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The Great Escape

Peace and Paradise at Captiva's South Seas Island Resort

By Pamela Jacobs

When it comes to travel, the word "luxury" is subjective. For some people, it means beautiful scenery; for others, it's pampering and relaxation. For many, though, regardless of the destination, luxury travel is all about an escape—an escape from home and from the pressures of daily life.

It also helps when that escape happens to be about three hours away.

Enter South Seas Island Resort. Located on the pristine, breathtaking Captiva Island, Florida—just a short, scenic drive from Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers—South Seas Island Resort is a true escape in every sense of the word. It's easy to get to, but with its white-sand beaches, 20 miles of bike paths, turquoise waters, 250 types of seashells, and neighboring Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, it's worlds away from New York City.

About an hour into my stay at the resort, my stress level was cut in half. By my first afternoon, strolling along an almost deserted stretch of beach with a frozen drink in hand, I realized my biggest concern was how I'd carry home all of the fragile, pearlescent seashells I'd collected. And by that first evening, watching the most magnificent lavender and fuchsia sunset over the tranquil Gulf of Mexico, I began plotting how I could live there.

The beauty of South Seas Island Resort—I mean beyond the actual beauty, of course—is that it is a completely self-sufficient, all-encompassing island escape. Should you never wish to leave, you don't have to. Its 330 acres (with two and a half miles of beaches) include nine options for eating and drinking, ranging from a convenience store and an onsite Starbucks to a 50s-themed pizza shop/ice cream parlor and the marina-front Harbourside Bar & Grill—where an abundant breakfast buffet begins your day in paradise, and a delectable dinner ends it perfectly (try the Island Bouillabaise, overflowing with fresh seafood; it's sensational!). Other than at Doc Fords—where Captiva locals and visitors alike congregate for fresh fish dishes and their famous mojitos—you can pay for all food and drinks with your key card, so you never have to carry your wallet.

Then there's the full-service Yacht Harbor and Marina—where in addition to 2,400 feet of berthing for yachts, guests can rent a variety of boats for fishing or simply relaxing on the water. The marina is also home to Colgate Offshore Sailing School, the country's number one sailing school, where clinics ranging from two hours to seven days can make a sailor out of any landlocked New Yorker.

Life here is all about the sublime waters, so of course sailing and fishing are just the beginning. At the resort's Sunny Island Watersports, guests enjoy jet skiing, banana boating, parasailing, kayaking, and my personal favorite, stand up paddleboarding; the calm waters offer the ideal opportunity to learn or perfect your SUP skills. For little ones, the Swimtastic program provides group and private lessons and a truly unique opportunity for a mermaid or pirate photo shoot (admittedly, I was envious of the little girls donning mermaid tails).

Beyond their beaches and multiple swimming pools, the Gulf of Mexico awaits, and it's home to an array of marine life, including manatees, Florida's gentle giants (known as sea cows), and dolphins galore. Captiva Cruises leave directly from South Seas' marina, and offer a wide variety of cruising options ranging from a Beach & Shelling Cruise to private chartered catamaran cruises. I opted for the Dolphin Watch & Wildlife Adventure Cruise, in hopes of spotting one or two dolphins; I saw about 20.

The list of activities goes on and on. I took an early morning yoga class with Yali Zawady and loved it (I don't always even *like* yoga). There's a fully-equipped waterfront fitness center (I went for pancakes instead, but it's nice to know it's there), several jogging paths, a beachfront golf course, and a 4,000-square-foot full-service salon and spa. The onsite photography center offers classes and professional portraits and an artist-in-residence program offers painting classes. There are multiple shops for everything from

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t-shirts and swimsuits to handcrafted gifts and sundresses. At Scully's Family Interactive Center, kids of all ages take part in a long list of activities, including lawn games, crab races, kids' night out, and much more—and if they've still got energy to burn, there's the ScoutAbout scavenger hunt around the entire resort.

Perhaps one of the most impressive features of South Seas Island Resort is the Blackwood Tennis Academy, complete with 11 courts, a tennis concierge service, daily clinics, and both group and private lessons by expert instructors. I took an excellent private lesson with Blackwood founder Nick Blackwood, and I would highly recommend a lesson with him for players of any level. Throughout the year, groups of tennis lovers flock to South Seas for a chance to play in paradise, and every November, the resort plays host to the Women's Pro Classic, a $50,000 USTA Pro Circuit Event.

Then, of course, there are the accommodations. This is a true home-away-from-home, with all of the benefits of having your own vacation house, and none of the work. There are a total of 471 guestrooms, condos, and private homes at South Seas Island Resort (yet during my visit the resort was at full-capacity and never felt crowded).

For a traditional hotel experience, the Harbourside guestrooms offer comfort and convenience, with private balconies overlooking the marina or Pine Island Sound. The condominiums, ranging from 850 to 3,400 square feet with up to three bedrooms—in addition to full kitchens and large living spaces—provide more space for groups and families.

The expansive private homes, however, are perhaps most ideal for couples and families looking for beachside bliss and the true vacation home feel. These casually-elegant, secluded beach houses—many with private pools—offer up to six bedrooms and are fully-stocked with everything you could possibly need and more, including daily housekeeping. While staying in South Seas' private homes, guests have access to all resort amenities with the added bonus of ultra-extravagant estate living. The six-bedroom home, for instance, features 8,000 square feet of opulence overlooking the ocean, a dining room that seats eight, a screened-in lanai, a wet bar, an outdoor grill, and a beachfront private pool with a hot tub. If this isn't luxury, I don't know what is.

Whether you're going from the restaurant to the beach, or yoga to the pool, you can easily get around the resort's 330 acres via bicycle or your own golf cart. Want to keep going? You can take that golf cart just beyond the resort's grounds into the quaint and colorful village of Captiva, where the famous Bubble Room awaits, offering desserts the size of bowling balls (go for the key lime pie!), or just around the corner, the Mucky Duck is the place to be for a cold drink and a Technicolor, toes-in-sand sunset experience.

What can't be described here—and must be experienced firsthand—is the feel of it all. It's that rare, inimitable quality of contentment and relaxation. Guests here just look happy. They put away their phones, trade in sandals for stilettos, and bask in true luxury—the luxury of being away and at peace, spending time with each other in a place that is truly one-of-a-kind. ◆

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