

# Bareboating Florida's Pine Island Sound

## America's Overlooked Charter Destination

by Chris Caswell

What's not to love about a bareboat charter destination that is within easy driving distance of half of North America and that has warm weather, warm water, and warm breezes year 'round, not to mention smooth seas?

A bareboating paradise dotted with luxe five-star resorts with great marinas, more getaway-by-yourself anchorages than you can count, and white sand beaches covered with the most amazing shells?

Welcome to Florida's Pine Island Sound!

Our plan was a simple one. We wanted a bareboat charter where the weather would be warm and wonderful, where there was a good breeze for sailing, where the sea conditions wouldn't be too challenging for the first-time sailors aboard, and where we could alternate between marinas and private anchorages. It seemed simple enough, but we did have this one tiny requirement.

We didn't want to get on an airplane to get there.

We're not fraidy-cats because of terrorists, but we're just weary of the endless security lines at the airports, the long waits, and the high cost of airfares with inconvenient routing.

And so we did our due diligence. Northwest, northeast...they all failed for one reason or another. But Florida.....

Aha!!

The west coast of Florida is one of those secret cruising grounds that are overlooked because they are just so darn convenient. No foreign airports, no passports, no hassles with provisioning and, though you're in the Deep South, usually not much of a language barrier although a drawl can sometimes be

a challenge.

But the cruising....oh, the cruising! Sandy beaches littered with beautiful shells, quiet anchorages and great marinas. There is something for literally every taste, regardless of whether your idea of fun is pub-hopping until the wee hours or finding a beach with no footprints except your own.

If you're accustomed to bareboat chartering in the Caribbean, this is a different animal. First, there are no fleets of cookie-cutter look-alike boats. Southwest Florida Yacht Charters has an eclectic fleet of privately owned yachts, which they manage in their charter program.

If you've chartered a few times, you know that charter companies can vary widely, both in their offerings and in the level of maintenance. Vic and Barb Hansen have owned SWFY for more than 32 years and, believe me, they run a tight ship. Before a boat gets into their fleet, it has to pass a thorough survey and then it has to be equipped to a high standard to meet the Hansen's requirements.

Mark is the all-around go-to guy for SWFY and he walked us through the essentials of *Southern*



'Tween Waters Marina



Picnic Island

## Our Boat: Leopard 38

The Leopard 38, *Southern Comfort*, was the chariot for our Pine Island Sound adventure and she was a recent addition to the Southwest Florida Yacht Charters fleet. She had recently returned from a six-week cruise through the Bahamas and was still being prepped by the SWFY crew.

With four staterooms and two heads, she's better suited to families than four couples, since someone always wants to use the head.

Equipped with a generator, two-zone air conditioning, and a Limin' 10-foot tender, she has all the basic amenities.

Sail area is nearly 1000 sq. ft. with roller furling on the headsail and a fully-battened mainsail. Power is a pair of Yanmar 30hp diesels which, we discovered, barely sip fuel.

Five-day charter rates range from \$2702 in summer to \$3373 in winter.

For info, contact Southwest Florida Yachts, [www.swfyachts.com](http://www.swfyachts.com) or (800) 262-7939.



*Comfort*, our home for the next few days. SWFY has recently moved their headquarters to the Tarpon Point Marina on Cape Coral, which puts it within minutes of more cruising choices than you could try in a month.

Right on the SWFY doorstep is Pine Island Sound, a cruising wonderland. About fifteen miles long and four miles wide, the Sound is protected by the barrier islands of Sanibel and Captiva from the Gulf of Mexico. You could spend a delightful week without ever leaving Pine Island Sound, sampling a different anchorage or marina every evening, hunting for shells or simply floating in bathtub-warm water.

Two navigation tips proved to be invaluable advice from Mark, and particularly to anyone new to the Intracoastal Waterway, which has its own navigation system.

First was “red-right-returning-to-Texas”, a mnemonic that makes sense out of why red buoys sometimes seem to be on the wrong side of the

channel, especially for those of us who usually navigate by “red-right-returning”.

The second piece of advice is vital because these waterways are often deceptively shallow: “White is all right, blue review”. Look at your chart, and you’ll see that deeper water is shown in white, while shallow water is in blue.

If you’re planning to tiptoe into the blue zones (which you will!), review the chart beforehand. Carefully.

These are thin waters and I don’t remember our depth sounder reading much over ten feet most of the time. A good pair of Polaroid sunglasses can help keep you afloat, but common sense is even more essential. “Let’s anchor over there....no, wait, I think those birds are standing, not floating”.

But though we went through channels where I couldn’t bring myself to look at the depth sounder, we never touched bottom and, according to the Hansens, even an occasional touch is rarely a



South Seas Island Resort

## Our Digs: Westin Cape Coral

You can spend the night aboard your charter yacht from Southwest Florida Yacht Charters, but why would you?

