



HILLARY RICHARD FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Checkers, a green sea turtle, watches visitors from his rehab tank at Loggerhead Marinelifelife Center in Juno Beach, Fla.

A day at the nearby Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge offers wildlife encounters of a different kind. If you canoe these Everglades, which span nearly 144,000 acres of endless waterways and lily pads with pink flowers, you'll encounter beautiful birds and plenty of alligators sunning themselves. You'll also spot George, Loxahatchee's most famous resident, lurking around the fishermen. Everyone has a story about George, the 15-foot-long alligator, but rumors swirl about the mysterious, even-larger creature who bit off George's foot during a fight years ago.

MacArthur Beach State Park, on Singer Island, offers a look at the untouched subtropical coastal habitat that used to cover Florida. In addition to endless nature trails and butterfly walks, the park has two miles of pristine beaches — and plenty of sea turtle nests. Florida is the largest loggerhead turtle nesting area in the world, and northern Palm Beach County is one of the turtles' favorite nesting spots. Turtles nest overnight, so every morning park rangers diligently record flipper tracks and rope off three-foot-deep nests full of eggs. Last year, 100,000 eggs hatched on the beach. At the start of the nesting season in May, there were already 200 loggerhead nests, 16 leatherback nests and one green turtle nest.

Watching the newborn hatchlings flip and flop their way toward the ocean is a hugely popular event. Guests at beachfront resorts with turtle nests buzz with excitement every night the baby turtles are due to emerge. At MacArthur Beach State Park, rangers allow a certain number of people in to watch hatchlings each year. The Loggerhead Marinelifelife Center announces hatchling sightings from area beaches online, and also offers hatchling release tours from nests that were brought to them. Plenty of people reserve their spots up to a year in advance.

As for the New England sea turtles, all but one have been released back into the wild. It looks like Shertz, a cold-stunned loggerhead who has gained 17 pounds since his arrival from Barnstable in January, might stay in Florida this winter with the rest of the snowbirds.

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Shell-shocked Florida refugees

Turtles disoriented by New England's hard winter found themselves among the rescued

By **Hillary Richard**
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

JUNO BEACH, Fla. — Last winter, five downtrodden New Englanders caused quite a splash when they landed in swanky Palm Beach County. In an area rife with celebrities, professional athletes, and millionaire tycoons, the star snowbirds were a bale of sea turtles. They were, quite literally, shell-shocked.

The sudden and frequent cold snaps last winter disoriented a record number of sea turtles, who were unable to navigate Cape Cod's hook during their migration to warmer waters. When temperatures in Cape Cod Bay dropped into the 30s, these turtles went into a hypothermic state that

left them unable to surface for air. There were over 750 live strandings in the Cape Cod area last year. Five of these loggerheads were relocated in January to the Loggerhead Marinelifelife Center in Juno Beach, where they were treated at a state-of-the-art turtle hospital.

The turtles — later named Audubon, Chowda, Codder, Mayflower, and Shertz — captured the hearts of Palm Beach County visitors, many of whom were escaping the New England winter themselves.

The Loggerhead Marinelifelife Center is a pioneering turtle hospital, research facility, and education center, with as much drama as a normal emergency room. Some turtles have swallowed fishing hooks, others have

been attacked, some are on the brink of starvation after getting stuck in drain pipes, and others have infections from eating foreign objects. After months of treatment and monitoring, the turtles are released back into the wild. In the meantime, the public can come in to view the turtles in their rehab tanks and learn their stories.

Ecotourism is rising rapidly in Palm Beach County, which is full of dramatic ecosystems and wildlife preserves. The county is both bigger and more diverse than most tourists realize — in land area, it's larger than Rhode Island. There are 38 towns (West Palm Beach being the largest), 45 miles of Atlantic shoreline, and four enormous lakes — including fa-

mous Okeechobee.

In Jupiter, the nonprofit Busch Wildlife Sanctuary houses and rehabilitates Florida animals of all types. The on-site animal hospital treats around 5,000 sick, injured, or orphaned creatures annually, with the ultimate goal of releasing them back into the wild. Some require a permanent home and lifelong care, like one blind baby eagle whose mother abandoned it, or the pair of panthers rescued from a private owner who left them perilously declawed. Temporary residents of the sanctuary include crocodiles, alligators, raccoons, deer, bobcats, owls, otters, snakes, bears and a very domesticated opossum, who now lives with one of the caretakers after following him home.

Their own private Florida

Anna Maria Island had wonders enough for 3 cold newcomers

By **Franci Richardson Ellement**
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By the end of last winter, I was begging The Man to consider moving far, far away to any place promising a snow-free life. With Mother Nature's erratic behavior, a major loss in our family, and a routine turned on its head from school cancellations and missed work, it was time for some relief for our family.

I was thinking first about Mexico — far away, lots of water, and hot. But because our passports had expired, our 6-year-old daughter, Scarlet, didn't yet have one, and we were budget-conscious, I remembered a friend had told us about a lesser-known place on the west coast of Florida: Anna Maria Island.

It is a seven-mile stretch of white, sandy, pristine beaches encompassing the communities of Bradenton Beach, Holmes Beach, and Anna Maria. This laid-back resort barrier island markets itself as a less expensive, more family-friendly alternative to Key West. There are no high-rise buildings but plenty of mom-and-pop stores.

