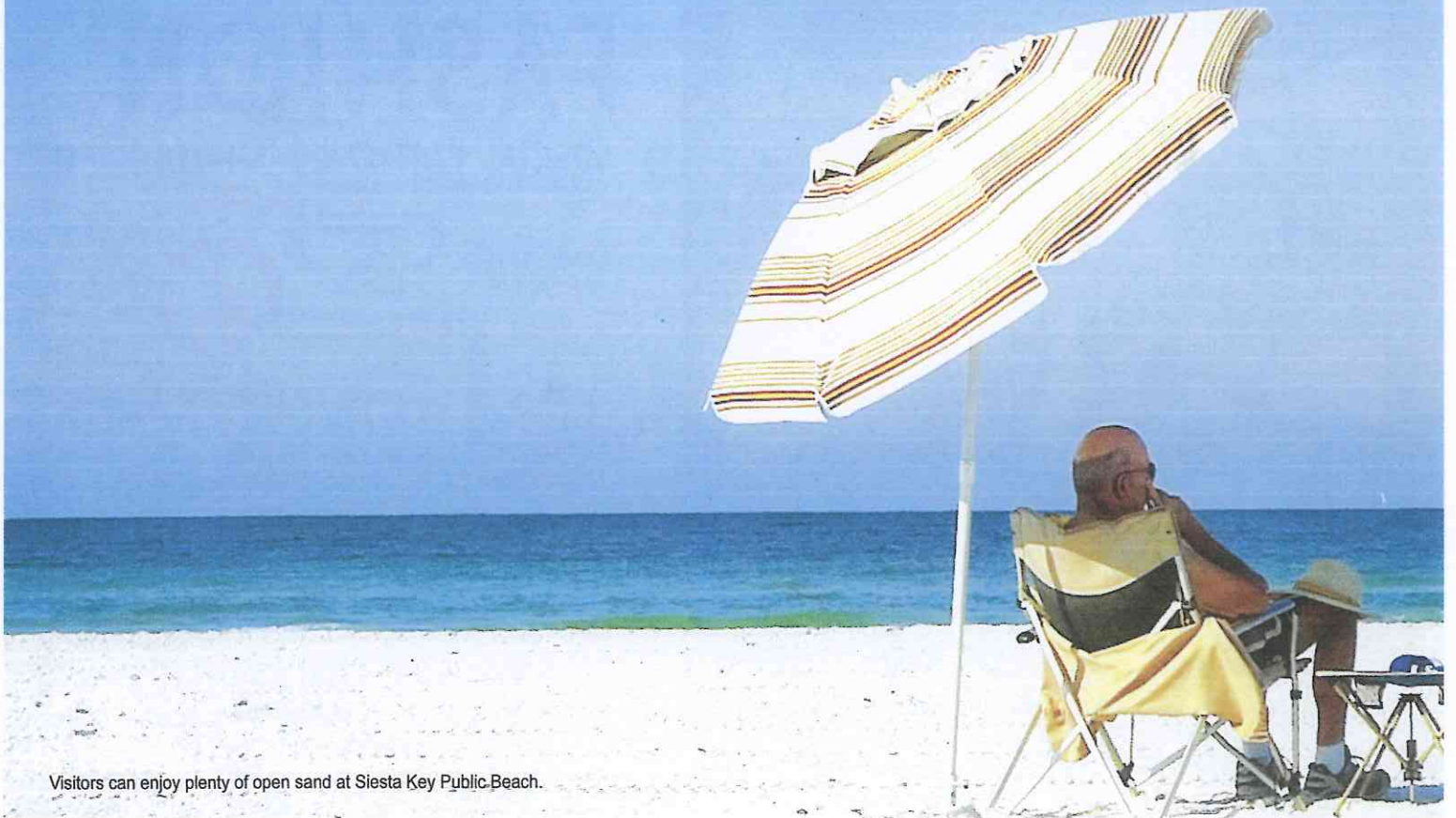


# WE'RE NO. 1 SIESTA KEY NAMED TOP BEACH



Visitors can enjoy plenty of open sand at Siesta Key Public Beach.



Cassie Bonenfant lays out on Siesta Key Public Beach while on vacation from Western New England College.

## NORTHBOUND

### Coquina Beach

Go out Cortez Road in Bradenton, through the quaint, historic fishing village of the same name, and you'll come to Coquina Beach. Beautiful white sands hide a plethora of tiny coquina shells, which gave this beach its name. Large Australian pines offer plenty of shade for picnickers, who will want to take advantage of the plentiful picnic tables and barbecue pits. Across the beach, a boat launch is available on the bay side of Gulf Drive. As you head north, you will pass through Bradenton Beach with its funky shops, restaurants and plenty of beach access. It's kitschy, fun and Florida through and through.

