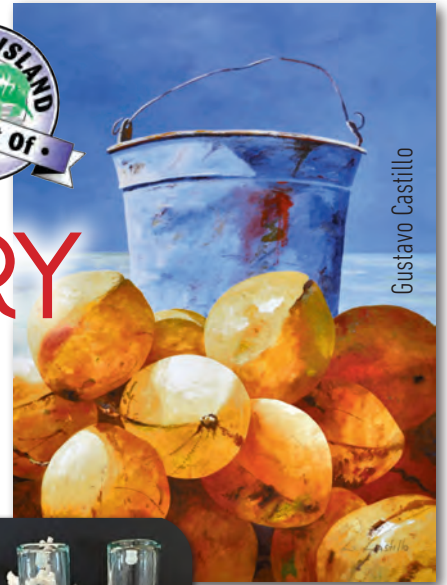
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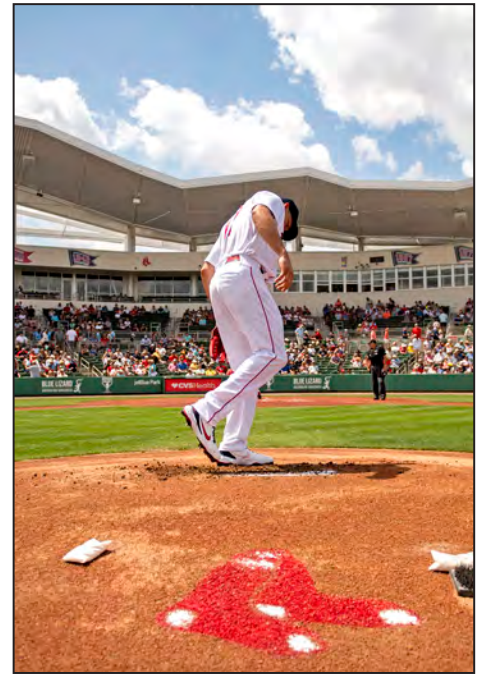
WHAT'S INSIDE



SWFL SPORTS

BEYOND THE SUN AND SAND: DELVING INTO AN ECLECTIC ATHLETIC LANDSCAPE

89



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SWFL SEVEN WAYS

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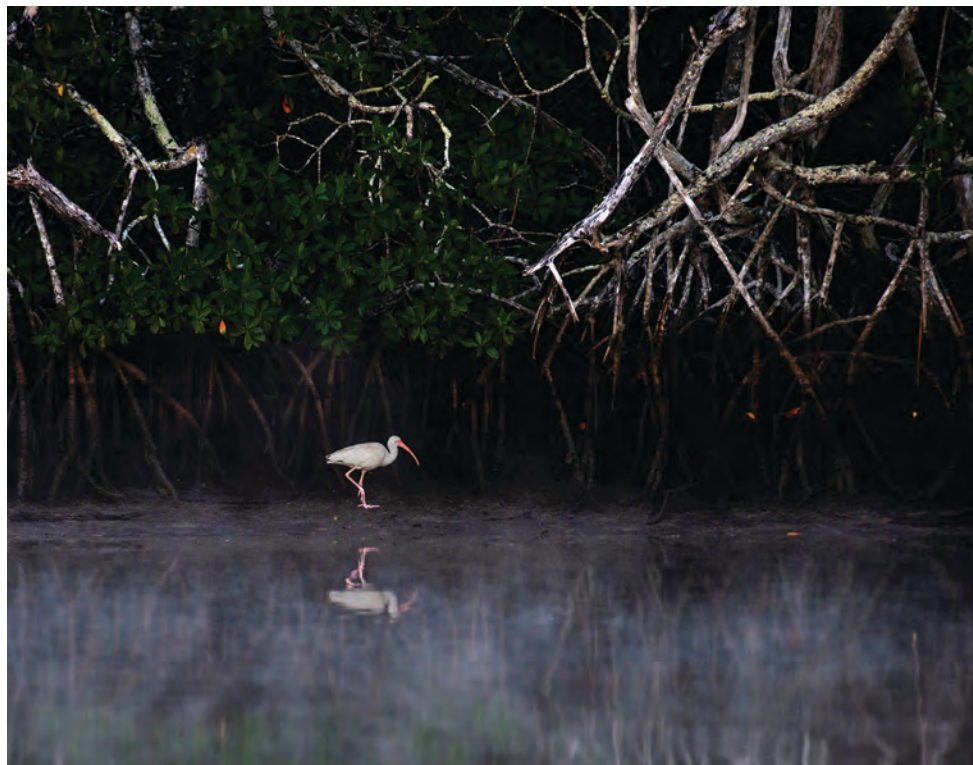
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— 406 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard,
Punta Gorda
941-575-7518, blanchardhousemuseum.org

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—Florida SouthWestern State College
941-637-3518, fsw.edu/charlotte/observatory

■ The Military Heritage Museum

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— 900 W. Marion Ave., Punta Gorda
941.575.9002, militaryheritagemuseum.org

■ Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary

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239-543-1130, octagonwildlife.org

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— 15080 Livingston Road, Naples
239-514-0084, cmon.org

■ The Holocaust Museum & Education Center of Southwest Florida

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— 975 Imperial Golf Course Boulevard, Suite 108, Naples
239-263-9200, HMCEC.org

■ Naples Botanical Garden

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— 4820 Bayshore Drive, Naples
239.643.7275, naplesgarden.org

■ Naples Pier

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— 25 12th Avenue South, Naples
239-213-1800, naplesgov.com

■ Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens

A paved path almost a mile in length winds past rare and wonderful animals residing within a tropical garden that was planted in 1919. Guests delight in seeing many of their favorite animals and also discover an array of rarely seen creatures such as the endangered Malagasy fossas, Red River hogs, and Asian deer that bark and eat meat.

— 1590 Goodlette-Frank Road, Naples
239-315-7626, napleszoo.org

■ REVS Institute

Recognized by Tripadvisor as one of the top Things-to-Do in Naples, REVS Institute is widely regarded as one of the top automotive museums in the world. Nearly every vehicle in the collection has been masterfully restored according to exacting historical standards and is maintained in peak operational condition. Tickets for admission must be purchased in advance.

— 2500 S. Horseshoe Drive, Naples
239-687-7387, revsinstitute.org

■ Rookery Bay Environmental Learning Center

On the way to Marco Island, find four research laboratories, classrooms, a 140-seat auditorium and a visitor center with a variety of hands-on experiences. Enjoy the 2,300-gallon aquarium and interactive exhibits about the research and stewardship efforts ongoing within the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve.

— 300 Tower Road, Naples
239-530-5972, rookerybay.org

LEE COUNTY

■ The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum

This one-of-a-kind museum remains under repair following the impact after Hurricane Ian. Visitors learn about shells, mollusks and their natural environment through exhibits, educational programs, library services and publications.

— 3075 Sanibel-Captiva Road, Sanibel
239-395-2233, shellmuseum.org

■ Edison & Ford Winter Estates

The winter homes of Thomas A. Edison and Henry Ford, beautifully situated along the Caloosahatchee River, are among the greatest historic treasures in Southwest Florida. Visitors can take guided tours of the homes, gardens and laboratory.

— 2350 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers
239-334-7419, edisonfordwinterestates.org

■ Wonder Gardens

Embracing a diverse family of rescued and rehabilitated wildlife, including Florida alligators, flamingos, macaws, pythons, turtles, tortoises and more, the sanctuary

boasts a vibrant botanical collection that offers something for everyone. Serving as a cornerstone of Old Florida, this sanctuary beautifully weaves together the narrative of the past converging with the future.

— 27180 Old 41 Road, Bonita Springs
239-992-2591, wondergardens.org

■ Gator Mike's Family Fun Park

Cape Coral's premier family adventure park has it all: go-cart tracks, miniature golf, batting cages, midway rides, a zipline and a 6,000-square-foot arcade.

— 35 N.E. Pine Island Road, Cape Coral
239.574.4386, gatomikes.com

■ IMAG History & Science Center

Dive into interactive displays, aquariums teeming with fascinating creatures, and engaging activities for the whole family. With a focus on STEM education and a blend of arts, culture, and regional history, IMAG offers an exceptional experience. Explore attractions like Science on a Sphere, Google Earth Wall, Nano Lab, USS Mohawk Aquarium, and more.

— 2000 Cranford Avenue, Fort Myers
239-243-0043, theimag.org

■ Southern Fresh Farms

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— 8500 Penance Boulevard, Fort Myers
southernfreshfarms.com
239-633-7705 ■



Edison & Ford
Winter Estates

COURTESY PHOTO

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SIGNATURE EVENTS

CHARLOTTE COUNTY

■ Smoke on the River BBQ & Music Fest

March 9

— Laishley Park, Punta Gorda
puntagordabbqfestival.com

■ Punta Gorda Sullivan Street Craft Festival

March 9-10

—331 Sullivan Street
Artfestival.com

■ Peace River National Art Festival

March 16-17

A vibrant celebration of artistic talent is set to grace the shores of the Peace River in historic Punta Gorda. Curated by the Visual Arts Center, this event gathers accomplished artists from across the nation, showcasing their skills in an array of mediums such as art glass, fiber arts, jewelry, leather goods, metalwork, oil paintings, photography, pottery, stone sculptures and watercolor.

— Laishley Park, Punta Gorda
boulderbrook.net
visualartcenter.org

■ Arts & Crafts Show

March 23-24

Gilchrist Park, Punta Gorda
mypromotions.com

■ Southern Grand Slam Musical Festival

April 19-20

— Charlotte County Fairgrounds
— 305-761-8860
thecharlottecountyfair.com

■ Bands, Brews, & BBQ Fest

May 4

— Laishley Park, Punta Gorda
business.charlottecountychamber.org/events

Bill Colletti performs during an Evenings on Fifth in Naples.



COURTESY PHOTO

COLLIER COUNTY

■ Evenings on Fifth

Second Thursday of every month, year-round

Experience a vibrant array of live musical performances lining the sidewalks of 5th Avenue South, complemented by exceptional dining, shopping, and more.

— 5th Ave S, Naples
naplesgov.com

■ Jewish Book Festival

Now through April 3

— Nina Iser Jewish Cultural Center, Naples
jewishnaples.org

■ Naples Artcrafters

March 9, April 13

— Cambier Park, Naples
naplesartcrafters.com

■ The Jewish Congregation of Marco Island Film Festival

March 10

— 991 Winterberry Drive, Marco Island
239-642-0800
jewishnaples.org
marcojcmi.com

■ Naples St. Patrick's Day Parade

March 16

For more than 40 years, the largest privately run parade in the Sunshine State has livened up downtown Naples in celebration of Irish culture and heritage in America. The Naples St. Patrick Foundation keeps the tradition going,

— 5th Ave S, Naples
naplesparade.com

■ Bayfront Art Show

March 16-17

— 465 Bayfront Place, Naples
naplespicasso.com

■ Beth Tikvah Naples Jewish Film Festival

March 17

jewishnaples.org

■ Naples Jewish Film Festival

March 17

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naplesjewishfilmfestival.org

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SIGNATURE EVENTS

■ **Collier County Fair**
March 21-31

— Collier Fairgrounds Naples
colliercountyfair.com

■ **Gulf Coast Orchid Alliance's
Orchid Show and Sale**
March 22-24

— North Collier Regional Park
gulfcoastorchidalliance.com

■ **Naples Downtown Art Sow**
March 23-24

—naplesart.org

■ **Marco Island Outdoor Art
and Craft Show**
March 23-24

— marcoislandart.org

■ **Bonita Springs Masters
Art Festival**
March 30-31

— The Promenade at Bonita Bay
boulderbrook.net

■ **Naples Flower Show**
April 5-6

This annual project of the Naples Garden Club is the largest juried flower show in Southwest Florida.

— Naples Botanical Garden
naplesgardenclub.org

■ **Bonita Springs
International
Food Truck Rally & Music
Festival**

April 5-7

— 28001 Old 41 Road
paragonfestivals.com

■ **Art in the Park**
April 6

— Fleischman Park, Naples
naplesart.org



Taylor Smith at the 2022 Punta Gorda Shrimp & Music Festival

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SIGNATURE EVENTS

■ **Cars as Art**

April 6

— Marco Island Center for the Arts
marcoislandart.org■ **World Famous
Swamp Buggy Races**

April 6

Get down and dirty —or just have fun watching others do so.

— Florida Sports Park, Naples
swampbuggy.com■ **Bonita Springs Short
Film Festival**

April 18

— Prado Stadium 12 Theaters
bonitaspringsfilmfestival.org■ **Bonita Springs Festival
of the Arts**

May 11-12

— 28001 Old 41 Road
paragonfestivals.com■ **MANHATTAN SHORT
Film Festival**

Oct. 2024

— Marco Island Center for the Arts
marcoislandart.org■ **Naples International
Film Festival**

Oct. 2024

— artisnaples.org

LEE COUNTY

■ **100th Annual Southwest
Florida & Lee County Fair**

Through March 10

Making memories since 1924 with local agriculture, horticulture, home-baked goods, small farm animals, and a horse show, plus dozens of carnival rides, games and food booths.

— Lee Civic Center, North Fort Myers
swflcfair.com■ **Downtown Fort Myers Art
Walk and Music Walk**

Every month, year-round



Art Walk happens every first Friday evening, while Music Walk is every third Friday evening.

