



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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What's new from The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

LEE COUNTY, Fla. (U.S.A.) – May on The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel means that spring has arrived and there is lots of news as visitors begin planning long-awaited vacations.

In addition to offering plenty of space for social distancing, great year-round weather, shell-drenched beaches, wildlife and the sparkling Gulf of Mexico, the destination offers lots of new experiences for return guests and first-time visitors. For the latest vacation information, visit FortMyers-Sanibel.com

Happening this month

The new **Welcome and Discovery Center** opens May 15 at **Lovers Key State Park**. The center is located on the banks of an inland waterway with a design that pays homage to this beautiful backdrop.

The \$5.7 million structure, a short walk from the beach tram station, begins educating its visitors outdoors, where the pillars of the elevated building imitate mangroves and a 400-gallon touch tank welcomes hands and curiosity. Inside, the exhibition hall invites visitors to explore replicas of beach and coastal dune ecology. There is a state-of-the-art classroom and indoor-outdoor event space. The information desk takes its cues from Old Florida fish shacks and the gift shop includes books, jewelry and art.

Future phases will feature more exhibits as well as outdoor manatee sculptures.

www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/lovers-key-state-park

Visitors from all over the world come to Lovers Key to enjoy its shell-strewn beach that stretches 2.5 miles, with three different beach accesses along calm, clear waters. Bikers enjoy more than 5 miles of multi-use trails through maritime hammock and off-the-beaten paths where you may encounter butterflies, marsh rabbits, gopher tortoises and alligators in a freshwater pond.

And for good reason, Southern Living magazine named Lovers Key one of Florida's most romantic destinations. In the early 1900s the island was accessible only by boat. Legend says that

only lovers made the effort to get to this romantic island, thus the name Lovers Key.
www.southernliving.com/travel/florida/most-romantic-destinations-fl

The **Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center** in the downtown Fort Myers river district plans an open house during Art Walk from 6 to 10 p.m. **May 7**. The event will also be a celebration of the long-awaited opening of the rooftop sculpture garden and reception area.

Visitors will also enjoy a walk through the Davis School of Music classroom, check out Six Fingers Recording Studios and view the two newest exhibitions: Unfunctional Function, a solo art show from artist Juan Abuela in the Grand Atrium. And showing in the Capital Gallery, a contrasting exhibition where artists of many talents were invited to participate in the Functional Art group show. sbdac.com

The **11th annual Fort Myers Film Festival May 12-16** at the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center in downtown Fort Myers will offer in-person and virtual activities. Screenings will also take place at the Edison and Ford Winter Estates, Alliance for the Arts, IMAG History & Science Center and the Laboratory Theater of Florida. The festival will feature screenings of 60 fresh international and independent films, with some throwback Florida films featuring cult classics and works by local filmmakers.

Participants and attendees safety will be prioritized with organizers implementing extra sanitization measures. For schedules, a downloadable guide and ticket information, visit fortmyersfilmfestival.com

On **May 14**, the history of the first documented tarpon caught on a rod-and-reel will be celebrated at the **ninth annual “Ding” Darling & Doc Ford’s Tarpon Tournament**. In its eight years, the “catch, care, and release” event has raised nearly \$500,000 to support wildlife research and conservation efforts at the refuge on Sanibel.

A mighty silver-sided tarpon was captured on a rod and reel for the first time on record in Tarpon Bay on March 19, 1885 and our area was changed forever. Southwest Florida became the epicenter of a new sport that generated interest around the globe. Celebrities and presidents were lured (no pun intended) here to catch the silver king. As a result, Southwest Florida became a major tourist destination. Anglers still come in search of the silver king of gamefish beginning each April. dingdarlingtarpontourney.org

Plan ahead and save the dates

7th annual Island Hopper Songwriter Fest

The countdown has started! Returning **Sept. 17-26**, the award-winning event will include new artists and events along with favorites from previous shows. The festival takes place over 10 days and offers a range of star-studded performances by some of country music’s greatest singer-songwriters from Nashville and beyond. Island Hopper kicks off on Captiva Island Sept. 17-19; moves to downtown Fort Myers Sept. 20-23; and closes at Fort Myers Beach Sept. 24-26.

