

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 24, 2015

Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau

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

2nd Annual Island Hopper Songwriter Fest, accolades, attractions news, nationally-recognized festivals and more!

LEE COUNTY, FL – In addition to great, year-round weather, shell-drenched beaches and the sparkling Gulf of Mexico, The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in southwest Florida continues to provide new experiences for visitors to Florida's unspoiled island destination. For vacation-planning information, please visit www.FortMyersSanibel.com.

Save the date for the 2nd Annual Island Hopper Songwriter Fest this fall

Award-winning, internationally-recognized singer-songwriters will entertain at the Island Hopper Songwriter Fest this fall on Captiva Island, Fort Myers Beach and downtown Fort Myers. The 2nd Annual Island Hopper Songwriter Fest begins Sept. 17-20 on Captiva Island and wraps up Sept. 25-27 on Fort Myers Beach. Historic downtown Fort Myers will feature mid-week performances Sept. 21-24. The free event takes place over 10 consecutive days and includes venues on the area's most beautiful barrier islands with a range of star-studded performers. Songwriters who have penned No. 1 hits for such artists as Garth Brooks, Brad Paisley, Lee Ann Womack, will perform at multiple venues. Some of the venues include 'Tween Water's Crow's Nest, Key Lime Bistro and Doc Ford's at South Seas Island Resort on Captiva; as well as Nervous Nellie's, The Beached Whale and Matanzas on the Bay on Fort Myers Beach.

Headliner, 2010 Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame inductee Terry Sylvester, started his musical career at the famous Cavern Club Liverpool in the early 1960s, often appearing with the Beatles with his first group, The Escorts. In 1968, he replaced Graham Nash in The Hollies. His first single with the group, "Sorry Suzanne," reached No. 3 on the U.K. charts and his first album "Hollies Sing Dylan" went to No. 1. In 1969 they recorded "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother," with Elton John playing piano. The song became The Hollies' biggest hit. Check [here](#) for a complete list of artists.

The event is presented by The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel; BMI, the largest music rights organization in the U.S.; along with partners iHeartMedia, and Cat Country 107.1. For details including artists, venues, accommodations and more, visit www.islandhopperfest.com.

Hiking and horseback riding at Buckingham Trails Preserve

The Lee County Conservation 20/20 program opened Buckingham Trails Preserve to the public adding another site within Lee County Parks & Recreation at which people can hike and ride horses. The east Fort Myers site provides a newly built parking area and trail system totaling more than seven miles. There are 2.3 miles of hiking trails and 4.8 miles for both horseback riding and hiking. Equestrian use is prohibited on the pedestrian hiking trails to prevent damage to the historic features of the property. This 572-acre preserve features scrubby and mesic flatwoods along with several small wetland systems and cultural resources associated with the property's past military use. Wildlife species on site include the threatened gopher tortoise, Florida sandhill crane and the Cooper's hawk. www.Conservation2020.org.

Wicked Dolphin Rum and Lee Reefs partner for Special Operations Bionic Warriors

The USS Mohawk Coast Guard Cutter (CGC), a 165-foot World War II warship that is now a living reef thriving with exotic marine life, is still serving veterans and the community three years after sinking with the production of “Sunken Barrel Mohawk Reserve Rum.”

For the first time in Gulf of Mexico history, a unique class of rum will be created using the atmospheric pressure in the crystal blue water of the ocean basin. This process allows the pressure of the water to squeeze rich rum syrup out of the barrel wood that will make a kind of rum unlike any other commercially produced in North America.

Five Wicked Dolphin Rum barrels filled with distilled water were sent 90 feet down to the USS Mohawk Veterans Memorial Reef recently and then raised 72 hours later. This batch will be used to craft the Florida distiller’s latest offering: Sunken Barrel Mohawk Reserve.

Wicked Dolphin Rum and Lee Reefs have partnered to create the limited edition rum to benefit the Lee Reefs program and Special Operations Bionic Warriors - a foundation that ensures wounded, injured or ill U.S. Special Operations veterans/athletes receive state-of-the art adaptive sports equipment, coaching and access to cutting-edge sports science that will ensure achievement of their athletic goals.

