

36 HOURS Sarasota, Fla.

By PAUL SCHNEIDER

SET on a sparkling bay, behind a necklace of sandy barrier islands, the resort town of Sarasota was pioneered in the Roaring Twenties by the immensely wealthy John and Mable Ringling of circus fame. The couple didn't come to get away from the clowns and freaks; they brought the entire circus with them to pass the winter in warmth and style. To this day, this scrubbed, suntanned and artsy little town offers just enough of a city vibe to sustain great food and a little night life. Plus, the circus still comes down in the winter.

Friday

5 p.m.

1 Flashing Cocktail

Get sand between your toes before the sky goes dark, and head to Lido Key beach, a relaxing stretch of white sand across the bay from downtown Sarasota. Park near the Ritz Carlton Beach Club (1234 Benjamin Franklin Drive) and make a beeline for the Lido Key Tiki Bar (941-309-2581). Leave your shoes in the car but don't forget to bring cash, so you can order the signature Green Flash Cocktail, a rum, pineapple and Midori concoction served with flashing ice cubes. A resident bongo player is there to provide a live soundtrack for the spectacular sunsets.

8 p.m.

2 Ceviche Choices

Darwin Santa Maria, the chef and owner of the Selva Grill (1345 Main Street, 941-362-4427; www.selvagrill.com), is originally from Peru, and the flavors of his country of mountains and coasts infuse almost everything on the menu. And everything on the menu is worth trying, as Selva serves quite possibly the best food in town. The ceviches de la casa alone offer 10 choices (\$11 to \$17), not including the daily specials. It's a tough decision, but the Selva ceviche, made with corvina, cusco corn and

roasted camote (sweet potato), tastes like the first day of summer. It's served up in a lively space, with a crowded bar and friendly patrons who wave to one another as they come and go.

10 p.m.

3 Rhythm and Balls

Sarasota's night life is a mixed bag, so for surefire action, head to the Gator Club (1490 Main Street, 941-366-5969; www.thegatorclub.com), a popular dance club with red brick, polished brass and R & B tunes. Not a dancing fool? Head upstairs to the billiards bar, where they serve 125 different single-malt Scotches. Don't try them all. For other options, pick up a copy of Creative Loafing (www.sarasota.creativeloafing.com), a free arts and entertainment weekly.

Saturday

8:30 a.m.

4 Polish that Backhand

Your morning tennis is about to begin. Though the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort (1620 Gulf of Mexico Drive, 941-383-6464; www.colonybeachresort.com) is a little frayed, it frequently ends up on the lists of top tennis resorts for its first-class instruction. Most patrons sign up for multiday packages, but the pros are happy to accommodate shorter lessons (dial extension 2312 to reserve). The adult clinics start at \$50 for a 90-minute lesson and private lessons start at \$80 per hour. And if your traveling partner doesn't need as much help with follow through, the glorious white sands of Longboat Key beach is a ball toss away.

1 p.m.

5 Healthy to Go

The thing about Floridian sprawl is that the best eats are sometimes in the most unassuming places. Such is the case with Simon's Coffee House (5900 South

Tamiami Trail, 941-926-7151; www.simonstogo.com), which serves one of the best lunches in town in a non-descript shopping plaza. Nothing fancy, just whole grain breads, meaty panini, fruity smoothies and creative sandwiches like roasted butternut squash, with soup, (\$9.50) that taste too good to be vegan. It's a local favorite.

2 p.m.

6 Viva la Siesta

Sarasota Bay has plenty of sandy beaches on the gently lapping Gulf of Mexico. But Siesta Public Beach, on Siesta Key, is widely considered by locals to be the fairest of them all, with talcum-powder-soft sands that never get too hot to the touch. And it draws a mixed crowd — the young and ancient, locals and tourists, active volleyball players and laid-back lollygaggers. Best of all, it rarely feels crowded.

5 p.m.

