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The Insider's Guide To Sarasota, Florida



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Travel

I cover adventure, luxury and family travel.

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The sunset at Siesta Beach. COURTESY VISITSARASOTA.COM

Heading south for a family vacation? Sarasota, Florida, has it all—good food, lots of family-friendly attractions and plenty of sunshine.

Where to Eat





Jack Dusty offers fresh food and great views. THE RITZ-CARLTON, SARASOTA,

Jack Dusty located in The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota, has fresh-caught coastal cuisine served up in a beautiful setting, right on the marina that overlooks Sarasota Bay. They are known for their cocktail program: Jack Dusty features their own blend bourbon from Russell's Reserve, and their own tequila from Maestro Dobel. One of the most popular cocktails is the Siren,

which features sparkling wine, St. Germain, gin or vodka, along with fresh lemon, grapefruit and cranberry juices. The combination marries crispy citrus flavors and just a touch of sweetness. The restaurant tap pours it from a keg, a fresh batch every two days. When it comes to food, the Sarasota Cioppino is one of the most popular dishes. Featuring local shrimp, bay scallops, middle-neck clams and fresh gulf fish, it offers an authentic taste of Sarasota. The snapper is another fan favorite—the whole fish is served crispy on the outside and tender to the bone. The naval brown bread that is served at the start of the meal is a beloved part of the Jack Dusty experience. (It's so good, don't be surprised if you ask for seconds.) This buttermilk and molasses bread is served warm from the oven. The delivery and name pay homage to the restaurant's nautical theme.





The restaurant has an extensive menu of both Thai and sushi dishes. DRUNKEN POET CAFE THAI BISTRO & SUSHI BAR

The Drunken Poet Cafe Thai Bistro & Sushi Bar is a great restaurant for families. The owner, Aporni “Oy” Punyhotra, is also one of the chefs (the other is Bank Tansiri) and she and Bank exude warmth and hospitality—greeting customers and welcoming them into their special place. The setting is also unique—the chalk portrait of an ancient Thai poet high up on the wall, the “library” in the front and the beautiful woodwork throughout. But the food is really the star of the experience—Oy puts her touch on classic Thai dishes, using her mother’s recipe. (Oy was born in Thailand.) Dishes are made to order, and you can taste the love and pride of representing their homeland. Popular dishes include the curries, pad Thai, and Oy’s specialty sushi rolls. (Be sure to try the Seafood Hoomok, which is served in a Thai coconut.)

The **Shore** restaurant has an enviable location right in the heart of St. Armands Circle. It has both indoor and outdoor seating and an expansive to-go menu. Popular dishes include the crab-cake salad and the grouper. They also have a diverse kids’ menu including steak, ribs, and grilled fish, along with the popular grilled cheese and sliders.

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Rosemary & Thyme is a bustling restaurant located in downtown Sarasota. They have ample seating both indoors and out and they also have a special \$20 to-go menu. It comes with an entrée, salad, and dessert. The restaurant is quite popular, so be sure to make a reservation. The salmon and meat loaf are two popular dishes.

Activities



Kayaking through the mangroves is a highlight for many people visiting the area. [KAYAKING SRQ TOURS & RENTALS](#)

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If you're looking to get out on the water, [Kayaking SRQ Tours & Rentals](#) is a must. Owners Greg and Kim Gregory have been operating the business for four years to great success. They offer regular group tours as well as private tours (for just one family). Tour options include Lido Key (the mangrove tunnels) and Siesta Key at Turtle Beach (the Jim Neville Preserve). Guests can go on a tour with a knowledgeable guide or can rent the kayaks and go on their own. The mangrove tunnel guided tour is two hours on the water, with the first hour searching for wildlife, including dolphins and manatees. The second hour is equally as amazing as guests explore the mangroves and the creatures within (including starfish, crabs, and small fish). Birders will enjoy the Jim Neville Preserve as a variety of flocks can be spotted. The rate includes the kayak (double or single) or SUP, dry bags for phones and keys, life jackets, and a map if you choose a self-guided tour.



