

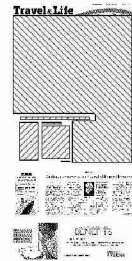


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Above: Delnor-Wiggins State Park features nearly a mile of natural beach with approaches that offer shaded alcoves of picnic tables and grills.

Left: Everglades Wonder Gardens in Bonita Springs, not far from Naples, is one of Florida's oldest roadside attractions.



Beaches, bistros and botanical gardens are prime spots to relax

BY RICHARD TRIBOU

Staff writer

Naples has been a tempting destination for decades. For many, a visit has translated to packing up worries and retiring to this southwest Florida paradise for good.

For others who can't make the great escape just yet, it still offers temptation, even if only for a weekend. The good news is that even a Friday-Sunday wanderlust can be sated by the options on Naples' menu. And for those hungry for a longer stay, it can keep you fed all week long.

First: Where to stay

There are some resorts in Naples where you won't want to leave. They have everything you need for an escape with on-site restaurants, bars, spa, golf and more.

The resorts right on the beach are a popular draw, and those include some of the highest-rated in the state.

That includes the city's oldest as well, The Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club (naplesbeachhotel.com), has its origins in the 1880s, although the current hotel was built in the the 1940s when Ohio toy maker Henry B. Watkins Sr. decided to retire to southwest Florida and build the resort into what it is today — 319 rooms, each with a balcony or patio, right on the Gulf of Mexico. The 18-hole course was the city's first, taking up much of the 125-acre property alongside tennis courts, a spa, a popular beachside grill and fine-

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dining restaurant HB's on the Gulf. Its old-Florida feel is no better demonstrated than in the massive lobby, with classic piano often setting the tone. The entire resort is adorned with works from local artists including Florida photographer Clyde Butcher, as well as thousands of orchids and native Florida plants.

North, but also offering high-end beachside stays

on a stretch of land called Vanderbilt Beach is The Ritz-Carlton Naples, the only AAA five-diamond resort in Naples. It features outdoor dining at Gumbo Limbo among half a dozen other options as well as an award-winning spa. Other popular beachside options include Edgewater Beach Hotel (edgewater-naples.com) and LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort (laplayaresort.com). The Gulf-view hotels and resorts have perhaps the best value for a stay in Naples, and that's the sunset view.

For those who want a more metropolitan feel, there's also Inn on Fifth (innonfifth.com), which gets both Forbes four-star and AAA four-diamond ratings. Fifth Avenue is the main shopping and dining destination for Naples, and staying at the Inn including its expanded Club Level Suites gives convenient access to more than 140 venues.

Other high-end, but more inland resorts include The Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples, also a Forbes four-star and AAA four-diamond option with two Greg Norman-designed courses. Those staying at either of the Ritz options get access to the others, so while they're separated by a few miles, there's beach, golf, two spas and a dozen restaurants.

Other high-end resorts more inland include the Bellasera Hotel (bellaseranaples.com), Hilton Naples (naples.hilton.com), Inn at Pelican Bay (innatpelicanbay.com), Naples Bay Resort (naplesbayresort.com) and Naples Grande Beach Resort (naplesgrande.com).

For a little less, there are

the more business-friendly, economical options along State Road 41, including Best Western, Courtyard by Marriott and Hampton Inn.

Second: Where to eat

For those who like to get a taste of the city through its breakfast offerings, there are a few places around Naples that are worth the drive, especially for those who are heading out to have fun for the day.

Blueberry's (blueberrys-restaurant.com): A quaint diner along State Road 41 north of downtown offers up breakfast items including pancakes with bacon mixed into the batter and the blueberry-stuffed French toast.

Mel's Diner (melsdinners.com): Just a few doors down (and in several other southwest Florida locations) is this 1950s-style restaurant focusing on fresh, locally sourced ingredients. They have some interesting eggs Benedict options, including a Big Easy Benedict with jambalaya sauce and shrimp.

EJ's Bayfront Cafe (ejsbayfrontcafe.com): With great outdoor views of Naples Bay, the cafe serves breakfast, brunch and lunch until 3 p.m. every day. Try the French toast made with challah bread, the Chunky Monkey waffle platter made with macadamia nuts, chocolate chips, coconut and pineapple, or one of the namesake dishes like EJ's Scramble with bacon, kielbasa, onions, mushrooms, cheddar and jack cheese.

Other popular breakfast options include local chain Skillet's (skilletrestaurant.com), Goldie's

(goldiesrestaurant.com) and Hoot's (hootsbreakfastandlunch.com).

For those juggling activities, there are oodles of places on Fifth Avenue to eat lunch or dinner, but one place worth the drive is in Isle of Capri, a little homage to the things that make Boston great called the Island Gypsy Cafe (theislandgypsy.com). Its founders, from Jamaica Plain, fell in love with southwest Florida. That doesn't mean that they have to let go of their roots, though. For some of the best clam chowder in Florida, this is the place. Located right on the docks of Capri Marina in Tarpon Bay between Naples and Marco Island, this place has many Patriots, Bruins and Red Sox banners hanging about. The menu has New England-flair items like Wicked Good Wings, Boston Garden House Salad and an entire "Supper" menu. That's pronounced "suppah," and only after 4 p.m.

Its location is also a great one for sunsets, but heading back to the beach is the best bet for that.