— myriverdistrict.com

■ **Taco Fest Fort Myers**

March 10

— Caloosa Sound Amphitheater
facebook.com/TacoFestSWFL
bscevent.com■ **Cape Coral Music & Arts
Fusion Walk**

March 16

Come out for an evening of live music, and vendors and support local businesses. This event will feature pop-up shops by local artists that showcase everything from handmade jewelry to paintings!

— SE 47th Terrace, Cape Coral
capecoral.gov■ **Fort Myers Spring Arts
& Crafts Show**

March 16-17

— Bell Tower, Fort Myers
mypromotions.com■ **ECHO's Global Food
& Farm Festival**

March 16-22

—17391 Durrance Road, Fort Myers
echonet.org■ **Fort Myers River District
Music Festival**

March 22-24

— Downtown Fort Myers
paragonfestivals.com■ **Sounds of Jazz & Blues**

March 23

An evening of musical enchantment, delectable food and delightful entertainment, showcasing some of the finest talents in the community.

— Coral Oaks Golf Course, Cape Coral
capeconcerts.com■ **Bonita Springs Masters
Art Festival**

March 30-31

— The Promenade at Bonita Bay
boulderbrook.net■ **Artisan Market**April 6, Sept. 21, Oct. 26, Nov. 30,
Dec. 22— Bell Tower, Fort Myers
belltowerfl.com■ **Rock The Arches
Music Festival**

April 6-7

— 10091 McGregor Boulevard, Fort Myers
ticketstripe.com/4throckthearches

SIGNATURE EVENTS

■ Bonita Springs Short Film Festival

April 18

— Prado Stadium 12 Theaters
bonitaspringsfilmfestival.org

■ Bonita Springs Festival of the Arts

May 11-12

— 28001 Old 41 Road
paragonfestivals.com

■ Fort Myers Film Festival

May 22-26

— Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center
fortmyersfilmfestival.com

■ Fringe Fort Myers

May 30 - June 2

Fringe Fort Myers is the newest Fringe theatre festival in Southwest Florida and maintains long-standing Fringe traditions of being 100% uncensored,



World Famous Swamp Buggy Races, Florida Sports Park, Naples

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— Alliance for the Arts
artinlee.org

— Events are subject to rescheduling or cancellation. Please visit the respective event's official website for the most up-to-date information. ■

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SWFL SEVEN WAYS

NAVIGATING THROUGH SOUTHWEST FLORIDA'S SEVEN DISTINCTIVE ENCLAVES

BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Talk about character! Southwest Florida brims with neighborhoods and communities that defy pigeon-holing. From historic riverfront downtowns to up-and-coming shopping districts, you've got a lot of exploring to do.

■ Ave Maria

Dive into the vibrant community of Ave Maria, one of Southwest Florida's fastest-growing areas, just a half-hour east of Naples. Founded in 2007, Ave Maria offers a rich tapestry of residential life, commercial enterprises, and academic institutions like Ave Maria University. At its heart lies the Ave Maria Catholic Church, a focal point of the town center.

Every Tuesday through April 23, enjoy guided trolley tours, free church tours, and musical performances in the Town Center from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Don't miss the Taste of Ave on February 3, featuring live music, culinary delights, and family-friendly fun.

On Saturdays through April 27, the Ave Maria Farmers Market boasts over 60 vendors, live music, and a vibrant community atmosphere from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Celebrate the Tex-Mex vibe at the Margarita & Taco Festival on March 16, offering country music, Latin-infused cuisine, and lively entertainment from noon to 5 p.m.

■ Babcock Ranch

Discover the allure of Babcock Ranch, a solar-powered city nestled in the heart of nature. With walking trails, cycling paths and bass-filled lakes, this regional outdoor haven invites everyone to explore a mosaic of oak hammocks and prairies. Uncover the community's essence at Woodlea Hall in Founder's Square—a central hub offering insights into Babcock's unique blend of sustainability and lifestyle.

Join the lively atmosphere during



Riverside Park on the Imperial River, Bonita Springs.

COURTESY PHOTO

Food Truck Weekends, where diverse culinary delights and live music grace Founder's Square every Friday and Saturday from 5-9 p.m. Immerse yourself in the Babcock Bandstand Concert Series, featuring upcoming live performances from Unfinished Business to The LineUp, promising delightful evenings of entertainment on Fridays from 6-8 p.m.

Embrace cultural richness at the Sixth Annual Babcock Ranch Art Show on March 9-10. Founder's Square transforms into an art haven with 65 artists, food trucks and live entertainment, showcasing a diverse array of artistic expressions. Whether cheering at Trailblazers Home Games, indulging in Square Scoops ice cream treats, or unwinding at Slater's happy hours, Babcock Ranch offers a tapestry of experiences in a sustainable and vibrant community. Don't miss out on these public events that bring the community together in shared enjoyment.

■ Downtown Bonita

Explore the revitalized charm of historic Downtown Bonita Springs along Old 41, a route that unfolds the town's 1920s roots. Shangri-La Hotel, since 1921, embodies

this history, now a healthful sanctuary and spa with the Harvest & Wisdom restaurant.

Farther north, Wonder Gardens, born in 1936, offers Victorian elegance alongside animal encounters. Riverside Park, the community center, hosts gatherings amid historic structures. Adding excitement is the Rooftop at Riverside food truck park, fulfilling the Magnus family's dream for Bonita Springs.

Amid this history, modern venues like Chartreuse Craft Cocktail Lounge and Ceremony Brewing thrive. The Causeway Bonita opened in October as Southwest Florida's first food hall. Downtown Bonita Springs merges history and vibrancy—a living testament to community spirit.

■ Downtown Punta Gorda

Navigate along the Peace River, where historic Punta Gorda reflects on its 19th-century origins through vibrant murals depicting its rich history. Marion Avenue, the quaint main street, hosts eclectic shops and eateries like The Perfect Caper and Celtic Ray Public House, each with its unique charm.

Stroll through streets like Sullivan,

SWFL SEVEN WAYS

Taylor, and Olympia, uncovering hidden gems. Along the river-front, Wyvern Hotel’s rooftop bar and Four Points by Sheraton with TT’s Tiki Bar maintain the lively atmosphere. Laishley Park and its crab house cater to both sea enthusiasts and families, complementing the extensive bike trails along the river.

Continue west to Charlotte Harbor, encountering the transformed Fishermen’s Village—a hub of entertainment, lodging, and shopping, nestled on old city docks. Experience Punta Gorda’s roots with stately historic homes, Gilchrist Park on Retta Esplanade, and the new Military Heritage Museum and its Gulf Theater, offering live performances and cultural experiences. Cap off your journey at Sunseeker Resort Charlotte Harbor, a waterfront haven for relaxation and entertainment.

■ Fort Myers Historic River District

Like many downtowns of a certain age,

there came a time for Fort Myers when urban sprawl left its core looking a little abandoned and forlorn., Wiser heads prevailed, however, to save the Historic River District with all its historic gems from falling victim to trends and “out with the old” attitudes.

Thanks largely to the vigor of the Edison & Ford Winter Estates at its fringes, historic downtown renewed. An old, handsome federal building became an art center; a circa-1915 vaudeville house, a theater. Stores and restaurants moved into buildings dating back to the late 18th century, as was the case with The Veranda, a gracious restaurant that lives in two pioneer homes.

Ambitious undertakings like the Franklin Shops turned one vintage structure into a crafty mall of sorts. Bars and lounges draw a young crowd to frenzied hangouts such as the Sky Bar and Cowboy Up.

The riverfront spruced up with the remastering of Centennial Park and the

appearance of Luminary Hotel & Co., with its modern good looks rooted in local history (named for Thomas Edison’s glowing claim-to-fame). With it came another rooftop bar, a sports bar with a golf simulator and a smattering of other food and beverage hotspots.

The Historic River District continues to take full advantage of its waterfront beauty and bygone intrigue as more hotels move in and people of all ages come out for its monthly street parties and annual festivals.

■ Naples 5th Avenue

Indulge in the unique blend of glamour and laid-back charm at 5th Avenue South, Old Naples’ exclusive destination. This iconic address seamlessly merges historic and modern architecture, offering upscale fashion, jewelry, spas, art galleries, fine dining, and more.

Adjacent to it, the Naples Design District, recently rejuvenated after Hurricane Ian, is a dynamic retail hub featuring art galleries,



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SWFL SEVEN WAYS

architect offices, trendy food-and-drink venues, and notable establishments like The Collective and Warren American Whiskey Kitchen. Anticipate the new attractions, including Gulfshore Playhouse's facility and the AC Hotel by Marriott Naples 5th Avenue, now open and ready for you to immerse yourself in this renewed energy, complementing the timeless allure of 5th Avenue South.

■ South Cape

Three parallel roads — Cape Coral Parkway, SE 47th Terrace and Lafayette Street — define Cape Coral's downtown area, which has evolved over the past decade into a dining and entertainment mecca. Cape Coral Parkway, the main thoroughfare, takes motorists from the Caloosahatchee River waterfront to the heart of the city, lined with fun and quirky dining establishments with names like Nevermind Awesome Bar & Eatery and Nice Guys Pizza.



SE 47th Terrace,
South Cape.

Slip off the parkway in either direction to find more fun spots. To the west on Lafayette Street, you'll find Jungle Bird Authentic Tiki and the Monkey Bar Steak & Seafood. Head east to SE 47th Terrace and you'll land at a streetscaped pedestrian mall, where deciding on a place to eat and drink requires serious research (or determined barhopping).

There's Cork Soakers Deck & Wine Bar, Front Porch Social, Sage on 47th, Fish Tale Grill, Dixie Roadhouse —the list goes on and on. Many establishments on Cape Coral Parkway are also accessible from the pedestrian walkway through their backdoors, giving them a speakeasy feel.

Downtown Cape Coral takes advantage of its abundant eat-and-sip options with trolley-hop events to celebrate everything from New Year's Eve and St. Patrick's Day to bacon and martinis. Other downtown events include arts festivals, Pride parades, farmers markets, bike nights, symphonies in the park and pub crawls.

South Cape's renewal got its jump start in 2019 with a \$13 million beautification project that added brick-paved pathways and pedestrian crossings, decorative streetlamps, a traffic roundabout and public Wi-Fi. Today, the SE 47th Terrace promenade continues to buzz day and night with diners and clubbers looking for the heart of Cape Coral's social scene. ■

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CHARLOTTE COUNTY

■ Audubon-Pennington Nature Park

Just minutes from downtown Port Charlotte, Audubon-Pennington Nature Park offers a serene retreat for nature enthusiasts. Open from sunrise to sunset, the park beckons with activities like picnicking, hiking, and nature photography. Two main trails, the half-mile Sandhill Trail and the challenging one-mile Gator Hole Trail, wind through diverse landscapes, including sandhills and wetlands. Smaller trails lead to different corners, ensuring encounters with Florida's wildlife. Providing a peaceful escape from city life, this easily accessible park promises a refreshing outdoor experience amidst the beauty of nature.

- Boardwalk, hiking trails, nature photography, picnic areas, wildlife viewing
1153 Alton Road, Port Charlotte
941-625-7529



LEE COUNTY VISITOR AND CONVENTION BUREAU / COURTESY PHOTO

■ Charlotte Harbor Preserve State Park

Spanning an impressive 42,000 acres, Charlotte Harbor Preserve State Park safeguards an expansive 70-mile stretch

of shoreline bordering Charlotte and Lee counties, tracing the picturesque expanse of Charlotte Harbor.

- Boating, canoeing and kayaking, fishing
12301 Burnt Store Road, Punta Gorda
941-575-5816

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SWFL PARKS

■ Peace River Preserve

Covering 450 acres, Peace River Preserve features a mix of scrubby flatwoods, mesic flatwoods, hammocks, marshes, and mangrove swamp. The western and northern sections support scrub-jay habitat, while the southern and eastern areas transition into high marsh and mangrove communities. Historical fire suppression led to a 1995 wildfire, shaping the uplands into xeric and mesic hammocks. Ongoing management, including prescribed burns and fuel reduction, aim to enhance habitat quality and address drainage issues in depressional marshes, fostering a resilient environment at Peace River Preserve.

— Birding, nature preserve, nature trail
28000 Sandhill Boulevard, Punta Gorda
941-613-3220

■ Punta Gorda Nature Park

The 19-acre Punta Gorda Nature Park, acquired in the 1990s with funding from the Florida Community Trust, stands as a unique urban oasis. Bordered by residential streets and a canal, the park offers preserved areas for walking, bird watching, and wildlife observa-

tion. With an urban interpretative nature walk, it showcases the natural features of pre-subdivided Punta Gorda, providing a serene escape accessible via bicycle and pedestrian pathways connected to the city's sidewalk system. This hidden gem is conveniently close to residential and commercial areas.

— Benches, gardens, multi-use recreational trail, observation deck, palmetto forest, parking, picnic tables, salt/high marsh habitats
1623 AQUI ESTA DRIVE, PUNTA GORDA

COLLIER COUNTY

■ Big Cypress National Preserve

Since its inception in 1916, Big Cypress has embraced the vital responsibility of safeguarding and preserving the nation's cherished natural landmarks. Drawing over 318 million visitors annually, this remarkable place offers an opportunity to explore and connect with the essence of the United States. Extending its reach beyond the park's confines, Big Cypress actively collaborates with tribes, local governments, nonprofits, businesses and individuals. This collaboration empowers communities to honor their

unique histories, preserve their cultural heritage and maintain outdoor spaces, inviting families to relish and cherish these invaluable assets. Their mission is to safeguard the natural and cultural treasures of this land, ensuring their enduring presence for the benefit, education, and inspiration of both present and future generations.

