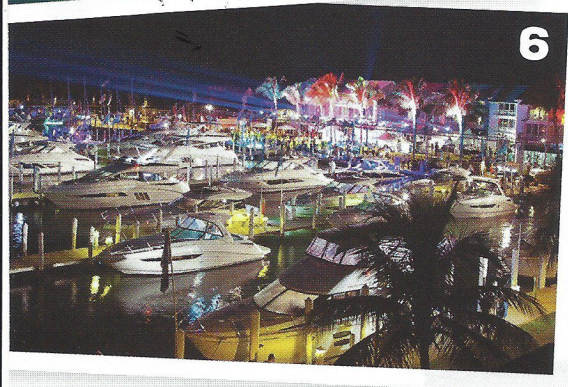
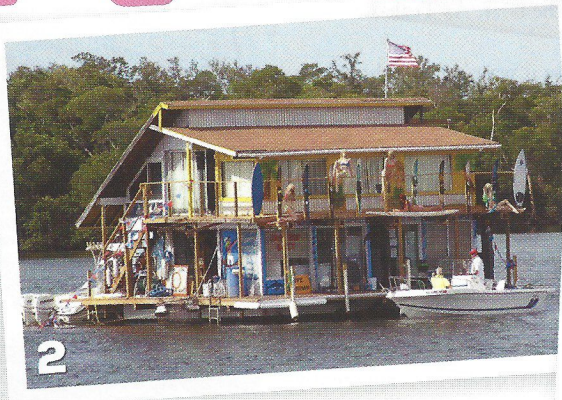
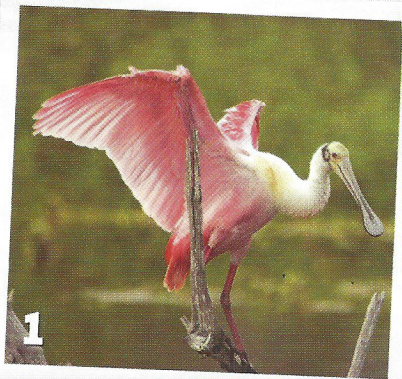


IN THE



Coming from a hyper-stressed office connected to the “Internet of Things,” the notion of cruising 3 to 4 knots to our first destination sounded painfully slow. Withdrawal from this “I need it now” existence felt like a one-cup-shy caffeine headache. No Wake zones and the morning return of a lackadaisical squadron of Roseate Spoonbills to mangroves that anchor the shoreline of Pine Island Sound were part of the therapy (1). Sighting these birds is part of a boat ride to Captiva Island, located just offshore from Ft. Myers, Florida.

Concerns about the number of signal bars on my iPhone were quickly replaced by the number of sandbars dotting the chartplotter of the 50-foot Carver we chartered from Southwest Florida Yachts in Cape Coral, Florida. Redundant depth finders were flashing low water alarms like a stock market bulletin moving across the bottom of CNBC.

“Put down the binoculars, you-would-be ornithologist,” I muttered to myself, “lest you become a certified bird brain” by drifting out of a well-marked channel the locals refer to as the “miserable mile.” Not to be confused with Chicago’s famous Magnificent Mile, this idle zone-enforced stretch of ditch where the Caloosahatchee River meets the pastel colored Gulf of Mexico is narrow and undeveloped. You can forget about shopping. Except for Jasper’s Bait Shop (2), a whimsical, two-story, 1500-square-foot house built on a floating platform and anchored in a river cove. Boaters tie up alongside, get snacks, shrimp and snap photos of the structure that once served as wrestler Hulk Hogan’s 1993 movie set home in *Thunder in Paradise*.

And paradise this is. Seagrape trees drape the two-lane road on both Sanibel and adjoining Captiva islands. A few more years of recovery following Hurricane Charley, and these fruit-bearing plants will once again create a sun dappled overhead canopy along the shoreline past the J.N. Ding Darling Natural Wildlife Refuge known for its abundant bird life. As much a refuge for wildlife, the blend of blooming red hibiscus (3) and prolific variegated pink and snow white oleanders (4) that line the road also provide cover for exquisite vacation homes occupied by luminaries seeking solitude and sun.

