



# The Gasparilla Inn & Club

A PLACE TO HARBOR HAPPINESS

*Recognized on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the resort prepares to celebrate its 100th anniversary season.*

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

BOCA GRANDE, FLORIDA: Often my wife will tease me about my regimented packing process when I prepare for a business trip. Although I have been traveling almost every week for the past 22 years, I still hold true to the same procedure I established fresh out of college.

My travel itineraries are equally rigid. I have made the Los Angeles to Florida trip 163 times, yet instead of venturing off onto the side roads and exploring the state every so often, I prefer setting my cruise control five miles per hour above the speed limit as I traverse I-75 and I-95 in the Sunshine State.

Some may say this is a lost opportunity, while others (particularly seasoned road warriors) would laud me for being efficient with my time management.

I also have been chided for not disconnecting from our family-run business to escape for a getaway.

So, my New Year's resolution was to once per year,

even if it is simply over a long weekend, turn the cell phone off, stop looking at e-mails, and relax. For me, this is easier said than done.

When the invitation arrived to visit The Gasparilla Inn on a barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico, I was very excited. My wife Jo Ann and I were able to line up day care for our trip so we could spend some one-on-one time together.

## FLORIDA AS IT WAS MEANT TO BE

From either Fort Myers Airport (RSW) or the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport (SRQ), The Gasparilla Inn is about a one-hour drive. The sense of arrival actually begins seven miles before the resort when you cross the swing drawbridge on the north side of Gasparilla Island.

The main entranceway at the resort is refined and elegant. The ten stately, ionic columns added to the hotel by

**“We are one of only 50 certified clean marinas in the state. Our staff goes to great lengths to protect our delicate ecosystem. If you love fishing, you are in luck. Tarpon season just started. From early May until early July our waters offer some of the best fishing in the world.”**

— CAPTAIN BRIAN KNIGHT, MANAGER, THE GASPARILLA INN MARINA





Barron Collier, a famous industrialist in the 1930s, creates a level of sophistication that permeates throughout the property.

It was midnight when we arrived at The Gasparilla Inn and we were road weary.

During check-in, Jo Ann turned to me and remarked how spotless everything was. I had the exact same thought. Our first impression, which in most cases proves to be true, was very favorable. After the bellman escorted us to the Presidential Suite (a surprise upgrade), we were handed an actual room key—not a key card. I'm not sure why, but it provided a comforting feeling. It was as if we were checking into a small, family run bed and breakfast in the countryside.

Room amenities included robes and slippers, complimentary bottled water, fresh cut roses, and a note card on our pillow with tomorrow's forecast.

After a terrific night's sleep on a Tempur-Pedic memory foam mattress, we were ready to explore. We quickly discovered the dress code of the island. Wearing brightly colored pastels is in vogue.

The day started with breakfast in what is appropriately called The Dining Room (the resort does offer several all-inclusive meal plans). The bountiful buffet included some of the best bacon and pancakes anywhere.



The Gasparilla Inn, circa 1930

As you would expect, there was a selection of fresh cut fruit, but in what I consider to be an upgrade over most resort buffets, breakfast included an abundance of raspberries and blackberries.

The public areas at the resort are a blend of old and new. The grand hallway on the first floor displays a fascinating timeline of the history of The Gasparilla Inn.

It was particularly fun to critique the fashion of the era. Clearly today, the

dress code is more comfortable.

"Our lobby décor is not your standard, run of the mill interior design," explained Jack Damioli, general manager at The Gasparilla Inn. "It is bright, warm, and a bit whimsical. For example, the large fireplace in our main entranceway is filled with beautiful sea shells and the throw pillows on our rocking chairs are imprinted with a welcoming smiley sun."

Much of the furniture in the central living room (the main gathering spot down the hall from the lobby) are antiques. The cane high-back chairs and slat love seats date from 1933, the wood floors are reclaimed heart pine, and the walls are inlaid with raffia.

Midway down the grand hallway is the handsome Pelican Club room. It was the gathering spot, circa 1935, for the first conservation club in Florida. To become a





The Clubhouse

member and gain entry into the club, there was one strictly enforced requirement—you had to catch a tarpon.

“Late April and early May bring the first waves of the annual tarpon migration. In Boca Grande, it’s common to catch a 85 to 95 pound tarpon. It feels like hooking and reeling in a Volkswagen,” kidded Damioli.

Today, the Pelican Club has been transformed into a game room complete with a pool table and a large flat-screen TV.

“It’s a very inviting atmosphere to watch your favorite sporting event,” said Damioli.

