



*The Good Life*  
*with a Southern Drawl*  
**Islands In The Stream**

#heading

By Amy Bailey — September 10, 2015



The salty ocean water swept across our skin, our feet splashed in the waves while my daughter sang and played. In a moment we saw a curved dark fin roll up and down in the water. Spellbound I stood up in the water and watched as 3 dolphins came less than 10

feet from us. They played for several minutes and all my daughter and I could do was stand and stare mesmerized by such enchanting beauty. They were close enough we could see their eyes and the detailing of their bodies as they twirled and capered in the water. We were present in that moment and felt the magic of nature, and it was extraordinary. It was at this point we began wondering if we were in fact becoming mermaids.



What we would discover in this unspoiled area of Southwest Florida is that these accidental encounters with nature would happen everyday and with them deep peace, clarity, and spiritual connection. In Japan the word Satori is used to describe these profound spiritual moments when you feel the energy and peace of the earth. What you will find is once you have these enlightened experiences you will begin to have these moments more and more.

*Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not. – Ralph Waldo Emerson*



We discovered **Palm Island** haphazardly, we had planned to visit neighboring towns on the west side of the Florida coast but with a little more research became captivated with Palm Island, Boca Grande also known as the Charlotte Harbor area. These islands sounded like such beautiful places to explore



Now this area is one of my favorite places in the world and I cannot wait to go back. Every morning we discovered massive sea turtle tracks where mother sea turtles had made their way to the beach to lay their eggs, we walked along the shore to uncover shells, sand dollars, starfish, and sea urchins, we saw manatees and their babies swimming in the harbor, we found a baby octopus in a conch shell, and we fished for our dinner. We had discovered a honey hole of magic and it existed in all its splendor just one state away.



To get to **Palm Island** you can fly into Tampa or one of the other 4 airports in the area, driving is of course another option. You take Placida Rd into Cape Haze where you will see the sign and entrance for the Palm Island Ferry. Palm Island offers a variety of accommodations from 1 bedroom condos at the Palm Island Marina that are perfect for docking your boat and exploring the entire area to 2 and 3 bedroom private homes on the island. A car ferry actually takes you to the island resort which is an experience within itself. Once on the island you pass hand painted signs asking you to 'Don't speed you might 'egret' it' and 'Slow, let us cross' with sea turtles painted on it. A boat ferry also shuttles back and forth daily between the island and the marina allowing you access to the mainland.



Our first day on the beachside of Palm Island we found beautiful fighting conch, scallop, and olive shells in the surf. We fell in love with the island's area called Stump Pass. Picturesque stumps line the beach along with shell wishing trees where people hang shells with holes in them on the trees to make a wish. At Stump Pass enjoy some of the most spectacular sunsets you can imagine as you watch a family of egrets forage along the shore. It was also at Stump Pass where our magical dolphin encounter occurred.



On the bay side of the island beautiful mangroves line the shore providing a home to thousands of species from crabs to barnacles to birds. Mangroves provide ideal breeding grounds for much of the world's fish, shrimp, crabs, and other shellfish. Many fish species, such as tarpon and snook, find shelter among the mangrove roots as juveniles, head out to forage in the seagrass beds as they grow, and move into the open ocean as adults. An estimated 75 percent of commercially caught fish spend some time in the mangroves or depend on food webs that can be traced back to these coastal forests.

*If there are no mangrove forests, then the sea will have no meaning. It is like having a tree with no roots, for the mangroves are the roots of the sea. -fisherman, Trang Province*

The area is also studded with barrier islands other than Palm Island including Don Pedro, Little Gasparilla, Useppa, Cayo Costa, and more which create Florida's second largest estuary, Charlotte Harbor. This combination of barrier islands and mangroves produce some of the world's best fishing and exploring. With this plenitude of marine life comes an abundance of activities.