— Canoeing and kayaking, hiking, hunting, ORV use, tours

Nathaniel P. Reed Visitor Center
33000 Tamiami Trail East, Ochopee
239-695-4758

Oasis Visitor Center
52105 Tamiami Trail East, Ochopee
239-695-2000

■ Collier-Seminole State Park

Sprawling across 7,271 acres, Collier-Seminole State Park is a captivating blend of diverse wildlife, rare royal palms and expansive mangrove swamps. Delve into history by exploring the last remaining Bay City Walking Dredge, a significant engineering landmark pivotal in constructing the Tamiami Trail Highway. The park offers comfortable campground sites and enriching park programs from December through March, featuring insightful pre-

Everglades National Park



SWFL PARKS

sentations on flora, fauna and history. Traverse scenic trails, canoe down the Blackwater River, or utilize the boat ramp for a remarkable wilderness experience.

- Bicycling, boat ramp, camping, canoeing and kayaking, fishing, hiking/nature trail, picnicking, playground, restrooms, showers, wildlife viewing
- 20200 Tamiami Trail East, Naples
239-394-3397

Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park

Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park has reopened its doors for limited day use, welcoming visitors to enjoy the breathtaking mile-long stretch of pristine sugar sand beach—the jewel of this 166-acre tropical paradise. Renowned as one of the nation’s finest, the beach invites beachgoers, boaters, and divers to relish in its natural splendor. From sunbathing and paddling to hiking and birdwatching, this coastal haven offers an array of activities. Anglers can find designated

spots in the northern park areas for a chance at trophy catches. Boaters will appreciate the easily accessible launch area into Turkey Bay, allowing exploration of the Cocohatchee River’s delicate estuaries leading to the expansive Gulf of Mexico. Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park ensures a memorable coastal experience, providing beach wheelchairs upon reservation and offering a complimentary beach shuttle service from Conner Park, since parking is extremely limited within the park. It’s a destination that invites all to unwind in the embrace of nature’s beauty while adhering to posted guidelines and respecting any closed areas.

- Beaches, boat ramp, boating, fishing, picnicking, restrooms, showers, scuba diving, swimming, wildlife viewing
- 11135 Gulfshore Drive, Naples
239-597-6196

Everglades National Park

For inquiries, contact the Nathaniel P. Reed Visitor Center at 239-695-4758.

Due to Hurricane Ian’s impact, the Gulf Coast Visitor Center is temporarily closed, but the canoe and kayak launch, parking lot, and covered pavilion remain accessible with limited services. Drinking water is not available. Concession boat tours are currently not operational due to ongoing construction. Everglades National Park, spanning 1.5 million acres of wetland in south Florida, offers diverse activities across its three separate entrances. Explore wildlife on the Anhinga Trail, savor panoramic views from Shark Valley’s observation tower, or paddle through mangroves on Nine-Mile Pond. With myriad options, Everglades National Park is an adventurer’s paradise waiting to be explored.

- Hiking, camping, fishing, canoe and kayak trails, boating, tours
- Gulf Coast Visitor Center**
815 Oyster Bar Lane, Everglades City
239-695-4758



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SWFL PARKS

■ Freedom Park

Explore the 50-acre Freedom Park in Naples, located at 1515 Golden Gate Parkway. Acquired in 2008, the park includes a 12.5-acre Conservation Collier portion, featuring a 3,500-foot boardwalk and trails with lookout pavilions. Open daily from 8 a.m. to dusk, the park offers vehicle access, free parking, and restrooms in the Exhibition Hall. The ongoing construction of the Freedom Memorial pays tribute to 9/11 and war heroes. Undergoing restoration, the park boasts freshwater marshes, native plants, and diverse wildlife, providing a tranquil retreat. Conservation Collier's acquisition emphasizes preserving native habitat, surface water resources, and connecting to existing conservation lands.

— 1515 Golden Gate Parkway, Naples

239-252-4062

■ Nancy Payton Preserve

Discover the 71-acre Nancy Payton Preserve's pine flatwoods, offering smooth hiking trails amidst native vegetation. With 147 plant species, including South Florida slash pine and Sabal palmetto, 82% native, the preserve teems with wildlife. From bobcats to Florida panthers, the habitat supports endangered species. Management efforts focus on enhancing red-cockaded woodpecker and gopher tortoise habitats. This refuge, crucial for native species, safeguards biodiversity in Collier County and beyond.

— Hiking trails, wildlife viewing
1540 Blue Sage Drive, Naples
239-252-2495

■ Picayune Strand State Forest

Critical to the Everglades, Picayune Strand State Forest, located at 1515 Golden Gate Parkway, Naples, safeguards ecological balance and wildlife habitats. Once logged and drained for a failed subdivision, it faced disruption from canal systems in the 1970s. Acquired for restoration, the 50,000-acre forest, managed by the Florida Forest Service, now serves vital roles in water quality improvement and public recreation. Explore trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding, witness diverse flora and fauna, or engage in freshwater fishing.



Cayo Costa
State Park

COURTESY PHOTO

— Biking, camping, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, seasonal hunting, paddling
2121 52nd Avenue SE, Naples
239-348-7557

LEE COUNTY

■ Cayo Costa State Park

Nestled within the protective embrace of the Charlotte Harbor Estuary, this unspoiled Gulf Coast Island is a sanctuary of wind-sculpted trees, inviting beaches, and the freedom to explore. Accessible solely by boat or kayak, Cayo Costa Island unveils 9 miles of undeveloped shoreline, inviting adventures in swimming, snorkeling, shelling, fishing, and birdwatching. The island is a haven for diverse wildlife, from abundant shorebirds to occasional manatees, porpoises, and sea turtles gracing the offshore waters. When the park is accessible, secure your visit with an online single-use day pass and immerse yourself in the wonders of Cayo Costa.

— 4 Nautical Miles West of Pine Island
(26.685789, -82.245381)
941-964-0375

■ Don Pedro Island State Park

A part of an extensive chain of barrier islands extending along Florida's Gulf Coast, Don Pedro is accessible only by private boat

or ferry. Boaters can tie up at the dock on the mangrove-lined bay side of the island.

— Boating, canoeing and kayaking, hiking/nature trail, picnicking, fishing, restrooms, swimming, wildlife viewing
Wednesday-Sunday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Closed on Monday and Tuesday.
8450 Placida Road, Placida
941-964-0375

■ Estero Bay Preserve State Park

Discover Estero Bay Preserve's natural wonders through rugged trails, traversing diverse uplands and showcasing abundant wildlife and native plants. Ideal for hiking, ensure you have sturdy footwear, insect repellent, sunscreen, and ample water. The preserve is dog-friendly, requiring pets to be leashed. Dive into unique ecosystems at the Estero River Scrub access, home to mesic flatwoods, scrub, salt flats, and various wildlife. Convenient amenities like pavilions, restrooms, and benches enhance your experience. Explore this natural beauty on foot, embracing nature's rich tapestry.

— Bicycling, boating, canoeing and kayaking, fishing, hiking/nature trail, restrooms, wildlife viewing
4940 Broadway West, Estero
239-992-0311

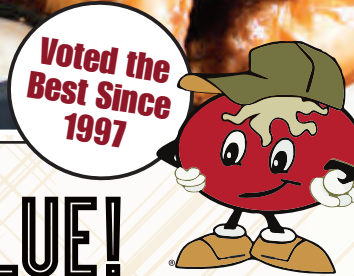


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SWFL PARKS



J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, Sanibel

COURTESY PHOTO

■ Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park

Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park unfurls its welcome to all, beckoning visitors to delve into its unspoiled natural wilderness. With a steadfast commitment to preserving its inherent essence, the park meticulously restricts facilities and activities, preserving an authentic and immersive communion with nature. Segmented into four primary zones, the park offers a journey through the scenic Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk, the picturesque East River reachable by appointment-only canoe launch, the tranquil Jones Grade lakes and trail ideal for fishing and kayaking, and the expansive Janes Memorial Scenic Drive granting access to an array of hiking and biking trails. Traverse the pristine landscapes and vibrant ecosystems, immersing oneself in the heart of Fakahatchee's untamed allure.

— Hiking/nature trail, tour, wildlife viewing
137 Coast Line Drive, Copeland
239-961-1925

■ Gasparilla Island State Park

Part of the Gulf Coast barrier islands, Gasparilla Island is adorned by the restored Port Boca Grande Lighthouse dating back to 1890. Activities like swimming, snorkeling, fishing, and shelling (best in winter) are enjoyed at the island's five accessible parking lots. Picnics with scenic views are possible at Sandspur and Boca Grande Lighthouse parking lots, both featuring pavilions. The lighthouse also hosts a museum, open for public exploration.

Accessible via the Boca Grande Causeway, this island sanctuary awaits at the south end of Gasparilla Island.

— Beaches, bicycling, canoeing and kayaking, fishing, hiking/nature trail, picnicking, restrooms, swimming, wildlife viewing
880 Belcher Road, Boca Grande
941-964-0375

■ J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge

Whether it's a first visit or a routine biking adventure, J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge extends a warm welcome to all. Begin at the FREE Visitor and Education Center, offering essential information, a nature store, engaging exhibits and noteworthy facilities. Explore the diverse ecosystems and migratory flyways showcased in exhibits, including a hands-on area for young enthusiasts. The refuge, part of the largest undeveloped mangrove ecosystem in the United States, is world-renowned

for its spectacular migratory bird populations. Embark on wildlife discovery through walking, biking, or driving the scenic four-mile Wildlife Drive, granting access to walking trails and canoe launches. Birdwatching and photography thrive with over 245 bird species residing within the refuge. Guided tram tours by Tarpon Bay Explorers unveil the Wildlife Drive, while water activities like stand-up paddleboarding and kayaking enhance the refuge experience.

— Bicycling, canoeing and kayaking, hiking/nature trail, picnicking, visitor center, wildlife viewing
1 Wildlife Drive, Sanibel
239-472-1100

■ Koreshan State Park

Nestled by the tranquil banks of the Estero River, Koreshan State Park unveils the compelling story of Florida pioneers. Once home to the Koreshans, a 19th-century religious sect led by Dr. Cyrus R. Teed, this place witnessed their unique beliefs in communal living and a universe inside the Earth. Immaculately restored historic buildings stand as a testament to their industrious lives, surrounded by lush gardens and ancient oaks. Amidst the peaceful ambiance of Fort Myers, this park offers a glimpse into a fascinating chapter of history and a chance to connect with nature's serenity.

— Boat ramp, camping, canoeing and kayaking, hiking/nature trail, historic site, fishing, picnicking, playground, restrooms, wildlife viewing
3800 Corkscrew Road, Estero
239-992-0311 ■



Port Boca Grande Lighthouse, Gasparilla Island State Park



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LOCAL FLAVOR

SWFL Spirited Mixologists Craft Memorable Cocktail and Cuisine Pairings

BY CARLIE ADMIRE

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Southwest Florida is known for pairing the fun in the sun lifestyle with hand-crafted cocktails and culinary delights! Bartenders of the favorite spots around town plated up their favorite duos as part of sharing Local Flavors of the sunshine state.

■ Bar Tulia

462 5th Avenue South, Naples

9118 Strada Place, Suite 8150, Naples

Bar Tulia opened its doors in 2014, incorporating a unique drink menu that complements the Italian influenced pub flare. Bar Tulia blends the cocktail style of Milan and New York with its highly skilled mixologist.

"I always recommend the Traveling Aztec and our Garganelli. Traveling Aztec is illegal Mezcal for the main liquor and mixed with tamarind lime, 10-year port wine, Campari, orgeat, and orange juice. It is a tiki styled drink and layered with both almond and fruitiness with a smokey taste. Our syrups and garnishes are made fresh and in house," said Andrew Cobaen, head bartender at Bar Tulia for four years.

He continued with, "I came up with this cocktail myself and we rotate our drink menu seasonally, about every six months. Traveling Aztec comes in a special themed glass and topped with mint and infused cherries."

Bar Tulia incorporates elements of Italy with imported beers and wine, flattering the small tapa style and full portion cuisines. This intimate bar is driven by fresh and flavorful ingredients prepared in traditional Italian style with unexpected zests.

"Gorganelli is lamb neck sugo with fennel seed, tomato, and pecorino romano. The twisted pasta and sauce make a heavier and richer dish and pairs perfectly with the refreshing tang of the cocktail. The smokey and herbal elements match the heartiness,"



Andrew Cobaen, head bartender at Bar Tulia.

COURTESY PHOTOS

said Cobaen. "We make our pasta fresh and daily here at our restaurant. During our Happy Hour menu, you can get a half plate, which is a partial serving and the Gorganelli is an option!"

■ Nice Guys Pints and Pies

1404 Cape Coral Parkway East, Cape Coral

Where flavor and passion collide! Nice Guys puts a twist on pizza and the artisan way of creating a cocktail. Lined with old fashion pinball machines and neon walls, Nice Guys also dishes out funky pies with hot honey and house-made ranch along with

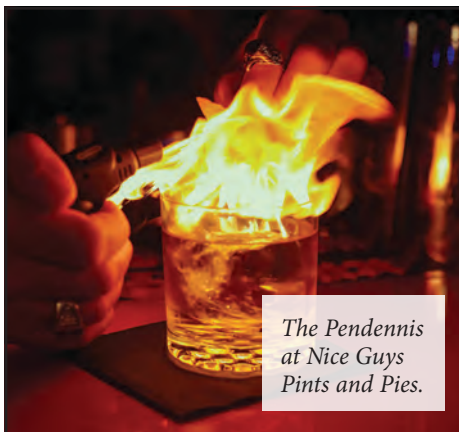
drinks on fire!

