

*Lose yourself in the beauty
of Old Florida.*

harbor

[HIDEAWAY]

by Susan Barnes

PALM ISLAND AERIAL PHOTO COURTESY OF PALM ISLAND RESORT



AS THE KAYAKS meander, birds take to the air, flying low and just above the waterline. Small black crabs emerge from their watery home, blending easily into the mangrove limbs that bow and arch, creating tunnels. The only sounds that can be heard are of paddles dipping into the water; voices calling, pointing out different sights; and the scuttling of unseen

creatures, making their way through the trees.

Time doesn't stand still in Charlotte Harbor and the Gulf Islands, but it certainly does move at a slower pace. Visitors to the area won't find high-rise condominiums, raucous crowds or many traffic jams. What they will find are fishing villages, 28 miles of unspoiled beaches and tons of natural beauty.



Golf at Palm Island Resort; Kayaking on the Blueway Trails.



Old Florida

A swamp buggy eco-tour with **Babcock Wilderness Adventures** is a terrific way to experience “Old Florida.” Specially built swamp buggies (think school buses with the windows cut out) take passengers through some of the 90,000 acres of the Crescent B Ranch, established in 1914. As you ride through four different ecosystems during the 90-minute tour, the driver/guide will point out native animals such as wild alligators, hogs, turkeys, bird species, rare fox squirrels and Florida Cracker cattle that are raised on the ranch. If you’re lucky, you may spot one of the white-tailed deer or panthers that call the ranch home. Be sure to pick up a bottle of palmetto berry honey in the country store for a truly unique taste of Florida.

In the '40s, 65,000 acres of Crescent B Ranch were transferred to the state and now make up the **Fred C. Babcock/Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area**, the seventh-largest wildlife management area in Florida. The public is welcome and birders find it particularly interesting; the woodpecker, eastern meadowlark, wood stork, red-shouldered hawk, belted



Flora in Charlotte Harbor

kingfisher, swallow-tailed kite, black-necked stilt and yellow-crowned night heron can all be spotted.

Kayakers and canoers know Charlotte Harbor and the Gulf Islands primarily for its 200 miles of Blueway Trails that wind through mangrove tunnels and four barrier islands. Mullet jump out of the water as you paddle your way from one island to the next, through sounds and along the river. Outfitters such as **Grande Tours** in Placida offer naturalist-guided

kayak eco-tours for beginners to advanced paddlers, including dusk and moonlight paddles.

In addition to these adventures, golf, boating, fishing, swimming, shopping and spa-ing are all available in

the area. You'll find more than 16 golf courses—from executive to championship level—and nearly 20 spas ready to pamper you from head to toe.

A sunset cruise is the perfect way to end the day. Board a **King Fisher Fleet** vessel at Fisherman's Wharf and sail away on a harbor cruise that almost always includes a glorious sunset.

Time to refuel

To prepare for a day's worth of exploring, it's important to fuel your body for all that's awaiting just beyond your door. If you'd rather travel outside the hotel, try one of the delightful—and filling—breakfasts at **Pies & Plates** in Punta Gorda. From overstuffed three-egg omelets and Belgian waffles with a variety of toppings to quiche, skillet scrambles and Irish oatmeal, you're sure to find something to fill you up before heading off on an adventure. Pies & Plates also serves lunch, including wraps, paninis, salads and sandwiches—perfect to take away for a picnic overlooking the harbor.

All of the fresh air from the day's adventures will result in a healthy appetite, and **Mamma Nunzia Ristorante** in Punta Gorda is the perfect place to satisfy it. Live music is the ideal accompaniment to the healthy portions of Italian fare, including the house specialty, Penne al Pesto Mamma Nunzia, a masterful pairing of basil, garlic, pine nuts, Parmesan cheese, sun dried tomatoes and grilled chicken. On Tuesday nights, area musicians travel from surrounding counties to “jam” the night away.

Your own private island

For a true escape from the everyday, ride out to Cape Haze on Palm Island via the Intracoastal Waterway. The island, accessible only by boat or ferry, is just 700 yards wide at its broadest and seven miles long. The island contains **Palm Island Resort**, which sports two miles of private beach on the Gulf of Mexico.

• CHARLOTTE HARBOR • TRAVEL GUIDE

In Charlotte Harbor and on the Gulf Islands, the pace of life moves with the rhythm of the tides, and hospitality is measured in warm, friendly greetings.



GETTING THERE

All destinations are accessible through Ft. Myers (25 miles) and Tampa (100 miles). Car rental facilities are available at each airport.



WHAT TO SEE & DO

**Sunset Cruise:
King Fisher Fleet**
941-639-0969
kingfisherfleet.com

**Kayaking:
Grande Tours**
941-697-8825
grandetours.com

**Charlotte Harbor
Enviro. Center**
941-575-5435
checlorida.org

**Buggy Tour: Babcock
Wilderness Adventures**
800-500-5583
babcockwilderness.com

**Birding: Babcock-Webb
Wildlife Management Area**
941-613-6753
peacerveraudubon.org

**Peace River
Wildlife Center**
941-637-3830
peacerverwildlifecenter.com



WHERE TO STAY

**Palm Island
Resort, Cape Haze**
941-697-4800
palmisland.com

**McCarthy's Inns
on the Beach,
Englewood**
941-474-1582
mccarthysinns.com

**Harbor Pointe
Condo Resort,
Charlotte Harbor**
866-501-7821
resortquestswfl.com

**Tropical Paradise
B&B, Port Charlotte**
941-624-4533
tropicalparadisebb.com



WHERE TO EAT

**BREAKFAST & LUNCH
Pies & Plates**
941-505-7437
piesandplates.com

**DINNER
Mamma Nunzia
Ristorante**
941-575-7575
mamma-nunzia.com



For more information on **Charlotte Harbor and the Gulf Islands**, visit charlotteharbortravel.com.

One-, two- and three-bedroom villas featuring kitchens and screened patios with gulf, bay or marina views are available for short or long-term stays. Golf carts and bikes are the only means of transportation within the resort.

Activities found on Palm Island include canoeing, kayaking, cycling, snorkeling and tennis. Boating, fishing and golf are available off-island and can be arranged through the resort concierge. The resort nature excursions for kids', including nature hunts, self-guided bike nature tours, scavenger hunts, sandcastle contests, shell hunts and more. ■

MIDWEST AIRLINES offers daily flights to and from Ft. Myers and Tampa. Details can be found at midwestairlines.com.