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March 1, 2009

## City Slicker Sarasota

*It's festival time in this Florida city, so get some culture with your suntan. Ian McCurrach offers a guide*

### WHY VISIT?

Florida's cultural centre springs into life this month with a series of high-profile events. The 29th annual Jazz Festival ([jazzclubsarasota.com](http://jazzclubsarasota.com)) kicks off today and runs until 7 March. There's a daily round of open-air and indoor concerts from such as Dick Hyman at venues such as the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall and Holley Hall.

Sarasota rolls out its red carpet for the 11th annual Sarasota Film Festival ([sarasota.filmfestival.com](http://sarasota.filmfestival.com)) from 27 March to 5 April. There will be more than 200 films from around the world and screenings every day. Past celebrity attendees include Felicity Huffman, Charlize Theron and Woody Harrelson.

Sarasota guarantees warm sunshine year round for visitors to its beaches. There are vast stretches of white sands and colourful Gulf Coast sunsets to enjoy. But beyond the beaches, the historic town has a creative soul, hosting opera and ballet companies, artist communities, art galleries, museums and a dozen professional and amateur theatre companies. Add to the mix some great restaurants – from boho cafés to gourmet dining options – and you have what travel pundits dub "the Greenwich Village of Florida".

It's easy to get to, too; Sarasota is a one-hour drive from Tampa, which has the only scheduled flight from the UK (British Airways from Gatwick). As a result, clearing US Homeland Security is frequently a swift affair here in contrast to the long slow queues you may encounter at Orlando and Miami.

### DON'T MISS ...

... Towles Court ([towlescourt.com](http://towlescourt.com)), a neighbourhood dating from the 1930s complete with pastel-coloured clap-board properties that house galleries and restaurants. At the heart of this artist colony, Canvas Café ([canvascafesrq.com](http://canvascafesrq.com)) is a popular meeting point for locals and serves good American and Mediterranean fare.

... Cortez Fishing Village ([cortez.village.org](http://cortez.village.org)). This is one of the last surviving commercial fishing villages on Florida's Gulf Coast. Look out for the working fish market and order fresh-from-the-boat seafood at the Star Fish Restaurant ([starfishcompany.com](http://starfishcompany.com)).

... The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art ([ringling.org](http://ringling.org)). Sarasota's circus heritage began in 1927 when circus magnate John Ringling set up home here. Highlights on show include 21 galleries featuring works by Old Masters including van Dyck, Titian, Velazquez and El Greco, the Ringlings' Venetian Gothic mansion Cà d'Zan, two circus museums and the Asolo Theatre, dating from the 18th century.

... Marie Selby Botanical Gardens ([selby.org](http://selby.org)). Rare orchids and tropical plants are part of the 9.5-acre living collection

of exotic species situated on Sarasota Bay.

... Award-winning beaches. Sarasota has eight islands, including Siesta Key, Anna Maria Island and Lido Key, which are rated as having some of the finest white sands in America by the likes of Dr Beach and the Travel Channel.

... Sandbar Restaurant ([sandbar-restaurant.com](http://sandbar-restaurant.com)). This popular institution on Anna Maria Island's north end combines beachside dining and fresh Florida seafood. Grab a table and a sundown cocktail. Guess the exact time the sun will set from the outside terrace and win a bottle of champagne.

... St Armand's Circle ([starmands-circleassoc.com](http://starmands-circleassoc.com)). Purchased by John Ringling in 1917, this island is now a mix of upmarket boutiques and award-winning restaurants amid Ringling's Italianate collection of statues.

## WHAT'S NEW

### Lakewood Ranch

This new community living development of seven residential villages, shopping malls and entertainment and sport complexes stretches across a vast 8,500-acre estate, set against a backdrop of preserved wetlands and woodlands. For all that, Lakewood Ranch has an intimate small-town feel. Main Street, one of the seven shopping malls, has a mix of shops, cafés, restaurants, spas and some fine ice-cream stores. And outdoor activities are well catered for too, with everything from polo and cricket to swimming and trail cycling on offer. There is plenty of wildlife around for nature lovers.

**Details:** [lakewoodranch.com](http://lakewoodranch.com).

### Circus Heritage Guide

This new tour gives a greater insight into Sarasota as the Home of the American Circus. The art, performance and culture of circus history is explored, taking in some of Sarasota's eight active circuses, including Circus Sarasota and Sailor Circus.

**Details:** [sarasotacircushistory.org](http://sarasotacircushistory.org).

### Ceviche

Situated in the historic Times newspaper building dating from 1925, and set over four floors, Ceviche is the restaurant of the moment. The decor is exposed brick and beams, the cuisine tasty Spanish fare such as tapas and paella. After dinner, dance under the Florida stars with the chic crowd in the open-air rooftop bar. Booking is advised.

**Details:** Ceviche, 1216 1st Street (001 941 952 1036; [ceviche.com](http://ceviche.com)).

### The New Florida West Coast Symphony

The Sarasota Orchestra has been renamed the New Florida West Coast Symphony to mark the celebration of its 60th anniversary and is showcasing a season of new works and videos. Forthcoming highlights include A Thousand and One Nights, Night at the Oscars and Going Green.

**Details:** [sarasotaorchestra.org](http://sarasotaorchestra.org).

### Longboat Key Club and Resort

This recently refurbished beachfront resort on Longboat Key has 218 rooms and suites with private balconies and high-tech in-room facilities such as 42in plasma-screen TVs and high-speed Wi-Fi internet access. There is a private white-sand beach, swimming pool, several dining options, a spa with a newly renovated fitness centre and a tennis academy.

**Details:** 301 Gulf of Mexico Drive, Longboat Key (001 941 383 8821; [longboatkeyclub.com](http://longboatkeyclub.com)).

## The Legacy Trail

When it opened in 1911, the CSX railroad corridor was the main form of transport in south-west Florida and carried the Kentucky Military Institute, the US army during the Second World War and the Ringling Brothers Circus. The railroad closed in 1971 and the line fell into disrepair. A recent redevelopment project has brought it back in to use for recreation. Walk, bike or blade along this 12-mile uninterrupted paved trail, which stretches from Sarasota to Venice. At its rest areas, you can soak up the natural surroundings and local history.

**Details:** [scgov.net/legacytrail](http://scgov.net/legacytrail).

## INSIDER'S SECRET FROM JENNY TAYLOR

Jenny Taylor, and her husband John, own the Londoner Inn

"For real Floridian fare with flair you must visit Ezra Café. The mahi mahi with risotto is divine. The menu stresses fresh local ingredients and you dine surrounded by local art, which is for sale. Eat early, then watch the sun set over Anna Maria Island."

**Details:** [ezrafinefoods.com](http://ezrafinefoods.com); [thelondonerinn.com](http://thelondonerinn.com).

## COMPACT FACTS

### How to get there

Ian McCurrach travelled to Sarasota with British Airways Holidays (0844 493 0758; [ba.com](http://ba.com)), which offers a seven-night fly-drive to Tampa from £471 per person. The cost includes return BA flights from Gatwick and all-inclusive car hire for the duration. Accommodation only at the five-star Ritz Carlton, Sarasota ([ritzcarlton.com](http://ritzcarlton.com)), costs from £57 per person per night, based on two sharing.

### Further information

Sarasota Convention and Visitors Bureau ([sarasotafl.org](http://sarasotafl.org); [floridasgulfislands.com](http://floridasgulfislands.com)).



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