



Interesting note:

The Ringling's first show was in 1870, grandiloquently called, "The Ringling Brothers United Monster Shows, Great Double Circus, Royal European Menagerie, Museum, Caravan, and Congress of Trained Animals" Admission was one penny.

Insider tip:

On Monday's admission to the Museum of Art is free.



To Do:

Join the Circus

When John Ringling brought the circus to town in 1927, I wonder if he knew that over 85 years later this world-class, 66-acre art complex would still be considered The Greatest Show on Earth. Plan on spending at least half a day exploring the Ca D'Zan, the Ringling's opulent, 56-room Venetian-Gothic mansion, the art museum, filled with Baroque masterpieces, and the Ringling Circus Museum, devoted to circus memorabilia. Here you can try your hand at tight-rope walking or squeeze into a teeny clown car, learn how to apply clown make-up, and gaze in awe at the world's largest miniature circus. For over 50 years circus historian and model builder Howard C. Tibbals, has continually been adding to the 44,000-piece display, which has to be seen to be believed.

Voted America's #1 small city for art.

Just a hop, skip and a somersault away you'll find a plethora of cultural offerings including a multitude of performing arts venues, theatre and ballet companies, numerous art galleries and a nationally recognized opera house. The Sarasota Opera (on the National Register of Historic Places) completed a \$20 million dollar historic renovation and restoration in 2008 and according to MusicalAmerica.com is now "One of the finest venues for opera in America".

Executive Director, Richard Russell says, "Not only will Sarasota Opera be marking the company's 55th consecutive season, we will be commemorating the anniversaries of the birth of three of opera's most significant composers through our programming; Wagner, Britten, and of course Verdi."

Sarasota, Florida: Circus, Culinary & Culture Galore

By Janice Nieder

All I knew about Florida was the hip, albeit slightly exhausting, party scene in South Beach and the family-oriented, albeit really exhausting, activities around Orlando. And then I discovered the southwestern coast of Florida, in particular, Sarasota, which is called Florida's "Cultural Coast" for good reason. Add in the pristine, white-sandy beaches, the burgeoning culinary scene, a wide selection of glam hotels, dozens of performing arts venues, glorious sunshine, and you have yourself a perfect winter getaway spot.



Insider Tip: Tickets start @ only \$19 and there's not a bad seat in the house.

Fresh batch of outdoor sculptures

This year, Season of Sculpture presents Season VII's "Shared Ground: Eight Artists, Eighteen Installations." This walk-around show is on display through May 2014 and features eighteen monumental works scattered along Sarasota's beautiful downtown Bayfront Park. Some selections are sure to spark a little controversy, such as the oversized "golf ball" by artist Robert Chambers, that comes alive after dark with colored lights and sci-fi music. I was particularly fond of Israeli sculptor Boaz Vaadia's mummys figures.

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Commune with nature

Myakka River State Park is one of Florida's oldest and largest state parks. The enormous Myakka River flows through the 53 square miles of wetlands, prairies and woodlands.

Great for hiking, wildlife and bird watching-almost 100 species have been identified. Many fun activities include narrated airboat and tram tours, biking, kayaking, fishing, and camping.

Insider tip: Climb the 74-foot wooden tower overlooking the canopied walkway, for the best bird's eye view.



Bathing Beauties

Don't forget to lather on the sunscreen when you take advantage of Sarasota's 13 public beaches. For sure you'll want to stroll along the baby-powder soft, sandy white beach on Siesta Key, ranked No. 1 in the USA by "Dr. Beach." Whether you want to snorkel, watch for dolphins and manatees, collect shells or build a sandcastle, the natural beauty of Sarasota's beaches offers it all.

Insider tip: For a sophisticated, secluded beachfront stay, The Resort at Longboat Key Club, Sarasota's only AAA four-diamond beachfront resort, offers a relaxing retreat where you can play golf or tennis, indulge at the full-service spa, and dine at any of the six delectable resort restaurants.

