

Back to the sun

With new openings and increased airlift, Florida's Fort Myers is bouncing back after Hurricane Ian, says **Alice Barnes-Brown**

As I walk barefoot on the cool morning sand, not yet warmed by the Florida sunshine, circular ripples on the Gulf of Mexico interrupt my conversation. A pod of bottlenose dolphins breaches the surface to feed, before swiftly disappearing. I've never seen dolphins in the wild before, and although it's peak tourist season, there's barely another soul on the beach to see them with me.

In September 2022, Fort Myers – a city on Florida's southwestern coastline – bore the brunt of category 5 Hurricane Ian. Homes were destroyed, hotels and restaurants suffered devastating flooding and attractions were gutted. Repair costs have been

estimated at \$100 billion, and visitors to the once-thriving destination have been afraid to return – between 2022 and 2023, the number of visitors from the UK fell 43%.

Yet Brian Hamman, the president of the Greater Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce, says: "We're seeing it as a blank slate – it's driven more investment in the area. People are seeing it as an opportunity."

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Tourism looks set to bounce back bigger and better, with newly renovated and brand-new hotels, including the 254-room Margaritaville Fort Myers Beach, which opened in January and was buzzing when I visited. There's ➤

PICTURE: JASON LINDSEY

DESTINATIONS

THE US | FLORIDA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bottlenose dolphins; the aftermath of Hurricane Ian; Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina; the hotel's beach; PICTURES: Shutterstock/Tory Kallman, Felix Mizioznikov, Ami Parikh; Brian Tietz; Alice Barnes-Brown

also increased airlift – British Airways flights to Tampa, the nearest major airport, were upped to daily in January.

Simultaneously, Fort Myers is doubling down on its efforts to raise awareness among UK agents.

Travel professionals can learn more about the region during this year's Visit Florida Roadshow, where destination representatives will be meeting agents in Glasgow, Birmingham and Manchester.

Increased online and in-person training will help educate, while a fam trip running later in the year aims to introduce more agents to the region's delights.

At the recently renovated Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina, sales manager Dony Taylor explains that British visitors make up a valuable crop of summer (low-season) visitors who tend to combine a trip to the amusement parks of Orlando or the vibrant streets of Miami with the "peace and quiet" of Fort Myers.

“The sand in Fort Myers is made of corals and seashells whittled into powder by the gentle lapping of the sea

The Key West Express, a catamaran that whisks travellers to the Florida Keys in three-and-a-half hours, also sails from here – providing another convenient connection with a place that's beloved by Brits.

IN THE PINK

On my first morning in Fort Myers, I roll out of my giant bed and hit the beach outside the Pink Shell, where the sand is freshly raked and laid out with turquoise sunbeds and umbrellas. Hurricane Ian swept up

a lot of sand from this beach – then deposited it in the hotel's swimming pool – so the beach has been refreshed with new grains.

The sand in Fort Myers is made of corals and seashells whittled into powder by the gentle lapping of the sea, so it's even softer than the crushed-up quartz I grew up building sandcastles on in Dorset; it feels like walking on soft, light-brown (or in this case, white) sugar. A heavenly sensation underfoot.

A 30-minute drive across estuaries and causeways lies Sanibel, one of more than 100 barrier islands around Fort Myers. If clients are fans of the beach, a day here is worthwhile, as the shores of Sanibel are renowned for their seashell-collecting potential. Thanks to their unique position in Gulf of Mexico currents, up to 250 types of shell wash up here.

More than half of Sanibel's land mass is nature reserve, and animal populations have been ➤

SELLING TIPS



Maggi Smit
managing director,
America As You Like It

🌿 **Rapid repairs:** Fort Myers has done a tremendous job of repairing many hurricane-damaged buildings and hotels.

🌿 **Wealth of activities:** Fort Myers Beach offers kayak tours, nature discovery programmes, dolphin adventure tours and guided beach walks.

