

Winter Get-Away... Head South



by Alexandra Edwards

Spring may be just around the corner, but the unusually cold, snowy winter we have experienced here in Southeast Tennessee has made many, including myself, feel the need to head for warmer climates.

Some great winter get-away deals to faraway places, like Mexico or the Caribbean, are being offered on the Internet. Some even tempting travelers with \$100 cash spending money. However, with homeland security the way it is, air travel is becoming less popular for vacationers.

Many from as far north as Canada are opting, instead, to sit in the comfort of their own car, zip onto I-75 and just keep heading South to sunny Florida. No exhibiting toiletries in plastic bags for everyone to see, no placing valuables in bins and removing shoes, except perhaps for a quick toe wiggle. No full body scanners.

This winter northern Florida has also had its fair share of cold weather, with quite a few frosts and a light dusting of snow was even reported as far south as Tampa. Heading farther south temperatures are usually much warmer no matter what time of year, mainly around 65-70 degrees during the winter months.

Anywhere south of Fort Myers on the Gulf coast, warm weather is more or less guaranteed for those who want to escape the winter blues.

From the 1-75 South exit at Fort Myers take U.S. Hwy 41, which runs almost parallel with the interstate along the Gulf coastline. Lined with exotic palm trees, the ride will take you along miles of fine residential gated communities, malls, restaurants and roads that lead to beautiful beaches of white sand and

palm trees. Passing through Estero, Bonita Springs, Naples, all the way to the Everglades, this stretch of Hwy 41 has something for every vacationer.

Southwest Florida is a great place for women who love to shop. Estero has some great open air shopping malls, where even the man in your life wouldn't mind tagging along in the cool breeze and sunshine. Miromar Outlets, voted southwest Florida's best factory outlet center, features 140 top designer and brand name outlets. Old Coconut Point Mall is another shoppers dream, with 500 acres of open air shopping and over 130 shops and restaurants.

Although March can still be just a tad chilly for sunbathing or swimming on the beach, there is nothing nicer than strolling barefoot along the many white, sandy beaches of southwest Florida. From Fort Myers Beach, right along the Paradise Coast are several public beaches to choose from. Bonita Beach includes Barefoot Beach Preserve County Park, home to numerous animal species, and for those travelers who can't



Miromar Outlet Mall



bare to leave there pets behind, Dog Beach Park, the only county owned beach where pets are allowed to run around off-the-leash. At the north end of Bonita Beach is Lovers Key State Park, a two mile stretch of beach accessible by boardwalk or tram. Delnor-



Bonita Beach

Wiggins Pass State Park in Naples not only offers access to a beautiful beach, but also features ample parking, picnic areas, a boat ramp, pavilion, restrooms and an observation tower where southwest Florida's most spectacular sunsets

can be viewed. Bottle nosed dolphins can be observed daily and if you're lucky, you may spot a West Indian Manatee. A little farther south in Naples is Vanderbilt Beach, a great place for bird watching and collecting shells. Also Lowder-

milk Park Beach, said to be a popular hotspot with tourists and locals alike. Just about 18 miles south of Naples is the prestigious Marco Island where the white, sandy beach is lined with tropical palm trees and upscale hotels and restaurants.

The Southwest Florida Gulf Shore offers a vast amount of sports and recreational activities. Famous for the numerous lush palm fringed Golf Courses that have attracted some of the worlds greatest golfers. There are also many boating marinas offering watersports, wind surfing and boat tours, which include deep sea fishing, bay fishing, dolphin sighting, and dinner cruises.

For the kids there are plenty of waterparks, playgrounds, fun parks and museums. Naples also has a zoo. Featuring exhibits include a Black Bear Hammock, Panther Glade, Fosas of Madagascar, Tiger For-



est, Leopard Rock and Backyard Wildlife habitat. Kids may also enjoy a visit to Everglades Wonder Gardens in Bonita Springs where they can see "Big Joe," the world's largest American crocodile, that's 14½ feet long and weighing in at over 1,000 lbs.

Better still, continue south on U.S. 41 to the Everglades and see for yourself the hundreds of alligators basking in the sun at the edge of the swamps along the side of the highway. Guided airboat tours will take you through the swamps of the Everglades. An interesting ride to try is Everglades Island Boat Tours in Everglades City, which is about 3 miles off Hwy 41 on Hwy 29. The ride offers "a narrated, guided excursion through the 10,000 islands and man-

grove jungles, where you will find alligators, dolphins, manatees, bears, birds, raccoons and other wildlife in their natural habitat." The tour gives a choice of back country swamp or open water ride to a private island named "Toch Island," right in the heart of the Everglades, where passengers will learn about the vast and silent history of the Everglades. Many airboat tour companies also offer convenient pick-up locations throughout southwest Florida.

From here in Cleveland, Tennessee, it's amazing that with just a 9-10 hour drive all the way on I-75 South, we can escape to a warm, sunny, tropical paradise. After a few days of vacation, what is even better...is the ride home on I-75 North!



Everglades Airboat