### Palma Sola Causeway

If you take Manatee Avenue in Bradenton out towards the beaches, you will come to Palma Sola Causeway, along Palma Sola Bay. This beach is short on public amenities, but remains a popular boating and jet-skiing spot. The close proximity to the busy causeway can be a nuisance, but it remains one of the few beaches where pets are allowed.

### Manatee County

#### Public Beach

Keep going out Manatee Avenue and you will run right into Manatee Public Beach. With free parking, bountiful concessions, restrooms and showers, volleyball courts, a playground for kids and more, this is one of the most family-friendly beaches around. Keep heading north and you will find plenty of beach access at the end of each street facing the Gulf. A great way to avoid some of the crowds nearer the concession stands.

### Anna Maria Island

Anna Maria is a seven-mile-long barrier island bordering the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay. At various points, the island offers stunning views of the Sunshine Skyway and Egmont Key. One of the best places to visit, aside from its beaches, is the venerable old City Pier, a 676-foot local landmark that was built in 1911. The pier remains a favorite spot among local

fishermen and boaters, and concessions are available.

## MIDWAY

### Longboat Key

While first impressions may lead you to believe that the beaches of Longboat are only for those who live in this exclusive Gulf-front community, it pays to take a closer look. There are public access points, if you know where to find them. Among the most popular is Whitney Beach, on the north end of the key. Secluded and quiet, you will find nothing but white sand and sea oats for as far as the eye can see. Longboat Key stretches over 11 beautifully manicured miles. November through March, this town of 8,000 more than doubles its population as visitors flock here from the north.

### North Lido Beach

On Lido Key, you will find North Lido Beach, just off of St. Armands Circle, where many locals go to flee the seasonal crowds. This secluded, half-mile stretch of beach was a topless beach until such things were banned in the 1980s. Great for shelling and strolling. Keep walking north and you will find some of the area's most spectacular homes.

### Lido Beach

With its pavilion, concession stand, restrooms and ample parking, Lido Beach remains one of the Gulf Coast's most popular destinations. Just off the concession stand is a public, 25-meter swimming pool open to the public for a small admission fee.

### South Lido Park

Go south and you will find South Lido Park, a 100-acre park with two walking trails, ample picnic tables, grills and a playground. This area is also big with boaters (who must stay away from designated swimming areas). One word of caution: Tidal currents have been known to be a problem in this area.

### Bird Key Park

Just as you are coming over the John Ringling Causeway, heading for St.

Armands Circle, you will find Bird Key Park, a favorite spot among windsurfers. Not a great place for swimming, this park is renowned as one of the few places where dogs can get their fun in the sun.

### Siesta Key

Its crystal white sand, clear and calm waters, boardwalks and 800 free parking spaces all combine to make Siesta the area's most popular beach. If the lot is full, try one of the 13 beach accesses located between the beach and Siesta Village. The main site offers lifeguards, grills, a playground, volleyball and tennis courts, a fitness trail and more. The village offers its own forms of beachside entertainment, including popular restaurants, bars and small shops.

### Turtle Beach

Stretching over 14 acres, Turtle Beach Park, at the south end of Siesta Key, is the perfect place for a romantic stroll. The narrow beach provides access to Little Sarasota Bay and is home to some of the highest dunes in the area.

## SOUTHBOUND

### Palmer Point

At the south end of Siesta and the north end of Casey Key, Palmer Point is accessible only by foot from Turtle Beach or by boat, and remains a relatively untouched beachfront oasis.

### Nokomis Beach

With coarser sand than its neighboring Siesta Key Beach, and with 22 acres to explore, Nokomis Beach is Sarasota's oldest public beach. Known for its fishing, this beach offers amenities including a boat ramp, picnic shelters and a boardwalk.

### North Jetty Park

On the southern tip of Casey Key, adjacent to Nokomis Beach, is North Jetty Park, a popular picnicking and surfing spot. The jetty juts into the Gulf for some of the finest fishing around. A bait shop, boat ramp, horseshoe and volleyball courts, are a few of the amenities.

### Venice Municipal Beach

A fossilized coral reef is located one-quarter mile offshore of this popular beach, making it a perfect spot for scuba diving. Take a walk along the shore and discover shark's teeth, for which this beach earned national acclaim. Situated near the shops and restaurants of downtown Venice.

### Caspersen Beach

South of Venice Airport, the southern two-thirds of this beachfront have been left in a natural state. Excellent shelling, a boardwalk, a nature trail and a fishing pier make this a popular spot for tourists and locals alike.