The Sunset Beach Bar & Grill, part of the Naples Beach Hotel, has one of the best views, with steps leading down to the beach and the ocean a mere 30 feet away. The menu includes fish sandwiches, burgers and salads. The drinks, while resort-pricey, are fun. The Green Flash, dedicated to the elusive glimmer of light some see when the sun dips below the horizon at sunset, features melon liqueur, creme de banana and lemonade.

Fine dining in Naples is an interesting mix. There are places where you can be dressed to the nines or wearing jeans and flip-flops, and it somehow

works, and people don't care.

The array of choices on Fifth Avenue is like South Beach's lineup of bars, but with a more refined feel. Yes, the heads of house want to get you in as there are more than 30 options from which to choose, but instead of bar hostesses tempting you with 40-ounce margaritas, these ladies and gentlemen welcome you with a smile and offer up a card for the venue.

Top-rated venues include Chops City Grill (chopscitygrill.com) and Bha! Bha! Persian Bistro (bhabhabistro.com) as well as chains Ocean Prime and Truluck's Seafood Steak And Crab House.

There are several seafood and Italian options, but one of the more quaint, eclectic options is Bistro 821 (bistro821.com), which has a mix of American, European and Asian flavors in a softly lit setting with contemporary art and chill music. So while there are plenty of cheese and meat boards at the Italian options, here one can try a sumptuous brie melted into puff pastry with figs and truffle oil along with a wild mushroom sauce, or perhaps the alligator quesadilla with caramelized onions, tomato, manchego cheese and avocado salsa verde and pico de gallo. Steak, pasta and seafood are prepared in unusual ways, such as the sea bass with a miso-sake marinade, the New York strip with cherry balsamic glaze or the "Shake & Bake" pork chop with smoked bacon and panko in a mustard-peppercorn gravy.

Other fine dining around Naples can be found at the resorts, including Baleen at LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort and The Grill at Ritz-

Carlton Naples.

Third: What to do

Hitting the beach and going fishing are no-brainers, but there are other worthy day-trip activities.

If you're not staying on the beach, there are several county and state parks that let visitors have the perfect beach day. One of the best is Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park. It features nearly a mile of natural beach with a series of approaches that offer shaded alcoves of picnic tables and grills. Visitors can rent paddleboards, kayaks, canoes, umbrellas and beach chairs.

On the opposite side of Wiggins Pass is Barefoot Beach Preserve, which is a little harder to access, but has 342 acres of to explore, including a mile-long stretch of beach.

The most iconic beachside destination in Naples is right by the Naples Pier. It's a more traditional, touristy part of the city with a cafe and gift shop that features things like seashells and starfish for \$1. The views from the pier, which stretches 1,000 feet into the Gulf of Mexico, draw crowds, and people often fish off the end of the pier, as there is no fee and plenty of space to cast a line.

There are several small beach access points for about nine miles, each with their own small parking lots. The biggest park is Lowdermilk Park, 2.5 miles north of the pier. Out-of-town drivers will need to feed the meter, but it is hooked up to an app that will remind you via phone to top up if need be.

For those who want to mix things up and see what else Naples has to offer beyond the beach, there are several smaller attractions that can be seen in half a

day.

Naples Botanical Gardens (naplesgarden.org): This destination is like nature's spa, with dozens of ways to embrace the calm in one's life. Partitioned into themes including an Asian garden, Brazilian garden, Florida garden and Caribbean garden complete with bocce ball, steel drums and hammocks, this 170-acre attraction features displays dedicated to plant life found between 26 degrees north and south of the equator. Naples is at 26 degrees north latitude.

Everglades Wonder Gardens (evergladeswondergardens.com): A 25-minute drive from downtown Naples in Bonita Springs is one of the oldest roadside attractions in Florida. Although recovering from devastation from Hurricane Irma, this small botanical garden features hundreds of rescued birds and reptiles. Founded in 1936, the attraction is still worth a visit to embrace its old-Florida charm. Curious, if not a little gruesome, is the Natural History Museum, with its jars of things like "Assorted Turtles" and "Pig Frogs." Be sure to pick up at least one bag of feed for the alligators, flamingos or other birds. The resident peacock, Picasso, likes to make its presence known with its call, yet isn't the most social of birds, but might come closer with some feed. The flamingos put on a theatrical performance of sorts. Some animal encounters are available.

Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (rookerybay.org): For a taste of the coastal nature that Naples offers, head to the Environmental Learning Center with hands-on exhibits, aquarium and half-mile nature trail and

observation bridge. The 110,000-acre reserve, though, is also filled with options to explore, including kayak and small-boat tours led by reserve staff. The destination is a favorite for nature photographers, especially with the abundance of birds that call the reserve home.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary (corkscrew.audubon.org): A haul from downtown Naples, this attraction features a 2.5-mile boardwalk that passes through pine flatwoods, wet prairie, marsh and the largest old-growth bald cypress forest in North America. The bald cypress tower over you. Several have names and interesting backstories, such as Roosevelt, Muir and Sentry, and the woods are teeming with birds and other wildlife. Rent or bring binoculars to catch a view of the largest ghost orchid ever found that flowers several times a year, with the best viewing in the summer.

Other attractions include the Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens (napleszoo.org), automotive-history museum Revs Institute (revsinstitute.org) and the Holocaust Museum & Education Center of Southwest Florida (holocaustmuseum-swfl.org).