

# Travel

## Beach Magic

The motto of Florida's Anna Maria Island says it all: "Welcome to paradise without an attitude." Our insider's guide helps you make it your own slice of heaven. By **Wanda McKinney**, photography **Cary Jobe**



I dreamed that I had escaped to the perfect getaway. As I slept, I visualized swaying palms, beautiful beaches, and not a high-rise condo in sight.

Colorful shops and local restaurants added charm, and a laid-back vibe erased all cares. I awoke smiling but shook my head. Surely there was no such piece of paradise left. Then I discovered Anna Maria Island.

**Small Not Tall** Surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico, Tampa Bay, and

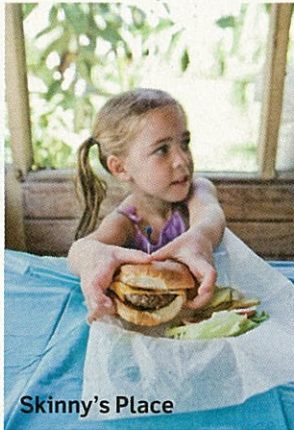
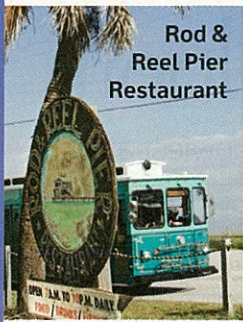
the Intracoastal Waterway, Anna Maria Island is an easy 1½-hour drive from Tampa. It's only 7½ miles long and less than a mile wide and, for starters, boasts not a single towering condo. (No building over three stories is allowed.) Chain restaurants? Very few of them. The restaurants are delightfully local and extremely good. In other words, you've stepped into the Florida of decades ago, with one major difference: New amenities enhance the old charm for a winning combination. [◀ turn to page 20](#)



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Take a long walk down the planks to the popular Rod & Reel Pier Restaurant for fresh seafood and beautiful views.





**BEST BEACH EATS**

**Best Burger Joint/Dive:** Skinny's Place. They serve Coke in frosty 8-ounce bottles and make a mean grilled chicken sandwich. (Cash only.) 3901 Gulf Drive North; (941) 778-7769.

**Most Colorful (and Tastiest) Breakfast Spot:** Ginny's & Jane E's At the Old IGA. The cinnamon rolls are Frisbee-size but taste much better. 9807 Gulf Drive; [www.annamariacafe.com](http://www.annamariacafe.com) or (941) 778-7370

**Sunset Dining Sensations:** Sand Bar Restaurant. For toes-in-the-sand dining, the Sand Bar Restaurant wins out. Everything tastes better if you're sitting at a table on the beach, with waves gently splashing nearby. No reservations are accepted, but you'll dine on such delightful entrées as freshly caught grouper and top sirloin, starting at \$14. 100 Spring Avenue; [www.sandbarrestaurant.com](http://www.sandbarrestaurant.com) or (941) 778-0444.

The Waterfront Restaurant. Ask to sit near the porch, and you'll have a grand view of the bay. If the white chocolate-raspberry cheesecake shows up on the menu on your visit, give in. 111 South Bay Blvd.; [www.thewaterfrontrestaurant.net](http://www.thewaterfrontrestaurant.net) or (941) 778-1515.

**BEST BEACH TRIVIA**

**Best Jeopardy-style Fact:** Movie star/swimmer Esther Williams filmed the movie *On an Island With You* here.

**Best Multiple Theories on How the Island Got Its Name:** 1. It was named to honor Mary, the mother of Christ, and her mother, Ann. 2. One of the first explorers named it after his mother. 3. Government surveyors named it after the mayor of Tampa's wife, Maria, and her sister, Anna. 4. It was named for the queen of Spain, Maria Anna.

**Prettiest Trailer Park You'll Ever See:** At the foot of the bridge at Bradenton Beach on Anna Maria Island. It's landscaped beautifully with flowers and features well-tended miniature lawns.

**Why the Jail Proved Uninhabitable:** Built in 1927, there was no glass in the windows; mosquitoes caused more harm than solitary confinement.

**They Enjoyed Their Solitude:** The first settler came to the island in 1893. The first bridge wasn't built until 1922.

beautiful silver bracelet adorned with a palm tree.) And the winner of my Most Kitschy contest is Bridge Street Bazaar. This charmer features fun wall plaques and pink flamingos galore, plus pirate and other nautical items. Any wife would love the sign reading, "Old fisherman lives here with his best catch."

**Much—or Little—to Do** After a couple of days of living my dream of sanctuary and sun, sun, sun, I wanted to see more of the island. Hopping on board the free trolley (which circles every 20 minutes) was a terrific way to get an overview of Anna Maria. I watched people bicycle in pretty Bayfront Park, located next to Anna Maria City Pier. And I jumped off to visit the Anna Maria Island Historical Society, with its long-vacant and amusingly graffiti-covered City Jail.

One day I took a little side trip off the island to Bradenton to explore Village of the Arts. This artists' colony covers several 1920s Crayola-colored cottages, each featuring a variety of artsy offerings, most open Friday and Saturday. My favorite was Dancing Crane Gallery, with its sculpture, jewelry, and ceramics. I especially loved the gem shop inside, where an artist designs your own piece of jewelry on the spot. I also enjoyed Village Voices & Eclectic Art Emporium, with its Florida author-written books, an art gallery, and local woodwork.

A quote from Wyatt Blassingame in the book *Anna Maria Island: The Early Days, 1893-1940* by Carolyne Norwood and the Anna Maria Island Historical Society states: "There was a time when most of us who lived here claimed—and not without some justification—that people who really loved this island had at least one thing in common: we were all a little cracked. We claimed this happily and pointed with pride to some of our better examples."

Cracked or not, Anna Maria residents and visitors have plenty of reason to take pride in their delightful piece of paradise. It was my dream come true. ●

For more information contact the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, [www.floridagulfislands.com](http://www.floridagulfislands.com), or Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce, [www.annamariaislandchamber.org](http://www.annamariaislandchamber.org) or (941) 778-1541.



On Anna Maria Island, it's easy to find your own private setting to bask in the Florida sun.