

# Easygoing Longboat Key

by Terry Conway

A thin sliver of land nestled between Sarasota Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, the island of Longboat Key often flies under the radar. You won't find mini-malls or glaring neon signs. On LBK - its shorthand moniker- the traffic is light and life moves at a slower pace.

Wrapped in this coastal paradise, it is easy to forget LBK's accessibility to nearby Sarasota and the Tampa Bay region. It's less than 11 miles in length, no more than a mile across in its widest places, and manatees and dolphins regularly swim just offshore. Great egrets and great blue herons fish along the beach while pelicans dive into the water in search of a meal. A variety of shorebirds find sanctuary here.

Before LBK became a winter destination, it was the vacation land of the Timucuan and Caloosa Indians for hundreds of years. Shell mounds have been found, indicating that picnics and fish fries were commonplace.

In 1539 Hernando DeSoto visited with his scout, Juan Anasco, manning the "longboat" as it went through the northern pass of the island. After being awarded a homestead grant of 144 acres on both the north and south ends of the island, Civil War veteran Thomas Mann settled here with his grown sons in 1891. Mann flipped his property around the turn of the century for \$500.

By the 1920s, John Ringling bought hundreds of acres on the south end and planted Australian pine trees along Ringling Boulevard (now Gulf of Mexico Drive) from one end of the island to the other. He also built the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on New Pass, which was started in 1926 but never finished. It was eventually torn down in 1962.

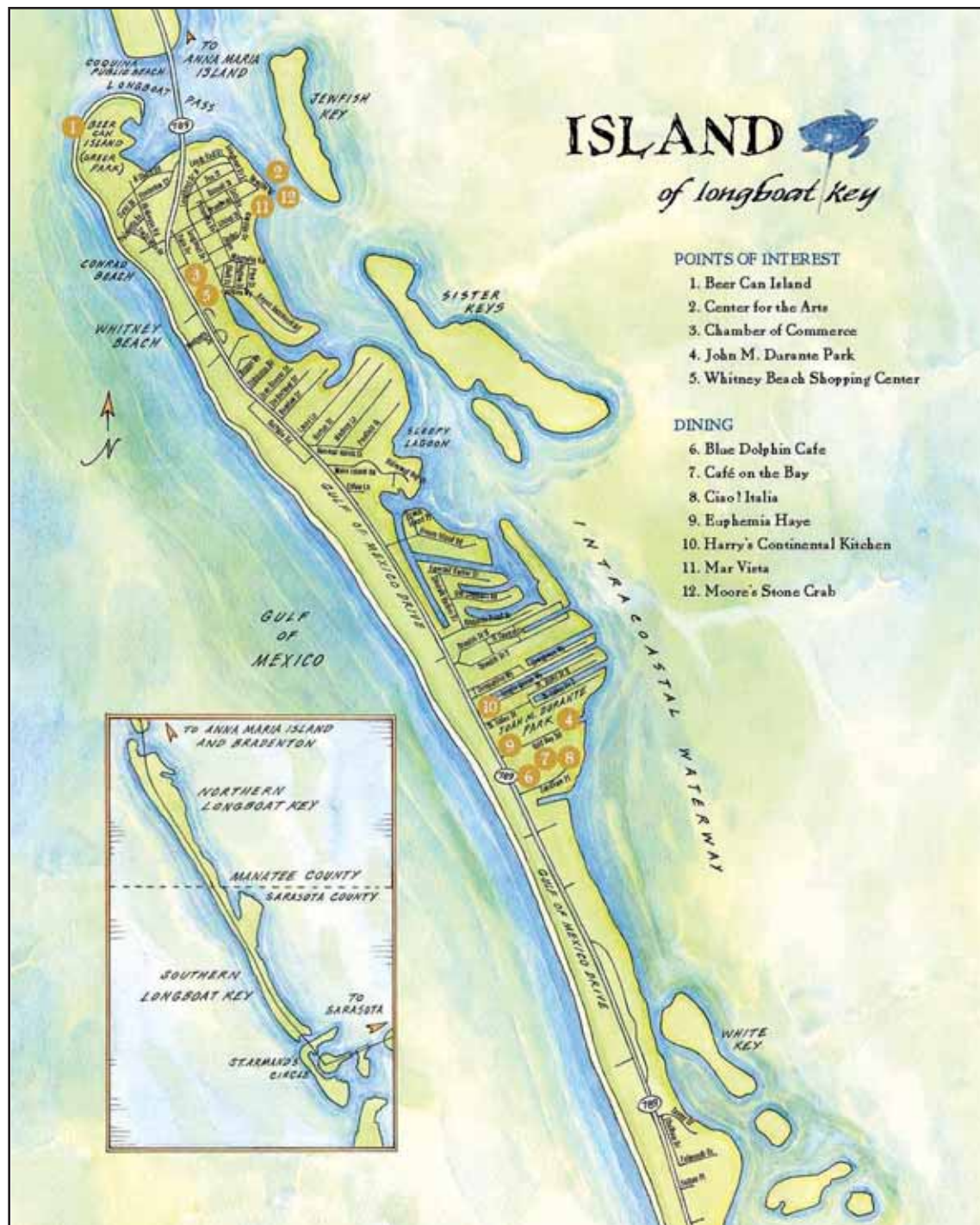
In large part they were all attracted by the sparkling waters of the Gulf of Mexico, which today holds a great bounty of tarpon, snook, red-fish, trout, flounder, cobia, kingfish, shark and pompano. Capt. Clive Burgess has been a Longboat Key resident for three decades, fishing Sarasota Bay and the Gulf of Mexico in everything from canoes to 65-foot sport fishing vessels. Burgess recommends shrimp (fished live) as the best bait, while the best lure is a plastic or feathered lead head jig. In the bay, the best action will be found near the grass flats. Structures including docks, ledges, rock piles and canal sea walls are also productive.

