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8 reasons to visit Sarasota, starting with the circus



The Howard Bros Circus Model. (The Ringling/TNS)

By **Patti Nickell**

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The Sunshine State has so many attractions that it's difficult for potential visitors to know where to start. Should it be the beaches of the Panhandle or Miami's South Beach; the horse country around Ocala or the Mouse Kingdom in Orlando; the Florida of yesterday at Captiva or the Florida of tomorrow at Cape Canaveral?

For this reason, one might be excused for not immediately thinking of Sarasota when planning a Florida getaway. The city, located on the southern Gulf of Mexico, along with its surrounding beach communities of Longboat Key and Anna Maria Island, have a lot to recommend them. Here are eight reasons to put the Sarasota area on your "must-see" list.

Ringling Museum Complex – Where the Glory Days of the Big Top Live On, Sarasota

As of this past May, the tradition of the American circus is no more; its spectacle and glamor, however, live on at the Ringling Brothers Circus Museum. Children and adults marvel at exhibits ranging from elaborately hand-carved calliopes to the tiny clown car from which famed contortionist Lou Jacobs unfolded his six-foot frame.

The piece de resistance is the 3,800-square-foot Circus Miniature, painstakingly crafted over a 60-year period by circus historian Howard Tibbels. With eight tents and some 42,000 tiny objects – from elephants peeping out of train cars to spectators in the seats – it depicts life in the fictional Howard Brothers Circus during the early part of the 20th century.

The Circus Museum is just one aspect of the 66-acre former winter home of John and Mable Ringling who spared no expense in making it a Florida showplace. Ca d'Zan, the couple's mansion, has been lovingly restored and is open for tours, and the pink Renaissance-style art museum houses a collection of European paintings, with special emphasis on works by Peter Paul Rubens.

The grounds and gardens are equally spectacular and just across the way is the acclaimed Asolo Theater, the largest repertory theater in the Southeast. It's hard to decide which is more impressive – the innovative performances (the one I saw, Jules Verne's "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," had a scene-stealing squid) or the theater itself, which was originally located outside of Venice, Italy, and was moved piece by piece to Sarasota and recreated in all its splendor.

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens – Where Flowers Become Art, Sarasota

When William Selby, an executive with Texaco Oil Company, and his wife Marie built an imposing mansion overlooking Sarasota Bay, they probably didn't realize that the 15 acre grounds would evolve into the only botanical garden in the world focusing solely on epiphytes, plants that get moisture and nutrients from the air.

Visitors wander through meandering tropical gardens under a canopy of trees draped in Spanish moss. This natural habitat allows for reflection on the true essence of Florida.

As befits a place where flora is art, the Selby hosts an annual art exhibition, strategically interspersed among displays of orchids and bromeliads.

If you get there before July 31, you can take in Marc Chagall's "Flowers and the French Riviera: the Color of Dreams." If not, you can start planning for "Warhol: Flowers and the Factory," opening in February, 2018.

Oooh and aaah at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Spa, Sarasota

For those who want the ultimate pampering package in an opulent oasis, the "Day of Indulgences" at the Ritz-Carlton is just the ticket, although admittedly something of a pricy one. You get what you pay for, however, and here you're paying for 16,000-square feet of luxury and 100 treatment options.

The Relaxation Sanctuary will have you thinking you're lounging in a Roman bath, waiting for your attendant to pop a grape in your mouth. If you prefer your grapes in liquid form, enjoy a flute of champagne on the outdoor

terrace before lunch (included in your package). Also included are three treatments of your choice — one of which should be the Ritz-Carlton's signature massage, customized to fit the individual needs of each client.

Upscale Chic on Longboat Key

On the barrier island of Longboat Key 12 miles of spun sugar beaches attract retirees and visitors. If you're the latter, join the former and stake out your spot overlooking the turquoise Gulf or play a round of waterfront golf.

You won't lack for places to experience fine dining on the Key. Harry's Continental Kitchens is the perfect brunch spot (it also has a deli for takeout); Dry Dock Waterfront Grill is the place to go for sunset-watching and seafood platters, and if you're still hungry after dinner, head for Euphemia Haye Restaurant and the Haye Loft for delectable desserts accompanied by live music.

Casual Chic on Anna Maria Island

If you prefer bare feet and beach attire to dressy duds, you might opt for Longboat Key's more down-home cousin, Anna Maria Island. Here, accommodations are more likely to be guest houses and quaint cottages than luxury resorts, and a burger at the beach heads up the dining scene. The main street, however, is chock-a-block with art galleries and one-of-a-kind shops such as Tide and Moon Jewelry, Bella by the Sea and the Anna Maria Olive Oil Outpost. Funky but fabulous.

A Moveable Feast at St. Armand's Circle, Sarasota.

With 150 shops, boutiques, cafes and restaurants, the Circle is the best place to shop and dine in Sarasota. It has the exclusive, "village-y" feel (although not the steep prices) of Miami's Bal Harbour. You won't lack for places to indulge your appetite, but the Circle's most famous eatery is Columbia, a sister restaurant of the Tampa landmark in historic Ybor City.

Although the Sarasota property doesn't have the legendary flamenco show like in Tampa, it does have the signature sangria, the mouthwatering paella and the atmospheric dining room which will put you in mind of an evening in old Havana.

Jam With the Clams at the Clam Factory, West Bradenton

Located near the fishing village of Cortez, the Clam Factory is a roadhouse in the best sense of those establishments. Bi-valves (don't pass up the crabby balls) and brewskis dominate the menu; T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops are acceptable attire, and don't expect to have a quiet conversation with your dinner companions as the decibel level is ear-splitting.

Save the talk for later, especially if you go on Tuesday nights when the house rocks at the "Clam Jam." Patrons are treated to an epic jam featuring bands such as B.C. and the Gang, on stage the night I was there. While most of the band members looked to be more familiar with Social Security than social media, they could rock out with the best of them.

You can have a good time (and hear great music) at the jam for relatively few clams.

Mi Casa es Su Casa at Casa Del Mar, Longboat Key

While Longboat Key has no lack of beachfront condo accommodations, many of them can make a serious dent in your wallet. Even those at the less expensive end of the scale often require a one to three month minimum stay. An exception is Casa Del Mar that offers four and seven night rentals (www.casadelmarlkb.com).

All 102 units have two bedrooms and two baths, fully equipped kitchen, living and dining quarters, and many of them have a large screened-in porch perfect for sipping a glass of wine and listening to the surf. Guests enjoy flat screen TVs and free Wifi, as well as a pool, six acres of landscaped grounds and an on-site staff.

The entire family can stay at Casa Del Mar for a rate equal to or less than that of a single room at many of the island's pricier hotels.

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