### Manasota Beach

Take a walk and discover sea shells along the shore of Manasota Beach, at the west end of the Manasota Bridge. This beautiful setting includes a boardwalk on the Intracoastal that winds through mangroves, past boat ramps, docks, picnic areas and concession facilities.

### Englewood Beach

Ample parking, showers, restrooms and picnic tables make Englewood Beach a delightful option for families. No lifeguards are on duty, however. While there are no concession stands, you'll want to visit the numerous restaurants and shops just across the street.

### Gasparilla Island

Gasparilla Island, located south of Englewood and across the Boca Grande bridge, encompasses five smaller beaches, a gift shop at Light House Beach and excellent fishing. Indeed, this area is acclaimed as the "tarpon capital of the world."

### Port Charlotte Beach Complex

This popular beach offers family-packed fun with grills, basketball, tennis and volleyball courts, a heated pool and fishing pier, all ideally situated along the tranquil Peace River.

### Boca Grande

Boca Grande, home of the famed Gasparilla Inn, is also home to lovely restaurants, boutiques, a lighthouse, exquisite beaches and its quaint fishing village. A favorite get-away for the rich and famous.

The powdery white shoreline of Siesta Key got the ultimate seal of approval this year from "Dr. Beach." Siesta Beach was ranked No. 1 in the annual survey by Dr. Stephen Leatherman, director of the Laboratory for Coastal Research at Florida International University.

"The sand is like sugar," Leatherman says. "Some people can't believe it. It's super-soft, super-fine. They claim to have the finest, whitest sand in the world, and I can't argue with that."

For the past two years, Siesta was ranked No. 2 in the survey. Now local tourism officials can boast of having locked up the top spot.

Leatherman ranks beaches on 50 criteria, including water quality, weather, facilities and crowds. A top score is 250. Siesta Beach registered in the 230s, losing a few points because the view is heavy on condominiums to the north and south. It got credit for free parking, along with its shallow water and gentle surf.

"Most days you measure waves over there in inches, not feet," Leatherman says.

Scott Montgomery, interim lifeguard manager at the time of the announcement for Sarasota County, spent more than 20 years at Siesta Beach. He always knew it was special. The No. 1 ranking just confirms that fact.

"It's about time," Montgomery jokes. "I've seen a lot of beaches, even beaches in Hawaii, and they just don't compare."

The 40-acre park at Siesta offers everything from tennis to beach volleyball courts, along with a snack bar and gift shop. The beach at Siesta is more than 100 yards deep — far wider than most beaches in Florida or anywhere else.

Thousands of people can spend the day without feeling crowded. In 2010, according to the county estimates, 2.2 million people visited Siesta Beach. Four lifeguard stands at the beach are painted different colors to help beachgoers remember where they are.

—Thomas Becnel

## WHAT MAKES SIESTA BEACH SO FINE?

The quartz sand on Siesta Beach tends to have two qualities that people love: a very fine grain size that gives the sand a loose, powdery feel, and a brilliant white color that is both attractive and cool to the touch on a hot summer day.

Siesta is not the only white sand beach in Florida or even along the west coast. The quartz particles that give the sand a white color eroded from the Appalachian mountains, washed down streams and rivers, and now cover much of the Florida peninsula.

But Siesta does tend to accumulate more fine-grained quartz sand than other nearby beaches for two reasons, says Curtis Smith, a geologist and coastal projects manager for Sarasota County.

Siesta Beach is just south of Big Pass, which washes sand out of Sarasota Bay. The bay has smaller, smoother sand particles because there is less wave action. Intense waves tend to wash away smaller particles, leaving larger, coarser material behind. Siesta Beach also benefits from Point of Rocks just to the south. The rocky outcropping acts as a catch basin for the fine-grained sand, preventing it from flushing south.

That allows Siesta Beach to widen and accumulate more sand even as other nearby beaches erode.

—Zac Anderson

## BEST BEACHES 2011

Ranked by Dr. Stephen Leatherman, director of the Laboratory for Coastal Research at Florida International University.

1. Siesta Beach
2. Coronado Beach, San Diego
3. Kahanamoku Beach in Waikiki, Honolulu, Hawaii
4. Main Beach, East Hampton, N.Y.
5. Cape Hatteras, North Carolina
6. St. George Island State Park, Florida Panhandle
7. Beachwalker Park, Kiawah Island, S.C.
8. Coast Guard Beach, Cape Cod, Mass.
9. Waimanalo Bay Beach Park, Oahu, Hawaii
10. Cape Florida State Park, Miami