For those who love the mystery and beauty of the undersea world, Mote Marine Aquarium, just off the south end of Longboat Key, is a marine research center and lab. Its 30-foot Touch Tank and 135,000 gallon Shark Tank bring visitors face to face with a variety of shark species, fish and marine life. The Ann and Alfred Goldstein Marine Mammal Research and Rehabilitation Center feature displays of whales, dolphins and manatees, and the work the Center performs on behalf of marine mammal conservation and rehabilitation.

The Wicker Inn, which features ten suites and one cottage, all with timeless Old Florida décor, is a quaint place to stay. Overlooking the clear Gulf waters on a private white sand



*The Wicker Inn overlooking the Gulf waters.*



beach, the inn is surrounded by scores of tropical blooms, lush foliage, vine-covered arbors, swaying palm trees and gazebo.

Nearby Sarasota abounds with pockets of historically-preserved buildings filled with boutiques, jewelry, art, and antique galleries. The Asolo Theatre is home to one of the area's leading regional theatrical companies, performing a unique repertory ranging from classics to new works. The John Ringling and Mable Ringling Museum of Art displays an array of baroque masterpieces, as well as a collection of modern art. Adjacent to the museum are gallery displays of

circus memorabilia.

Back on LBK, some of the best seafood can be found at Moore's Stone Crab Shack. It's love at first bite. Besides their signature stone crabs, they'll cook any of a dozen kinds of fish to order (broiled, fried, sautéed, etc.). If snook or pompano is on the menu, place your order quickly.

For a bevy of casual restaurants and cafes, take the south bridge off the Key to St. Armands Circle, which radiates out and around a circular park. Hemingway's offers a window into the romantic past - cozy and classy - with a "beach life" theme and a balcony dining area overlooking the circle. Try the shrimp and avocado-mango salad or the Lido specialty salads that offer a cool, crisp change of style for folks wanting a lighter lunch, or better yet, Hemingway's famous chowder.

Once you've had your fill of seafood, head for Mr. Bones BBQ. Intriguing African and Caribbean folk art decks the walls; a wooden casket by the door filled with ice and two dozen types of beer sits in a corner. As for eats, it's all over the map - from exquisite baby back ribs to Congo chicken to Burrito Gonzales to amazing fried rices.

Mr. Bones backs up to the banner stretched over the door:

"No salt, pepper, ketchup in dining room. Don't even ask. Our food is expertly made by New Orleans-trained chefs. No improvement is needed."

For more information call 941-383-2466 or visit [www.longboatkeychamber.com](http://www.longboatkeychamber.com).