Visitors will enjoy more than 80 artists, 100 shows, most of which are free and in small, intimate venues. The event is presented by iHeart Media, Cat Country 107.1, BMI and The Beaches of

Fort Myers & Sanibel. Check out the latest details and begin making plans at islandhopper.fortmyers-sanibel.com

Meanwhile, tune into our live virtual concert series, Songs from the Sofa and Songs from the Sand. At 8 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month, enjoy a BMI songwriter performing live from the comfort of their sofa (or from one of our beautiful beaches). Facebook [@islandhopperfest](https://www.facebook.com/islandhopperfest); Twitter [@IslandHopperSWF](https://twitter.com/IslandHopperSWF); and The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel [YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)

The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in the news

Southern Living picks Sanibel Island as one of The South's Best Beach Towns

The editors of Southern Living magazine featured Sanibel in its fifth annual The South's Best issue, selecting the island as one of its Beach Towns of 2021. Sanibel was featured on the cover of Southern Living's April edition. The island "kept the heart of the South beating during some of the toughest times of 2020 and 2021," says the magazine.

The recent accolade was noted within the magazine's double issue, which also includes Cabbage Key as one of the South's Best Places to Stay in 2021. The magazine is on newsstands and is currently available at www.southernliving.com

Fort Myers, Sanibel and Matlacha on "Samantha Brown's Places to Love"

The award-winning "Samantha Brown's Places to Love" returned in April for season 4 on PBS and featured Fort Myers, Sanibel, Matlacha and more. Visit samantha-brown.com/episodes/season-4

Town & Country magazine features Boca Grande's newly renovated Gasparilla Inn

The classic, Old Florida resort has undergone a refresh that is detailed in Town & Country magazine. The article begins with "Because sipping on Boca Punch and playing a game of backgammon sounds good right about now, doesn't it?"

It goes on to say, "Since its 1913 remodel, the Gasparilla Inn & Club has been a power hub in the sleepy village of Boca Grande, located on a barrier island between Naples and Sarasota. Titans of industry like J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford vacationed there, as did Hollywood elite like Katharine Hepburn. But after a century of vacationers, the shabby-chic transomed rooms (sans air conditioning), peanut butter and bacon canapes at cocktail hour, and a strict, clubby dress code, were in need of a refresh."

Check out the result and beautiful renovation photos at townandcountrymag.com/leisure/travel-guide/a35589148/boca-raton-gasparilla-inn-photos

Have fun and save with Fort Myers Sun Saver Passport

Sunshine is just one of many reasons to visit Southwest Florida. Use your mobile phone to access exclusive deals and savings on experiences and find yourself exploring everything under the sun here.

The Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB) has launched a free mobile savings passport that is available to Lee County locals and visitors. Users have access to exclusive deals on attractions, restaurants and experiences throughout the destination.

To participate:

- Sign up at <https://explore.fortmyers-sanibel.com>
- The passport will be delivered to your mobile phone via text
- Redeem it on your mobile phone at participating businesses
- Visit the website for a complete list of attractions, restaurants and experiences.

Dining news

The Oxbow Bar & Grill has opened at the **Luminary Hotel & Co.** Located in what was once known as the City Pier Building in the Downtown Fort Myers River District, it offers a mix of casual dockside dining and shopping. Open daily for lunch and dinner it serves brunch on weekends.

With panoramic riverfront views on the Caloosahatchee River, Oxbow features an upbeat nautical vibe that will appeal to the area's boaters. The restaurant's warm interior features the stylish use of modern brass lamps, Edison-style light bulbs, stained oak with copper metal finishes and antique oars adorning the ceilings. Creamy white walls, subway tiles and floors of large format porcelain tile keep the feel fresh and modern.

Inspired by its unique location, the 150-seat restaurant offers both indoor and outdoor seating. Menu selections include fresh oysters and seafood, craft sandwiches, burgers and steaks. The second floor will offer 2,400 square feet of event space featuring a patio with private access and a catering kitchen for private celebrations or meetings for up to approximately 150 guests.

Oxbow also offers a retail store for sportswear, gear, accessories and destination souvenirs. A watersports outfitter with kayak and paddleboard rentals plans to open in time for summer. www.oxbowfortmyers.com

Boop's By the Bubble Room, the nostalgic, yummy, old-fashioned soda fountain, has just opened on **Captiva Island** adjacent to the popular restaurant. An ice cream parlor that serves Love Boat ice cream also includes espresso coffees, pastries and the famous Bubble Room cake. www.bubbleroomrestaurant.com

Cru Wine Club has opened in **Bonita Springs**. The intimate, 650-square-foot wine tasting room, which features seating inside and outside, may be booked for a maximum of 12 guests to learn about California wines and discover new varieties to buy for enjoyment at home. Light bites and wine tastings will be featured during the day and chef-prepared small plates with host-led wine pairings will be featured during happy hour. The room will also be available for small private events www.cruwineclub.com