The environment is one draw. Another is its location: one stretch is over the bright yellow 4.1-mile-long Sunshine Skyway Bridge across Tampa Bay, and great proximity to such attractions as Busch Gardens and the famous Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa along with the shops, museums, and beaches that make up the unique culture of St. Petersburg, just 35 miles north. And if you must, Disney World is two hours or so away in Orlando.

We stayed in a beachfront two-bedroom unit of the Anna Maria Inn — complete with full kitchen and laundry, which allowed us to bring only what would fit into one backpack. But the highlight of the unit was its sliding glass doors that opened to a little deck, perfect for coffee and breakfast in the morning, and provided sweeping views of the Gulf of Mexico no more than 100 feet away. It was time to trade the heels and boots for flip-flops and let the warm ocean water soothe our rumpled souls.

Court Zoller, the Inn's general manager and co-owner, said he met his wife soon after her family moved from Berkley, Mass., in the spring after the



Blizzard of 1978. "They had had it with the snow," said Zoller, a third-generation islander.

Zoller said a lot of families book their stay at Anna Maria Island and do the trek to Disney World, only to find that in the end, it wasn't necessary.

"We're competing with the likes of Disney World, and we're winning," he said.

After a couple of days on the island, and more specifically in an apartment overlooking the beach, we found he was right. My husband and I, "Old and Older," as I like to call us, had to take shifts playing with our daughter in the uncharacteristically tumultuous surf of the warm-water Gulf. She could play there for hours. All we really needed for Scarlet was a boogie board, sunscreen, and an informative laminate pamphlet on the ecology of the island that she would turn to when a new to us species of seagull would land nearby.

But by the time lunch time rolled around, we were all pretty beat from the water. In the afternoons, we'd explore the local culture. We hopped on

From outside their place on Anna Maria Island, Fla., the author watched another beautiful sunset.

the free trolley that travels across the island, and visited the Bradenton Beach City Fishing Pier. The historic fishing pier is 678 feet long and was built in 1911 by "Will" Bean and Charles Roser, who is said to have developed the recipe for the Fig Newton. Families can be found fishing off the pier under the hot sun, looking to spot some manatees or hook some snapper, grouper, and bluefish. We then meandered around the island, poking into galleries as well as the local Flip Flop Shop and Candy Stop, which was well stocked with bulk nostalgic sweets and souvenirs.

Pursuing more aquatic adventures, we opted to take the 15-mile drive south to nearby Sarasota, the upscale city planned and developed in 1923 by John Ringling of circus fame. This beautiful town shares a multitude of secrets such as the town-run swimming pool and the mangroves of Tam-

pa Bay.

Liquid Blue Outfitters (www.liquidblueoutfitters.com) and its TripAdvisor legend, Kelly, took us on an informative two-hour guided tour in a tandem kayak through the Lido Key Mangrove Tunnels. Thick mangrove branches jut across the watery path, requiring teamwork for mother, father, and headstrong daughter. Kelly paddled us into Sarasota Bay, and with eyesight honed by years on the water, pointed to a mild disturbance on the surface. It was a manatee, he said, and moments later a green shape flowed beneath a neighbor's kayak, the animals' shape clear enough to be seen by us.

While in Sarasota, we ambled around the high-end shops, cafes, and art galleries around St. Armand's Circle. **The Wyland Gallery** (www.wylandkw.com) was particularly attentive to Scarlet's many questions. Wyland's sculptures and paintings, the curators explained, highlighted the artist's commitment to spread awareness of the needs and traits of the ocean's life. The curators would bring a piece that in-

terested our family into a back room and show us how it looked at different times of the day by manipulating the room light.

We ended our day in Sarasota with a delicious meal of Spanish-Cuban fare at the **Columbia Restaurant** (www.columbiarestaurant.com/sarasota), which opened in 1959. My husband and I split a pitcher of the best Sangria we've had since Barcelona, and we all shared Cuban pork and chicken dishes prepared with chorizo, ham, and herbs, followed by a rather large piece of chocolate cake.

One big discovery for us was government commitment to public access to beaches and to the quality of public facilities, both of which were on display at Fort DeSoto Park, a 1,136-acre pristine park that stretches across five interconnected islands. The small piece of beach we settled on — out of seven miles of beachfront — gave us front seats to oceangoing vessels, and access to water so stirred up as to safely batter our energetic kid.

Steps away were clean, fully functioning restrooms and a fully stocked snack stand. Fort DeSoto, which looks and feels like Castle Island, allows rambling on its ramparts, offering still better views of the Gulf from their height.

After a week, our hopes of making it to some St. Petersburg sites were dashed. We weren't going to make it to the **Salvadore Dalí Museum** (www.thedalí.org), which seems to have an impressively busy calendar of events just for children. We walked around beautiful Vinoy Park, an open waterfront area complete with playgrounds, but then it began to rain.

While we would have liked to try the seafood at the **Rod & Reel Pier Restaurant** (www.rodreelpier.com) and the popular, newly renovated **Beachhouse Waterfront Restaurant** (www.beachhouse.groupersandwich.com), we mostly cooked for ourselves on the back deck outside our unit where we could also watch the Gulf's ever-changing vista and spectacular sunsets and then be lulled to sleep by sounds of the crashing waves.

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