

Stay-cation in Paradise

WE'RE SO LUCKY to be able to drive a few minutes to the places most people spend hundreds if not thousands of dollars to visit.

Erin and I went for a "stay-cation" on Anna Maria Island. We wanted to act like tourists for a weekend.

From our home in downtown Sarasota, we drove 20 miles over the Ringling Causeway, through St. Armands Circle and then up Longboat Key to reach this little slice of paradise.

We wanted to start by checking out the new high-profile restaurant smack-dab on the Historic Bridge Street Pier in Bradenton Beach. John Horne, who opened a series of successful and popular "Anna Maria Oyster Bars" has opened an abbreviated—or "acronymed"—version, appropriately called "AMOB on the Pier." Clever.

AMOB is a wide-open space full of windows that let the sun shine in. The staff is cheery and upbeat and the system is unique: order your food at

the counter, take a triangular shaped number—actually a name ("lunch is ready for Jennifer Aniston!") and wait for a server to bring it to you.

Erin and I both have gluten issues—me, by DNA, her by sympathy—and the staff was able to rig up a shrimp and scallops dish that made us both very happy.

We had an interesting ice cream dessert. It comes in a hand-size packet and looks like pellets, but melts in your

mouth. Loved it!

Conventional wisdom around Bradenton Beach is that previous tenants tried to be too much, formal dining, etc., while AMOB is more user friendly. (However, parking isn't easy on the pier. You may have to walk a few blocks.)

Refreshed, we walked out the door and into the next business on the pier, "Paradise Boat Tours" with Captain Sherman Baldwin. We boarded a pontoon with a dozen or so other "tourists" and went for a dolphin-watching/sight-seeing cruise around the intracoastal waterway—or Sarasota Bay. The driver of the boat narrated our 90 minute excursion, while a 2nd guy, chit-chatted with customers in the seat. They called him "Dr. Dolphin."

We saw several dolphins looping up and back into the water. I told Erin, people from outside the area react like they just caught a glimpse of the Loch Ness monster! Shows how spoiled we are to live here—dolphins aren't



that unusual to see. The captain also pointed out other wildlife as well.

Done with the pier, we continued our journey north to our next activity. We went for His/Her spas at a quaint Old Florida salon in the "village-y" section of Anna Maria at 9805 Gulf Drive. (By the way, and this is confusing: on Anna Maria Island are three towns, Bradenton Beach, Holmes Beach and Anna Maria.)

Danielle Sewall runs Body & Sol Spa and Wellness. She offers a wide variety of massage, skincare, hair, nails and bridal parties. (No bachelor parties?) It's a soothing shop appropriately sub-headlined "Natural wellness in Paradise."

It's one of those places where you walk in the door, and the scents and sights immediately calm you down. It's on the 2nd floor of the historic "Old IGA" building. Over 3,000 square feet of pampering. Erin and I were received by our respective therapists and off we went. Strangely, I prefer the Swedish light massage, while she prefers the deep-tissue treatment. (Receptionists always get confused by that when we first call.) Afterward, we melted out of there, both very happy, Erin even called it "the best massage" she ever had! High praise!

From there, it was back south to Holmes Beach where we checked into our lush and tropical boutique resort on the Gulf of Mexico. Angelinos Sea Lodge is a charming family-owned resort with just four cottages of different sizes and prices. Lynn and Richard are a lovely couple that own and operate it.

Their website says it best: "Hidden in a quiet residential street, these beachfront vacation rentals are quaint,



charming, and just a few steps to the white sand and blue sea. All sea lodges have direct ocean views through a subtropical garden of swaying palms and whispering pines."

We were lucky to have been in the "Dominica" which is their largest—including a living room, area and full kitchen. We had Happy Hour just outside our door in chairs that face the Gulf. So soothing, especially after our massages. There are only a few units, so there are no crowds to face. Just a nice break from the rest of the world. Ahhhhh.

We freshened up and walked half an hour down the beach for dinner at the popular Gulf Drive Cafe. This is a large, long, building, patio, porch and tiki hut along the beach. 450 square feet of waterfront! Everyone has a view of the water.

Make no mistake, it is crowded, but thanks to dozens of energetic servers, the atmosphere is fun and light. Most people are here on vacation and in good moods. Live music serenades from inside the spacious tiki/bar area—or as they called it, "The Kokonut Hut."

This place has been here 35 years and keeps getting bigger and better by the year.

They have separate menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We both



had salad, followed by crab legs in drawn butter and baked potatoes. Coffee and ice cream for dessert. Absolute perfection. We sat there watching the setting sun while meeting other diners around us. FUN atmosphere!

We stayed for a nightcap in the Kokonut Hut and then were able to do something you normally only dream about: kick off our shoes and walk back up the beach to our secluded cottage. Those clean sheets felt so good!

The next morning, we packed up, and enjoyed a leisurely drive back down Longboat Key while sipping coffee in the car. We'd only been gone for less than 24 hours, but it felt like we were away for a week! Nothing like a stay-cation within paradise!

— Ray Collins