charlotte life

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BUSH COUNTRY

Island of tranquility for America's first family

Boca Grande a favored retreat of the elite

It's tarpon time, and the fish are jumping

PHOTO / WILLIAM THORSEN (NIGHT PHOTO) / HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE

The Temptation

First twins Jenna and Barbara Bush frequent The Temptation, a high-end restaurant and bar where, according to Craig Lutz of the Chamber of Commerce, you might find "a billionaire sitting next to a local."

By PATRICK WHITTLE

Gene Marra sits on the deck behind his beachside Boca Grande restaurant, where the setting sun spills into the Gulf of Mexico and the smells of salty sea and fried grouper mix into a pungent stew, and reflects on the millionaires, the kings of industry and stars of stage who have walked through his doors.

It's nice to see Katie Couric or Jimmy Buffett come down to the South Beach Bar & Grille for a quick nosh, but Marra, who's been coming to Boca for 25 years, is mostly unmoved by fame. He knows why this tiny island town always seems to bring in the big names.

"They will tell you, every last one of them," says Marra, general manager at the Gulf Boulevard fish house. "The reason Boca Grande is special is because it's quaint and it's private and it's elite. All at the same time."

Quaint, elite and perennially oozing with money, Boca Grande is the lanai of the rich, famous and powerful. The sea — shimmering Gulf to the west, placid Charlotte Harbor and Gasparilla Sound to the east — is Boca's screen. Over the years, the Gasparilla Island town has served as a part-time home or weekend playground for the likes of J.P. Morgan Jr., Katharine Hepburn and George W. Bush.

So when South Beach is graced by hockey great Phil Esposito, who won two Stanley Cups with the Boston Bruins, "he's pretty much local color," Marra says.

Boca Grande Causeway, a narrow bridge that allows access to Boca from mainland Placida, only stretches about 2½ miles, but it might as well lead to another planet. Trains brought monied visitors to Boca 50 years before the causeway opened in 1958. Today, the 900-resident town (4,500-plus in season) boasts homeowners and visitors from bearded home improvement guru Bob Vila to moustachioed country music star Alan Jackson.

Boca Grande's elite come to fish, golf and swim like most Florida tourists. But the famous also favor Boca because they can blend into the crowd, says Andy Nagle, general manager of the venerable Gasparilla Inn. Everyone in Boca Grande knows the rich and famous are present, but it's an island tradition to treat the stars like everyone else, he says. It's a place where the famous can go relatively unnoticed.

"You don't know the name necessarily, but then you find out — do you know who that is?" Nagle says.

None of the town's 30-something businesses have reaped

PHOTOS / CHRISTOPHER BUNN, BELOW, AUDREY BUNN

Gasparilla Inn

The Gasparilla Inn, above and left, has played host to captains of industry, inventors and world leaders. Among past guests are inventor **Thomas Edison**, top, and auto magnate **Henry Ford**.

"It's the remoteness of the island, the privacy, the luxury, the elegance. They are coming here for the best."

Gasparilla Inn manager Andy Nagle

the benefits of Boca's affluence and anonymity more than Gasparilla Inn. Long a hideaway for heavyweights of industry and banking, the 93-year-old hotel's guests have included du Ponts, Vanderbilts and Rockefellers, and many believe J.P. Morgan Jr. died there. A single room at the elegant Inn, which doesn't advertise or even have a Web site, can cost more than $300 a night. Nagle humbly calls the Inn "one of the focal points of the island," and describes its relationship with Boca Grande's rich and famous as symbiotic.

"It's the remoteness of the island, the privacy, the luxury, the elegance," Nagle says. "They are coming here for the best."

The huge tarpon mounted over the front desk at the Gasparilla Inn makes you glad that the massive fish don't have teeth. Boca owes a lot to the silver game fish that have lured fishermen to Gasparilla Island since the turn of the 20th century.

Tarpon also afford Johns Knight, a third-generation Boca Grande fisherman who runs a charter boat, a front-row seat to the town's wealth. His fishing resume includes three Kennedys — including John F. Kennedy Jr. Gulf War Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf also likes to cast a rod around Boca, Knight says. Still, he contends that, "The only time I've really been impressed" was when he led a tour for former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.

"Boca Grande really has always been so casual and everything, you remember parts of it, so and so was here, but you don't really remember it because it wasn't a big deal," Knight says.