SWFY has a deal that gets you a fat discount with the Westin Cape Coral Resort, which is a posh hotel literally within walking distance of your boat.



We opted for the one-bedroom suite which had a full kitchen, marble bathroom, king-size bed, sitting area with large flat screen TV and dining table. The bedroom also has a large flat-screen TV.

Even before the SWFY discount, our room was under \$200, which is a steal for such an upscale property.

The resort has two restaurants, three pools, an Esterra spa, plus a fitness studio.

For info, contact [www.westincapecoral.com](http://www.westincapecoral.com), (239-540-5000





problem because the bottom is generally soft mud or sand.

A lazy start the first morning sent us northwards along the Intracoastal (toward Texas!), but we found that the perfectly named Picnic Island, our planned lunch stop, was already lined with sportboats on day trips.

Moving on, we had our first encounter with the wild dolphin on Pine Island Sound, which amused themselves (and us) by playing in our bow and stern waves. Talking to other skippers, it seems that the dolphin simply love boats and nearly everyone on these waters has several encounters with them.

Our first night was spent at 'Tween Waters, a folksy resort on Captiva Island with a rustic marina. What started as a collection of fishing cottages in 1931 has morphed into a casual property that still caters to fishermen and families. While the docks seem to be original from the '30s, they did have 30-amp power and fresh water, always bareboat requirements.

We have to give a tip of the hat to the Old Captiva House, the upscale restaurant on the property, which served up a meal of grouper that seemed to be just minutes old, and two of our crew were sated with "surf and turf", perfectly cooked filet mignon steaks plus a lobster tail. Yum! Don't be surprised when you look at the starter menu: it runs heavily to sushi, with offerings of traditional rolls and sashimi.

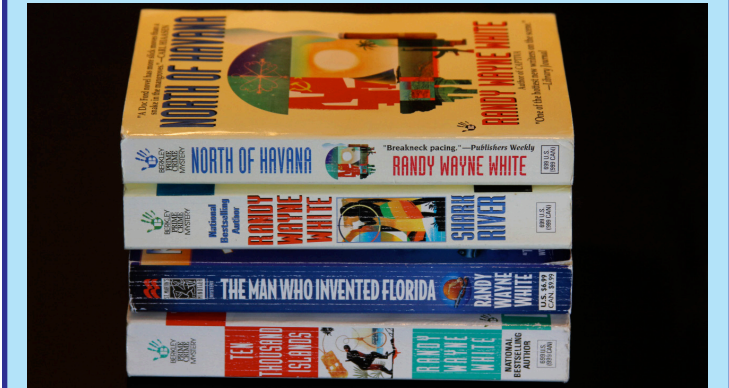
Further north lies Cabbage Key, a private resort that welcomes bareboaters to their marina. Built in the '30s as the home of mystery writer Mary Roberts Rinehart, Cabbage Cay has another notable claim: the most expensive wallpaper in the world. The Cabbage Key bar, with its original hardwood floors and fireplace, is literally papered with thousands of autographed one-dollar bills. Guestimates place the value at between \$40,000 and \$60,000 but, hey, who's counting. The owners gather up loose and falling bills and, when they reach \$10,000, donate them to charity. A nice touch.

Nearby is Useppa Island, a private island club that allows no cars (golf carts only) on the island, but which has a marina available to charterers from SWFY since the Hansens are members.

## The Local Spy: Doc Ford

If you're like me, a good book is as essential to a bareboat charter as, well, a good boat. A particular pleasure is a book that is set in the same area where I'm chartering so I can enjoy a local flavor. In the case of Randy Wayne White, his books are based in Florida, include boating, and are powerful mysteries.

White's protagonist is Doc Ford, a marine biologist living in a stilt house on the bay in Sanibel. Ford has a shady past as a former covert agent and assassin for one of those nameless government agencies but, when it was time, he quit and turned to the sea. When he is not studying it or fishing it, he takes time to sort out problems for his many friends. The problems of these friends, and Doc Ford's solutions, have filled 19 books.



Called the heir to John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee series, his first book was *Sanibel Flats*, in which he introduced both Doc Ford and his quirky sidekick, Tomlinson.

As an author, White has good credentials, too. A long-time contributor to *Outside* magazine, he has written first-hand accounts on adventures from dog sledding in Alaska to bat fishing (really!) in the Amazon. There are also interesting rumors about his relationship with the CIA in the Vietnam War era and as he traveled as a freelance writer. He ran a charter boat and was a light-tackle fishing guide.

When not writing at his home on Pine Island, he can probably be found fishing for tarpon or at Doc Ford's Rum Bar & Grill on Sanibel Island, where you can buy White's own line of Doc Ford-inspired hot sauce. With a little luck, you'll run into White on the porch and he'll sign his book for you. --RC

## Shell Shock!

Sanibel and Captiva Islands are actually made out of shells, which is only one of the reasons that they have earned a well-deserved nickname as the Shell Islands. Residents digging in their gardens often find conchs and other shells perfectly intact.

