


# Spread your wings



Combine wildlife and winter sun on the sandy beaches of southwest Florida, says **Deborah Cicurel**

**O**ver there! Over there!” The boat sputters to a halt and everybody falls silent. Perching on top of a wooden pole, a bald eagle stares haughtily down at us, oblivious to our indiscreet gaping. She helpfully poses for pictures, and even when her silence is broken by the blast of another ship’s horn, refuses to leave her post; after all, you don’t get a better sunbathing spot than this.

We’re sailing from Florida’s swanky Captiva Island to the untouched isle of Cayo Costa State Park with Captiva Cruises, and the disdainful-looking bald eagle is far from the only exciting creature we’ve spotted on our way. As we sail through Pine Island Sound, dolphins leap into the air beside the boat, buoyed by the whooping of passengers, and later, as we disembark, we spot a lazy manatee floating indolently in the water.

It turns out that spotting a whole host of animals wherever you go is a regular occurrence on the beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel, where I’ve come for some much-needed winter sun.

Located on southwest Florida’s Gulf Coast, the destination has 50 miles of white-sand beaches, more than 100 subtropical islands and 270 days of sunshine: the perfect recipe to convince you to ditch the blankets and hot water bottles and hop on a flight to Southwest Florida International.

But while winter sun can mean simply lazing on a quiet beach with a good book (and Cayo Costa State Park, which has nine miles of undeveloped shoreline and is only accessible by boat, is certainly a good spot for such luxuries) I found that in this destination, there are so many active adventures to cram in that – unless you’re a bald eagle – there’s no excuse to spend all your time sunbathing. ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## WINTER SUN | FLORIDA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kayaking; Lovers Key State Park; an aninga at JN Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge; dolphin in Pine Island Sound

PICTURES: The Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel; Jason Boeckman; The Lee County VCB; Jason Lindsey

### WORKING UP A SWEAT

Exercise is best when you don't even realise you're doing it, and a sunset kayak at the Mound House, on the site of the 2,000-year-old Calusa Indian Shell Mound, is so impossibly picturesque you won't even notice your arms aching.

Led by an expert guide, I initially regretted my many missed gym sessions as I attempted to muster control of my kayak, but I soon got the hang of it, and dare I say it, even enjoyed the repetitive motion.

As the sun set, its deep orange tint glistening against the waters of Estero Bay, we glided rhythmically past enormous mangroves and encountered birds, fish and even dolphins as we carried on in awed silence, the colours of the Floridian twilight washing over us.

That was arm day, but the next morning it was leg day as I headed to Lovers Key State Park and jumped on a bicycle to explore the barrier island's pristine beaches and dense mangrove forests. Our gentle bike ride was punctuated by a few slightly terrifying pauses as we tried to spot alligators lurking in a murky freshwater pond (sadly – or perhaps luckily – none materialised).

As a reward for the real-life spinning class, the state park's two-mile-long beach is just waiting to be collapsed onto, but if clients are feeling energetic, they can also try stand-up paddleboarding, shelling, canoeing or kayaking, or walk on five miles of trails. There's wildlife galore to be spotted, from manatees and dolphins to tortoises and ospreys.

If the search for manatees and dolphins has left



### FORT MYERS BEACH

#### Outrigger Beach Resort

Clients can stay in comfort right on the beach at this wallet-friendly resort. Rooms are spacious and comfortable, but they won't be spending much time inside: with direct access to the beach, two restaurants and a beachside Tiki Bar with live music, they'll find themselves working on their tans, cocktails in hand, in no time. Rates from £106 per night.

[outriggerfmb.com](http://outriggerfmb.com)

### SANIBEL ISLAND

#### Sundial Beach Resort & Spa

Larger groups certainly won't run out of space at this beachfront property. Recently renovated rooms come in the form of sprawling apartments complete with kitchens and living rooms, from studios to three-bedroom suites, so clients can bring the whole family. Direct beach access and complimentary amenities are a hit with guests who want to try kayaking or stand-up paddleboarding, and there are also six tennis courts, five swimming pools and five dining options for when clients need to recharge their batteries. Rates from £129 per night.

[sundialresort.com](http://sundialresort.com)

clients more determined to come face to face with creatures they would never see back at home, they should visit the JN Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, which occupies over half of Sanibel Island. Clients can be as active or as leisurely as they wish, exploring the refuge on foot, by bike or in a kayak, or by hopping on the tram for a guided tour. Here, they'll see hundreds of bird species, learn more about the mangrove ecosystem and keep one eye on the water for sightings of manatees, alligators and otters. ➤



"The beauty of Fort Myers & Sanibel is without a doubt its versatility. It has many destinations within itself: Fort Myers Beach is different from Sanibel and Captiva, and Cape Coral sets itself apart from Matlacha or Estero. Each area has its own unique characteristics. My favourite part is that there are lots of different spots, but everything is within 30 minutes' drive, so there are no excuses for visitors not to explore as much as they can!"

**Stefanie Zinke,**  
international tourism sales manager,  
The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel



**DO IT THE LAZY WAY**

If you like living manatee-style and drifting around at a slower pace, rest assured there's no need to get your gym kit on to make the most of the destination. To learn more about how vulnerable creatures are cared for, a visit to the Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (Crow) is a must.

The teaching hospital and visitor education centre, which is one of the leading wildlife hospitals in the US, takes care of about 3,500 needy wildlife patients every year, with tours offering an insight into how the facility cares for sick animals.

My tour started by meeting some of the hospital's residents, including a very shy Virginia opossum, and continued with a behind-the-scenes peek at what it takes to run such a smooth



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Cayo Costa; flying squirrel at the Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife; Miromar Outlets

PICTURES: The Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau; The Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel

operation, from seeing the stuffed toys that have been donated by supporters, to watching a pelican being anaesthetised for surgery.

After what can be an emotional couple of hours meeting orphaned animals, clients should head to the award-winning Wicked Dolphin distillery in Cape Coral for a more lighthearted tour. Located just a few miles from sugar cane fields, this is where home-grown rum is produced using a variety of local ingredients.

Visitors can book a free hour-long tour to watch and learn exactly how the drink is sourced, fermented and distilled, and then enjoy a free tasting of rum flavours such as mango, vanilla bean and even apple pie.

If there's any space left in their suitcases, clients should head to the Miromar Outlets for some retail therapy. The outdoor mall has more than 140 designer and high street outlets where clients will be able to snap up bargains at up to 70% off retail prices at brands including Calvin Klein, Kate Spade and Nike, and enjoy choosing from a never-ending selection of comfort food at the mall's beer and burger joint, Ford's Garage.

It's also just a 10-minute drive from Southwest Florida airport, so if they forget about the outlets until the end of their trip, they can always squeeze it into the schedule – and squeeze all their new clothes into their suitcases – on the way home. **TV**

**BOOK IT**

**Funway Holidays** offers a seven-night stay with car rental from £869 per person staying in a standard room at the Best Western Waterfront, or from £1,399 for a two-bed villa at the Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina including a buffet breakfast. Both prices include Virgin Atlantic or Delta Air Lines flights from London to Fort Myers airport, via Atlanta, in December. [funway4agents.co.uk](http://funway4agents.co.uk)

**Premier Holidays** can arrange a 10-night stay including car rental from £1,599 per person, staying at Sanibel Island Beach Resort, including British Airways flights to Miami in November. A twin-centre stay comprising five nights at Sanibel Island Beach Resort and five nights at Gullwing Beach Resort, with flights and car hire, also comes in at £1,599. [trade.premierholidays.co.uk](http://trade.premierholidays.co.uk)

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