The rum will be available at Wicked Dolphin Distillery, based in Cape Coral. It’s a limited edition sold in 750 ml bottles. There will be 200 signature bottles sold with the name “Sunken Barrel Mohawk Reserve.” To see more, visit <http://wickeddolphinmedia.com>

Kudos

Tops for family beach vacations

U.S. News & World Report ranked Sanibel Island #4 for best family beach vacations. Noteworthy: Sanibel rose to the top in 2015 above Fort Lauderdale, Hilton Head, Honolulu, and U.S. Virgin Islands. Factors cited included safe waters, kid-friendly attractions and dining, spacious accommodations, multi-generational appeal and overall accessibility.

Best family-friendly vacation spot in the U.S.: Sanibel Island

Sanibel Island is the best *Family-Friendly Vacation Spot* in the U.S. according to a poll conducted by the readers of the national publication [FamilyFun Magazine](#).

FamilyFun stated that “Sanibel Island is the perfect family getaway, boasts 250 types of shells, 230 types of birds, 50 species of fish, 25 miles of bike paths, 15 miles of unspoiled beaches and 0 stoplights.”

Best beach

Lovers Key State Park was named one of 10 Florida "best beaches" by readers of *USA Today* and *10 Best*. www.10best.com/awards/travel/best-florida-beach/

Top vacation rental destination

Sanibel Island has been named one of the top 20 vacation rental destinations in the United States, according to *TripAdvisor* traveler reviews in 2014. In a study comparing average review scores for vacation rentals by U.S. region, Sanibel Island was one of six Florida destinations to make the list with a score of 4.70 out of a possible five, equivalent to 94 percent. “Sanibel Island’s bayside homes and pet-friendly condos hold numerous TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence awards, owing to their stellar review scores,” TripAdvisor stated in the announcement.

In addition, *TripAdvisor Vacation Rentals* has released the results of its price comparison study of the average weekly rate for a two-bedroom rental. On the top 10 list: Bonita Springs and Fort Myers. Check out the area's condo rentals [here](#).

Dog-friendly

Sanibel Island was ranked among the top 10 dog friendly vacations in the United States by *bringfido.com*. The island offers pet friendly hotels, events, restaurants and parks and beaches for dogs to enjoy. www.bringfido.com/destination/

Attractions

The historic Koreshan home in Estero has completed the cottage rehab where one of the "Final Four" Koreshans lived. The home of German-born Conrad Schlender, the tiny wood-frame building was likely built around 1900, then moved to the Utopian communal settlement in the 1930s. The \$50,000 restoration included leveling the foundation, repairing siding, windows and door and installing a new metal roof. A clattering stand of giant bamboo shades the little building on the grounds of the **Koreshan State Historic Site**, which offers visitors a glimpse of the lives the idealistic pioneers carved out of the subtropical scrub around the turn of the 20th century. Led by the charismatic Cyrus Teed, who renamed himself Cyrus (Hebrew for shepherd), the group planned to create the New Jerusalem. The Koreshan State Historic Site is located at Corkscrew Road and U.S. 41 in Estero. For details: Call 239-992-0311 or visit floridastateparks.org/koreshan

Free summer programs at J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge

Bi-weekly family nature films, weekly walks, and nature crafts highlight the free programming offered through Aug. 9 at J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island. For information, call 239-472-1100 ext. 236 or visit <http://dingdarlingsociety.org/summer-programming>

The **Edison Botanical Laboratory** became the first site in Florida to be designated by the American Chemical Society as a **National Historic Chemical Landmark**. The American Chemical Society established the National Historic Chemical Landmarks program in 1992 to recognize important achievements in the history of the chemical sciences. Achievements recognized through this program have included the discovery and development of penicillin and the work of historical figures such as George Washington Carver and Rachel Carson.

