

What a special day we have in store for you
on Monday, Feb. 21 from 8:30am-8:00pm when we visit
Fred Howard Park and Tarpon Springs
(just 1 hr. 45 mins. from The Villages)

First, while we're not yet sandy and sweaty, we'll stop for just a few minutes to stretch our legs and admire the interior beauty of the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Tarpon Springs built in 1943. It was designed in the Byzantine Revival style representing the affluence that the sponge industry brought to this city during the late 1930's and early 1940's. Please be sure you are reasonably dressed—no bikinis or thongs please--for this brief visit.

Then on to the fabulous Fred Howard Park which is a man-made beach at the end of a man-made mile-long causeway. This narrow and pristine park consists of 155 scenic acres with plenty of wildlife to be seen, including many types of aquatic birds (eagles, ospreys, herons, egrets, pelicans, etc.) and occasionally dolphins and manatees. Palm trees provide a shady escape. Best yet, there's not a building within site~~well maybe 20 miles away.

The water is shallow but since it will be only about 64 degrees in mid-February, plan on just relaxing on the beach--instead of swimming--with a good book, good conversation or a good stroll circling the island in the sand. There are restrooms, and chairs and an umbrella is \$26.75, including tax. Pay the vendor upon arrival.

We are recommending that you bring your lunch. Take your choice of enjoying it on the beach--just keep it close to your chest so seagulls don't get the mistaken impression you want to share it with them.

Or, after 1 1/2 hours in the sun, re-board the buses to drive about 2 minutes away to enjoy your lunch (or a table game) at a lovely shaded waterfront picnic pavilion for 30 or 45 minutes.

After another hour of peaceful repose at the beach, we will proceed for a 30-minute drive along Whitcomb Bayou to Millionaire's Row on the Spring Bayou. There you will be amazed by many water-front homes, ranging from grandiose mansions to simple wood frame dwellings that were built between the 1880's and 1910's. We will briefly share with you any stories about them that a neighboring museum has offered to send to us.

We will then drive to Dodecanese Blvd. where we'll spend the remainder of our day. A few of our gentlemen may wish to be excused by this time to visit the Anclote World Famous Brew at 735 Dodecanese Blvd (Unit 50 in The Sponge Exchange) where there's 20 ice-cold craft beers on tap from Florida and around the world, plus many varieties of gourmet grilled cheese sandwiches, Cuban sandwiches, and smoked Mahi fish spread.

The Gulf of Mexico is the world's best location for natural sea sponges. The wool and yellow sponges harvested from the Gulf of Mexico are the most sought-after sponges in the world. Tarpon Springs harvests about 90 percent of all of the world's sea sponges and Spongeorama's Sponge Factory offers you the "creme de la creme" of the world's finest sponges. At that factory at 510 Dodecanese Blvd. you become a sponge expert. Visit the sponge museum and watch their free movie on sponge diving and harvesting and learn how to take care of your sponges so they will last for many years to come. (Who says you can't get educated on a beach trip!) And, of course, there are many sponges, gifts, oils, and home décor items to purchase.

They also feature an exciting 2-hr. narrated dolphin cruise down the beautiful waters of the Anclote River to the Gulf of Mexico. You'll be looking for dolphins, manatees, birds, the Anclote lighthouse and other historical sites. They offer snacks, margaritas, sangria, and soft drinks. To add to your comfort, they also have restrooms on-board. They say that they sell out quickly. Their senior rate is \$19.95 and their tours depart at 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. If there are enough people interested in the 1 p.m. cruise, we could ask the bus driver to take those members there.

You can make a reservation for the dolphin cruise at the following website:

<https://spongeoramacruiselines.com/dolphin-cruise-reservations/>

There is also the Tarpon Springs Aquarium and Animal Sanctuary at 1722 N. Pinellas Ave. Senior price is \$17.99 but you can get 25% off by printing the coupon at this website:

<https://www.tarponspringsaquarium.com/coupon>

Tarpon Springs is also known for some of the most superb Greek restaurants, markets, and bakeries outside Athens. There are at least twelve of them within walking distance along the main thoroughfare, Dodecanese Blvd.

Because the restaurant, Hellas (at 785 Dodecanese Blvd) came highly recommended to us during a past visit, we enjoyed a delicious \$34 dinner for two there, then proceeded next door to their bakery where we--like naughty children--somehow racked up \$36 in baked goods. Hope you're more mature and disciplined than were we!

However, you might also get tempted by many other restaurants included at the below website:

<https://familydestinationsguide.com/best-restaurants-in-tarpon-springs-fl/>

(Note that Rusty Bellies Waterfront Grill that comes highly recommended is not open on Monday.)

Of course, on the way back to the buses are hundreds(?) of "touristy" shops with souvenirs you just couldn't live without.

Drop some of those Greek calories as you hike back up Dodecanese Blvd to the buses in the parking lot where you were dropped off. We will depart—probably looking a lot like this--at 6:15 pm.

Let's have a first-ever BBC "photo caption" contest on our way home. Hand us your caption (with your name) on a slip of paper when you come aboard that day! Valuable prize (of at least \$8.37) will be awarded!!