400 Rabbits on Sanibel Island. The new (and only) Mexican restaurant on Sanibel, 400 Rabbits gets its name from the 400 drunken rabbit gods, an Aztec myth involving the infinite ways people could get tipsy. Restaurant co-owners Debra and Jeramie Campana brought in Chef Don

Yamauchi, who was nominated for a James Beard award as one of the top five rising star chefs in 1993. He is also a 400 Rabbits co-owner. The restaurant is known for hand-crafted margaritas, dedicated guacamole station, burritos and street tacos. www.400rabbitssanibel.com

Coming soon to downtown Bonita Springs...

Chartreuse Craft and Cocktail Lounge is under construction in the Bonita Springs Historic District. Scheduled to open this month, the lounge offers classic and craft cocktails and a variety of desserts with a 1930s, Old Florida, swanky vibe. www.chartreuselounge.com

Ceremony Brewing is completing final renovations in preparation for a late summer opening. The brewery will make and sell its own beers as well as supplies and equipment for home brewers. The tap room plans to also serve drinks from other area brewers, offering patrons a variety. Local restaurants will supply food. www.facebook.com/CeremonyBrewing

The Bohemian plans a summer opening as the owners of the popular Downtown Coffee and Wine Company are branching into the restaurant scene with a new, upscale and intimate restaurant with a menu filled with eclectic cuisine. Patrons will be able to watch chefs at work in the restaurant's unique layout that includes seating for 44 inside and 33 on an outdoor deck. www.thebohemianbonita.com

Be inspired: Road Trips for Families

Travel writer Cheryl Rodewig says that a road trip from Fort Myers to Marco Island is the "best Southwest Florida trip itinerary." In her article for Road Trips for Families, a travel website for families planning their next trip, her mentions include visits to Edison and Ford Winter Estates, IMAG History & Science Center, Calusa Nature Center & Planetarium, Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum, the River District, Ella Mae's Diner, Luminary Hotel & Co., Everglades Wonder Gardens and more. Check out the article and you may be inspired to follow in her footsteps for a fun road trip close to home. www.roadtripsforfamilies.com/fort-myers-to-marco-island-best-southwest-florida-road-trip-itinerary

Accommodations news

Luminary Hotel & Co. opens in downtown Fort Myers

Reaching 12 stories above downtown Fort Myers, the new, waterfront Luminary Hotel & Co. is the area's first hotel in the prestigious Autograph Collection® of Marriott International. The 243-room boutique hotel is home to the signature Silver King Ocean Brasserie and Lobby Bar; Beacon Social Drinkery rooftop lounge; Ella Mae's Diner; Dean Street Coffee Roaster & Retail; The Workshop culinary theater; an indoor and outdoor fitness facility; and a spacious pool area on the fourth floor featuring an event deck overlooking the Caloosahatchee River. Luminary offers 10,000 square feet of adaptable indoor and outdoor function space ideal for a variety of events and meetings and is adjacent to the neighboring Caloosa Sound Convention Center. The hotel also offers convenient access to the riverfront Oxbow Bar & Grill, which opened March 22. Oxbow Retail & Rentals, and Caloosa Sound Amphitheater located on the Caloosahatchee and scheduled to open in 2021. LuminaryHotel.com

Hotel Indigo in downtown Fort Myers

Plans are underway for a renovation and a brand name change at the 67-room, eight-story hotel. Once renovation is completed, the hotel will have 72 rooms and it will become part of the Tapestry Collection by Hilton, an upscale brand. www.ihg.com/hotelindigo

Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village

The \$15 million room renovation at Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village is planned for completion this spring. It includes increased room inventory and a new design taking inspiration from the concept of biophilia, a belief that people have an innate need to connect with nature. Each room includes natural materials locally sourced from Florida with soothing fluid patterns related to water and vibrant accents evoking a peaceful ambiance, complementing waterfront views from each guest room. marriott.com/hotels/travel/rswwi-the-westin-cape-coral-resort-at-marina-village

More new accommodations

The opening of the 243-room Luminary Hotel & Co. in the River District led the way for a resurgence in area lodging. Other new hotels include a 100-room SpringHill Suites Fort Myers Estero, a 118-suite Home2 Suites by Hilton Fort Myers, an 80-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites Fort Myers Beach-Sanibel Gateway and the 101-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites Fort Myers Airport.

