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U.S. TRAVEL

Fla. islands feature controlled wildness

Sanibel, Captiva islands charm Gulf Coast.

By Carol Ann Davidson
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

Michael Billheimer hands me a jar of strawberry preserves as I leave his Lighthouse Cafe. "It's just a little taste of our island for you to take home," he said. Now THAT'S hospitality. The Lighthouse Cafe on Periwinkle Way on Sanibel Island is reputedly home to the best whole wheat blueberry pancakes in Southwest Florida. The cafe is small and cozy, and every available wall space is clad with framed photos or drawings of lighthouses from around the world, most of them sent by fulfilled customers. Just down the road, and by the beach fronting the Gulf of Mexico, is the beacon of Sanibel, an authentic lighthouse — a landmark since 1884 when the entire island was a nature preserve.

The lingering "taste" I have of Sanibel Island and its smaller sister island, Captiva, is complex. There's a controlled

wildness to it. On the one hand, the islands are spotlessly clean; no buildings taller than the tallest palm tree; the roadways have no ruts; even the policemen who control the traffic (as there are no stoplights anywhere) are neat and courteous. Yet the mangroves, the beaches, the small inner islands are wild havens for multitudes of birds including white pelicans, alligators, tree crabs, dolphins and those permanently folded manatees. It's still a preserve, but accommodations have been made for humans: biking (on the 23-mile bike path), kayaking, sailing, swimming and sightseeing.

One evening I took a sunset cruise from McCarthy's Marina in Captiva. Just before the red ball dropped below the horizon, a trio of dolphins entertained us with their acrobatic leaps in the boat's wake. The eco-system in this part of Florida is so rich and so protected that most creatures thrive there with, dare I say, wild abandon.

Many of the two-legged creatures of the human persuasion who congregate along the seashore



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are searching for seashells in this world class seashell trove of over 400 varieties. If you can't find what you're looking for on the beach, the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum will satisfy all your mollusk and cephalopod cravings. (Positively no shucking allowed). They even have a computer with seashell recipes from all over the world that you can email to whomever you wish. (I sent a whole whack of them to friends.)

Down the road from the museum is the Clin-

ic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife. This center offers a rare opportunity for visitors to witness the care for injured and orphaned wildlife. It's a great place for kids to can play "vet" as they follow the cases of four animals from admission to release, live on video. From there I took a narrated tram tour of the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Besides being one of the top bird-watching destinations in North America, I got a kick out of our well-informed and

no-nonsense guide who, like an army squad leader, yelled out the Latin names of the critters we saw or were about to see from the horseshoe crab to a rare alligator sighting.

Charming arts and craft stores dot the islands and cafes and bistros are a plenty. One morning I had breakfast in the sunshine at the Island Cow. If the Lighthouse Cafe was filled with photos, then the Cow practically mooed with its whimsical decorations and its "tenderly" delicious menu for

breakfast, lunch and dinner. However, for hands-down most visually interesting restaurant eat at The Bubble Room in Captiva. Three floors of nostalgia, a bizarre cross between Hollywood and Christmas. I happened to be ushered to a table where my eating buddies were pint-sized figures of W.C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy, Frank Sinatra and that presidential actor, Ronald Reagan. The desserts are piled high and are larger than life. I chose a modest but delicious carrot cake, partially because it was the smallest offering of the evening. Even at that, I couldn't finish it and Laurel and Hardy weren't interested in helping me.

During my four-day stay, I came "home" every night to Casa Ybel Resort. This award-winning resort has catered to families since the 1890s. I lounged on my private screened-in porch, (part of my one-bedroom suite) overlooking the gulf, and dined at their Thistle Lodge. The food was superb and the atmosphere quiet and romantic. What else does a gal need for the last night of a charmed vacation?

Seattle

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One is the first Sur La Table cookware store, opened in 1972. (By the way, you can't see it from inside the shop, but just upstairs there's a jaw-dropping 1,400-square-foot loft apartment. For \$1,500 a night, it's yours. For details, consult the Inn at the Market next door.)

The even bigger story is Starbucks, which was born a block away in 1971 as a purveyor of coffee beans and equipment and moved to its current district spot in 1976. Management finally got around to selling coffee by the cup in the '80s. Also, at some point on the road to global domination, the company redrew its logo to make the mermaid more demure. But the Pike Place location still uses the topless original.

There are plenty of young businesses in the market, too. Not far from Starbucks and Sur La Table is Steelhead Diner (opened in 2007), a sleek lunch and dinner destination that shows off its Black Witches and Green Butt Skunks (fishing lures, not cocktails) in museum-style displays. Just downstairs, Rachel's Ginger Beer (opened in 2013) brags about its Moscow Mules and Porch Swings (cocktails, not fishing lures). Radiator Whiskey, an upstairs den for dinner and spirits (not necessarily in that order), has done gangbusters business since



Tossing fish around is a tradition at the Pike Place Fish Market that has evolved into a show-stopping, crowd pleaser. PHOTOS BY MARK BOSTER / LOS ANGELES TIMES

opening last year.

And, of course, you'll need to linger at Pike Place Fish Market, where wisecracking mongers draw crowds with their hardy fish-flinging and order-hollering. John Yokoyama, its owner of 49 years, has a healthy side business in motivational books and speeches, and his guys speak that language, too.

