

# Travel



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## The seduction

## Island hopping leads to a meaningful experience

**S**ANIBEL ISLAND, Fla. — Islands are seductive. You stop for a brief look, then hours, even days, later you find yourself there still, perhaps sitting in the Brass Elephant while a young maitre d' from Michigan prepares scampi and linguini at tableside.

I came to Sanibel Island to visit a friend "for an hour or two at most," on my way from Sarasota to Marco Island, crossing the causeway in full sunshine, enjoying the sailboats bending against the wind, the motor boats knifing white through the water, a water skier swimming back to his boat after a fall.

Couples and families were picnicking, others were leaning fishing poles over



**1-of-a-kind traveler**  
**Iris Jones**  
contributing travel editor

beach chairs or poking them out van doors and making a picket fence along the sea edge.

That was mid-afternoon and here I am at 10 p.m. driving back across the causeway to Highway 41, Marco Island still far ahead of me as I watch the lights of boats blink against the water on either side.

I HAVE BEEN to Sanibel Island before but I have never had the insider's tour from Joan Hooper before, so I know a lot more about the island now than I did after a weekend vacation, doing the Sanibel Stoop morning and night. That's the picture most associated with this island — figures silhouetted against the morning and evening sky, heads bent, hands outstretched in search of the perfect shell.

Sanibel is the southern end of the barrier islands that stretch along the gulf from Texas to Florida, and it daily lives up to its reputation as the best shelling island in the Americas, third best in the world.

Joan and her husband Van Hooper are northerners, like most of the people you meet in Florida, snowbirds who flow down from Wisconsin, sniffed the hibiscus-scented salt-sea air and stayed. They are publisher and editor of Islands Magazine.

EVERY ISLAND has its own geography, history and lifestyle, but not every island has been populated long enough to have old families and an exclusive social life of its own. In a place like that, tourists seldom get below the surface unless insiders like the Hoopers show them the island the way the real islanders know it.

When local people give directions to some place on Sanibel Island, they always begin with "go across the causeway to the first traffic light." As if there was a traffic light on every corner, instead of one or two holding lonely vigil under the Australian pine trees that long ago overgrew the native salt-bush of the area.

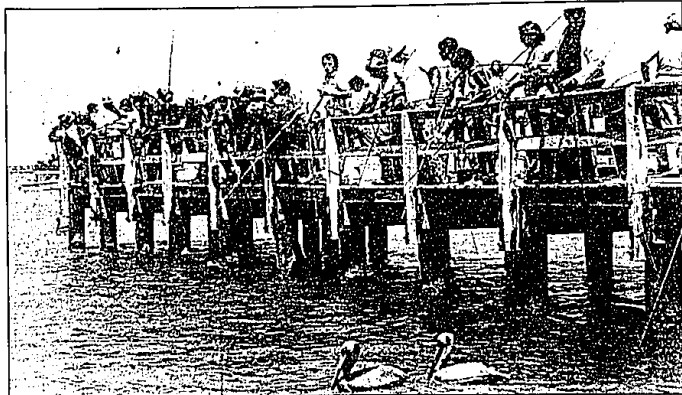
The first traffic light, where Lindgren Boulevard crosses Periwinkle Way, you can turn left to the historic Sanibel Lighthouse with its fishing pier and the best shelling beach on the island; you can go straight ahead to the glorious sand beach that runs past motels and condos on the Gulf of Mexico; or you can turn right into town.

Town is a series of small shopping plazas with names like Heart of the Island Plaza and Periwinkle Place, full of restaurants and boutiques. There's a restored city hall, with a five-flag hurricane alert system that only the locals understand.

THE HISTORY of the island can be briefly told. There are a few not-very-noticeable signs of the early Indian culture, and no sign at all of the pirates who once were here. The story is that they buried their loot on Sanibel and held women for ransom on the island. Captivity, a continuation of the barrier reef joined by a bridge to the western end of Sanibel.