Posh shopping around St. Armands Circle

If your pursuit of happiness involves retail therapy, you'll want to thank visionary circus magnate John Ringling, who purchased the St. Armands property in 1917 with plans to develop a luxury shopping center for all his friends who came to visit. With over 140 designer boutiques and many eclectic restaurants, St. Armand's Circle, aka the Rodeo Drive of Florida, offers a unique island shopping experience located across two bridges over Sarasota Bay, complete with eye-popping views.

Insider tip: Kilwin's Chocolates of St Armands, "Sweet in every Sense since 1947" makes the best homemade ice cream. Be sure and sample a few different flavors (for example: the salted caramel, chocolate peanut butter, and turtle cheesecake) before committing to an outrageous chocolate covered toasted coconut cone.

Urban Garden of Eden

Sprawling over 13 acres, the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, is the world's only botanical garden specializing in epiphytes, which are plants that grow on another plant upon which it depends for mechanical support but not for nutrients. Selby Gardens is perhaps best known for its

collection of over 20,000 plants, including more than 6,000 orchids, as well as a rainbow of bromeliads and gesneriads. The tangled roots of the Banyan trees are amazing.

Insider tip: Start your day off right by signing up for a peaceful mind/body outdoor Yoga class held overlooking this tropical oasis.

Stay: The centrally located Hyatt Regency Sarasota has emerged fresh from a recent face-lift, sporting a new, youthful, pinky beach-chic look, courtesy of fashion icon, Lilly Pulitzer.

The floor-to-ceiling windows in the open lobby offer striking views of the hotel's private marina and lagoon-style, waterfall pool. The 294 generously sized guestrooms are all bright and airy, many with balconies and Sarasota Bay sunset views. I also appreciated the immaculate, well-equipped fitness facility.

This eco-friendly hotel has been awarded a 2013 TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence as well as a Palm One designation from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Green Lodging program.

But the best reason to stay here for a girlfriend getaway is the outstanding level of service. The friendly staff jumps to accommodate your every need, with a ready smile and helpful suggestions. Kudos for the immaculate, well-equipped fitness facility.

Insider tip: I adored the thoughtful "Convenience Collection" folder with a long list of items available to borrow or keep, ranging from deodorant, Woolite, hair brush, free weights, humidifier, yoga mat, slippers, etc. What a generous touch!

Eat: Another quirky local fact is that while Ohio has the nation's largest Amish settlements, Sarasota is the top vacation destination for Amish and Mennonites from all over the United States. Which is one reason that Der Dutchman is

always packed with folks who can't get enough of their traditional Amish family and buffet-style meals and scrumptious bakery pastries. You'll be tempted to heap your plate with bountiful helpings of their stick-to-your-ribs-so you-can-carry-your-load-at-the-next-barn-raising, juicy old-fashioned roast beef, slow-roasted turkey, country meatloaf, Amish stuffing, real mashed potatoes, creamed corn, green beans, homemade noodles, and for sure, their lip-smacking, juicy broasted chicken.

Insider tip: As hard as it is, try and save room for Der Dutchman's homemade pie. There are at least 20 flavors to choose from, including Peanut Butter Cream, made from a recipe with roots in Ohio's Amish Country, and traditional favorites like Dutch apple.

For someplace a little more upscale, head back to Saint Armands Circle to the Shore Diner for some fab Floribbean food served in a beachy (lots of natural wood and stone) atmosphere.

Grab a seat outside (they have a retractable roof) and settle in to enjoy some beautifully presented, local food. Every dish we tried was impeccably fresh and as pretty as a museum painting.

Insider tip: For a Shore-thing in seafood perfection share a trio of starters: Kung Pao Calamari, Thai Curry Mussels, and Tuna Tartare and then go for the Red Snapper with caponata and you'll be humming with happiness.

Final Insider Tip: Don't even try and diet here. Instead, eat all you want and then head over to the Mote Marine Laboratory to have your picture taken standing in front of a manatee. You'll never look thinner! ■