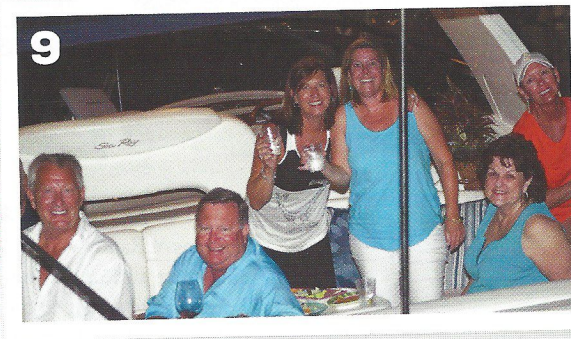
At times only a sliver of mangroves separate estuaries to the east and pristine sea oat-covered dunes anchoring undeveloped beach to the west. This is the Mecca boaters seek, in particular two marina resorts, different as night and day, yet all in year-round high demand.

SOUTH SEAS ISLAND RESORT

Captiva’s premier boater destination is South Seas Island Resort. Back in full glory after the devastation from Charley 11 years ago, this gated, 330-acre tip of the island retreat (5) pulls together a blend of natural beauty and resort-quality activities that cater to all generations.

A newly dredged channel from the Intracoastal Waterway all but eliminates timing arrivals and departures based on tidal flow. Popular with cruise clubs (6) along Florida’s West Coast,

PINK



Southwest Florida Yacht Charters offers boaters paradise — without the passport.

BY ALAN WENDT

weekends see a fair share of custom yachts as well. A new 76-foot Monte Carlo eased into Lima dock next to our tie-up. Just about every yachtsman poked heads out of cabins, watching with envy as the skipper skillfully toyed with the multidirectional joystick, bringing her alongside with little need for dockhand assistance.

Firm side-to slips accommodate all but the megayachter. Gas and diesel fuel docks make this a popular halfway stop for West Coast Florida boats heading to and from the Keys.

With three pools, including a new one for kids with water slides, Jet Ski, kayak and paddleboard rentals, a par-3 executive golf course that fronts the beach (7), tennis courts, and a host of other activity-based diversions, this is the ideal meet-up resort.

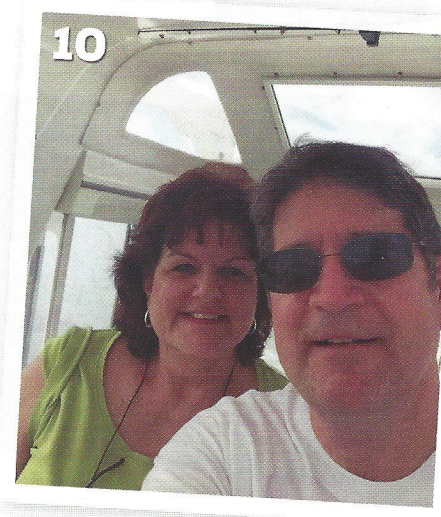
Massillon, Ohio boaters Joseph and Sandra Kuntz (8) are frequent visitors to South Seas. The resort is a short cruise aboard their 46-foot Sea Ray from their winter home in Estero, Florida.

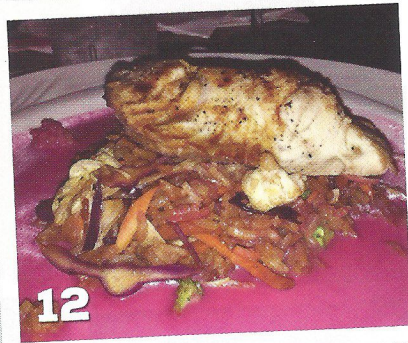
“Look around, you can still have friends and grandkids visit, but they don’t have to stay on the boat overnight,” Joe says as he points to the landside accommodations that surround the marina.

