

SEEING *Florida* SNOWBIRD-STYLE

By Cris Cadiz

This winter my sister and I took a trip to visit my parents who live in Palmetto, Florida. They are snowbirds, spending six months on the shore of Coventry Lake and the rest of the year escaping winter with lots of other folks. They live in

an over-55 trailer park and love it. Both spent most of their lives in central New York (Think lake-effect snow!), so now they hightail it out of New England before the first flake falls. This trip was a chance to visit family and get some sun on the cheap.



If you haven't visited a Florida trailer park lately, know that many are not at all "trashy" and often there are few truly mobile homes. These are houses; they just happened to arrive on a truck. Many of the trailer parks on the Gulf Coast near Sarasota have vibrant neighborhoods with well-tended gardens, tidy landscaping—and of course some tacky statuary. They often feature community centers with gyms, pools, meeting rooms, even theaters. My parents' place has two bedrooms and two baths, so there was plenty of room for me and my sibling to stay with them: Savings #1! Major airlines usually run specials to warm places during winter. I snagged a deal on Southwest (2 free checked bags!), which now flies nonstop from Hartford to Tampa: Time *and* money savings #2!

Of course, it's not on the beach, but my parents' park has a nice little pool with hot tub, to which my sister and I rode our borrowed bikes almost every day. Their park is located on the water near the mouth of the Manatee River, so we were able to launch kayaks and paddle directly into **Terra Ceia Bay**. The warm, sea-tinged breeze blows off the water through the tall palms and herons, egrets, pelicans, and seagulls are abundant. For a frugal escape from frigid New England, what more could you want?

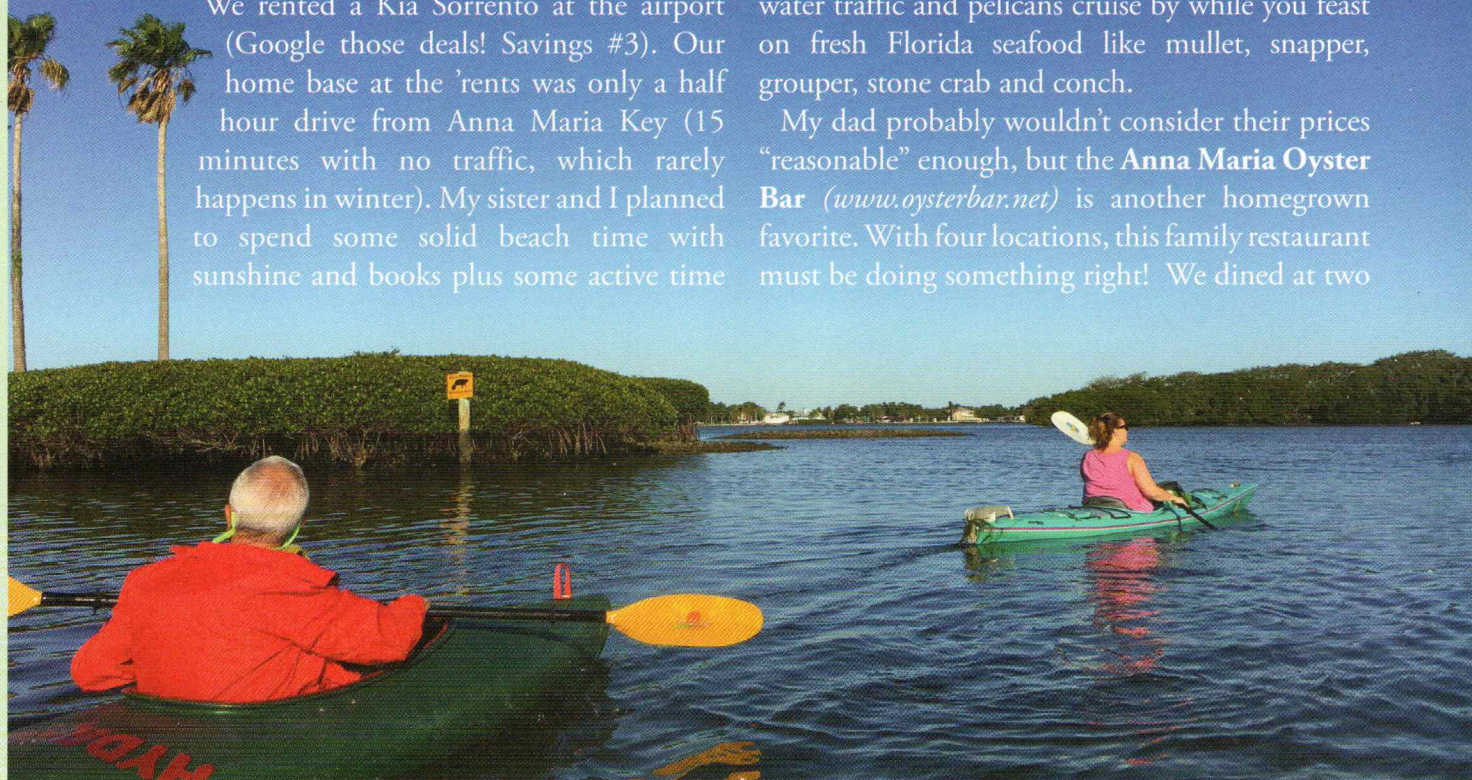
We rented a Kia Sorrento at the airport (Google those deals! Savings #3). Our home base at the 'rents was only a half hour drive from Anna Maria Key (15 minutes with no traffic, which rarely happens in winter). My sister and I planned to spend some solid beach time with sunshine and books plus some active time

with Dad and visit with Mom back at the hacienda in our downtime. Lucky for us, the weather did not disappoint.

