



{STAYCATION} A SHORE THING

With turquoise waters that rival the Caribbean and speed limits meant for zipping around on golf carts, Anna Maria Island is the place to go to for certain serenity.

The bone-white, sugary sand whistles underneath my bare feet as I walk along Bean Point, a secluded broad beach dotted with dunes and tucked away on the northern tip of Anna Maria Island. It's 7:30 in the evening, and everyone is already in position for the big show. Most have settled into beach chairs, their cameras ready with anticipation. Children are zig-zagging through the sand, gripping sweating ice cream cones from nearby Two Scoops. Others are still soaking waist-deep in the gentle, warm waters of the Gulf, or casting their nets in hopes of catching dinner. Everyone is there to celebrate the fiery ball that's seemingly taking its time sinking into

the horizon. No one is in a hurry, and the sunset only becomes more dramatic as the sky darkens.

ISLAND CHARM

On laidback Anna Maria Island, a 7-mile barrier island on Florida's West Coast and a four-hour drive from Miami, you're encouraged (maybe even forced) to slow down. You won't find chain restaurants, towering condos and mega hotels — buildings are no taller than three stories — and the preferred transportation are bikes, golf carts or a free trolley, which is perfectly acceptable since the speed limit is 35.

The area boasts some of the best beaches in Florida, many of which few people know about, and that's

exactly how the locals like it. The powdery sand and ridiculously clear turquoise waters take your breath away, prompting the question, "Is this the Caribbean, or Florida?" You can literally visit a different scenic beach every day, each with its own personality and abundant wildlife. At times, it feels like you're floating in an aquarium; shallow waters lead to sandbars; and dolphins make frequent appearances.

PAINT A PICTURE OF RELAXATION

When you're done with the sun, stroll the crushed seashell walkways of Pine Avenue sprinkled with coastal chic boutiques, art galleries and cafes. A favorite is the adorable Shiny Fish Emporium, a store filled with elegant and unique treasures,

where you can forget everything for a few hours as you paint a sand dollar. Surrounded by inspiration — think 1950s Palm Beach glam — gather around the table to bring your sand dollar to life with an array of paint colors and the sweet owners will "sugar" it with glitter. Whether you're Lilly-obsessed or just looking for a beachy coverup, dress or swimsuit, don't miss locally owned shops like Pink & Navy and the Island Cabana.

Known for aqua-hued views and its historic City Pier, Anna Maria Island offers a laid-back lifestyle that appeals both to residents and visitors looking for a respite from the real world.