"We are a diverse and energetic atmosphere that allows us creativity to grow knowledge in mixing drinks and providing an elevated experience, with our live music and family-like patrons," said Zach Santana, who has been employed at Nice Guys for the past three years.

"My favorite pairing is The Washing Carver Pizza and the Pendennis. The Pendennis is an old fashion that makes you warm and tingly. The cocktail is prepared with house-made orange and black walnut bitters, a touch of sugar for balance, and a toasty grain forward bourbon. It is stirred with ice before being poured over a large cube in a rocks glass that is smoked to order over cherry wood. We then torch and express an orange peel over the beverage for an aromatic and citrusy perfume. The first sip greets you with richness and lingering charred wood notes, it is smooth with a hint of black pepper to finish," said Santana.

The Washington Carver Pizza is made with house peanut sauce and rich applewood smoked bacon, mozzarella, and topped with a healthy amount of house-made raspberry jam and sliced jalapenos.

"The pizza has a bit of heat! But the first bite out of the oven will change your life,"



The Pendennis at Nice Guys Pints and Pies.

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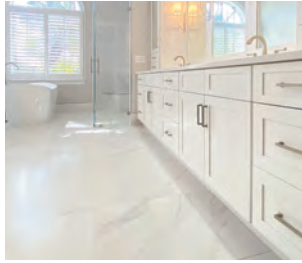
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LOCAL FLAVOR

joked Santana.

He continued with, “I always recommend this pairing to encourage our guests to explore non-traditional styles of food and beverages. Torching the wood to smoke the glass provides the guest with an experience and helps strike up a conversation about how we craft our drinks while enjoying our delicious menu items.”

The Washington Carver and Pendennis allows different flavor profiles to bond with the touches of smokiness and sweet from the jam and oranges.

“This cocktail and the Washington Carver Pizza go together like PB&J!” said Santana.

■ Doc Fords Rum Bar and Grille

2500 Island Inn Road, Sanibel

708 Fisherman’s Wharf,

Fort Myers Beach

610 2nd Avenue Northeast,

St. Petersburg

8790 Bay Pines Boulevard,

St. Petersburg

Doc Fords Rum Bar and Grille has four amazing locations with waterfront seating! Serving the freshest seafood and signature cocktails along with premium rum selections, Doc Fords is known for “a vacation on a plate!”

The mixture suggested is the Yucatan Shrimp and Tarpon Bay Breeze cocktail, bringing paradise in each sip!

Tomlinson traveled to the Bay of Ascension, Quintana Roo, Mexico to fish for bonefish and came back with this great recipe! Steamed peel-and-eat shrimp in a dressing of real butter, garlic, mild Colombian chilies, fresh cilantro, and key lime juice,” said bartender Brian Cruz. “I would pair with the cocktail, Tarpon Bay Breeze. It is made with toasted coconut rum, Blue Chair Bay Banana Rum, both pineapple juice and cranberry juice.”

Cruz continued with, “the drink is a fantastic combination of coconut and banana rum with tropical juices. It makes a very refreshing and light rum drink! Our Bay Breeze paired with our Yucatan Shrimp provides a refreshing contrast of sweet and refreshing with the slight spicy and citrus taste of the Yucatan Shrimp.”

Doc Ford’s Rum Bar and Grille takes pride in bringing flavors and styles from other countries and tying it into the Flor-



Yucatan Shrimp and Tarpon Bay Breeze cocktail at Doc Ford’s Rum Bar and Grille.

COURTESY PHOTOS

ida lifestyle.

“Come in and enjoy sitting on one of our covered outdoor patios overlooking Estero Bay with our Bay Breeze cocktail and signature Yucatan Shrimp,” said Cruz.



The Magnum Mary at Hooked Island Grill

■ Hooked Island Grill

9924 Gulf Coast Main Street, Fort Myers

Originally calling home to Matlacha, Hooked Island Grill has moved into Gulf Coast Town Center.

The seafood joint has a dynamic pair all into one order, the “Magnum Mary.” Hooked Island Grill is known for the visual delights of entrees, carefully crafted and plated, bringing an extra layer to the dining experience.

“Our Magnum Mary is a drink and meal all into one,” said Kyle Sherman of Hooked Island Grill. “Sail in and catch our weekend brunch from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday!”

“First we rim the glass with smoked paprika and old bay, next we add Ketel One and our Q Mixer Bloody Mary mix,” said Sherman. “Then we get to the fun! We add all the skewers! You get a pound of snow crab, three blacked shrimp, two strips of apple cider bacon, a mini lobster roll, queen stuffed olives, Wisconsin cheese curds, dill pickle chips, celery stalks, and finished with lemons and limes!”

He continued with, “It is the perfect Bloody Mary and fresh seafood bunch!”



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■ IceHouse Pub

408 Tamiami Trail, Suite 111, Punta Gorda

The Icehouse Pub is an authentic English pub and restaurant. This historic spot is built from an ice storage unit used in the late 1800s.

“The Fish n Chips with the Pimms Cup is the perfect pair! They go well together since the carbonation of the drink helps balance the fresh battered cod. It is the perfect selection to experience the taste of a classic British combo,” said Shannon Mercer of the Icehouse Pub.

The Icehouse is known for its hearty dishes and Guinness on draft, along with other traditional style cuisines.

She continued with, “Each and every order of fish is hand battered and fried to order with our house-made beer batter.” Fish n Chips is made with Belgian ale and served with a side of coleslaw and home-made tartar sauce. Choose a 4 oz or 8 oz portion.

“The Pimms Cup drink is a gin based English liquor that was made by James Pimm in the 19th century London. James Pimm owned an oyster bar and would offer his gin to help with the digestion of the heavier English style foods,” said Mercer. “This drink is sweet, fruity, and bubbly! My favorite part is the presentation. I add fresh cucumber, basil, and strawberries with the Pimm No. 1 and some fresh lime juice and a little bubbly.”

She laughed with, “I’ll let you in on a little secret, the cucumber is the best part!”

■ 10 Twenty-Five

**33 Patio De Leon, Fort Myers
1025 Santana Barbara Boulevard,
Cape Coral**

10 Twenty-Five brings together crafted cocktails and homestyle scratch kitchen entrees with indoor and outdoor seating and bar stools.

“The dish and drink pairing are our signature Elote Chicken Wings and The Bitter End cocktail,” said Emilee Werline, bartender at 10 Twenty-Five in downtown Fort Myers. “They are crispy fried wings doused in our chili lime aioli and then topped with street corn, cilantro, chopped jalapeno and cotija cheese. The perfect mix of savory and a hint of spice!”



*Elote Chicken Wings and
The Bitter End cocktail
at 10 Twenty-Five.*

Elote Chicken Wings come in a serving of six wings and plated with celery and ranch.

Werline continued with, “the Bitter End is a blend of Mezcal, Campari, pineapple, fresh lime, and agave. The mix of sweet pineapple and bitter Campari almost hints at the senses of grapefruit, but the cocktail is more so a crushable, smokey, tiki-style drink with a tongue-biting finish.”

“I would describe this pairing as an ele-

vated, craft version of the classic ‘taco and margarita’ duo. Personally, I enjoy familiarizing the public with the complex flavor and bold taste of Mezcal. As important as it is to make sure our guests are comfortable and be confident that they are ordering a cocktail they will enjoy, I find just as much joy in educating and challenging their taste buds,” she said.

“This pairing would be perfect for the outlandish and curious guest. The wings



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being one of our most popular items to date - the perfect blend of house-made Mexican flavors, coupled up with an original and sweet-smokey, not to mention boozy, cocktail. It makes for a satisfying lunch or dinner stop at 10 Twenty-Five in downtown Fort Myers!"

■ Rooftop at Riverside

27333 Old 41 Road, Bonita Springs

Nestled in the heart of downtown Bonita Springs, Rooftop at Riverside is a two-story bar and food truck hangout. Featuring hand-crafted cocktails and assortment of Southwest Florida's finest flavors.

"We make our own rum infused with pineapples and cinnamon and named these drinks after this community. The goal is to have people learn our history and keep them coming back," said Phil Willis.

Rooftop at Riverside has eight signature drinks named after the history of Florida. Banyan Burst salutes the regal Banyan tree, planted in 1921 and covers Reynolds Street and Old 41.

"My favorite drink to make is the Banyan Burst Watermelon Jalapeno Cooler! It just has so many fun elements to it and I love putting it all together. It is like I am doing a little dance as I grab bottles with both hands and shake it together!" said bartender Alyssa Jaen. "It has vodka, watermelon juice, bittersweet Apersol, and a sour finish. It is then topped with sparkling soda and fresh jalapeno kick!"

She continued with, "I really love the pizza truck we have here since they are gluten-free! The salads are also amazing!"

Zoey's Pizza is the featured truck on location, along with five other options.

"It is a brand-new truck I put together with my dad! You got to grab the Chick from Buffalo, which is our buffalo chicken pizza, it is my favorite!" said Zoey Lester of Zoey's Pizza. "It is flakey crust topped with mozzarella, wood fire chicken, banana peppers, pickled red onion, scallions, and finished with ranch and buffalo sauce."

Willis added, "the number one person here is always the guest. To sit back and enjoy the weather and view while sipping something good!"



Jefferson Oatts with the white negroni at Stretto Coastal Italian Table.

COURTESY PHOTOS

■ Stretto Coastal Italian Table at Sunseekers

5500 Sunseekers Way, Charlotte Harbor

Experience waterfront resort and dining experience within the Charlotte Harbor! Overlooking the Peace River with shopping and cuisines, open to the public to hangout and relax.

Pair the Chef's Charcuterie and Cheeseboard and White Gegrone from Chef Dave Blackburn at Stretto Coastal Italian Table. Stretto has traces of Italy within the menu, from the tip of the Italian boot to coastlines of Sicily.

"The white negroni is neoclassic cocktail. A spin-off of the Italian classic, and bartender favorite, the Negroni. While there is no standardized recipe for a white Negroni, the plot remains the same: A classic Italian profile that incorporates bitter and sweet liqueurs and is perfect before dinner. The big difference, the spirits are usually clear with a slight yellow hue,"



Turco Margarita and the Tinga Con Pollo Taco!

said Jefferson Oatts.

Continuing with, "I have been making this drink for several years. It is a bitter-sweet mix of Gin, Luxardo Bitter Bianco, and Bianco Vermouth stirred and poured over a coconut ice cube with grapefruit essence. As the coconut ice melts, the drink evolves and changes. Each sip delicious, but each sip different. The coconut brings a richness and tropicality that is delightful against the bracing bitterness of the typical aperitivo styled cocktail."

Chef's Cheeseboard includes seasonal selection of Italian meats and cheeses with marcona almonds, Florida honeycombs, and grilled bread.

"I love this combination at sunset while sitting at the bar or on the patio. The same way each sip changes, each bite from the charcuterie and cheese board is different than the last, and the sky is also changing as the minutes pass with the setting sun. It is a situational pairing that I love. Each moment is different than the last, and it just gets better-and-better," he said.

■ Turco Taco

**410 9th Street North, Naples
1514 Immokalee Road, Suite 116, Naples**

Turco Taco is known for using fresh, organic, and locally grown produce and balancing flavor with dietary restrictions from vegan, gluten-free, and keto lifestyles. Turco Taco creates smiles, one taco at a time.

"I would recommend the pair of our Turco Margarita and the Tinga Con Pollo Taco! The Turco Margarita is El Guirron agave, Triple Sec, with fresh lime juice, cane sugar, and filtered water," said Dragan Teov of Turco Taco. "The taco is handmade crispy corn tortilla shell, chicken in chipotle crema, organic romaine lettuce, sliced radish, and cotija cheese."

Teov continued with, "It tastes like heaven! The medium spicy from the Tinga Con Pollo Taco combined with the freshness of the lettuce and radish complements the sweet and savory margarita flavor. They go well together since the margarita is a very refreshing nature, it balances the level of spice within the taco."

Tinga Con Pollo Taco is priced at \$4.25 each and the signature margarita is \$7.

"The pair is going to create flavor exploration in your mouth!" said Teov. ■

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attractions, shopping and events to make a visit the best it can be. We also share some insider secrets to help visitors and new residents experience SWFL like a local.

■ **Arts Preview** (November and February) – Our definitive guide to what’s coming up in theater, music, festivals and more.

■ **Florida Weekly’s Best** (May) – Florida Weekly’s intrepid writers and editors scour South Florida looking for the best of everything and bestow dozens of Flamingo awards.

■ **Pet Lovers** (July) – A salute to our furry companions.

■ **Businesses of Distinction** (September or October depending on market) – Our nod to the local business community.