🌿 **Convenient transport:** Options include renting a bicycle, which is a popular choice for those looking to casually explore the area. Golf carts are a street-legal and leisurely way to get around. There is also a free trolley bus to discover Fort Myers Beach.

🌿 **City sights:** Don't forget to explore Fort Myers city, particularly the Edison and Ford Winter Estates beside the Caloosahatchee River, which are home to a historical museum and an eight-hectare botanical garden.

🌿 **Multi-centre trips:** A visit to Fort Myers can be combined with cities such as Miami, Tampa or Sarasota to make an excellent two or three-centre Florida holiday.





TO SUPPORT RECOVERY

1 Visit an animal sanctuary

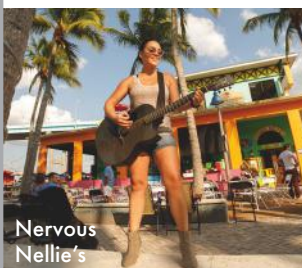
Stopping in at one of Sanibel's many sanctuaries is a sustainable way to support the hurricane recovery. At CROW, travellers can attend an educational tour, purchase adorable soft toys from the gift shop or simply donate a few dollars.

2 Take a boat tour

Getting on the water in Fort Myers is a serene experience – particularly if clients set out just before sunset. Captains know Fort Myers like the back of their hand and are happy to share stories from the area. Whether it's a bring-your-own tiki cruise or a sail to see manatees, each trip is an organic and fun way to connect with local people.

3 Eat out, eat local

Munching one's way around the bay helps hurricane-impacted restaurants get back on their feet. Soak up the live music and shrimp at Nervous Nellie's (try to get a seat on the harbourside decking), snack on Latin American street food at Backyard Social, or shop for fresh Florida bananas at Sanibel Farmers' Market.



ABOVE: Flamingos have set up colonies on Sanibel for the first time since the 1970s PICTURES: Shutterstock/HGU Foto; Brian Tietz

remarkably quick to recover from the hurricane: American flamingos have been spotted setting up colonies here for the first time since the 1970s.

Facilities designed to house injured wildlife weren't quite so lucky. At Sanibel's Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (CROW), my guide Ali Reece explains that only six of the centre's 18 animal enclosures survived Ian. "Nobody expected how bad the hurricane would be – we weren't able to move back on site until October 2023," she says.

However, rebuilding work has been swift. CROW acts as an animal hospital for trainee vets and offers tours from Monday to Friday, so visitors can learn more about Sanibel's creatures. I watch through a clinic window as a batch of frightened marsh rabbits are brought in, the adorable critters swaddled in towels donated by local hotels and fed with out-of-date produce from Jerry's, Sanibel's mom-and-pop greengrocer. "They really stepped up – the other grocery store was knocked out by the hurricane," says Reece.

“As my eyes adjust to the dark cavern, I see cowries, conches and scallops stacked in neat strata

Inland in Fort Myers city, the story is a little different. Many of its colourful art deco shopping streets and traditional 'Old Florida' wooden mansions survived the hurricane's wrath: crucially, the charming 19th-century winter homes of American entrepreneurs Henry Ford and Thomas Edison (including a laboratory the two constructed to extract rubber from local flora) were largely unscathed.

SHELL SHOCKED

Another historic attraction to suffer minimal damage was Mound House, a 20th-century bayside home built atop a 2,000-year-

old shell mound. Constructed over the millennia by the Native American Calusa people, even the paths leading up to the mound make ingenious use of shell fragments rather than gravel.

Lined with fruit-bearing bushes, these walkways descend to a mysterious metal door, behind which is the heart of the 13-foot mound. As my eyes adjust to the dark cavern, I see cowries, conches and scallops stacked in neat strata – layer upon layer of Fort Myers history. The walls look brittle, but they've held for thousands of years, remaining resilient – just like Fort Myers itself. **TW**

BOOK IT

Gold Medal offers seven nights' B&B at the Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina from £1,649 per person, based on two sharing a Deluxe Studio 1 King Bed Gulf Front room. The price includes flights to Tampa on September 9 and car hire. goldmedal.co.uk