

# GULFING AROUND

Chris Caswell discovers the delights along Florida's west coast and Pine Island Sound while trying to stay on the right side of the buoy

Story and photography by Chris Caswell

It was no dark and stormy night, but the middle of a bright Florida afternoon when I spotted the mystery buoy. It was near our course and I had no idea what it marked, so I brought the engines back to neutral and we drifted while I issued orders.

“What the heck is a green nun with vertical white stripes? Where’s Claiborne’s cruising guide? Is there a copy of Chapman’s aboard?” I called out.

As my wife, She Who Must Be Obeyed, rummaged through the briefcase of books and charts I’d brought aboard, she murmured just loud enough for me to hear: “Perhaps it’s a submarine transit zone? Or a seaplane anchorage?”

A few evenings before, preparing myself for the buoyage of our voyage, I had bored her senseless with all the never-seen buoys from the pages of **Chapman’s Piloting and Seamanship**. Now Chapman had bitten me back.

I grabbed the binoculars to look for a number on the mysterious buoy and, ta-da, problem solved. It was, in fact, a green buoy but the vertical stripes were surprisingly neatly applied streaks of bird poop. Somewhere, I knew there must be egrets laughing and giving each other feathery high-fives as they humiliated another skipper.

As I eased the engines back into forward, I could also feel SWMBO’s smirk in the hairs on my neck. I didn’t look around.

We were exploring the waters out of Cape Coral, Florida, aboard one of the charter sailboats from Southwest Florida Yacht Charters, and it was proving to be an immersion course in buoy navigation. If Berlitz can teach you Greek in a week, cruising this area can help you remember everything you learned at that U.S. Power Squadron course ages ago.

The west coast of Florida is one of those secret cruising grounds that is overlooked because it is just so darn convenient. No foreign airports, no passports, no hassles with provisioning and, although you’re in the Deep South, not much of a language barrier.



The beaches along the islands of Florida’s Gulf Coast are perfect for whiling away the time with a good book, above. A thunderhead rises in the afternoon, facing page.

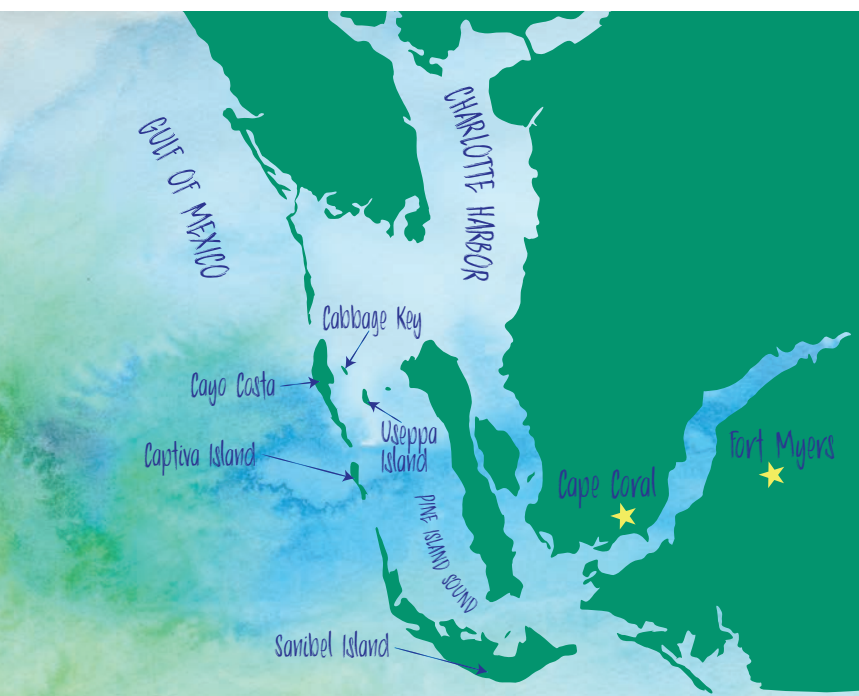
What’s not to love about a bareboat charter destination that is within easy driving distance of half of North America and has warm weather, warm water and warm breezes year-round, not to mention smooth seas? It’s a bareboating paradise dotted with luxe resorts with great marinas, more getaway-by-yourself anchorages than you can count, and white sand beaches covered with the most amazing shells.

If you’re accustomed to bareboat chartering in the Caribbean, this is a different animal. First, there are no fleets of cookie-cutter lookalike boats. Southwest Florida Yacht Charters has an eclectic fleet of privately owned yachts, which it manages in its charter program. In its sail fleet, these range from a 29-foot Hunter to Island Packets and Catalinas of various sizes, and its power fleet is equally eclectic with Grand Banks, Carvers, Beneteaus and Mainships. Our choice was a Leopard 38 sailing cat appropriately named *Southern Comfort* which, in fact, was a perfect description of this four-stateroom, two-head yacht.

The boat was in pristine condition when we arrived and the staff member who did our check-out was thorough and knowledgeable on everything from the location of breakers to finding the best burgers. Even better, there were manuals for every piece of equipment aboard. Not sure how to work something? Look it up!