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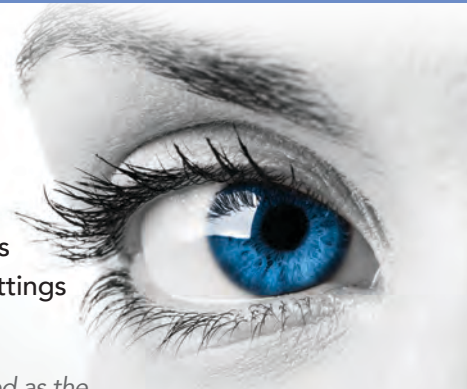
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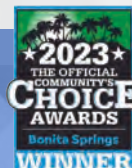


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SWFL GOLF



The National by Lennar at Ave Maria.

AVE MARIA DEVELOPMENT | AVE MARIA, FL

BY GLENN MILLER

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Pick almost any spot in Southwest Florida on a map, draw a circle around it with an estimated driving time of about an hour, then look for golf courses!

It won't take long to find dozens. Many dozens.

At Florida Gulf Coast University's Golf Management program, a count has been done. The program's website estimates there are 135-to-140 golf courses within an hour's drive of its Lee County campus.

Golf is a staple of the Southwest Florida economy and recreation and has been for more than a century, going back to the opening of the Fort Myers County Club in 1917.

"I honestly think golf put Southwest Florida on the map," said Tara McKenna, director of the FGCU golf management program.

Each golf course is business. Golf-



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ers generate more than drives off tees. They generate jobs. Take away those golf courses?

“There wouldn’t be the restaurants, the hotels,” McKenna said. “There wouldn’t be a need for that stuff.”

The impact is profound from the golfers paying greens fees to grabbing a bite to eat at a club’s snack shack to purchasing multimillion-dollar homes in gated golf communities.

McKenna cited Golf Life Navigators CEO Jason Becker as the source for these statistics:

- The annual marketplace national for private club membership and real estate sales is \$187 billion.
- Southwest Florida makes up about 2 percent of that market, which works out to between \$3 and \$4 billion annually.

More than a century since the Fort Myers County Club opened, golf continues its hold on the region.

A highlight of the winter season is the Chubb Classic at the the Tiburon Golf



Tara McKenna, director of the FGCU golf management program.

Club in Naples the PGA TOUR Champions event, with a purse of \$1.8 million, is played on Tiburon’s Black Course.

McKenna has witnessed much of the

region’s growth since first visiting in 2003.

“That’s when (U.S.) 41 was four lanes,” McKenna said, sitting in her second-floor office in Sugden Hall on the FGCU campus. “Estero was nothing. It was like open land and there were a still a lot of golf courses here. “

But now there are more.

“We are a destination for golf,” McKenna said.

We are now in the midst of golf season. The peak of golf and tourist season is January to around Easter.

“Busy, busy, busy,” McKenna said of that time of year.

A measure of the popularity of golf in the region comes from checking the South Florida Section of the PGA of America website. It lists 580 members in Collier, Lee, Charlotte, Glades and Hendry counties.

A quick glance around Southwest Florida shows the abundance of courses. Golf Digest reported 38 courses within

Paradise is calling.



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15 miles of Port Charlotte and Golflink reported 48 courses within 20 miles of that community.

Are all those courses within Charlotte County?

“Visitors don’t see county lines,” said Sean Doherty, tourism director for Charlotte County.

Some nearby courses may be just over a county line and in neighboring DeSoto County.

Just south of Charlotte County, Jeff Mielke, executive director of the Lee County Sports Development office said no study has been done on golf’s economic impact on the county.

But he knows “golf tourism is significant.”

That is certainly the case across the state in Palm Beach County, which has more than 160 courses.

The headliner golf event on the calendar there may be the Cognizant Classic in The Palm Beaches. The tournament, which boasts a \$9 million purse, is sched-



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uled for Feb. 26 to March 3 at the PGA National Champion Course.

What is golf's economic impact in Palm Beach County?

"We haven't done a specific economic study like we did for Major League Baseball," said George Linley, executive director of Palm Beach County Sports Commission.

While golf continues booming in Florida, that isn't the case everywhere.

"In the past 15 years, we'll call it, we actually lost more golf courses than we gained," McKenna said. "A net loss nationally."

A glance at the data showed 105 courses closed in 2022.

But Southwest Florida has added courses recently. Examples include Babcock National in Charlotte County, which opened in 2020.

Ave Maria, a town that was founded in 2005, now has two courses, The National Golf and Country Club in Ave Maria and Panther Run Golf Club.

McKenna keeps tabs on local golf clubs from the FGCU Golf Management Program. It is one of only 16 such programs around the country and it's no accident it is located in Southwest Florida.

"We're blessed with a great location," McKenna said.

That helps explain why there are about 140 golf



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courses with an hour's drive of campus. Each of those golf courses is an economic engine.

"The average club membership is anywhere from 300 to 400 people times 140 (clubs)," McKenna said. "When you do the math, that's a lot of people that are shopping at the stores and dining in the restaurants and driving on the roads and you know, I look at it, if you didn't have 140 golf clubs, what would you have here?"

Fewer restaurants. Fewer hotels. Fewer shops.

Golf, of course, is about more than economics and real estate. At its essence, this very difficult sport to master is about the vexing challenges plus the camaraderie of playing with friends.

What keeps people coming back to the links?

"I think because you get that one pure shot that brings you back you might have had 20 crappy ones prior to that but. ..., Oh, I got it," McKenna said.

The appeal is based on more than



those rare, serendipitous moments of golf swing bliss.

McKenna said part of golf's appeal is that it is a lifelong sport. And there's more.

"You're on a great piece of real estate,

the views are fantastic. You have four hours of socializing with friends and it's individual."

And in Southwest Florida a golf course is seemingly around every corner. ■

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BACK & BLOSSOMING



Balcony view at AC Hotel by Marriott Naples 5th Avenue.

AC HOTEL NAPLES 5TH AVENUE / COURTESY PHOTO

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA REBUILDS AND RENEWS WITH ROBUST VIGOR AND FRESHNESS.

BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

The coastline from Port Charlotte and Punta Gorda through Naples and Marco Island refuses to be defined by devastation. The region has thumbed its nose at Hurricane Ian as it not only recovers but reinvents and rejuvenates. Here we look at classic favorites that have bounced back and new silver linings cropping up as we move further from the eye of a villainous cat-4 storm.

Dining icons & inventions

Never in such a short time have so many new restaurants popped onto the scene, even as iconic spots pick themselves, dust themselves off and start all over again. Naples has seen a strong resurgence of its famed dining scene. Fifth Avenue South returns to its glitz, glamour and reputation for sidewalk cafes and gastronomy. Restaurateur-chef Vincenzo Betulia leads the pack with his Osteria Tulia, Bar Tulia and The French Brasserie Rustique. At The French, he has added a new layer of love with the opening of uber-elegant, speak-easy-style Rouge, tucked into the back. Seating

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BACK & BLOSSOMING

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A new trend, perhaps more post-pandemic-related than hurricane-inspired, restaurants are embracing “social” into their nomenclature, implying gathering, musically orchestrated components. New in Cape Coral, High Tide Social House spins off the popular Lobster Lady Seafood with a thing for creative pizza and a marina setting, while popular Jungle Bird Tiki has created another downtown pleasure, Front Porch Social. In Fort Myers, BackYard Social combines the trend with another for venues that collect several food experiences in one location.

The new Causeway Bonita food hall brings live music, three unique concept restaurants and a bakery-ice creamery to downtown Bonita Springs. Repurposed food containers serve as kitchens and a self-serve beer wall. Nearby Rooftop at Riverside adds still another popular local



Rouge is tucked into the back of The French Brasserie Rustique, Naples.

COURTESY PHOTO

trend of late – a rooftop bar – to its six food trucks model.

The hard-hit barrier islands welcome back old favorites like Dixie Fish Company on Fort Myers Beach, with its flip-flop,

waterside vibe; Sanibel fine-dining icon Cielo; and, on Captiva Island, Keylime Bistro, which also cloned in Boca Grande.

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BACK & BLOSSOMING

brated the debut of two innovative concepts: The Shipyard, providing a relaxed, nautical ambiance, and perched above it, commanding stunning views of the Gulf, the upscale Crow's Nest Steakhouse, renowned for its elevated cuisine and ambiance. Besides fine steaks, the latter touts its bourbon stock as it joins still another trend for whiskey bars. Warren American Whiskey Kitchen opened recently in Naples, and Whiskey Joe's Bar & Grill has broken ground in Port Charlotte.

Lodging renewed & new

In addition to Tween Waters, resorts like Fort Myers Beach's Pink Shell Beach Resort, Boca Grande's Gasparilla Inn, Sanibel Island Beach Resort and Edgewater Beach Hotel in Naples make their comebacks, better than ever. The Ritz-Carlton, Naples, has unveiled a totally updated, reimagined product that was underway before Ian hit.

Also in the works pre-hurricane, a



Sunseeker Resort in Port Charlotte

SUNSEEKER RESORT / COURTESY PHOTO

new crop of destination resorts and city hotels make the scene. Most notable are Sunseeker Resort in Port Charlotte and Margaritaville Fort Myers Beach. Both

opened earlier this winter to resounding applause. Another Jimmy Buffett-inspired brand, Compass by Margaritaville opened in Naples, exuding the same

A colorful advertisement for Mike Greenwell's U-Pick Farm. The background features a collage of fresh produce like strawberries, tomatoes, and blackberries. On the left, there's a logo for '31 PRODUCE & MINING CO.' featuring a strawberry character wearing sunglasses and giving a thumbs up. Below the logo, it says 'Free FARM ANIMAL PETTING ZOO!'. In the center, the text reads 'Mike Greenwell's U-PICK FARM' in large, stylized letters, followed by 'FAMILY OWNED & OPERATED SINCE 2008'. Below that, it says 'CRACKER SHACK CAFE! Open for Breakfast & Lunch Tuesday - Sunday 7:30am-2:30pm To-Go Orders: 239-543-2400'. At the bottom, it says 'We offer seasonal Strawberries, Tomatoes, Blackberries, and a variety of fruit trees for U-Pick! SOUTHWEST FLORIDA'S #1 gem and fossil mining!'. On the right, there are two photos: one of a man in a baseball cap holding a bat, and another of a man in a yellow shirt with children. At the bottom right, a large strawberry character with sunglasses and a thumbs up is featured. The bottom of the ad has a red banner with the text: 'Open Daily 9am-5:30pm • 239-313-8213 • www.31produce.com • 18672 State Rd 31 • Alva, FL 33920'.

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BACK & BLOSSOMING



The Fins Up! Beach Club at Margaritaville Fort Myers Beach opened earlier this winter.

COURTESY PHOTO

tropical, party-time air. The town also celebrated the opening of AC Hotel by Marriott Naples 5th Avenue, with its own rooftop bar and a sleek, Euro, understated look and feel.

Emerging neighborhoods, attractions redefined

The AC Marriott is part of the excitement building at the latest neighborhood sensation, Naples Design District. Watch for the grand opening of Gulfshore Playhouse's new Baker Theatre and cultural campus in the district for its first season later this year.

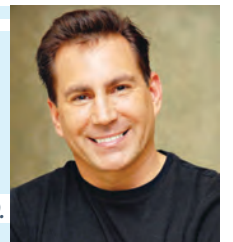
Downtown Bonita Springs continues its growth spurt with new restaurants, micro-breweries, a food truck complex and the metamorphosis of historic



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BACK & BLOSSOMING

Shangri-La Springs hotel and its Harvest & Wisdom organic brunch spot. Riverside Park grounds downtown with its stories of days gone by and glories of festivities throughout the year. Iconic Wonder Gardens is back to full operation and adding new programs like Mindfulness Walk and Wild World of Wonders Family Club.

On Sanibel Island, a fascination with nature and wildlife happily lives on. J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge has set the tone since 1945 and continues today as its trails and programs come back. The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum adds “& Aquarium” to its name as it reopens in stages and refocuses on living mollusks and conservation.

In a historic vein, the Sanibel Historic Museum and Village has done a stellar job of putting back together the past. On Fort Myers Beach, Mound House restored its role as cultural and recreational hub for the community, focusing on the Calusa tribe, which came here first.



J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island.

“DING” DARLING WILDLIFE SOCIETY-FRIENDS OF THE REFUGE / COURTESY PHOTO

Harold's



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Harold's was founded in 2015 by Harold Balink, one of the most well-known chefs in Southwest Florida. This upscale restaurant features a rotating weekly menu which features dishes that show the Chef's sensibilities. All dishes are made from scratch and farm-sourced.

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BACK & BLOSSOMING

Still event-full

The other big chunk in the Fort Myers Beach history puzzle dwells with the shrimp fleet at the San Carlos Island docks. The town again celebrates that heritage each March with the Lions Club Shrimp Festival on the beach. It is one of several seafood celebrations returning to recognize our briny bounty.

Everglades Seafood Festival in Everglades City is one of the oldest around, held in February. In Naples, Stone Crab Festival coincides with the opening of season in October. Punta Gorda and Fort Myers Seafood & Music Festivals take place in January.

Art festivals glorify local and national artists throughout the year, with the biggest in Naples, including March's Downtown Art Fair, and Fort Myers, whose ArtFest happens in February. Bonita Springs National Art Festivals fill Riverside Park with excitement three weekends in January, February and March.



The new Causeway Bonita food hall in downtown Bonita Springs.