One of my father's favorite maxims since he became a snowbird is, "It's really reasonable!" To me, this means "consistently mediocre but cheap," which I guess is a better choice than "delicious but expensive." Seafood at restaurants in Florida is plentiful but not cheap (unless you frequent Red Lobster). One way to save is get takeout: Savings #4. My parents like **The Clam House** (www.theclamhouse.com). This family and fisherman owned and operated establishment in Palmetto is fresh and tasty but only open for dinner—after the fisherman gets home with the day's catch!

If you can cook it yourself, that's savings #5. There are a number of area seafood markets that are supplied fresh off the boats daily. We bought 2 pounds of fresh, pink Gulf shrimp to grill from the **Star Fish Company** (www.starfishcompany.com) in Cortez Village. Originally a wholesale market that opened in the 1920s, the Star Fish Company is located on one of the last remaining working waterfronts in Florida, according to their website. You can also eat at their super casual Dockside Restaurant. Grab a picnic table and watch the water traffic and pelicans cruise by while you feast on fresh Florida seafood like mullet, snapper, grouper, stone crab and conch.

My dad probably wouldn't consider their prices "reasonable" enough, but the **Anna Maria Oyster Bar** (www.oysterbar.net) is another homegrown favorite. With four locations, this family restaurant must be doing something right! We dined at two



of these. My favorite was the one on the **historic Bridge Street Pier** on Anna Maria Island. It's beachwear casual with a great view of the Intracoastal Waterway. You order at a counter but the staff delivers your food. Great drinks too.

We also tried the **Anna Maria Oyster Bar** (www.oysterbar.net) on Cortez Road in Bradenton. This is in one of Florida's ubiquitous strip malls but the location is easy to access from Anna Maria Island, Bradenton and Palmetto, so it's popular. The food was good, service was great and we also enjoyed browsing through two surprisingly cute shops in the strip mall. **The Maker's Market** (www.makersmarketchdiy.com) is a boutique and DIY studio with well curated and whimsical gifts and the **The Hive** (www.thehivecreation.com) features handmade jewelry, art and other locally crafted artisan items.

Beaching it on **Anna Maria Island** is fun, free and painless, as long as you use sunscreen and plan your drive from the mainland over one of the two bridges at low traffic times. This 7-mile long barrier island is not yet overrun with huge resorts or towering condos. You can still rent single family beach houses if you can afford them. For the day-tripper, there's plenty of free parking, lots of places to eat (and buy souvenirs) and a free trolley that runs the length of the island all day.

My favorite of the island's broad, soft white sand beaches is **Coquina Beach** at the south end of the key. It is quieter and often has parking spots in the shade under tall Australian pines between the lot and the small dunes that border the beach. There are bathrooms, washing stations and a small outdoor café with casual food and drinks. The clear water and surf are safe and family friendly.

The beach is named for the delicate butterfly-shaped shells of tiny saltwater clams that wash into piles, especially near the old pier foundations. Walkers here often stroll head down, searching for the perfect shell to add to their collection. I choose to watch the usually gentle, turquoise blue ocean waves on my walk to an old wooden jetty that still juts out into the channel between Anna Maria Island and Longboat Key. Here you can watch boat



traffic pass under the bridge and sometimes see dolphins play in the channel current. On this visit, I watched a manatee make its way slowly along the edge of the island from the cool water of the Gulf into the warmer inland waterway—a rare and serendipitous sight. For more information about visiting this pretty and low-key “old Florida” island, go to www.annamariaislandchamber.org.

Our dad taught us to love nature and outdoor adventure, so a trip is never complete without some sort of exploration. Palmetto is home to **Emerson Point Preserve**, a small public park at the west end of Snead Island, a nice flat bike ride from my parents' home. The preserve is located on the north shore of the Manatee river where it flows into Terra Ceia Bay. It offers a small but diverse network of hiking and kayak trails where you can experience coastal Florida wildlife and habitats.

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On a few days I borrowed my dad's decrepit (and slightly dangerous) bicycle and rode about four miles out to the point on sidewalks, over the bridge from Palmetto onto Snead Island, and onto both paved and gravel/seashell walking paths and wooden boardwalks through the wetlands. It was scenic, pleasant (no New England hills!) and breezy even in the heat. Although I did not explore it, Emerson Point Preserve also features some archeological sites and artifacts from the area's Native people preserved and interpreted with signage.