**Palm Island Outfitters** – Palm Island Outfitters' Captain Mike Slattery took us out for extraordinary fishing. Along the mangrove lined banks we would cast and immediately get a bite from a snook or snapper. The water was crystal clear so we could see every fish and watch them as they fought over our bait, we were able to catch our dinner very quickly. Feeling adventurous we also decided to go tarpon fishing. Boca Grande Pass with its deep blue waters is the world's best place to fish for tarpon aka the silver king. It was magic to watch them roll



through the ocean in groups, their bodies so large and silvery. If you are looking for instant gratification, tarpon fishing is not for you, this type fishing is more like hunting and knowing why and when this fish decides to bite is a mystery. In beautiful Boca Grande Pass 12 boats each with at least 2 lines in the water sat for hours on top of a school of rolling tarpon with no bites. But when they do bite it is quite the thrill reeling in one of these fish that averages 6 feet in length and 150 lbs.



**Hooked On SUP** – Hooked On SUP offers an array of stand up paddleboarding and kayak tours. From snorkeling at Stump Pass to mangrove tours to Light Up The Night tours in which your paddleboard or kayak will be lighted from underneath while you float above in the dark, giving you a whole new perspective and ability to see sea creatures in a way you've never seen them before.





**King Fisher Fleet** – King Fisher Fleet in Punta Gorda offers sightseeing cruises to several barrier islands including Cayo Costa State Park. Begin your trip at 9:00 a.m. with a two hour narrated cruise and then you can enjoy 3 hours on this secluded island. Cayo Costa State Park lies on an eight mile long barrier island with a pristine, white-sand beach with many treasures to discover from sand dollars to starfish to sea urchins. A complimentary park service shuttle picks you and your beach gear up at the boat landing and deposits you on the beach. On the cruise you may have dolphins play and jump in the wake of the boat or pass a sea turtle swimming.



**Boca Grande** – A trip to Boca Grande is a must. The shell-lined beaches and glass-like water will entice your mind and soul. Both sunset and sunrise are something not to be missed in Boca Grande. One morning after discovering beautiful shell after beautiful shell, we put them in a pile. I noticed the pile began to



move and looked down to discover a baby octopus crawling out of one of the fighting conch shells. My daughter and I took our 8-legged friend in his shell back to the ocean. For one of the best meals you may ever enjoy, try Newlin's Lobster Salad then get a scoop of ice cream at The Pink Pony Ice Cream Parlor.

**Tampa Bay Rays** – You can even take the kiddos on a short drive to St.

Petersburg to watch the Tampa Bay Rays play a game. During Spring enjoy **The**

**Rays Inaugural Spring Training Season** in Charlotte

County at the state of the art Charlotte Sports Park. The Rays minor league affiliate, the Charlotte Stone Crabs, also call Charlotte Sports Park home.

We really enjoyed simply relaxing and eating our fresh catch on our balcony over looking the water, but we also discovered some great places to eat.



**Rum Bay on Palm Island** – Offering an extensive menu Rum Bay is located on Palm Island and allows you to enjoy dinner out without leaving the island. Try a delicious grilled Mahi sandwich, Heart of the Oceans Salad with chilled lobster, a steamer pot of shellfish, fresh fish any way you like it, or even a homeade pizza.



**Leverock's At Pam Island Marina** – Located right on the water, Leverock's offers fresh fish, oysters, broiled lobster tails, and so much more. A

vibrant atmosphere invites guests from all over the area.



**Newlin's in Boca Grande** – Their lobster salad is an absolute must. You can also find wine, key lime pie, cheese, and more grocery needs at this health food store.

**Lock & Key in Englewood Beach** – Located across the street from the beach, Lock & Key offers a laid back atmosphere. Their calamari is delicious and their Stuffed Grouper with crabmeat and South Beach Salad with coconut tempura shrimp are specialities.

Do not worry about fighting crowds or waiting hours for a table, the Charlotte Harbor area remains more intimate and secluded than other parts of Florida. So often you will feel, especially on Palm Island, like you have the entire beach to yourself. Another wonderful aspect of this area, the beaches are dog friendly, so bring your four-legged friend.



While in the area also make sunrise and sunset top priorities. Some of the most brilliant sunsets I have ever seen occurred here. Whether we were watching from the beach or had just gotten back to the marina from boating, each day the sunset looked as if it had been painted onto the sky.

People often joke about older people retiring to Florida, my reply is, “Have you been to Florida? Who wouldn’t want to retire there?!” This enchanting piece of paradise did not just feel like a vacation, with all its magic and beauty it felt like we were on another planet. If you are looking to feel worlds away yet still be in the continental United States, Palm Island and the Charlotte Harbor area are for you.