COURTESY PHOTO

One of the region's oldest and flashiest local festivals in back, paying homage to Fort Myers former resident Thomas A. Edison. The Edison Festival of Light in February culminates in a lighted night

parade. Other lighted night parades involve decorated boats around the holidays, and you can find them in Fort Myers Beach, Cape Coral, Punta Gorda and Naples. ■

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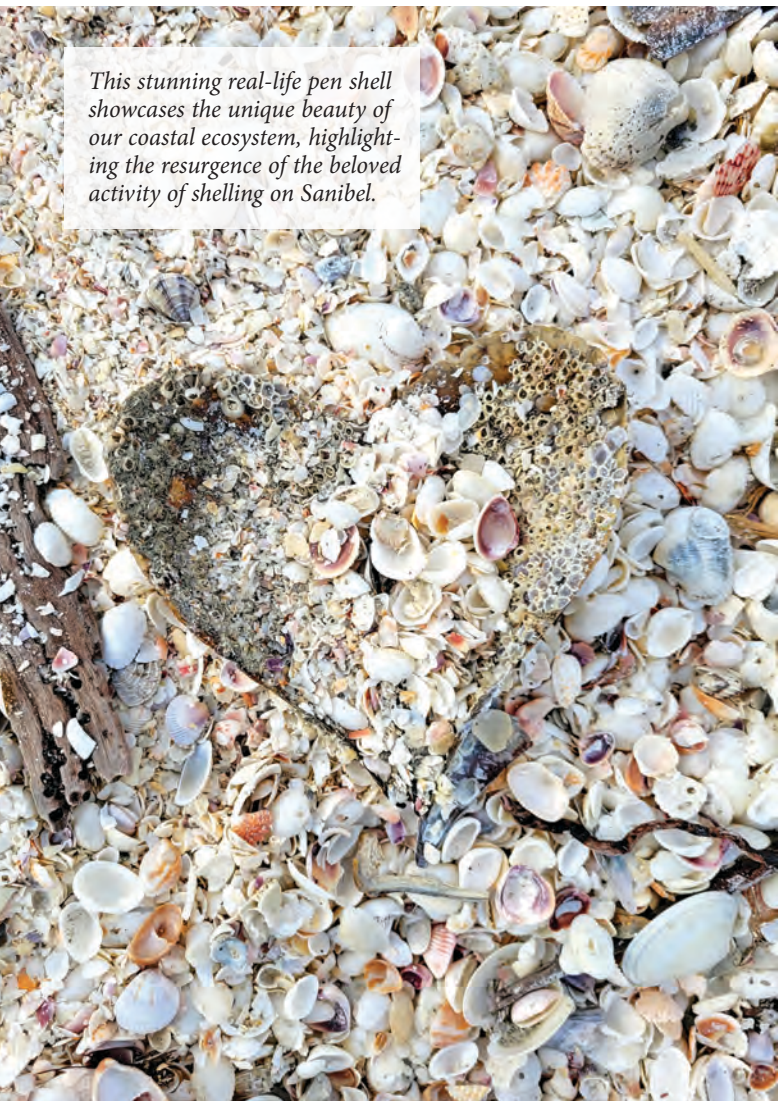
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CHARLOTTE COUNTY

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Pool: 941.629.0170

■ Stump Pass Beach State Park

In the southwest corner of Charlotte County lies a tranquil mile-long beach, where visitors can revel in year-round sunbathing and swimming. The winter months bring optimal shelling opportunities. A scenic hiking trail meanders through five distinct natural communities, creating a habitat for various wildlife species. Kayak enthusiasts can paddle around two islands located just east of the park. Keep an eye out for West Indian manatees, gopher tortoises, snowy egrets, least terns, and magnificent frigate birds. Ranger-led nature hikes are available during the winter, offering educational experiences in this coastal haven.

— Fishing, hiking, paddling, picnicking, scuba diving, snorkeling, swimming, tours, wildlife viewing
900 Gulf Boulevard, Englewood (South end of Manasota Key)
941-964-0375

COLLIER COUNTY

■ Barefoot Beach Preserve County Park

In the pinnacle of Collier County's coveted coastline, Barefoot Beach Preserve offers a serene retreat, encompassing 342 acres of natural land. Positioned as one of the last undeveloped barrier islands along Florida's Southwest coast, the preserve provides a haven for various animal species. The Barefoot Beach Access, situated 20 feet off Bonita Beach Road on Lely Barefoot Boulevard, offers a tranquil spot for sunbathers. To the south lies Barefoot Beach Preserve Park, while just north awaits Bonita Beach Park, creating an idyllic coastal escape for visitors.

— Restroom, showers, concessions with beach rental equipment, pavilion
505 Barefoot Beach Boulevard, Naples
239-252-4000

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SWFL BEACHES

Clam Pass Beach Park

Boasting 35 acres of coastal habitat, the park preserves its natural beauty, allowing visitors to access the sandy beach via a scenic three-quarter-mile boardwalk. Immerse yourself in the tranquility of Clam Pass Park, a perfect destination for nature lovers and beach enthusiasts alike.

- Beach wheelchair, bike racks, foot shower, free tram to the beach, guided nature walk, life jacket loaner program, parking booth attendant, restaurant, restrooms
- 465 Seagate Drive, Naples
239-252-4000

Vanderbilt Beach Park

Located in the sought-after North Naples area, Vanderbilt Beach Park stands out as one of the most favored beach accesses. Boasting a prime location near upscale hotels, this popular destination provides ample space, stunning white sand, and sea oats, creating an inviting atmosphere. While the



SETH WARREN / COURTESY PHOTO

beach offers abundant sun and sand during the tourist season, securing parking is recommended before 10 a.m. from January to March. With dedicated parking options, including a garage and on-street spaces, a short walk to the beach awaits those who ar-

rive early enough to enjoy this coastal gem.

- Beach wheelchairs, bike racks, foot showers, life jacket loaner program, parking garage availability, restrooms, toll booth attendant
- 100 Vanderbilt Beach Road, Naples
239-252-4000



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SWFL BEACHES



LEE COUNTY VISITOR AND CONVENTION BUREAU

LEE COUNTY

■ **Bonita Beach Park**

Positioned between Fort Myers Beach and Bonita Springs, a 2.5-acre beachfront park unfolds with a boardwalk and swimming area. Embraced by sand dunes and coastal vegetation, the park features a gazebo and eight picnic shelters, creating tranquil retreats. Access is made easy with bus and trolley services available, and a parking fee of \$2 per hour ensures convenient visits.

— Beach access, paddlecraft landing/launch, restrooms
27954 Hickory Boulevard, Bonita Springs
239-229-0632

■ **Bowman's Beach**

Tucked away and picturesque, this beach stands as a prime destination on Sanibel. Renowned for its excellent shelling opportunities and well-appointed amenities, it's worth the brief five-minute hike from the parking area. For the adventurous beachcomber, several miles of unobstructed white sand beaches adorned with shells await exploration. Unlike the more developed parts of the islands, Bowman's Beach maintains a pristine shoreline, offering a serene escape surrounded by natural beauty.

— Beach access, charcoal grills, fishing, fitness stations, hiking trails, paddlecraft landing/launch, pavilion, playground, restrooms, showers
— 1700 Bowmans Beach Road, Sanibel
239-472-6397

■ **Fort Myers Beach**

On Estero Island's southwest Florida coast, Fort Myers Beach presents 29 public beach accesses, such as Newton Beach Park and Seven Seas Cottage. Easily reached from Estero Boulevard, these spots offer parking and ADA features. With seven miles of sandy beaches, vibrant shops, and unique cultural spots, Fort Myers Beach stands resilient, making remarkable strides in its recovery from one of the world's top five most catastrophic natural disasters.

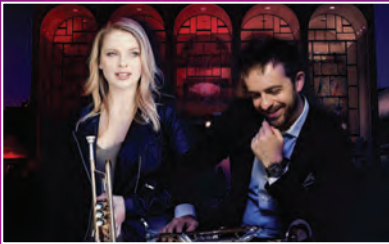
— Fort Myers Beach Town Hall
2525 Estero Boulevard
239-765-0202

Jukebox Music Series



JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER PRESENTS SING & SWING

MONDAY, MARCH 11 at 8PM



Jazz at Lincoln Center PRESENTS celebrates the Great American Songbook in all of its playful and sophisticated glory brought to life by two of this generation's brightest stars. Each armed with prodigious trumpet talent and vocal charm, Bria Skonberg and Benny Benack III will relive and re-imagine some of the classic partners in jazz and popular song, including Ella Fitzgerald, Judy Garland and Bing Crosby, Dean Martin, and Peggy Lee. Featuring songs by Gershwin, Ellington, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and many more, and joined by a who's who of New York all-stars, this is an unforgettable evening of singin' and swingin' with Bria and Benny.



REMEMBERING BOBBY VEE

MONDAY, MARCH 25 at 8PM

A joy-filled ride through the music and life of Bobby Vee and his contemporaries, including Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Ricky Nelson, Del Shannon, The Shirelles, and others, performed by Bobby's sons, nephew, and grandson. Celebrating the Legacy of Bobby Vee and the Golden Era of '50s & 60's Rock 'n Roll! Songs include: *Take Care of My Baby, Runaway, Garden Party, The Night Has a Thousand Eyes, Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow, The Locomotion, That'll Be the Day*, and many others.

EVREN OZEL, PIANO

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13 at 2PM

American pianist **Evren Ozel** began his musical studies at age 3 in his hometown of Minneapolis, MN. He has won numerous honors and awards including first prize at the 2016 Boston Symphony Concerto Competition. Most recently, he received second prize and special prizes for Best Mazurka and Best Polonaise at the 2020 U.S. National Chopin Competition securing the honor of representing the U.S.A in the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, Poland in October 2021. Ozel has performed with orchestras such as the Cleveland Orchestra, Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, RTE National Symphony, and Boston Pops among others.

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FRIDAY & SATURDAY NIGHT at 8 PM



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ABBACADABRA - THE ULTIMATE ABBA TRIBUTE

TUESDAY, MARCH 19 at 8PM



Dust off the leisure suits! Shine up those platform shoes! Be transported back to a simpler time -**ABBACADABRA**, The Ultimate ABBA Tribute is coming to the Duncan Theatre; experience decades of your favorite ABBA hits performed by some of the most talented performers in the game. This high-energy show will have you singing and dancing in the aisles by performing 20 of the group's greatest hits in full ABBA flair. "Mamma Mia!", "S.O.S.", "Super Trooper", "Take a Chance on Me", "Waterloo" and "Dancing Queen" are re-created with such precision you'll swear you were listening to the originals themselves.

SWFL BEACHES

■ **Lovers Key State Park**

Now open for limited day-use activities, including tram services from 8 a.m. to sunset, providing transportation to within 800 feet of the 2-mile beach, accessible by boardwalk or tram. Paddling equipment, beach chairs and umbrellas are available for rent. The gift shop offers cold drinks and some merchandise. The Discovery Center is open Wednesday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The boat ramp is open with limited parking. Please follow posted signs and note that the park does not have electricity. This park is also a haven for wildlife, with the islands and their waters being home to West Indian manatees, bottlenose dolphins, roseate spoonbills, marsh rabbits and bald eagles.

— Beaches, bicycling, boat ramp, canoeing and kayaking, fishing, concession and restaurant, hiking/nature trail, picnicking, playground, restrooms, showers, swimming, tours, visitor center, wildlife viewing



Lovers Key State Park tram

8700 Estero Blvd, Fort Myers Beach
239-463-4588

■ **Lynn Hall Memorial Park**

Situated on Ft. Myers Beach, Lynn Hall Memorial Park is a vibrant Gulf-front oasis located just north of the Matanzas Pass Bridge, alongside the bustling “Times Square” in downtown. Boasting a lively atmosphere, this park offers a per-

fect blend of coastal charm and urban convenience, as it is conveniently positioned near shopping outlets and restaurants. Discover a dynamic waterfront experience at Lynn Hall Memorial Park, where the beauty of the Gulf meets the lively heart of downtown.

— Beach access, restrooms
950 Estero Boulevard, Fort Myers Beach
239-823-1447 ■

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AMAZING MUSEUMS

SWFL'S MUSEUM ODYSSEY: A CHRONICLE OF ART, HISTORY AND NATURAL WONDERS

BY NANCI THEORET

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Museums abound throughout Southwest Florida. Some of them connect visitors to the local color and quirkiness of the region that no doubt inspired tales of “a Florida man” long ago. There’s also an authentic Seminole trading post deep in the Everglades where an infamous murder took place. And there’s a one-time roadside attraction that today promises visitors a look at real live gators, colorful birds and botanical wonders.

We also have museums for kids, autophiles and art aficionados, as well as one reminding us to never forget the horrors of the Holocaust and the will to survive, and at least three museums



REVS Institute, Naples

COURTESY PHOTO

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AMAZING MUSEUMS

dedicated to America's military history.

■ America's Military & First Responders Museum

Spanning the Revolutionary War to the war in Afghanistan, this hidden gem at the Naples Airport honors all military branches, its 800-square-foot is jam-packed with memorabilia including Medals of Honor, uniforms, weapons, flight suits, photos, model planes and battleships donated by veterans and their families. There's even a Civil War surgeon's medical bag with bone saws. Much of its 10,000-plus collection is warehoused; displays honoring first responders are currently on loan to NCH.

The POW/MIA memorial table honors those who gave all, with each element — from the white of the tablecloth to the upended goblet — chosen for its symbolism. 1,952 American flags pinned to an oversized Florida state flag serve as a reminder of Florida's fallen Vietnam soldiers killed and missing in action. A

kamikaze flag boasting the traditional signatures of villagers and commanders and a display with a red swastika armband, Nazi-era German work permits and weapons are a somber reference of hatred.