I saw birds of all kinds in the air and water, including nesting osprey, fish jumping in the mangrove-lined waterways, and one morning I was startled by two small armadillos bumbling out of the underbrush to cross the path right in front of me. Another day at the tip of **Snead Island**, where you can see Tampa Bay's Sunshine

Skyway Bridge far off in the distance, I watched a group of windsurfers on brightly colored sailboards cruising the bay, scudding along with the wind at nearly 40mph.

One day we borrowed some boats and the three of us took a morning paddle from the trailer community's convenient kayak launch into Terra Ceia Bay. We made our way down a canal and out around a guano-splashed rookery island, where bright pink spoonbills, elegant herons, and brown and white pelicans adorned the trees like fruit. We explored quiet mangrove mazes that led to a small boatyard and then paddled home before the wind picked up and made our leisurely trip a struggle.

Another day, I rented a hybrid bike from family-owned **Ringling Bicycles** on busy Manatee Avenue in Bradenton for \$20, including a helmet and bike lock (www.ringlingbicycles.com). My dad rode his ancient steed and my sister borrowed another bike from a fleet of aging cycles that a neighbor in my parents' park maintains. We crammed the bikes into Dad's minivan and drove to **Robinson Preserve** in northwest Bradenton (although, according to the bike shop staff, we could have ridden there a few flat miles from the shop, through city streets but with a view of posh waterfront homes).

We explored the park's 682 acres of mangrove, tidal marsh, and former agricultural lands, which have slowly been preserved and transformed into beautiful coastal wetland habitat. The path system, popular with walkers, runners, and cyclists, consists of flat, gravel and seashell paths, wooden boardwalks and a few paved sections. We stopped for a great view of the surrounding preserve and waterways from a three-story wooden observation tower. My dad got tired and rode back to the van, while my sister and I continued out to the busy main road. We



traveled the sidewalk across Perico Island and the drawbridge to Anna Maria Island where we met my dad at Holmes Beach. It was a scenic and safe casual ride of about seven miles. You can find and download walking, hiking and paddling maps and get more information about the area's parks and preserves at www.mymanatee.org.

If you are tired of the beach, touring **Downtown Bradenton** is a good full or half-day affair. **The Village of the Arts** (www.villageofthearts.com) is a unique, free-to-tour attraction. This colorful and creative place is a planned neighborhood designed so artists can live and work and also sell their work there. The Village of the Arts was started in 1999 with the creation of the Artists Guild of Manatee. This organization's mission was to resurrect a neglected neighborhood and build a community of artists (and other residents and businesses) where everyone could live, work and play in a "harmonious environment."

The Village spans over a dozen city blocks and includes about 275 properties. The buildings are a funky mix of early 20th century residential bungalows, Florida cracker-style homes, and later additions, most of which are single story and painted vivid colors. Outdoor décor includes art "shrines," murals, sculpture and more. Many properties are home to artists and their studios and galleries, plus restaurants, gift shops, healing arts and other services, specialty shops and more. The Village hosts a popular art walk the first Friday night and Saturday afternoon of every month, with live music, food and unique, original art representing every genre.

If you happen to visit on a Monday like we did, when most of the shops and restaurants are closed, you can get refreshments within walking distance at **Motorworks Brewery** (motorworksbrewing.com). The cavernous circa 1923 building was originally an

automobile dealership. Today it houses Motorworks' 30-barrel brew house and commodious taproom. The three of us tried about a dozen of their 30 craft beers on tap in "flights" (collections of small tastings). My favorite brew was a tangy Berliner Weisse called "Bizarre Gardening Accident." The curious name I later learned is from the cult classic mockumentary "This is Spinal Tap," which made it all the more amusing. All the tastes we had were pretty tasty!

Motorworks Brewery also boasts the largest beer garden in Florida. The fenced-in outdoor space includes a 150-year-old oak tree with a large deck built around it, a 3-hole putting green, 2 bocce ball courts, a giant Jenga game, a corn hole tournament field (for over a dozen teams), a stage for live music and more. It's pretty impressive.

Although we did not tour these venues, Downtown Bradenton is also home to the **South Florida Museum** (www.southfloridamuseum.org) (cultural history plus a small planetarium and aquarium) and a Major League Baseball stadium, where the Pittsburgh Pirates conduct their spring training. We did take a stroll on the **Riverwalk**, a pleasant 1.5-mile-long public park along the Manatee River with great views, a lovely breeze and interesting public art and sculpture. There is also a skate park, beach volleyball court, splash pad, day dock where boaters can tie up to visit, and fishing pier. Also, all free! The website www.realizebradenton.com is a good resource for visiting the area.

We came home tan, relaxed and not stressed about how much money we just spent on vacation. Our parents enjoyed our visit but were happy to see their grown children fly back home again. My advice: If you need to save money and would like to plan a winter vacation south, consider the snowbirds in your life. They might have some ideas or even invite you to visit.