The project to restore the 1928 Edison Botanical Laboratory was led by Edison Ford staff and consultants, which included a very diverse group of university professors, scientists, industrial engineers and retired trade workers from the industrial machine shops of the past. The three-year restoration with overall funding of more than \$1 million provided building stabilization, restoration of exterior siding, windows and roof, state-of-the-art fire suppression and alarm systems, and new building access. Historical documents and photographs were used by the Edison & Ford Winter Estates research team to correctly place items in the laboratory.

Behind-the-scene tours with a historian are available at 10:30 a.m. each Tuesday and Friday. Visit [here](#) for details and tour information.

The historic **Everglades Wonder Gardens** has reopened in **Bonita Springs** following a change in ownership and a renovation. Opening in 1936, the gardens offer a piece of Florida history to visitors who may tour one of Florida's original roadside attractions. Wander the newly-created paths, see pink flamingos, alligators, a swinging bridge and a butterfly garden. The park also includes landscape photography in John Brady's Everglades Gallery and a picnic area. The park, located at 27180 Old U.S. 41 in Bonita Springs, is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Call 239-992-2591 or visit www.evergladeswondergardens.com.

The Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum on **Sanibel Island** hosts a weekly beach walk with a marine naturalist each Tuesday at 10 a.m. Cost is \$10 per person and includes half-price admission to the museum. Reservations are required. [Details: www.shellmuseum.org](http://www.shellmuseum.org).

The 500,000-square-foot **HeadPinz** bowling center plans a July opening in **Fort Myers**. The entertainment attraction includes a two-story laser tag arena, a suspended aerial ropes course and an arcade area. Of its 28 bowling lanes, eight are set in a boutique area with a bar and four vintage-style lanes with pin setting by hand. The center will also feature indoor/outdoor lounge areas, conference, meeting and party rooms. Nemo's Sports Bar will serve breakfast, lunch and dinner with a bar and large screen TV's.

Accommodations

Sundial Beach Resort on **Sanibel Island** has completed a multimillion-dollar renovation that includes refreshing of accommodations, new fitness center, HydroGrid tennis courts, a campus of the Sanibel Sea School, a Kay Casperson Lifestyle Spa and Boutique and a satellite operation of Sanibel's Bailey's Marketplace. Visit www.sundialresort.com.

The historic **Gasparilla Inn** on **Boca Grande** added [five new estate homes](#), offering accommodations for friends or multi-generational travelers. Preserving the same old-Florida charm the 101-year-old inn is known for, the homes include three- and four-bedroom options, featuring a kitchen, dining and living areas with an open layout and amenities. A member of Historic Hotels of America and listed on The National Register of Historic Places, the resort offers 142 accommodations in a pristine environment in the heart of Boca Grande, located on Gasparilla Island. Visit www.gasparillainn.com.

TripAdvisor named **Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort and Spa** in **Bonita Springs** for the second consecutive year as a Gold Level GreenLeader. The program helps travelers plan greener trips by identifying environmentally-friendly accommodations across the United States. In more news, the resort's Calusa ballroom has been refurbished with a \$2.4 million new look that includes LED lighting, neutral wall coverings, digital signage, dramatic glass light fixtures, contemporary furnishings and artwork. www.coconutpoint.hyatt.com.

Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina on **Fort Myers Beach** has employed naturalist Vince McGrath to offer resort guests morning wildlife walking and kayaking expeditions to explore the eco-zones of the local marine environment. Guests are able to observe numerous flora and fauna, from what's under the sea to the shoreline, tide pools and upland habitats of the dunes. McGrath also is available to guests to answer questions about creatures they find during their own beach exploration. Visit www.pinkshell.com.

Casa Ybel Resort on **Sanibel Island** has been ranked by *Travel and Leisure Family* magazine as one of North America's Top 20 Family Resorts. www.casaybelresort.com.

Food and Dining

Cabbage Key was named by [USA Today Travel](#) as one of 10 restaurants not reachable by car. Visit www.cabbagekey.com.