Hmm, how'd that happen? One of the more curious items is an instrument panel from a Huey helicopter purportedly flown in combat during the Vietnam War — origins unknown, for the record. Another fan favorite is the 1939 WWII Harley-Davidson carrier pigeon bicycle.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Saturday; noon to 3 p.m. Sunday

Admission: Free

— 500 Terminal Drive, Naples
614-205-0357, amfrm.org

— *In addition to the Naples Veterans Museum, there are other noteworthy military museums in the area. The SWFL Military Museum & Library, located at 4125 Cleveland Avenue inside Edison Mall in Fort Myers, can be explored at swflmm.*

org. Another notable destination is the Military Heritage Museum, at 900 West Marion Avenue in Punta Gorda, where visitors can go to militaryheritagemuseum.org for more information.

■ The Baker Museum

Take your time: Spend an hour or two exploring The Baker Museum's large-scale outdoor installations, the most concentrated collection of public sculptures in the U.S. Better yet, join a docent tour at 10 a.m. any Thursday.

Must-see: A mainstay since the museum's opening, "Persian Seaform Ceiling" by renowned multimedia artist Dale Chihuly demonstrates why he's the master of glass as light plays with 1,028 pieces of blown glass, creating an ethereal under-the-sea ambiance. Among the museum's permanent collection of mostly modern and contemporary art, you literally can't miss the 25-foot "Dawn's Forest," illustrating Louise Nevelson's iconic assemblage style.

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AMAZING MUSEUMS

The Baker Museum, Naples



COURTESY PHOTO

2024 Highlights: Come see “Botanical Revolution” that displays repurposed clothing and other textile art inspired by

the bird and plant life of Southwest Florida through April 7. “Selections from the Ahmet Ertegun Collection” features a re-

markable selection of modern art of the United States that demonstrates Ertegun’s comprehension of rhythm, pattern and color through June 16. Discover “Tradition Interrupted” (May 4 – July 28), where 12 artists blend old customs with innovative techniques, disrupting tradition while honoring the past across rugs, mosaics, metalworks and ceramics.

Take in the sunset: Art After Hours from 6 to 9 p.m. on March 27, April 24, May 29, June 26, July 31, and Aug. 28. This fun evening of art and entertainment caters to audiences of all ages, featuring live music by local musicians, delightful food offerings, and complimentary admission to all museum exhibitions.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; noon to 4 p.m. Sunday (closed Monday)

Admission: \$10 adults, \$5 students, free for children 17 and younger.

— 5833 Pelican Bay Blvd., Naples
239-597-1900, artisnaples.org/baker-museum

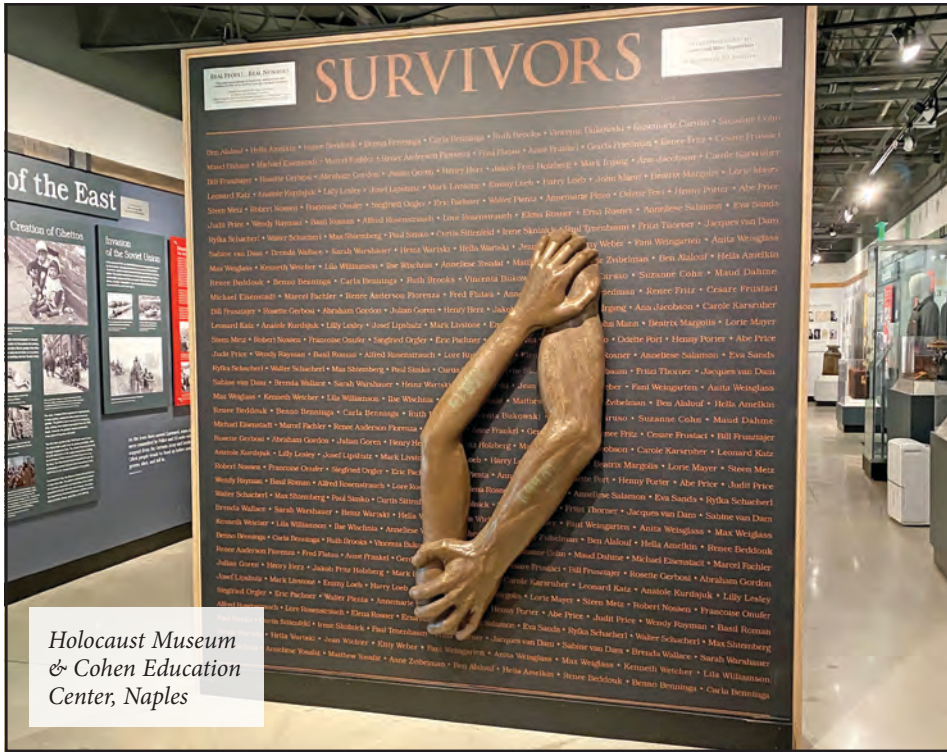


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AMAZING MUSEUMS



COURTESY PHOTO

■ C'mon: Golisano Children's Museum of Naples

Primarily screen-free, C'mon proves play has no age limit, delivering an immersive, fun, and educational experience for children and families. Here, kids can build a spaceship (and fly far away), stage a rocket launch, tend to animals at a pet vet, journey through the Everglades, and explore the world around them.


Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday-Sunday (closed Wednesday)

Admission: \$20 general, \$15 local residents, \$10 for first responders, \$2 for EBT, SNAP and WIC cardholders, free for members, children under 1 and local teachers


— 15080 Livingston Road, Naples
239-514-0084, cmon.org

■ Holocaust Museum & Cohen Education Center

What to expect: Visitors embark on a



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AMAZING MUSEUMS

chronological journey through history's darkest days — from Jewish life between the two world wars, the rise of the Nazi party and the horrors of concentration and slave labor camps to Allied liberation and the Nuremberg Trials. With more than 1,000 WWII, Holocaust artifacts and original photographs, you'll learn about odds-defying reunions and heroes who harbored families as told by Southwest Florida survivors, their families and liberators.

Hours: 1-4 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, closed Monday

Admission: \$15 at the door, \$13 online

— 975 Imperial Golf Course Boulevard, Suite 108, Naples
239-263-9200, hmcec.org

■ **IMAG History & Science Center**

Discover a world like never before at the IMAG, where you'll explore Southwest Florida in ways that are truly unparalleled. Wander through its rich history, soar through its atmospheric conditions, and interact with its creatures up close.



C'mon: Golisano Children's Museum of Naples.

Engage in a hands-on experience by feeding stingrays in the SEA-to-SEE Touch Tank, unleash your creativity in the Engineering Lab, and encounter the vibrant web of life in the Animal Lab—from the majestic Tegu to the Florida Box Turtle. Command the forces shaping our world with the interactive Science on a Sphere, experience the dynamics of our planet in

the Science of Motion, and find endless possibilities at the IMAG, catering to individuals of all ages.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Thursday-Saturday, closed Tuesday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: \$19.50 for adults, \$15 for college students (with ID) and children ages 3 to 18, free for children under age 2

—2000 Cranford Avenue, Fort Myers
239-243-0043, theimag.org

■ **REVS Institute**

While car enthusiasts and gearheads may initially come to mind as the primary audience, the nonprofit Revs Institute holds a revered status among researchers, restoration experts, scholars, and anyone eager to explore how the advent of the automobile has forever shaped daily life, influencing both society and sport.

Positioning the automobile as a form of art, the institute boasts a collection of over 100 historically significant vehicles built between 1896 and 1995, sourced

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AMAZING MUSEUMS

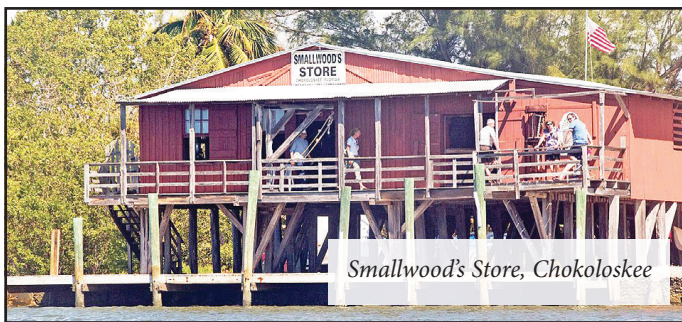
from the personal collection of founder Miles Collier. Collier's family, credited with introducing sports car racing to the U.S., has left an indelible mark on automotive history. The displays serve as a captivating roadmap and historic timeline, guiding visitors through the evolution of the automobile—from its infancy to the exhilaration of the open road, the quest for speed, and the race-winning excellence of Porsche.

For those seeking a deeper understanding, insider intel suggests embarking on a docent-led tour and a behind-the-scenes walk-through of Rev's operational workshop. Here, cars undergo meticulous restoration, returning to both working condition and their former aesthetic glory. Additionally, visitors can preview the online collection, offering a glimpse of cars not currently displayed. The collection can be explored by manufacturer, year, and keywords, unveiling hidden gems like the rare 1961 Citroën 2CV Sahara and a 1901 carriage-like Benz Dos-à-Dos that surfaced with a simple "rare" search.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday

Admission: \$20, docent tours \$30, docent/workshop \$35. Online reservations are required.

— 2500 Horseshoe Drive South, Naples
239-687-7387, revsinstitute.org



COURTESY PHOTO

■ Smallwood's Store

Perched above Chokoloskee Bay in the Ten Thousand Islands and steeped in history since its opening in 1906, this store-turned-museum, a National Register of Historic Places site, is a treasure trove of ancient Calusa artifacts. Reflecting its origins as a Seminole trading post, the museum showcases original furs, animal pelts, and carvings. In its heyday, this establishment served as the only market and post office in the wild western Everglades wilderness.

The store gained notoriety when townsfolk gunned down the Wild West outlaw and suspected murderer Edgar J. Watson right outside its doors in 1910, an event immortalized in the 1990 novel "Killing Mr. Watson."

Boat tours around the bay often offer glimpses of the critically endangered smalltooth sawfish, which favors these waters. Adding to the experience, kids revel in the novelty of sipping an ice-cold Coca-Cola dispensed by a meticulously restored vending machine. The Tigertail gift shop pays homage to Seminole Chief

Charlie Tigertail, featuring authentic Seminole crafts and local artwork, providing a charming blend of history, nature, and local culture.

Hours: December-April, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; May-November, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily

Admission: \$5

— 360 Mamie Street, Chokoloskee
239-695-2989, smallwoodstore.com

■ Wonder Gardens

Established in 1936 as a roadside attraction, the Everglades Wonder Gardens in Bonita Springs dropped "Everglades" from its name in 2020. The nonprofit Wonder Gardens, once known for attractions like the swinging bridge over the alligator pit and alligator feedings, has transformed into a vibrant botanical garden. Now focused on local flora and fauna, it provides a sanctuary for over 300 rescued reptiles and birds, including juvenile gators, free-range peacocks, and lively flamingos.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily

Admission: \$12 for adults, \$7 for children ages 4 through 12, \$10 for seniors.

— 27180 Old 41 Road, Bonita Springs
239-992-2591, wondergardens.org

— *Naples Botanical Garden also celebrates Southwest Florida's native flora (and other subtropical and tropical flora around the world), as does the Peace River Botanical & Sculpture Gardens in Punta Gorda. Find out more at naplesgarden.org and at peacrivergardens.org.* ■

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SWFL SPORTS

A CLOSER LOOK AT SPORTING PASSION THAT DEFINES SOUTHWEST FLORIDA



Red Sox spring training, JetBlue Park, Fort Myers

COURTESY PHOTO

BY GLENN MILLER

Florida Weekly Correspondent

The world contains about 2,600 species of palm trees but only 12 are native to Florida.

Florida seems to have as many sporting passions as palm trees. That's certainly true here in our corner of the state, Southwest Florida. It is home to perhaps 200 golf courses, four Major League Baseball spring training teams and a division 1 collegiate athletic program.

That's at Florida Gulf Coast University.

Then there are recreational sports of many species, or varieties.

That includes pickle ball, tennis, bowling, running, cycling, disc golf, traditional golf, baseball, softball, kayaking, swimming, volleyball, basketball, bocce, track, croquet and

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SWFL SPORTS

even at least one athlete who excels in the luge.

Luge?

Isn't that a winter sport in which athletes go hurtling down mountains on a sled the size, it seems, of a kitchen table?

Yes.

But there aren't mountains or snow around here, as all residents and visitors can plainly see.

But in January a 16-year-old Iona resident named Isabela Aponte competed in luge in the 2024 Winter Youth Olympics in South Korea.

Incredibly and almost inexplicably, Southwest Florida can boast a winter sports tradition going back decades.

Naples resident Brian Shimer competed in five grown-up Olympics in the bobsled from 1988 to 2002 and even become for a time the coach of what is officially called the United States Bobsled and Skeleton Federation.

Not many sports fans likely know much about steeplechase, a track and field event that involves running, leaping over hurdles and splashing through water. It is an Olympic sport.

Fort Myers High School graduate Kris-ty Gear excels in the 3,000-meter event, which became an Olympic event for women in 2008. Gear won the national steeplechase title in July in Eugene, Oregon. That qualified her for the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest, Hungary. She finished seventh in her heat and failed to qualify to move forward.

No matter where one turns or drives or walks or runs in Southwest Florida, one will likely encounter athletes and sporting events.