"If you're short with people and you don't love them, they're going to go down the hall and spend their money," fishmonger Jake Jarvis told me. "If we're really having fun, people feel it."

When I asked to buy a copy of Yokoyama's and Joseph Michelli's book, "When Fish Fly," Jardin leaned back and hollered: "One Johnny

book!" Then the mongers swarmed and seven of them signed the title page.

Some locals grumble that the market has become too touristy, especially when the cruise crowds shuffle through in summer. But I didn't hear visitors complaining. Most seemed busy basking in the market magic.

Which isn't magic at all, of course. It's highly curated capitalism. To change the color of a fixture or stock a new product, tenants often need permission. Street performers annually renew permits to circulate among 13 designated spots (look for the musical notes painted on the pavement). To ensure turnover, the limit is one hour in a spot.

In fact, Pike Place's birth and rebirth were both cases of government intervention.

In 1907, Seattle first set aside a patch of Pike Place as a farmers market because consumers were complaining that middlemen were inflating the price of onions and other produce. Once direct-to-the-public sales began, developers rushed in to put up buildings.

By 1971, many shoppers had turned to the suburbs, and privately owned Pike Place buildings were starting to fall apart. That's when a citizens campaign to stave off demolition led to voter approval of a rescue plan.

City officials created the Pike Place Market Preservation and Development Authority to set rents, approve tenants, keep out nonnative chains and enforce a set of restrictions that has grown to 48 pages. These crowded aisles might be the most carefully managed chaos this side of professional wrestling.

Fortunately, that's not what most people think when they step up under that big orange Public Market Center sign. If they're like me, they think: Who wants to catch a flying fish on a cold day? Would it be wrong to follow my morning croissant and coffee from Le Panier with pastry and coffee from DeLaurenti? What will my wife do if I come home with a cigar-box guitar made by that guy in the arcade?

Meanwhile, the market's management has launched plans for a new \$65-million waterfront entrance and addition on Western Avenue. The state is tearing down the Alaskan Way Viaduct, which has screened the market from much of the waterfront.

At Virginia Street and Second Avenue, a new Palladian hotel, a 97-room boutique property from the Kimpston chain, is scheduled to open late this year. At Stewart Street and 1st Avenue, a 159-room Thompson Hotel is to open in 2016.

In other words, more tourists are coming. Now all the market has to do is keep making magic.



A ferry heads away from Seattle with Mount Rainier in the background. Ferry rides run \$8. MARK BOSTER / LOS ANGELES TIMES

SEATTLE

Bainbridge Island feels so far away

Short ferry ride will transport you to a land of diversions.

By Christopher Reynolds
Los Angeles Times

The Seattle waterfront wants you. Especially the Seattle Aquarium (Pier 59) and the Seattle Great Wheel (Pier 57), whose bright lights can be seen for miles. But if you're there when the weather is mild, you might want to consider Pier 52, the ferry terminal.

That's where you can catch a 35-minute ride to Bainbridge Island. The round-trip tab is just \$8 a person, or \$13.65 per car. (For adults, that's way less than a \$21.95 aquarium ticket or a \$13 wheel ticket.) The trip will take you far from the urban grid.

The island (population 23,196) is close enough for islanders to commute to Seattle on the ferry yet far enough away to feel like another country.

I gave it only about four hours — a serious tactical error because I could have spent five hours just eating, never mind the 30 miles of trails (www.bit.ly/1yzyBc0) or the seven wineries (www.bainbridgewineries.com).

Once the ferry has pulled into Eagle Harbor, it's an easy walk up Olympic Drive Southeast to Winslow Way East, the main drag of the tiny town of Winslow.

There the diversions begin with the curvy Bainbridge Island Muse-

um of Art (550 Winslow Way E.; 206-842-4451, www.biartmuseum.org), which opened in June 2013 and specializes in contemporary works with a regional focus. Then come the restaurants and shops.

I prowled the waterfront trail at the foot of Madison Avenue, browsed Eagle Harbor Book Co. and Bainbridge Arts & Crafts, then settled in for late lunch at Doc's Marina Grill (403 Madison Ave. S.; 206-842-8339, www.docsgrill.com), a casual, surfy-turfy place with a big patio overlooking the marina. (Most main dishes \$12-\$26.)

Then came a difficult choice: a drink at Hitchcock (133 Winslow Way E.; 206-201-3789, www.hitchcockrestaurant.com), a locavore restaurant and bar that opened in 2011, or dessert at Mora Iced Creamery (139 Madrone Lane; 206-855-1112, www.moraicecream.com), part of a three-location Seattle-area chain.

Mora's blackberry gelato (made from local berries) won me over. But next time it'll be dinner at Hitchcock, the chef, Brendan McGill, has won a kitchen full of best-chef prizes.

I wouldn't make any changes in the timing of my return trip, though. If you catch the ferry just before dark, as I did, you can watch the sun set as the island fades into the distance and the Seattle skyline begins to light up. That's \$8 well spent.



Lee Lauckhart has been the owner of First and Pike News in the Pike Place Market in Seattle for more than three decades. A news waterfront entrance is being planned.