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Trip Report: Spring Getaway on Captiva Island, Florida

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By Kühl Editor (<https://www.kuhl.com/borninthemountains/author/ed/>) on May 10, 2021

Are you ready to travel to an out-of-state destination by plane? It's a question that many avid travelers are asking as the COVID restrictions are being relaxed. I admit that I was a bit apprehensive about flying during the pandemic, but after Ira and I were fully vaccinated, my comfort level was restored. I happily started researching destinations and booking future flights.

Discovering South Seas Island Resort

Our first journey was to Captiva Island (<https://www.visitflorida.com/en-us/cities/captiva-island.html>) off the west coast of Florida. After arriving at Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers, we drove for approximately an hour to the 330-acre South Seas Island

R (<https://www.southseas.com/>)e (<https://www.southseas.com/>)sort (<https://www.southseas.com/>), a former key lime plantation located on the northern tip of the island. This tiny barrier island is only five miles long and about ½ mile wide. South Seas Island is easily reached by crossing a three-mile causeway and then driving through Sanibel Island.

Due to an unexpected delay and a shortage of rental cars, we arrived a bit later than anticipated. We'd planned to explore the resort for a few hours before darkness, but the sun was already setting as we placed our luggage into our harborside guest room. We had a quick bite to eat and spent our first evening relaxing.



Sunset over the marina, Captiva Island, Florida

Since the resort's nearby restaurants were not open for breakfast, we had to find an alternative place to eat. Instead of driving our car or taking the resort's trolley, we walked on the winding, narrow South Seas Plantation Road to reach our morning nourishment. Partially shaded by the dense foliage, we glanced at enormous homes, cottages, villas, and guest rooms on both sides of the road.

Posted signs suggested the presence of an assortment of wildlife. We did not encounter any snakes or alligators but did see a few birds flying overhead. Just a short distance from the resort's gated entrance, we found a small group of shops and cafes. With limited options for fresh fish in Colorado, I was content to try an ultimate seafood omelet filled with gulf shrimp and white fish at RC Otter's Island Eats (<https://captivaislandinn.com/captiva-island-restaurants/rc-otters-menu/>). For the remainder of our meals, we took advantage of our coastal location by ordering an abundance of fish.

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Seafood Omelet at RC Otter Eats, Captiva Island, Florida

Instead of taking the trolley back to our guest room, we returned on foot. With almost no sidewalks, we had to be mindful of the golf carts, cars, and trucks that sped by us, despite the posted speed signs. Rented golf carts were ubiquitous, since many chose to commute from one place to the next in these smaller, open-air vehicles. To reach our guest room quicker, we cut through the marina where we saw impressive yachts and a handful of manatees along with numerous gulf coast birds.

After our invigorating five-mile round trip walk, we were happy to relax at the nearby pool complex which included water slides. A pool attendant found us unoccupied lounge chairs. Just a few hours earlier, most of the seats had been empty. By mid-morning, the pool decks were inundated with frolicking families and quieter couples.

Dining at Doc Ford's Rum Bar & Grille

After reading numerous complimentary restaurant reviews for Doc Ford's Rum Bar & Grille's (<https://www.docfords.com/>) four locations, we were looking forward to dining at their Captiva Island location. With an emphasis on local seafood and Caribbean seasonings, we anticipated a great meal. We were not disappointed by our macadamia nut crusted grouper that was topped with a toasted rum coconut sauce.

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Macadamia nut crusted grouper at Docs Ford's Rum Bar & Grille, Captiva Island, Florida

Capturing Dusk at Sunset Beach

Before returning to our room, we took a romantic walk along Sunset Beach as the sun was heading toward the Gulf of Mexico horizon. Between taking photos, we started collecting seashells. Sanibel and Captiva Islands are known throughout the world for their ocean treasures, and the former is recognized as one of the top shelling spots in the world. Sanibel Island has a shallow shelf and is uniquely orientated in an east to west direction which lends itself to an abundance of mollusks and shells.



Sunset Beach lives up to its name. Captiva Island, Florida

Unfortunately, atmospheric conditions at sunset were not optimal for us to witness the Green Flash which periodically occurs when high frequency blue/green light from the sun curves more and remains visible after the earth blocks the lower frequency light.

Worries Washed Away at the Beach

Instead of returning to the overcrowded pool area the next day, we headed to the impressive 2.5-mile beachfront. The Sunset Beach attendants had already placed long rows of lounge chairs and blue umbrellas, properly spaced, adjacent to the shoreline.