Give our new podcast – Shellcast – a listen

Think of Shellcast as a beach break for your ears. The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel's new podcast gives listeners a chance to soak up some virtual sun and learn more about our slice of paradise. Listeners from around in the world tune in to experience the sounds of the destination's beaches, nature and interviews with local experts. The Shellcast catalog includes:

- Episode 1: Sanibel beach time
- Episode 2: On the water with Capt. Brian Holaway
- Episode 3: Cape Coral's Burrowing Owl Festival
- Episode 4: What would Thomas Edison think about podcasts?
- Episode 5: Pretty in pink birdwatching with Ranger Toni
- Episode 6: Talking scat on the Indigo Trail
- Episode 7: All about the WoW & when nature calls
- Episode 8: Everglades Wonder Gardens, an original Florida roadside attraction
- Episode 9: When I get older, I want to be a manatee
- Plus four bonus episodes

Shellcast is available on fortmyers-sanibel.com, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, iHeartRadio, Google Podcasts and wherever fine podcasts are downloaded. Follow Shellcast on Instagram [@shellcastthepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/shellcastthepodcast).

Explore Lakes Regional Park in Fort Myers

One of Lee County's most visited parks for both locals and visitors, Lakes Regional Park is showcased in a new public service announcement that includes aerial footage of the park's 300 acres of lakes, preserve areas, gardens and recreational features.

Amenities for families to enjoy include the new Children's Garden, playgrounds, water features, nature trails, botanic gardens and lakeside picnic areas. Wheel Fun offers all types of bike rentals to travel the park. Kayak and paddle boat rentals are available to explore the lakes and get a close-up view of the abundant bird population. The Train Museum and its popular miniature train ride takes all ages on a 15-minute ride. For outside exercise, a series of fitness stations complement the 3.5 miles of walking/running trails throughout the park. Watch "Explore Lakes Park" on YouTube at <http://bit.ly/LPEF30psa>. More information is available at LakesPark.org

Lee County historic places

Known for our year-round sunshine and outdoor activities, it's easy to overlook the rich history of Lee County. To date, there are 57 places that have been named to the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to the well-known Edison and Ford Winter Estates, a few others that are included: Boca Grande Lighthouse, Captiva School and Chapel-by-the-Sea Historic District, Dean Park Historic Residential District in Fort Myers, Paul Lawrence Dunbar School (also known as Dunbar Community School) in Fort Myers, Sanibel Lighthouse and Keepers Cottage, the Mound House on Fort Myers Beach, Pineland Archeological District in Pineland, Useppa Island Site, Koreshan Unity Settlement Historic Site in Estero. Check them all out at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Register_of_Historic_Places_listings_in_Lee_County,_Florida

Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum opens "Beyond Shells" on Sanibel Island

Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum's new \$6 million expansion, "Beyond Shells: The Mysterious World of Mollusks," transforms the visitor's experience. It connects them to the little-known live animals that contribute to the ocean's stunning shells and educates visitors about the important role these animals play in our ecosystem.

The bright new space gives visitors the chance to rediscover the museum with 11 aquariums that showcase cold and warm water species, like octopuses, squid and nautilus. Visitors duck into a pop-up bubble for a 360-degree look at mollusks and fish, and immerse their hands in two engaging 15-foot touch-pool experiences.

To learn more about the shells from our beaches, download the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum app (\$1.99). Snap a photo of your shell and learn what kind it is and all the details about it. shellmuseum.org

Snack House nostalgia at IMAG History and Science Center in Fort Myers

The Snack House, an iconic downtown Fort Myers diner from 1949 to 1993, is back with a nostalgic twist at IMAG History and Science Center in Fort Myers, formerly known as the Imaginarium.

In an effort to recapture the nostalgia, mystique, and excitement of the Snack House, the IMAG, working with [@CarbonPress](https://www.carbonpress.com) of Fort Myers, refurbished the original 1950s Snack House sign (which is on permanent display in the museum) and also developed a larger-than-life mural of the Snack House diner counter from an original 1960s photograph of its interior. Bringing back the history of this golden age of dining, the IMAG also features an exhibit of Snack House

memorabilia including original menus, news clippings, matchbooks and photographs for our appreciation and reminiscence. theimag.org

Take a ride on a 1927 carousel in North Fort Myers

After a total refurbishment, this 1927 beauty has found a new home and popularity at the Shell Factory and Nature Park in North Fort Myers. For \$1 per person, take a ride and enjoy a nostalgic trip, then go for a bite at Capt'n Fishbone's. shellfactory.com