I have been fortunate to call on many of America’s finest resorts. Almost all have manicured golf courses, a wide range of activities, lavish spa treatments, and fresh rooms. Thus, I tend to dig deeper and pay special attention to the little things. I notice at sunset if the hotel’s windows are spotless or have a layer of gritty film on them. Other distinguishing factors that make a good resort a great resort (in my humble opinion) include fresh flowers and



The Spa

if the restaurant’s menu is presented on crisp clean paper without the edges curling up from weeks of use. The Gasparilla Inn passed the test.

### AN ISLAND WITHIN AN ISLAND

The Pete Dye-designed Gasparilla Golf Club is a short, five-minute walk from the hotel. The golf course is set on a flat parcel of land that is actually its own island (you traverse a small bridge during your walk from the hotel to the clubhouse or a bellman can take you over in a golf cart).

Each hole is fairly straightforward. What you see is what you get. There is little rough and the scattered palm trees throughout the course rarely present an obstruction.

Two challenges create a fair test of golf. First, there is extensive trouble around the greens. Dye’s signature footprint bunkers are everywhere and an expert short game from within 50 yards will save the day. Second,

water comes into play on over half the holes. Make sure to fuel up and be energized before heading into the home stretch.

The prevailing trade wind is not your friend. Typically, the wind is in your face and will steer your ball toward the bay or lakes on the final four holes.

“Nine years ago, I did a major redesign and upgrade,” said Dye. “We removed Australian pine trees to open up the views of the bay and sprigged the entire golf course in paspalum, salt-water tolerate grass. As a result, the

playing conditions at Gasparilla are some of the finest in the state of Florida.

“My bunkering will bedevil you at Gasparilla,” said Dye. “No two holes have the same sand and waste area configuration. I believe the short game is the great equalizer in golf. Modern equipment can make you hit the ball significantly farther, but at the end of the day, you still have to get up and down and make the putt if you want to score well.”

**In 1907, the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad completed a five and one-half mile rail line through Boca Grande to deliver phosphate mined in Central Florida to ships waiting to deliver the valuable ingredient used in fertilizer to countries all over the world.**

**As late as 1969, Port Boca Grande ranked as the fourth busiest port in Florida.**

**Today, the old rail line is a scenic bike path and jogging trail.**





**“Jack Nicklaus and Phil Mickelson are equally good athletes, yet Phil hits the ball 65 yards farther than Jack. Why? Equipment is the reason. Players can now swing faster, hit the ball longer, and still keep it in play. As an architect, I don’t know what the solution is. We need to keep the game fun and encourage a new generation to enter the sport, but at the same time, not make some of our most cherished golf courses obsolete.” – PETE DYE**

On the third hole, take a moment to notice the dead tree. It is probably the only dead tree actually transplanted on purpose. “For years, eagles would come and nest in the lifeless, leafless tree,” said Robert Duke, director of golf. “A couple of summers ago, an afternoon thunderstorm felled the dead tree. We searched the island and found a similar sized dead tree and, the same afternoon we planted the new dead tree, the eagles returned.”

#### **SURE, SPA, AND SCALLOPS**

The 40,000 square-foot Gasparilla Beach Club is a two block walk on hard-packed, shell-crushed, sandy streets from the main hotel. Amenities include a fitness facility with views of the Gulf of Mexico, a restaurant, a resort-style pool, tennis courts, a dog park, private sandy beach with colorful yellow umbrellas, and an award-winning spa.

“Our spa was ranked No. 11 by *Condé Nast Traveler* readers for 2013,” beamed Damio. “We even placed ahead of the well-respected Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina. We offer a full-service salon staffed with stylists trained by Frederic Fekkai, the French celebrity hairstylist. Fekkai is known to be the ‘go-to’ stylist for Kim Basinger, Jessica Lange, and Hillary Clinton.”

The resort offers two fine-dining experiences. The Dining Room (jackets are required during peak season

winter months) and the more informal Pink Elephant consistently earn rave reviews for creative interpretations of black grouper sliders, grilled swordfish, and lamb burgers. Two unusual specialties I recommend are the pretzel crusted snapper and key lime pie at the Pink Elephant and the Caesar salad and bread pudding at The Dining Room. Between the two, we favored The Dining Room’s ambience and cuisine.

I believe Gary Galyean, the editor of *The Golf Letter* summarized the resort best. “The Gasparilla Inn is not the place if your desire is to wear exercise clothes to meals or permit your children to run amuck. This is exactly the place if you prefer quiet conversation, no golf starting times, a wonderfully run spa, gentle Gulf surf, shell covered beaches, good humored staff, and fellow guests who are respectful of your space.” ■

*About your stay: The resort closes July 7 for the summer and reopens on October 10. In addition to its selection of standard rooms and suites in the main hotel, there are two, three, and four bedroom, pet friendly cottages that can accommodate up to eight people.*

*For more information, visit [gasparillainn.com](http://gasparillainn.com) or please call (877) 403-0599.*