7 Amber and Bandanas

St. Armand's Circle is the vaguely touristy heart of Sarasota shopping. There are a few big-name stores like Tommy Bahama, but mostly it's jammed with smaller boutiques like the Baltic Amber Gallery (9 North Boulevard of the Presidents, 941-388-2651, www.ambershowroom.com), where handmade earrings from Latvia, Poland, and elsewhere start as low as \$18 a pair. If you forgot your bathing suit, there are plenty to choose from at the Beach House (331 John Ringling Boulevard, 941-388-1025; www.thebeachhouseswimwear.com). If you forgot sandals, check Foxy Lady West (481 John Ringling Boulevard, 941-388-5239, www.foxyladysarasota.com). And if you forgot your New Year's resolution, grab a homemade waffle cone at Big Olaf Creamery (561 North Washington Drive, 941-388-4108), a sort of home-grown Ben & Jerry's.

8 p.m.

8 Pan-Am Dining

By day, sleepy Hillview Street seems an unlikely spot for night life, but when the weekend rolls around, good luck finding a parking spot. A handful of buzzing res-

taurants and bars have recently opened along this block-and-a-half stretch. For lively ambience and inventive food, go to the Table (1936 Hillview Street, 941-365-4558, www.thetablesarasota.com), an upscale restaurant that serves so-called Atlantic Rim cuisine, which blends Caribbean, South American and southeast American flavors. Favorites include spring rolls with Havana short ribs (\$7.95) and grilled salmon encrusted with Venezuelan crab and served with purple sticky rice (\$23.95). Ask for a table in the back room; a D.J. starts spinning at the bar around 9 p.m. By 10 p.m., it's a full-on dance.

10 p.m.

9 Rock On

If D.J.'s aren't your thing, head next door to the Five O'Clock Club (1930 Hillview Street, 941-366-5555; www.5oclockclub.net), a rocking dive bar that's been showcasing live music since 1955. On any given night, there might be reggae or an eccentric AC/DC tribute band.

Sunday

10 a.m.

10 Weird Growth

Had enough sun and sand? Stroll around the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens (811 South Palm Avenue, 941 366-5731; www.selby.org), a 9.5-acre park with bamboo, banyans and shady benches where you can enjoy great views of Sarasota Bay. But the real prize is the tropical display house, which has rare orchids, psychedelic caladiums and a strange yet beautiful society of pitcher plants that trap insects.

1:00 p.m.

11 Freak Show

The Ringlings left behind more than just a circus. They amassed a large art collection, including a series of gargantuan paintings by Rubens that are displayed at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (5401 Bay Shore Road, 941-359-5700; www.ringling.org), on the 66-acre bayside estate where they wintered. But the main event is the Howard Bros. Circus, a miniature model of the

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus at its height in the early 20th century. Created over half a century by a passionate circus fan, Howard Tbbals, the three-quarter-inch-to-the-foot scale replica covers 3,800 square feet and is, as one might say, the Greatest Historical Installation on Earth. ■

THE BASICS

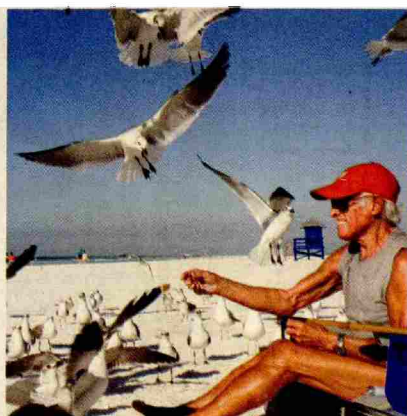
JetBlue has direct flights from Kennedy Airport to Sarasota, with round-trip fares starting at about \$200 for travel next month. More flights and airlines service the much bigger Tampa airport, which is about an hour's drive away.

If your budget is up to it, the Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota (1111 Ritz-Carlton Drive, 941-309-2000; www.ritzcarlton.com) offers all the usual big hotel pleasures, plus access to its private beach club on Lido Key. Double occupancy rates range from \$399 to \$5,000 a night.

Groovier and cheaper in-town lodging can be found at the Hotel Ranola (118 Indian Place, 866-951-0111; www.hotelranola.com). Rooms with full kitchens start at about \$159 a night.

On Lido Key, Coquina on the Beach (1008 Ben Franklin Drive, 800-833-2141; www.coquinaonthebeach.com) has clean and simple rooms that offer views of the Gulf of Mexico, but not a whole lot more. Double occupancy with beach views start at \$189.





FROM LEFT TO RIGHT A Rubens painting at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art; feeding the seagulls on Siesta Public Beach; and duck breast with beer-infused risotto at Selva Grill.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIPPE DIEDERICH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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