The spa is located just a short distance from the resort's waterfront pool. DON RIDDLE IMAGES FOR THE RITZ-CARLTON, SARASOTA

If you're looking for a bit of R&R, the [Ritz-Carlton Spa, Sarasota](#), is the place to be. The 12 treatment rooms offer a variety of options including the popular HydraFacial. With the strong sun exposure present in South Florida, this treatment is a fan favorite because it provides intense hydration for the skin and LED light therapy. The goal is reducing fine lines and wrinkles. The massages—especially the deep tissue—are also very popular. The spa is unique in that it offers a healing waters component—it's the only spa in the area that features saunas, steam rooms, and whirlpools. It also has several relaxation lounges to ensure a pampered, tranquil experience. The spa attracts many guests from the nearby areas such as Naples, Tampa, and Bradenton, as well as Miami, Atlanta, and Charlotte. Be sure to visit the Spa Terrace, an expansive outdoor space overlooking the marina of Sarasota Bay. It's perfect for unwinding before and after your treatment.



Purple orchids are just some of the flowers on display at the botanical gardens. VISIT SARASOTA COUNTY

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in downtown Sarasota, is a relaxing, tranquil place set right on the water. The Ann Goldstein Children's Rainforest Garden is a space for kids to foster a love and appreciation for rain-forest plants. This garden is elevated so guests feel like they are walking through the treetops. The children's rain-forest garden also features a waterfall, swinging bridges, field research station, caves for exploring, and an adventure trail. Another highlight of the botanical gardens is the Steinwachs Family Foundation Mangrove Walkway that showcases the intricate stem and root system of the red, black, and white mangroves. The walkway also has gorge views of Sarasota Bay, Bird Key, and downtown Sarasota. Layers of color, shapes, and textures play among sunlight and shadows in the bromeliad garden—a popular source of inspiration for photographers and painters. The Coleman-Lienhart Savage Garden offers a wide variety of live carnivorous plants. Whether you have an hour or a whole afternoon, there's plenty to see and learn.



Manatees are a bring draw at the Marine Mammal Center. CONOR GOULDING/MOTE MARINE LABORATORY / VISIT SARASOTA COUNTY

Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium is well worth a visit for the manatee viewing alone. While many people visiting Sarasota may be lucky enough to spot a manatee in the wild, it's usually just a nose or part of the tail or flipper. At Mote, visitors can see these gorgeous sea cows up close and observe just how graceful and large they are in the water. Other highlights include the large turtles and the touch tanks, which house sharks and stingrays.



The free-roaming flamingos are a fan favorite at Sarasota Jungle Gardens. EDDIE KIRSCH

Sarasota Jungle Gardens has more than 10 acres of jungle and botanical gardens. Located just north of downtown Sarasota, the property has over 200 animals including birds, lemurs, reptiles (alligators and crocodiles), birds of prey, and small mammals. There are many opportunities to interact and feed the animals, including the large flock of free-roaming flamingos. (The flamingos have free rein, so you may see them throughout the park.) There are also educational presentations introducing various animals offered throughout the day. The Jungle Gardens were

founded in 1939 and are currently owned and operated by the same family since 1971.

Where to Stay



The rooms are divided EMBASSY SUITES BY HILTON DOWNTOWN SARASOTA

[Embassy Suites by Hilton Downtown Sarasota](#) opened in December of 2018 and is a good option for families. Complimentary breakfast and happy hour, bike rentals (\$10 for four hours), valet in/out parking, and a great location make it a hit when traveling with kids. There are 180 rooms spread across 18 floors, with a pool on the 8th floor (where there are also great views of Sarasota and the water). The hotel is within walking distance of plenty of restaurants. A short drive away is Lido Beach, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, and Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport.

Check out my [website](#).



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