As we noshed on finger foods and gourmet cheeses picked up from the South Seas marina deli, other boaters dropped by for this impromptu docktails party, sharing life stories, common interests and thoughts about boating along Pine Island Sound (9).

Most were well traveled. Loved the Caribbean. Agreed that St. Barts sounded exotic, but that Captiva was less than two hours by plane from the Midwest and didn’t require a passport, Rosetta Stone crash course, or a second mortgage to pay for a few days of R&R. Best of all, you weren’t stuck on an island for seven days because of airline schedules.

That notion of variety, flexibility and discovery kept working its way into the conversation, everyone eager to learn about our charter and cruising itinerary. My wife, Susan, is the cruise planner with a serious case of OCD for details (10). She had just two requests for this trip: No more than one night at each marina; and only one meal in a restaurant per day. The tough call was picking the night we were going to eat at Doc Fords Rum Bar & Grille: Friday at South Seas, or Saturday when we cruised to Pink Shell Marina and the flagship restaurant on Ft. Myers Beach.





THE JOY OF CHARTERING

For fans of Randy Wayne White, fishing guide turned adventure author and now restaurateur, a trip to Doc Fords is like a visit to Sloppy Joe's in Key West. White's novels are inspired by the backwater shrimpers and legion of offbeat, modern day characters likely to be found in the bait stores and beach art galleries, untouched by Florida's theme parks and Interstates.

Leveraging the author's protagonist Doc Ford, the growing chain is earning serious culinary recognition for seafood treats like Yucatan Shrimp, "a vacation on a plate," Banana Leaf Snapper (11) and deep water Mahi-Mahi (12).

White routinely visits each location for book signings. I missed him by just one shrimp too many. He joins dozens of gifted authors who, for more than a century, have found inspiration cruising these skinny blue-green waters and back bays.

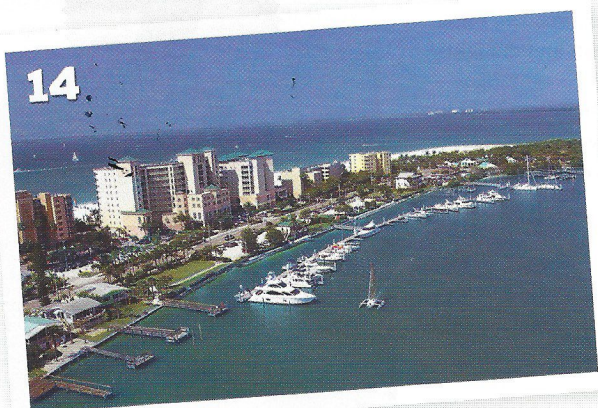
"You'd be surprised at the notables who charter with us," says Barb Hansen of Southwest Florida Yachts. From captains of industry to recent empty nesters reconnecting, Hansen sees many experienced and new boaters who come to charter from her diverse fleet of power and sail based in Cape Coral at Tarpon Point Marina.

"We offer two, back-to-back, three-day introductory, hands-on courses all through this area," she says. "Never more than a few hours from home base, this is a fantastic way to see if you'll like boating, or can even get along with a spouse in tighter quarters than at home," Hansen adds with a laugh.

Chartering makes sense. An experienced boater can explore an area like Southwest Florida without having to ship his or her boat from the Great Lakes. If you're thinking of buying a boat, a charter immerses you in all the aspects of boating at warp speed. The best part: Someone else is handling maintenance, haul-out and keeping spare oil and cleaners on board. You simply concentrate on the fun. Sort of like turning the grandkids over to the parents after a weekend.

