

10 best places to visit in Sarasota (and what to do when you get there!)

Top restaurants, bars, attractions, parks, hotels, beaches and more.

Wade Tatangelo



Regardless of whether you're a local, snowbird or tourist, there are certain places in Sarasota you just have to experience. And with the weather pretty much perfect these days, now is an ideal time to visit, or perhaps revisit, these iconic Sarasota destinations.

We've included our top family-friendly attractions and our favorite neighborhoods for dining and drinking. In fact, wherever possible, we have added restaurant and bar suggestions while also including recommendations for hotels, with many being destinations themselves.

Presented in alphabetical order, here are the 10 best places to visit in Sarasota with lots of suggestions for things to do when you get there!



Bayfront Park

5 Bayfront Drive, Sarasota

Just across the road from downtown Sarasota, Bayfront Park offers a wonderful oasis for a waterfront walk by the free Embracing Our Differences outdoor art exhibit (on display through April 1) or perhaps a picnic under the beautiful banyan trees. You'll find Sarasota Bay dotted with sailboats in the mooring field and then multimillion dollar yachts at Marina Jack, which is also home to several fine restaurants including the open-air Blue Sunshine Patio.

Closer to the park itself, you'll find Marina Jack's sister business, O'Leary's Tiki Bar and Grill. An Old Florida treasure, it's an ideal place for enjoying a margarita, cheeseburger and listening to a guy with a deep tan and a guitar play Jimmy Buffett songs. FYI: The Steigerwaldt/Jockey Children's Fountain is currently closed until further notice.

Downtown Sarasota

Info: dsarasota.com

If you want to be centrally located within walking distance of our acclaimed performing arts district and exciting dining scene, and have beautiful beaches

located less than five miles away, stay at a great downtown Sarasota hotel. Our favorites include The Ritz-Carlton with its waterfront Jack Dusty restaurant and Beach Club out on Lido Key, as well as Art Ovation and Westin, with the latter two both featuring fabulous rooftop bars overlooking Sarasota Bay. The Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, aka the Purple Palace, and Sarasota Opera House are the two most famous venues with numerous other theaters located nearby and cautiously mounting a post-pandemic comeback.

Downtown Sarasota's most famous restaurants include The Bijou Cafe, with a menu inspired by owner Jean-Pierre Knaggs' French and South African heritage, the Italian dining institution Caragiulos, the Parisian bistro C'est La Vie, and the sandwich shop Main Bar opened by retired Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus performers in 1958. For clever comfort food that was featured on Travel Channel's "Food Paradise," stop by Made, and no visit downtown is complete without experiencing the artist colony Towles Court, which contains the restaurants The Bodhi Tree Cafe, as well as Indigenous, owned by James Beard-nominated chef Steve Phelps. Oh, and if you're into bars with a whole lot of history and an immense whiskey selection, stop by Gator Club. Finally, if you visit on a Saturday, be sure to check out the massive Sarasota Farmers Market that has been going strong since 1979.

Lido Beach

400 Ben Franklin Drive, Lido Key; 941-861-5000; scgov.net

On Lido Key, between Longboat Key and Siesta Key, Lido Beach with its powdery white sand on the Gulf of Mexico is where Sarasotans have been coming to play since the days of the old Lido Casino. Now, beachgoers congregate at the Lido Pavilion with its new roof, new concrete patio, new shade covering, new patio furniture, and new concession stand tenant, Lido Island Grill. Offering an extensive lunch and dinner menu and full-liquor bar, it's set to begin welcoming guests today at 11 a.m.

Lido Beach is home to many great hotels including the Lido Beach Resort featuring the recently opened, eighth-floor Drift Kitchen & Bar overlooking the Gulf and one of Sarasota's best full-service tiki bars, which is located poolside. Both are open to the public. There's also the Ritz-Carlton's guests-only Beach Club with its

absolutely stunning pool area and its Lido Key Tiki Bar. Operated by Ritz-Carlton since 2001, the Lido Key Tiki Bar remains open to the public as well and remains a slice of Old Florida among the hotel and condo towers. Another great hotel option is the Holiday Inn at Lido Beach, which features Gulf views from its Sand Dollar Restaurant and also includes the Kokonuts Lounge and Tiki Bar poolside.

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens

1534 Mound St, Sarasota; 941-366-5731; selby.org

Featuring 15 acres of fabulous flora on Sarasota Bay, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens is a slice of paradise within walking distance of Main Street. Founded in 1973, the Downtown Sarasota campus is billed as the only botanical garden on the planet dedicated to the display and study of such tropical plants as epiphytic orchids, bromeliads, gesneriads and ferns.

The downtown campus also includes Ann Goldstein Children's Rainforest Garden featuring an elevated garden with swinging bridges and caves for exploring plus a 12-foot waterfall. In 2020, Selby Gardens adopted the 30-acre Historic Spanish Point located about 10 miles south of downtown Sarasota. Overlooking Little Sarasota Bay, the Historic Spanish Point Campus ranks as one of the largest waterfront preserves hosting native Florida plants in the state, with archaeological records dating back 5,000 years.

Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium

1600 Ken Thompson Parkway, Sarasota; 941-388-4441; mote.org

Mote Marine Lab & Aquarium studies Sarasota's marine environment and wildlife, cares for our sick and injured dolphins, whales and sea turtles, and also happens to be a fantastic place to visit. Be sure to pet a stingray once you're in the aquarium and don't miss such awesome exhibits as the 135,000 gallon Shark Zone habitat as well as ones featuring river otters, sea turtles, manatees and more.

In 2019, Mote unveiled virtual reality pods for guests to experience various scenarios including exploring a shipwreck and swimming with humpback whales. Located on City Island, Mote also happens to be within walking distance of a couple of great waterfront restaurants: Old Salty Dog and New Pass Grill.

The Ringling

5401 Bay Shore Road, Sarasota; 941-359-5700; ringling.org

Built to house the multimillion-dollar art collection circus magnate John Ringling acquired during the '20s, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art remains one of the country's top places to admire European paintings from the late Middle Ages to the 19th century as well as various traveling exhibitions. The Ringling also contains The Circus Museum, the Ca' d'Zan mansion overlooking Sarasota Bay, the Historic Asolo Theatre and the Bayfront Gardens and, for the children, the impressive David F. Bolger Playspace.

Also, be sure to enjoy a meal and perhaps a glass of Freakshow wine at The Ringling Grillroom. One of the biggest openings of 2020, it's a Modern American restaurant with open-air seating overlooking the museum grounds. Pro tip: The Ringling offers free admission to the Art Museum and Bayfront Gardens on Mondays.

Sarasota Jungle Gardens

3701 Bay Shore Road, Sarasota; 941-355-5305; sarasotajunglegardens.com

A gorgeous getaway located just off U.S. 41 and only a few miles north of downtown, Sarasota Jungle Gardens is where children of all ages go to hand-feed free roaming pink flamingos, get their picture taken while petting an alligator, and explore tropical trails spread across 10 acres in a classic Old Florida setting.

Other fun things to do include holding a parrot, watching ring-tailed lemurs at play, and feeding a giant tortoise. A Sarasota landmark dating back to 1939, Jungle Gardens is 90 percent outdoors with the popular animal shows held throughout the day in a covered, open-air amphitheater.

Siesta Beach

948 Beach Road, Siesta Key; 941-861-5000; scgov.net

The most famous destination in Sarasota, Siesta Beach has been ranked No. 1 in the country twice by Stephen "Dr. Beach" Leatherman, topped Tripadvisor's list of best U.S. beaches in 2020 and placed No. 17 nationwide this year. "It's almost like a sin to walk out here with your shoes on," Dr. Beach said. "If you can't feel that cushy sand under your feet, you're missing a lot of the experience."

Yes, unlike most Sunshine State beaches where the sand comes from pulverized coral, Siesta's sand is made from quartz minerals and in addition to being sugary

soft remains cool to the touch even in the Florida heat. In addition to the famed sand, Siesta Beach includes a smartly designed pavilion that houses restrooms, a snack shop and a souvenir and beach-gear store, and then there's the Siesta Key Drum Circle, which has been meeting on Sunday evenings for nearly 25 years.

Siesta Key Village

Info: siestakeychamber.com

Located less than a mile away from world-famous Siesta Beach is the charming beach town Siesta Key Village. In addition to containing some of the most adorable and, yes, expensive homes in the region, the village is home to an awesome array of restaurants, bars and shops. If you're looking for top drinking spots and to perhaps run into a cast member from the MTV reality show "Siesta Key," be sure to visit the Beach Club (established in 1947), Daiquiri Deck, Gilligan's, and Siesta Key Oyster Bar, all of which can be found along Ocean Boulevard. Big Olaf Creamery, where children of all ages have been enjoying ice cream made by local Amish experts since 1982, is another place you don't want to miss.

Looking for something a bit more high end? Enjoy steaks and seafood at Summer House, named one of the Top 10 most romantic restaurants in the U.S. in 2019 by TripAdvisor. And while the area is home to many fine hotels, people interested in partying in the village will want to book a room at the [Siesta Key Beach Resort and Suites](#) with its zero-entry pool and giant tiki located right on Ocean Boulevard across from two more great dining and drinking destinations: 3.14 Pi Craft Beer & Spirits and Blasé Café.

St. Armands Circle

Info: starmandscircleassoc.com

In addition to the museum that bears his name, John Ringling established St. Armands Circle in the 1920s, which includes the [Circus Ring of Fame](#) and remains one of the most famous shopping and dining destinations in Southwest Florida. Located on St. Armands Key and connected to downtown Sarasota via the pedestrian-friendly John Ringling Causeway, the circle includes myriad stores selling everything from touristy trinkets and T-shirts to high fashion and home decor fit for a mansion.

As for dining, we highly recommend a couple of classics, the Cuban restaurant Columbia (established 1959) and the Continental cuisine destination Cafe L'Europe (established 1973), as well as newer faves like Blu Kouzina, Shore and Speaks Clam Bar. Looking for a great Irish pub? Stop by Lynches. Top nearby hotels include The Resort at Longboat Key Club.

Wade Tatangelo, the Herald-Tribune's entertainment editor, may be reached by email at wade.tatangelo@heraldtribune.com. Support local journalism by subscribing.