Coming in 2021: Topgolf plans to bring its technology-enabled entertainment experience to Fort Myers in late 2021. The seventh venue to be located in Florida, the complex will include 70 climate-controlled hitting bays, full-service restaurant and bars, 200 HDTV's, rooftop terrace, private event space and meeting rooms. www.topgolf.com/us/fort-myers

Awards

Golden Spoon awards include five area restaurants

We are pleased to see that Florida Trend magazine's best places to dine include six from our area: Angelina's Ristorante in Bonita Springs (Italian), Azure in Fort Myers (French), BLANC in Fort Myers (Contemporary), Ember Korean Steakhouse in Fort Myers (Korean), Harold's Restaurant in Fort Myers, (Continental) and Sweet Melissa's Café on Sanibel Island (Seafood and American).

The Golden Spoon recognizes outstanding fine dining restaurants that have demonstrated consistency in high standards and longevity, usually earned after three years in business or more. www.floridatrend.com/golden-spoons

Island Hopper and ArtFest named winners

Two Lee County events were named winners in the Florida Festivals & Events Association (FFEA) 2020 SUNsational Awards. The organization recognizes Florida's best and brightest for innovation, individuality and creative collaboration for event production.

Island Hopper Songwriter Fest, received four awards, including first place awards for banners, mobile app and radio coverage. It earned second place for its volunteer program that utilizes hundreds of locals to support this mostly free event each fall. The event returns Sept. 17-26, 2021 on Captiva Island, downtown Fort Myers and Fort Myers Beach. Check out all of the exciting details at island-hopper.fortmyers-sanibel.com

ArtFest Fort Myers won three awards that included crisis communication plan, green program and social media advertising campaign. In its 21st year, ArtFest Fort Myers is one of the area's most popular art events with made-in-the-USA originals, including ceramics, jewelry, glass, unique paintings, wearable art and more by 170 artists. ArtFestFortMyers.com

Wine Spectator recognizes 11 area restaurants

Wine Spectator's Restaurant Awards recognize restaurants whose wine lists offer interesting selections, are appropriate to their cuisine and appeal to a wide range of wine lovers. A total of 11 restaurants have been recognized in two prestigious categories.

Award of Excellence went to Charley's Boat House Grill & Wine Bar, Fort Myers Beach; Ruth's Chris Steak House, Estero; Sunshine Seafood Café & Wine Bar, Captiva Island; Sweet Melissa's Café, Sanibel; A Table Apart, Bonita Springs; The Temptation Restaurant, Boca Grande; Terra Nostra Ristorante, Fort Myers; The Pink Elephant, Boca Grande; and Twisted Vine Bistro, Fort Myers. These wine lists offer at least 90 selections, feature a well-chosen assortment of quality producers, along with a thematic match to the menu in both price and style. Whether compact or extensive, focused or diverse, these lists deliver sufficient choice to satisfy discerning wine lovers.

Best of Award of Excellence went to Angelina's Ristorante, Bonita Springs; and The Gasparilla Inn Main Dining Room, Boca Grande. These wine lists display excellent breadth across multiple winegrowing regions and/or significant vertical depth of top producers, along with superior presentation. Typically offering 350 or more selections, the restaurants are destinations for serious wine lovers, showing a deep commitment to wine, both in the cellar and through their service team. winespectator.com

The arts

Art in Flight at Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW)

For the last 15 years, the Alliance for the Arts, a nonprofit visual and performing arts center in the heart of Fort Myers and the Lee County Port Authority have partnered on Art in Flight, which brings art to the public spaces and the millions of travelers at Southwest Florida International Airport.

The current exhibit, Pop of Color, features a diverse collection of 29 artworks that use line, shape, texture and color to amaze the senses. With a varied collection of styles and media, artists on display demonstrate the wide possibilities of abstract art from clean and crisp edges to wild and energetic strokes of paint. Various materials and their textures are explored as well with everything from found objects to sculptural, low relief mixed media. Pop of Color will exhibit now through the end of the month. artinlee.org/experience/exhibits/art-in-flight

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***Editor's note:** The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in Southwest Florida includes Sanibel Island, Captiva Island, Fort Myers Beach, Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Estero, Cape Coral, Pine Island, Boca Grande & Outer Islands, North Fort Myers and Lehigh Acres. For media assistance, visit www.fortmyers-sanibel.com/media-central*