Charles Mereday, chef-owner of Naples' Mereday's Fine Dining and Alto Live Jazz Kitchen, has taken his signature style to Estero with the European-style **Mereday's Brasserie**. The restaurant is located in **Estero's** Coconut Point retail center. The menu, designed by Mereday, is ingredient-driven and presented and will change daily. The a la carte selections include starters, salads and sandwiches, main courses and desserts. For information: 239-949-9466.

Art and Music Walks in the River District, downtown Fort Myers

Art Walk takes place the first Friday of each month, 6-10 p.m. An opportunity for art buyers and art enthusiasts to meet artists at their galleries during show openings; the events end with an after party.

www.fortmyersartwalk.com.

Music Walk features live music on the third Friday of each month, 6-10 p.m. More than a dozen participating venues feature music by local and regional talent. Restaurants, bars, art galleries, and shops showcase a wide range of music from jazz and blues to rock, drums and much more.

www.downtownfortmyers.com/Music_Walk/

Upcoming special events and festivals

MangoMania, Pine Island

July 18-19, 2015

239-283-0888

www.mangomaniafl.net/

The mango is the star attraction for two days each summer on Pine Island. Go wild for fruit as you sample locally-grown delicacies at this annual affair, an unusual celebration of all the tropical fruit grown on the island, which includes lychee, carambola, longan, papaya, and "chocolate pudding fruit." Fruit, exotic fruit trees, and fruit-related products are available for purchase. The 2015 festival will take place at the Pineland Marina. This fun, family event celebrates Pine Island's mangoes and other tropical fruits. In addition to mango food and beverages, the event features live music, art and craft vendors, food and recipe contests, activities area for kids and a chance to meet the Mango Queen!

10th Annual Fort Myers Beach Pirate Fest, Fort Myers Beach

Oct. 9-11, 2015

www.fortmyersbeach.org/fort-myers-beach-pirate-festival-events/

Ahoy Mateys! Mark your calendar and head to Fort Myers Beach for some swash-buckling fun at this jam-packed weekend pirate fest. This family event includes a scavenger hunt, pub quest, sea battles, Blackbeard kid's show and so much more. If it's a pirates life for you, check back for details and start planning your pirate costume!

50th Annual Summerset Regatta, Fort Myers Beach, Downtown Fort Myers

Oct. 9-11, 2015

<http://www.summersetregatta.com>

With activities for the entire family shore side at the Pink Shell Resort & Marina on Fort Myers Beach, this event benefits youth sailing in Southwest Florida. Sponsored by the Caloosatchee Marching & Chowder Society.

29th Annual Oktoberfest, Cape Coral

Oct. 16-18 and 23-25, 2015

German-American Club

239-283-1400

www.capecoraloktoberfest.com

Hosted by the German-American Club, this huge celebration includes German culture, food, music and dancing. Highlights include authentic live entertainment with large musical groups from Germany, along with enough German food and beer to make anyone do the "Chicken Dance." There is also a carnival area for kids. Call or check website for schedule and ticket information.

26th Annual J.N. "Ding" Darling Days, Sanibel Island

Oct. 18-24, 2015

239-472-1100

www.dingdarlingdays.com

“Ding” Darling Days include a week of eco-activities with free refuge tram tours, live wildlife presentations, birding, kayaking tours, environmental speakers, a Federal Duck Stamp artist presentation and more. The festival celebrates the birthday of the refuge's namesake, conservationist and Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist, Jay N. “Ding” Darling.

Images of Nature Week, Lovers Key State Park, Fort Myers Beach

Nov. 2-8, 2015

www.friendsofloverskey.org/index.php/events/images-nature-week/

The week begins with a selection of topics and on-site sessions at Lovers Key State Park, each session is two hours and attendees may continue to enjoy the park all day, or arrive early for afternoon sessions. The week culminates on Nov. 8 with the Images of Nature dinner and presentation by National Geographic photographer Carlton Ward, Jr. Ward is a conservation photographer and eighth-generation Floridian based in Tampa. His work is exhibited widely and published in Audubon, Smithsonian, Geo, Nature Conservancy and National Geographic. Each weekday session is limited to 20 participants. For details and registration information, visit website.