Within no time, the beach filled up with guests who were frolicking along the Gulf of Mexico shoreline. Beyond the swimming area, parasailers, kayakers, wave runners and paddleboarders took advantage of the onsite rental shop. Instead of participating in one of these enticing activities, we simply enjoyed our surroundings, swam in the Gulf of Mexico and took long walks in the sand. We had the added bonus of being in a prime viewing area for a family of dolphins swimming near the shore.



Sandy and Ira are all smiles strolling along beach, Captiva Island, Florida

While our initial intention was to stay at the beach for just a couple of hours, we ended up ordering lunch and strolling back to our room just hours before our dinner reservation. The rhythmic sound of the waves and the warm sun were captivating and opened the door for a brief respite from our cares and concerns.

Day Trip to Sanibel Island

The smaller Captiva Island is less developed than its sister island, Sanibel. Our Sanibel Island adventure focused on the 6,300-acre J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge (https://www.fws.gov/refuge/jn_ding_darling/) and the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum (<https://www.shellmuseum.org/>) located conveniently on the northern part of Sanibel-Captiva Road. Our day began at the Over Easy Café (<http://www.overeasycafesanibel.com/>), where we enjoyed a hearty Farmer's Skillet with two eggs, grilled breakfast potatoes, mushrooms, onions, tomatoes, and bell peppers.



Farmer's Skillet at Over Easy Cafe, Sanibel Island, Florida

At the information center, we learned that the wildlife refuge is the largest undeveloped mangrove ecosystem in the United States. It was named after Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling, a pioneer conservationist and Pulitzer Prize winner. His 20th century newspaper cartoons advocating the preservation of America's natural resources appeared in approximately 150 American newspapers. Disappointingly, the park official also advised us that the majority of the 245 species of birds had recently migrated north. From now until the end of the summer, only native birds would be visible.

After learning this fact, we opted not to buy tickets for the 90-minute tram tour with a guided naturalist, the pontoon boat cruise excursion or the kayak trail tour. Instead, we chose to take a few short hikes and to make the four-mile Wildlife Drive in our car. On the gravel based Indigo Trail, we were greeted by many small lizards that darted on and off the path. While we were looking forward to the possibility of encountering alligators near the Wildlife Education Boardwalk, none were visible.



Exploring J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge (https://www.fws.gov/refuge/jn_ding_darling/). Pictured in KÜHL Top (<https://www.kuhl.com/kuhl/womens/short-sleeve/>) and Shorts (<https://www.kuhl.com/kuhl/womens/shorts/>).

During our drive, we saw a handful of year-round residents—white ibis, black-necked stilts, osprey, double-crested cormorants, red-shouldered hawks, brown pelicans, herons, and great egrets—wading in the shallow waters on either side of the road or in the dense foliage. Since we avoided the marsh areas and the water's edge, we didn't see any of the native mammals, reptiles, amphibians, or fish.



Two white ibis cast a reflection in the water.

On the Calusa Mound Trail, we took a stroll into the past where we learned how the Calusa, indigenous Native Americans, went through a Shell Age instead of a Stone Age. By using the native vegetation for food, medicine, tools and building material, they survived by taking advantage of their marine environment.

As the sun's mid-day rays became more intense, we took a short drive to the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum. For decades, our family has strolled along beaches in coastal destinations and collected seashells. I never thought much about the 80,000 species of mollusks or the fact that many of these animals are a soft-bodied-animals with hard shells while others, like the octopus, belong to a shell-less class. With one of the largest collections of mollusks in the world and a cross-section of exhibits focusing on local history, marine ecosystems and conservation, visitors walk away with an enhanced appreciation of aquatic wildlife.



Sanibel and Captiva Islands are known for their seashells.

Before returning home, we took several more walks along the South Seas Island Resort's romantic coastline. Our toes gripped the grains of sand as our mouths tasted the salty air. Cool cross breezes offset the intense sunshine. After more than a year of COVID restrictions, we were thrilled to be visiting another region where we could consume fresh fish and take advantage of a soothing coastal environment.

*When Sandy Bornstein isn't trekking in Colorado or writing, she's traveling with her husband Ira (<http://www.thetravelingbornsteins.com/>). After living as an international teacher in Bangalore, India, Sandy published an award-winning book, *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life* (<https://sandrabornestein.com/>), as a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Among other things, Sandy writes about family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences.*

As a recipient of a North American Travel Journalist Association gold medal in the culinary online category, Sandy Bornstein received a complimentary stay at the South Seas Island Resort.

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