Knight's status as one of Boca Grande's fishing shamans also led him to the social event of 2004 — a party for Roy Chapman, owner of race horse Smarty Jones. Chapman, who died in February, "seemed like a pretty nice fella," Knight says.

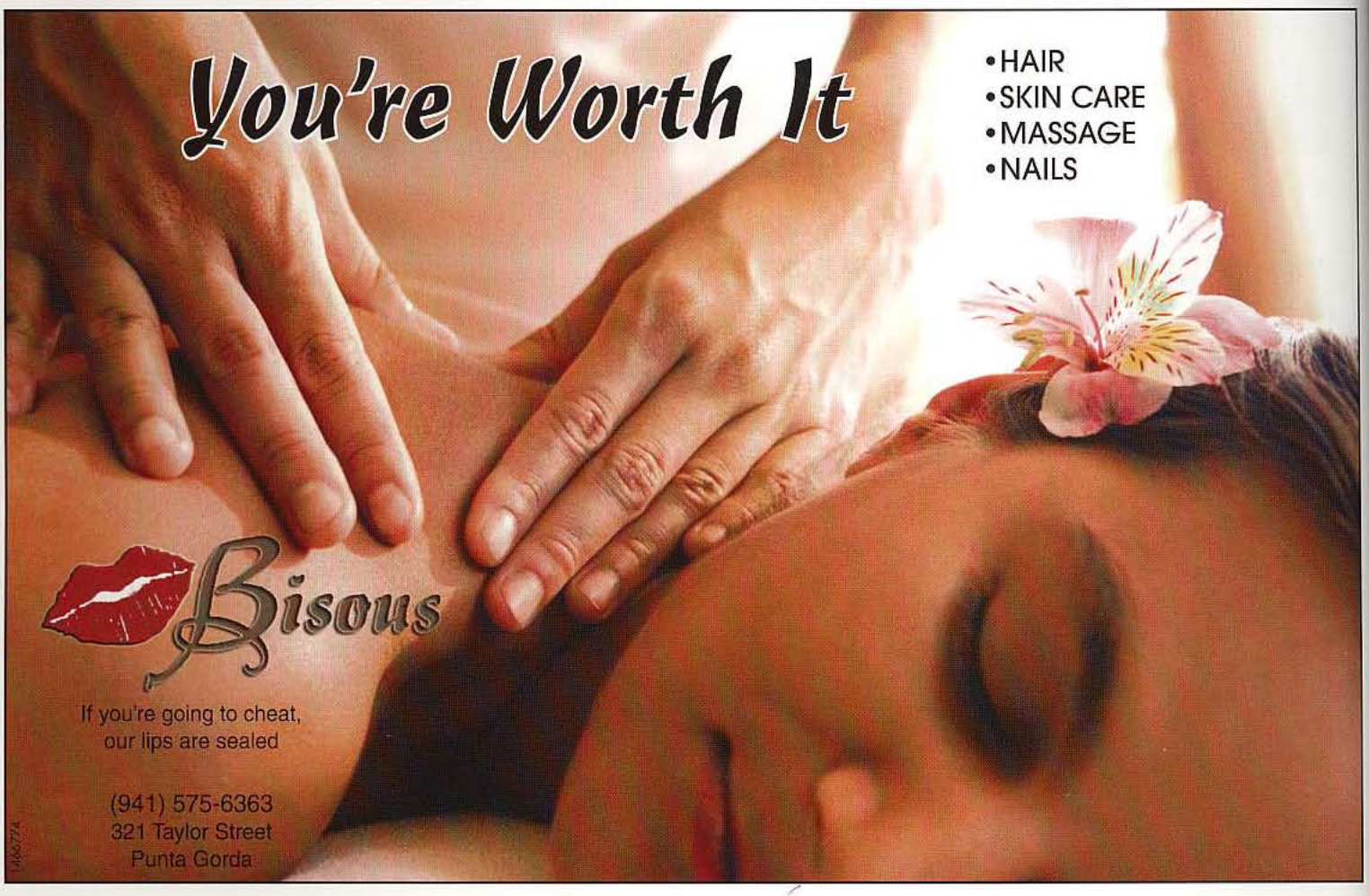

PHOTO / PHILLIPPE DIEDERICH

Hudson's

Katharine Hepburn and **George H.W. Bush** have shopped at the venerable Hudson's Market.