But it is the sheer abundance and variety of the shells on these beaches that draws shell-collectors and tourists to these beaches.

Known as the best in the world for shelling, the curve of these islands act like a shovel to scoop up all the seashells imported by currents in the Gulf of Mexico.

This has led to the so-called "Sanibel Stoop", named for the beachcombers who walk bent over while shell-hunting.

Shells are a major industry for Sanibel and



Captiva, with shell shops lining the streets and an annual Shell Fair held every March. Rare is the bareboater who goes home without at least a few shells as reminders of their adventure.

Look for shells on the Gulf-side beaches, especially at low tide and after storms have brought new shells ashore. Collecting any live shells is prohibited, including sand dollars and starfish. All shelling is prohibited in the Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

Common along the beaches are conch, junonia, whelk, and olive shells as well as sand dollar shells.

To clean shells, soak them in a 50/50 solution of fresh water and bleach for a few hours. A coating of mineral or baby oil will give them a shine. Sand dollars can only take 10 minutes of bleach before crumbling. --RC

Further east is Pelican Bay, a well-protected anchorage at the tip of Cayo Costa that is a favorite among cruising skippers.

Arguably the best resort/marina in this area is South Seas Island Resort at the northern tip of Captiva, and one so good that we chose to stay in their marina for two nights! South Seas was decimated by Hurricane Charley in 2004 but, after a change of ownership and a massive rebuild, it now boasts a truly great marina (dockmaster Charles Martz and his crew are superb!) with everything fresh: docks, pilings and electrical.

We dined that evening at The Pointe which, though casual, has a terrific menu. Well managed by Kristin and bar-tended perfectly by Hunter, the skirt steak was amazing, shrimp scampi with fettucini not to be missed, and huge mahi-mahi tacos. Trust me: do not miss The Pointe.

South Seas has two-and-a-half miles of sparkling beaches for swimming and shelling, a 330-acre wildlife preserve and no less than 20 swimming pools, although we're taking their word for it. Cute shops and endless activities on both land and water make this a great getaway. Our crew wandered around and even fished near our boat, catching a most unhappy hammerhead shark! Expect to see docile manatees nuzzle up to your boat to gently slurp the freshwater coming from your air conditioning pumps.

We could have continued on into Charlotte Harbor and Gasparilla Sound, both with more appealing anchorages to explore, but time was running out and we'll save them for our next cruise.

Trust me on this: we'll definitely be back to explore Pine Island Sound again.



# Postcards From Florida



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## Charter Briefing: Florida's Overlooked West Coast

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**Weather:** The prime season is the winter, roughly from November to the end of April for generally balmy and pleasant conditions, marred only by occasional cold fronts. Spring and fall are popular, often escaping the heat and humidity of summer. Hurricane season runs from June through November, but they are well predicted.

**Getting There:** Depending on where your charter company is located, there are a number of airports available. Ft. Myers, Sarasota and Tampa all have commercial airline service with good connections. Florida is also accessible easily by car, with driving time from Atlanta about 8 hours, from New Orleans about 10 hours, and from Annapolis about 16 hours.

**Extra Costs:** On return, you are required to top off the fuel tanks and empty the holding tanks (conveniently done at the fuel dock). Insurance is offered by the charter companies and is a good idea, particularly since these are shallow waters. Dockage, depending on the marina, can be expensive with electricity and water extra. A saltwater fishing license is required to fish, at US\$30 for non-residents.

**Money:** The US\$ is the currency, and most credit cards and travellers checks are accepted everywhere. ATMs are very accessible, and many banks are open Saturday mornings but closed Sundays.

**Legal:** No boating licenses are required, although all aboard should carry identification (driver's license or passport).

**Cellphones:** Cell phone reception is excellent throughout this region, and most areas of the Intracoastal have good service.

**What To Take:** Sunblock, lots of sunblock!! The midday Florida sun, even in winter, can be ferocious. Several t-shirts and two bathing suits (so one can dry), lip balm, polarized sunglasses with a safety cord. Some charter companies include masks, snorkels and fins (check first), but may not have children's sizes. Reef runners or other protective footwear for use in the water or on shell-covered beaches. A sturdy canvas tote bag is good for carrying shells or groceries back from shore. Don't forget some clothespins to hold laundry to the lifelines.

**Provisioning:** All charter companies offer provisioning, but major supermarkets and discount stores (such as Costco, Sam's or BJ's) are in most cities. Many marinas have, or are close to, small groceries for restocking. Water is widely available at marinas.

**Details:** Electricity is 120v with two- or three-pin grounded plugs. Most boats also have outlets or cigarette lighter plugs for 12v charging.

**For More Information:** Visit the official website for the Ft. Myers/Sanibel area, at [www.fortmyers-sanibel.com](http://www.fortmyers-sanibel.com).

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