The SWFYC base is convenient to major airports and highways, and it’s on the doorstep of Pine Island Sound, a cruising wonderland. About 15 miles long and 4 miles wide, the sound is protected from the Gulf of Mexico by the barrier islands of Sanibel and Captiva. You can 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, particularly to those of us new to the Intracoastal Waterway, which has its own navigation system. First was “red-right-returning-to-Texas,” a



# SHELL HUNT

**S**anibel 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.

It is the sheer abundance and variety of the shells on these beaches that draw shell collectors and tourists to these beaches. Known as the best in the world for shelling, the curve of these islands acts 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 Gulfside 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, olive shells and sand dollars. 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. --SWMBO



With a quick trim of the headsail, the Leopard 38 *Southern Comfort* heads up Pine Island Sound. The crew passes a stilt house, just one of many along the barrier islands.

mnemonic device 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 depthsounder reading much over 10 feet most of the time. A good pair of polarized sunglasses can help, but common sense is even more essential. “Let’s anchor over there ... no, wait, I think those birds are standing, not floating.”

Although we went through channels where I couldn’t bring myself to look at the depthsounder, we never touched bottom, although even an occasional touch is rarely a problem because the bottom is generally soft mud or sand. Once you break the habit of sticking just to the main channels, Pine Island Sound and neighboring Charlotte Harbor have a multitude of little anchorages and protected waterways that can give you solitude even in the busiest months.

A lazy start the first morning sent us reaching northward along the Intracoastal (toward Texas!) and we found that the appropriately named Picnic Island, which has an anchorage protected from southerly winds and a curving beach that hides an inner lagoon, was already lined with sportboats. Moving on, we had our first encounter with the dolphins on Pine Island Sound, which amused themselves and us by playing in our bow and stern waves. Talking to other skippers, it seems that dolphins simply love boats and nearly everyone on these waters has had several encounters with them.

We tiptoed into the blue area of the chart (after review) at Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island and dropped a lunch hook in what seemed to be a set for the Discovery Channel. This refuge has the largest mangrove ecosystem in the U.S., and is home to more than 200 species of birds including the bald eagle. An osprey family had built a complicated nest of twigs on a nearby piling, and we took the dinghy to examine it more closely, until the arrival of father osprey with a display of razor sharp talons and beak encouraged us to keep our distance while he gave us a yellow stink-eye.

Because Pine Island Sound is oriented roughly north and south, the predominant easterlies gave us a wonderful close reach that afternoon. This isn’t man-against-the-elements bareboating and if you’re looking for big seas, go elsewhere. Pine Island Sound has flat water and pleasant trade winds, which were perfect for our cat.

Our first night was spent at ‘Tween Waters Inn, 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 1930s, it had 30-amp power and fresh water, always bareboat requirements.

After a long but easy sail, we opted to anchor the next night at Cayo Costa, a state park with a protected cove and excellent holding. Because it can only be reached by boat, its incredibly perfect

# READ LIKE THE LOCALS

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 the local flavor.



Author Randy Wayne

White's 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, White's first book in the series was **Sanibel Flats** in which he introduced both Doc Ford and his quirky sidekick Tomlinson.

As an author, White has good credentials too. A longtime 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 as he traveled as a freelance writer. He also 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 his 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. --SWMBO



The happy fisherman shows off his catch.

beach isn't clogged with tourists and you can often find yourself alone on it. The rangers run a shuttle to the gulf side, and a gentle breeze kept the anchorage cool and bug-free all night.

With a solid easterly the next day, we took advantage of the open waters and breeze of Gasparilla Sound for some power-reaching in flat water, with our cat hissing along nicely. Hunger took us to Cabbage Key, a private resort known for a cheeseburger that allegedly inspired Jimmy Buffett to write "Cheeseburger In Paradise." Dubious as that distinction may be (dozens of restaurants also claim that title), the fact is that its cheeseburger is well worth the visit: "Heaven on earth with an onion slice!"

Built in the 1930s 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 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.

We overnighted at nearby Useppa Island, a private island club that allows no cars (golf carts only) on the island, but which has a great marina available to charterers from SWFYC. We could have opted for Pelican Bay, a well-protected anchorage at the tip of Cayo Costa that is a favorite among cruising skippers, but staying at a private resort appealed to our crew.

Another power reach the next day took us to the South Seas Island Resort at the northern tip of Captiva that boasts a truly great marina (dockmaster Charles Martz and his crew are superb) with everything fresh: docks, pilings and electrical.

Florida weather is variable and, as they say, if you don't like it, wait a few moments. In the afternoon, we watched huge thunder-

heads build into white castles in the distance, and it wasn't long before we were deluged by a biblical downpour. That evening, we were treated to a spectacular fireworks display of lightning.

The next day was pristine, however, and we went sailing in a fine breeze, with our crew sunning against the full jib while we sliced through the smooth waters. We had kept our side-tie at South Seas and returned in the afternoon, sated with sailing, tingly with sun and wind, and ready for shelling. South Seas has 2 1/2 miles of sparkling beaches for swimming and shelling, a 330-acre wildlife preserve and no fewer 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 family getaway. Expect to see docile manatees nuzzle up to your boat to gently slurp the freshwater coming from your air conditioning condensation drains. It was the cook's night off and we dined at The Pointe which, though casual, has a terrific menu. 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.

With regrets, we headed for Cape Coral the next morning. It had been a delightful charter, with a good yacht, an attentive charter company, and a wonderful cruising area. Broad-reaching along our course back down the Intracoastal (away from Texas!) was a lot easier after several days of buoy practice. It had rained hard one day, so that vertically striped green nun was now washed back to a solid green, although there was a heron sitting on it as we passed.

I think he was grinning. 📍

For more information on this charter visit Southwest Florida Yacht Charters at [www.swfyachts.com](http://www.swfyachts.com) or contact by phone at (800) 262-7939.

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