Our boat (13), a 1997 aft cabin, was ideal for two, maybe three couples or families. With two full heads and showers, a galley and ample seating, you really only need the proverbial swimsuit and toothbrush. Sheets, towels, tools... even a cute set of serving dishes for docktail parties are part of the charter package. Stopping at a nearby grocery store prior to check-in rounded out the provisions. The advance package of information from SWFY occupied many evenings before our trip, and consulting with Hansen was better than searching the web.

We could have spent longer at the homeport of Tarpon Point. With a pool, eclectic sandal shops and art galleries, plus a Westin hotel with an upscale outdoor marina bar called the Nauti Mermaid, arriving early and staying late is encouraged.



PINK SHELL MARINA - FT. MYERS BEACH

"Let's Do It, hailing Pink Shell on 12," I radioed as we rounded the tip of Matanzas Pass. Dockmaster Dave O'Connor greeted me by name instantly, provided a slip number and had us tied up and connected to shore power before I could even get the helm electronics shut down. Talk about efficiency; this resort has zoomed ahead on my list of Florida favorites.

"The only thing we overlook is the beach," quips O'Connor (14).

Guests are issued a waterproof arm band embedded with an RFID chip that unlocks marina showers, provides cashless charges for poolside beverages, Starbucks coffee in the a.m., and even a Sunday brunch at Jack's. Ask for a table overlooking the 7-mile-long beach.

O'Connor is a familiar face to boaters, having served as dockmaster at South Seas for years and several other resorts before signing on to oversee construction of the new Techno Marine advanced floating aluminum and composite docks. There are



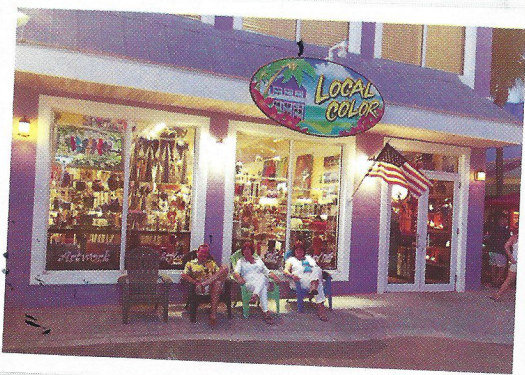
39 slips in all, with room for 100-foot vessels, 30-, 50- and 100-amp service, and, of course, Wi-Fi. The marina and resort satisfies the boater who wants less seclusion and more variety in entertainment and landside accommodation choices.

A themed pool (see if you can spot the iconic Octopus hugging the waterfall) (15) and a quieter adult pool are steps from the marina. Like South Seas, there are many planned activities to keep little ones busy all day, with a focus on eco-tours and an on-staff naturalist who leads kayak trips to spoil islands for birding, shelling and even dolphin watching. On our cruise, a trio of bottle nose dolphin juveniles took a liking to our boat and auditioned for a role in the next “Dolphin Tale” movie, jumping in our wake over and over.

While you easily can stay put for lunch or dinner at the cool tropical rainforest setting of Bongos Bar & Grill, less than a mile from the marina is Ft. Myers Beach. Every 15 minutes a trolley stops in front of the Pink Shell for the 5-minute, 75-cent ride to the city pier and entertainment district known as Times Square (16). Like Key West’s Mallory Square, buskers will keep you in stitches hustling for tips. There are dozens of outdoor dining establishments, rooftop sunset bars, ice cream stores, galleries, and, yes, signature sunsets (17).

Pink Shell offers a dining experience that is sure to rekindle the romance. Dinner for two on the beach at sunset; your white linen table decorated with a single candle hurricane lamp, centerpiece bowl of pink auger and scallop shells, and your toes wiggling in the sand.

Imagine the boating memories you’ll make by slowing down to 3 or 4 knots and leaving the daily routine trailing behind in your wake. ★



RESOURCES

Southwest Florida Yachts
800-262-7939; SWFYACHTS.COM

South Seas Island Resort
844-2ESCAPE; SOUTHSEAS.COM

Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina
855-210-9327; PINKSHELL.COM