There are way too many to mention here but a quick overview will provide perspective on the active lifestyle and spectating options available in the region.

THE COLLEGES

Florida SouthWestern State College has become a juggernaut in national junior college sports.

The Bucs' cavalcade of champions may start with the softball team, which has won three consecutive national titles. Three!

The Bucs entered 2024 perhaps poised to win another. They began the season ranked No. 1 in the pre-season national poll.

The volleyball team is also a national



Florida SouthWestern State College softball team has celebrated three consecutive national titles.

COURTESY PHOTO

power, winning its second successive national JUCO championship in 2023. Outside hitter Alondra Alarcon was named the national player of the year by Volleyball-Mag.com.

Other sports at FSW have set their sights on replicating the success of the softball and volleyball teams in recent years.

The FSW baseball team was ranked No. 16 in the nation in the pre-season poll in January.

A short drive away at Florida Gulf Coast University the women's basketball is a dominant power in the Atlantic Sun Conference. The Eagles have won five consecutive conference titles and, in those seasons, have a combined record of 79-3 in conference play.

FGCU also has teams in baseball, softball, men's basketball, soccer, tennis and women's swimming and diving, cross-country, golf, indoor and beach volleyball.

The most famous athletic alum of the school is pitcher Chris Sale, a seven-time All-Star who is now with the Atlanta Braves. He previously pitched for the Boston Red Sox.

The Red Sox and Braves both have spring training in Southwest Florida. The Red Sox train at JetBlue Park in Fort Myers and the Braves call CoolToday Park in North Port

their spring training home.

Speaking of professional sports...

THE PROS

This time of year, in this land of sunshine and warm weather, though, a bigger focus than bobsled or luge is spring training baseball.

The region has a history of big-league spring training going back nearly a century, to 1925 when the Philadelphia A's started training at Terry Park in Fort Myers.

But professional spring training goes back even further. The minor-league Louisville Colonels held spring training in Fort Myers in 1914.

Now, the city is home every year for two big-league teams who each have been calling this their spring-training destination for more than 30 years.

The Minnesota Twins have been here since 1991 when they moved from Orlando into the Lee County Sports Complex. The Boston Red Sox have trained in Fort Myers since 1993, first at City of Palms Park and since 2012 at JetBlue Park.

The Tampa Bay Rays, who play their regular season games at Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, have called the Charlotte Sports Park in Port Charlotte their spring home since 2009. It's only about 75 miles

SWFL SPORTS

south of their regular-season home.

The Rays, though, returned to St. Pete in 2023 for spring training because of Hurricane Ian damage at the Charlotte Sports Park forcing a move for one year. They are back this year in Charlotte County.

The Atlanta Braves have trained at CoolToday Park in North Port since 2019.

Southwest Florida professional sports include more than Major League Baseball.

There is a minor-league baseball team, the Fort Myers Mighty Mussels of the Florida State League. There is also a minor-league hockey team, the Florida Everblades of the ECHL.

Both teams have been fixtures on the local sports scene since the 1990s.

The Mighty Mussels began life at the Lee County Sports Complex as the Fort Myers Miracle in 1992. They are affiliated with the big-league Twins and former players of the team include two men who are now Hall of Famers.

David Ortiz, the man known as Big Papi, played for the Miracle in 1997 and later the Twins before going on to fame as a Red Sox slugger. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2022.

Former Miracle catcher Joe Mauer, who won three American League batting titles with the Twins, was elected to the Hall of Fame in January and will be inducted into the Cooperstown shrine this summer.

The Everblades have been a part of the Southwest Florida sports landscape nearly as long as the Miracle/Mussels.

The Everblades started playing at what is now called Hertz Arena in 1998. They are affiliates of the Florida Panthers of the NHL and the Charlotte Checkers of the American Hockey League.

The list of local pro teams continues growing.

In January, an expansion team in the United Soccer League was awarded to Naples and will play at the Paradise Coast Sports Complex starting in 2025.

Clearly, Southwest Florida offers a wide range of sports options.

But don't expect luge competition anytime soon. ■



Twins spring training, Lee Health Sports Complex, Fort Myers

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— 350 S. McCall Road
941-474-5548, ringling.edu/EAC

■ Langdon Playhouse

A venue of the Charlotte Players

— 1182 Market Circle Street, Murdock
941-625-4175 ext. 220, charlotteplayers.org

■ Lemon Bay Playhouse

— 96 West Dearborn Street, Englewood

941-475-6756, lemonbayplayhouse.com

■ Military Heritage Museum

Home of the 247-seat Gulf Theater

— 900 W. Marion Avenue, Punta Gorda
941-205-8545, gulftheater.org

■ The Charlotte Performing Arts Center

— 701 Carmalita Street, Punta Gorda
info@thecpac.net, thecpac.net

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The portrait studio at the Visual Arts Center, Punta Gorda.

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■ Cambier Park Bandshell

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■ **Gulfshore Playhouse**

—755 8th Avenue South, Naples
866-811-4111, gulfshoreplayhouse.org

■ **Naples Art Institute**

— 585 Park Street
239-262-6517, naplesart.org

■ **The Naples Players**

— 701 Fifth Avenue South
239-434-7340, naplesplayers.org

■ **TheatreZone**

— Community School of Naples, 13275 Livingston Road
888-966-3352, theatrezone-florida.com

LEE COUNTY

■ **Alliance for the Arts**

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— 10091 McGregor Boulevard, Fort Myers
239-939-2787, artinlee.org

■ **Arts Bonita**

— 26100 Old 41 Road, Bonita Springs
239-495-8989
artcenterbonita.org

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239-481-4849, bbmannpah.com

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— 8099 College Parkway,
Fort Myers
239-489-9313,
bobrauschenberggallery.com

■ **Broadway Palm**

— 1380 College Parkway,
Fort Myers
239-278-4422
broadwaypalm.com

■ **Cultural Park Theater**

— 528 Cultural Park Boulevard,
Cape Coral
239-772-5862,
culturalparktheater.com

■ **FGCU Bower School of Music**

— 10501 FGCU Boulevard, Fort
Myers
239-590-1000,
fgcu.edu/cas/bsm/concerts

■ **Florida Repertory Theatre**

— 2268 Bay Street, Fort Myers
239-332-4488, floridarep.org

■ **Gulf Coast Symphony**

— Performances at various
locations in Lee County
239-277-1700,
gulfcoastsymphony.org

■ **Laboratory Theater of Florida**

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Florida Repertory Theatre,
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■ Fishermen's Village

On the Punta Gorda waterfront of Charlotte Harbor, Fishermen's Village has become a stay-and-play destination. With more than 30 shops, restaurants and services, a resort and marina, plus frequent special events, it's a perfect place to come for a day of shopping or for an entire vacation.

— 1200 West Retta Esplanade
800-639-0020, fishermensvillage.com

■ Port Charlotte Town Center

More than 100 specialty stores and places to grab a bite for every budget mark this Charlotte County institution, anchored by Macy's, JCPenney, Dillard's and Bealls. There's also a Regal Cinemas.

— 1441 Tamiami Trail
941-624-4833, portcharlottetowncenter.com
Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Sunday, noon-6 p.m.

COLLIER COUNTY

■ Coastland Center

Opened in 1976, Coastland Center is anchored by Macy's, JCPenney and Dillard's. In all, there are more than 130 places to shop and dine.

— 1900 Tamiami Trail N., Naples
239-262-2323, coastlandcenter.com
Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Sunday, noon - 6 p.m.

■ Fifth Avenue South

Naples' Fifth Avenue South is a timeless mix of glamour and laid-back ease for shopping, dining and entertainment. Historic and modern architecture blend in eclectic sophistication, and tropical blooms grace its pedestrian-friendly promenades.

—Fifth Avenue South, Naples
239-692-8436, fifthavenuesouth.com

■ Mercato

Anchored by Whole Foods Market and Silverspot Cinema, Mercato offers upscale retailers and luxury residential condominiums. The year-round event calendar includes live music, festivals and fairs, most of which are free.

— 9132 Strada Place, North Naples
239-254-1080, mercatoshops.com
Monday - Saturday, 10 a.m. - 9 p.m.
Sunday, noon - 6 p.m.



■ The Village on Venetian Bay

Set on the waterfront of Venetian Bay, the village encompasses almost 50 shops and restaurants. Be sure to check out the special events calendar.

— 4200 Gulf Shore Boulevard North, Naples
239-261-6100, venetianvillage.com

■ Third Street South

Delightful shopping and dining on historic Third Street South await amidst courtyards, antique European fountains and colorful, cascading flowers.

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SWFL SHOPPING

■ **Waterside Shops**

A collection luxury brand retailers from around the world and elegant dining options in a tranquil, outdoor environment. Anchored by Saks Fifth Avenue, the center's 60-plus stores include Gucci, Johnny Was, Lilly Pulitzer, Lululemon, Tiffany & Co., Tory Burch, Van Cleef & Arpels, St. John and Tesla.

— 5415 Tamiami Trail N., Naples
239-598-1605, watersideshops.com

LEE COUNTY

■ **Bell Tower**

Here you'll find everything from groceries and other everyday essentials to custom-made jewelry, boutique apparel, books and great home decor and gifts. Food and entertainment options make Bell Tower a great place to connect any time of day.

— U.S. 41 at Daniels Parkway, Fort Myers
239-489-1221, belltowerfl.com
Sunday-Wednesday, 11 a.m. - 9 p.m.
Thursday-Saturday, 11 a.m. - 10 p.m.

■ **Coconut Point**

This picturesque open-air mall has more than 140 stores, from Dillard's and Target to Lilly Pulitzer, Banana Republic and the Apple Store, plus a Regal Cinemas and a host of fine restaurants to please every appetite.

— 23106 Fashion Drive, Estero
239-992-4259, simon.com/mall/coconut-point
Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Friday-Saturday, 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Sunday, noon-6 p.m.

■ **Edison Mall**

The region's original indoor mall, which



COURTESY PHOTO

celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2015, is anchored by Macy's, JC Penney and Dillard's.

— 4125 Cleveland Avenue, Fort Myers
239-939-1933, shopedisonmall.com
Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Friday-Saturday, 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Sunday, noon-6 p.m.

■ **Gulf Coast Town Center**

This outdoor mall continues to expand since its first phase opened more than 15 years ago just off Interstate 75 at Alico Road near Florida Gulf Coast University. The center features Bass Pro Shops, Belk, Best Buy, Costco, Dick's Sporting Goods, and Target as anchors. There's also a variety of dining options to suit every budget and taste.

— 9903 Gulf Coast Main Street, Fort Myers
239-267-5107, gulfcoasttowncenter.com

■ **Miromar Outlets**

More than 140 designer and brand-name retailers here include Saks Fifth Avenue OFF 5TH, Adidas, Lucky Brand, Brooks Brothers, Ecco Shoes, Coach and Columbia. There's a Norman Love Confections chocolate salon, too, and dining options from pretzels and pizza to Greek and burgers.

— 10801 Corkscrew Road, Estero
239-948-3766, miromaroutlets.com

Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Friday-Saturday, 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Sunday, 11 a.m. - 6 p.m.

■ **Periwinkle Place**

Once selected by the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau as Sanibel's top shopping destination, this gem on the island's Periwinkle Way suffered the wrath of Hurricane Ian and remained closed as of press time.

— 2075 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel
239.395.1914, periwinkleplace.com

■ **Promenade at Bonita Bay**

With fashions for all ages, home decor and great gifts, salons, restaurants, a gourmet market and even a Saturday farmer's market, Promenade at Bonita Bay attracts both locals and visitors from around the world. This open-air center is Lee County's southern-most shopping, dining and entertainment destination.

— 26811 South Bay Drive, Bonita Springs
239.949.1573, promenadeshops.com
Oct. 15 - April 30
Monday - Saturday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Sunday, noon-5 p.m.
May 1 - Oct. 14
Monday - Saturday - 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM
Sunday - Call Individual Stores for Hours

■ **Sanibel Outlets**

Just east of the Lee Island Coast, Sanibel Outlets' 40-plus designer name shops and the play area for kids remains closed from the aftermath of Hurricane Ian. Be sure to check the status before venturing out.

— 20350 Summerlin Road, Fort Myers
dahlmannproperties.com/retail-properties/
sanibel-outlets ■

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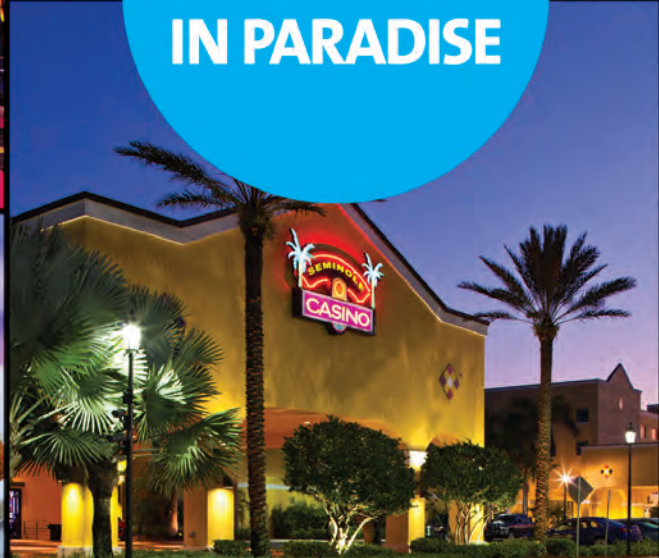
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