Cape Coral CoCoNut Festival, Cape Coral

Nov. 12-15, 2015

239-573-3121

www.cocofest.com

Sun Splash Family Water Park

The Cape Coral CoCoNut Festival celebrates Cape Coral's reputation for coconuts, multi-cultural food, boating, fishing and wildlife. The festival will feature a national musical act, gymnastic entertainment, carnival rides, water-ski shows, tropical food, contests, coconut crafts and fireworks.

10th Annual Sanibel Island Writers Conference

Nov. 5-8, 2015

239-590-7421

www.fgcu.edu/siwc/

BIG Arts and the Sanibel Island Public Library

This intimate writers' conference draws acclaimed authors and songwriters, award-winning poets and screenplay writers. This talented group holds small workshops for all levels of aspiring writers who want to follow in their creative footsteps. Participants also enjoy nightly readings and concerts, which are open to the public. The conference welcomes any aspiring writer who wants to create new work or refine a project in progress. Keynote speaker: Haitian-American author, Edwidge Danticat. For details and reservations, visit website.

29th Annual American Sand Sculpting Championship, Fort Myers Beach

Nov. 20-29, 2015

239-454-7500

www.fmbandsculpting.com

Come and join the fun on Fort Myers Beach for the 29th Annual American Sand Sculpting Championship and Beach Festival. Sponsored by the Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce, this fun-filled event will include world-class master sand sculptors, a state championship contest, an amateur contest, sand sculpting demonstrations and lessons, and much more. USA Today listed the event as one

of the 10 best sand sculpting competitions and the Southeastern Tourism Society recognized the American Sand Sculpting Championship as a top 20 event.

40th Annual Holiday Nights at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers

Nov. 27, 2015 through Jan. 3, 2016 (Event is closed Dec. 24 & 25)

239-334-7419

www.edisonfordwinterestates.org

Edison Ford Holiday Nights reflect the many contributions of Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and their families. It was chosen by the editors of USA Today as one of the 10Best Historic Homes for the Holidays, which also included The White House, Mount Vernon, Monticello and the Biltmore in North Carolina. To view the article visit: <http://www.10best.com/interests/trip-pics/historic-homes-for-the-holidays/>.

A not-to-be-missed holiday tradition, the historic buildings and acres of gardens are decorated with lights and traditional decorations. The holiday estates offer a behind the scenes tour, Children's Holiday Tree Trail, Santa visits on select nights, refreshments and shopping in the Holiday Cottage Shoppe, Museum Store and Garden Shoppe. For admission and details:

www.edisonfordwinterestates.org/events/annual-events/holiday-nights/

Captiva Holiday Village, Captiva Island

Weekends beginning Thanksgiving weekend through mid-December 2015

www.captivaholidayvillage.com

Beginning with a tree-lighting and fireworks, this popular southwest Florida barrier island transforms into a Holiday Village with events every weekend through December. This themed, fun-filled holiday extravaganza is set against the backdrop of the shimmering Gulf of Mexico and breathtaking sunsets. Visitors to Captiva Island during Captiva Holiday Village weekends enjoy a Mullet Band parade, lighted boat parade, South Seas holiday strolls, a Junkanoo Parade, a carol sing at the Chapel by the Sea, sunset arias, a holiday golf cart parade and much more.

The 31st Annual Christmas Luminary Trail and Open House, Sanibel (Dec. 4) and Captiva (Dec. 5) islands.

This event draws visitors from all over the world as they join local residents to celebrate the season with three miles of luminary candles and events. For more information visit www.sanibel-captiva.org. For information on accommodations, visit www.captivaholidayvillage.com/accommodations-getaway-vacations/

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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, Lehigh Acres. For media assistance, visit www.fortmyerssanibel.com/media.