A few lucky inhabitants ruled this sea-sand-sun place alone until a causeway brought the developers in 1933. By 1974, the islanders had had enough. They seceded from Lee County and, in the true spirit of revolution, made themselves into a city and created their own zoning laws.

Now you can't build anything higher



photos by IRIS SANDERSON JONES

Fishing and shelling are favorite activities on Sanibel Island. Sometimes fishing poles leaning over beach chairs or poking out through van doors form a line as thick as a picket fence. These people are trying their luck from the public pier.

than one of those Australian pine trees, and you'd probably get a ticket if you didn't stop for a snowy white egret high-stepping along the road.

The birds were here first and they still rule the roost. Islanders build high wooden platforms so the ospreys can nest somewhere other than on house-hold chimneys.

BIRDS ALSO rule J.N. Ding Darling Wildlife Refuge, a cumbersome name for a beautiful piece of real estate named for a popular cartoonist. It takes up the western half of Sanibel. Local people take their cocktails to the refuge when the Roseate Spoonbills are in.

If you just keep driving west, past the refuge and on to Blind Pass, you cross over a bridge to Captiva. By this time I was not surprised to learn that a lot of rich and famous people live in the first strip of houses near Blind Pass. World-famous artists Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein have houses on Captiva. And a postmistress and justice of the peace called Nethel Moss conducts marriages on the beach.

All this is insider talk, of course, the real question is how can you and I enjoy being a tourist here? It's not a high rise island, and there's not much slick entertainment at night, but it's attractive to the right kind of traveler.

ON SANIBEL, you can have your own kitchen in a two-story motel with old world charm, called Song of the Sea, or you can stay in a more sophisticated hotel known as the Shell Harbor Inn and now the Hilton Inn. That's where we visited the Brass Elephant, but I'll get to that.

You can also stay in a number of

condos, such as those at the Tortuga Beach Club. There's one camp ground but you need reservations and it's usually full. Captiva also has accommodations, especially Tween Waters Inn and the South Seas Plantation.

The Hoopers were so graphic about it that I could easily imagine Christmas Eve at Tween Waters Inn, when candles filled the beach and the nearby Chapel-by-the-Sea. I had to settle for a tour of the lovely old Florida dining room and a peek into the Crow's Nest, where the young folk hang out at night.

"THAT'S ABOUT as exciting as the island gets at night," Joan said. She and I didn't stop there; we settled our well-toured bones into a banquet at the Brass Elephant restaurant, where ex-Detroit Robert Truax is the maitre d'.

As I said at the beginning, islands are seductive. You drop in for an hour or two and the next thing you know you are full of linguini and Caesar salad and you are trying to follow the map as you cross the island causeway in the dark. Over there is the real world and it's full of traffic lights.

## China beckons U.S. teachers

Two tours of China for teachers, professors and other educators are being offered this year by Michigan Educational Travel Inc. of Ann Arbor.

Round trip costs range from \$2,499 to \$3,599, and side trips in the Far East and Southeast Asia are available at the end of each tour.

Guiding the tours will be Dr. Robert Hooper, longtime U-M professor, who has led seven similar trips since 1979. A major goal of the tours is to meet teachers and students at a variety of educational institutions; in addition, major tourist attractions, such as the Great Wall of China, are included.

The first trip, Aug. 3-26, includes stops at cities along the "Silk Road" from Urumqi in the extreme northwest region of Xinjiang to Kian — site of one of the greatest archeological finds of the 20th century.

The second trip, Dec. 21 to Jan. 5, features stops in the warmer southern and tropical portions of China.

Application deadlines are 60 days before departure, although some reservations may be accepted as late as three weeks before departure.

For more information write Michigan Educational Travel Inc. at 1407 Morton, Ann Arbor 48104, or call 662-1867.



Sanibel Island, at the southern end of the barrier islands that stretch along the gulf from Texas to Florida, is often identified with shelling. One frequently sees figures silhouetted against the morning and evening sky, heads bent, hands outstretched in search of the perfect shell. Some say Sanibel is the best shelling island in the Americas, third best in the world.

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