

We're finding that nothing is quite the same as it was pre-Covid, so we're going to deliberately change this one up a bit. On Monday, September 19, we'll explore Fort De Soto, two of its beaches and Shell Key Island from 9:30am until 9:00pm.

The later departure accommodates those who wanted to go to Shell Key during our trip to Pass-a-Grille, but were foiled by an unannounced early closure of the vendor offering that ferry trip. Shell Key to me, seems an area worth a little time shifting. We've also been offered a group rate for the ferry.

But first let's talk about Fort De Soto...which has already earned a 2022 TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice Award. It's a sad commentary that the early settlers could find no better use for this 1100+ acres of gorgeous land, with 7 miles of soft, white sand beachfront than putting up a fort on it. But that's what they did prior to the Civil War. The upside of that decision is that the 5 keys that make up this area, Mullet Key (the v-shaped portion of the island), St. Christopher Key, St. Jean Key, Bonnie Fortune Key and Madeline Key are now all owned and maintained by Pinellas County. We're also fortunate that between 1933 and 1937, the Florida Public Health Service launched an aggressive mosquito eradication effort on Mullet Key that was successful.

When we arrive at Fort De Soto, those who want to ferry to Shell Key will be dropped at the marina on Madeline Key, just inside the park entrance, to catch the noon ferry. We'll continue to the southern end of the island which hosts the 1000' Gulf Pier, beach, Historic Fort and the concession stand. At this location, you have the option of the beach, fishing from the Gulf Pier, bicycle and surrey rentals and taking a self-tour of the Historic Fort and Quarter Masters' Museum. Download your map from:
https://www.pinellascounty.org/park/05_Ft_DeSoto.htm.

Or.....the bus can drop you at the North Beach, a bit more secluded and known for being a great spot to collect sand dollars. If you snorkel out a bit from shore, you're likely to find huge beds of live sand dollars in addition to the ones already on the beach. North Beach is about a 30 minute walk from the Gulf Pier if you decide to come back to the Gulf pier area before the bus retrieves you. The concession stand at North Beach will be open.

The park offers a wide variety of activities – hiking trails, bicycles, surreys, fishing, kayaks, paddle boards for you adventuresome types....and of course, the beach.

The one thing it doesn't have is a great restaurant. The concession stand offers hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken & fish sandwiches, so this might be a good trip to pack your lunch at home or swing by the Fresh Market deli before hopping on the bus.

Rental costs: 2 chairs + 1 umbrella = \$26.73; single umbrella is \$16.05; chairs are \$8.02 tax included.

We will phone in a total count of chairs & umbrellas and they will be set up for you and waiting on the beach of your choice. However, we are not collecting ahead for any beach equipment rental.

Single Kayak – \$23 + tax for 1 hour; \$40 + tax for 2 hours; rented near the concession shop, as are the bicycles – \$11 for one hour; additional hour is half price; Beach surrey – \$27 for one hour

The ferry to Shell Key is offering us a group discount from their regular fare of \$35.40 (\$30 + 18% tip). The total cost will be \$29.40 per person and we DO need to collect this in advance to make your ferry reservations. You will be on the noon ferry to Shell Key, leaving the Key at @ 4:30, pulling into the marina by 5pm. There is an extensive write up about Shell Key on the Pass-a-Grille trip page (June 2022) which we will not repeat here. However, this is your best chance to travel to an uninhabited barrier island with white sand, warm water, and shells galore. Bring your own snorkeling gear if you want to snorkel. The ride to the island is about twenty minutes and offers great chances to spot dolphins, sea turtles, sea birds and even manatees!

Vendor is Hubbard's Marina <https://www.hubbardsmarina.com/>. More about Shell Key: <https://www.pinellascounty.org/park/managedlands/skp.htm>

After an afternoon at the beach, we'll load up the buses at @ 5pm, stopping at North Beach first for any members are there and ending at the marina to pick those up who ventured to Shell Key. (There is a restroom at the marina where they can change.) Then we will all head for dinner at the St. Pete Pier about 25 minutes away. Directly on the Pier (which is a destination all by itself), you can choose from these restaurants:

Doc Fords Rum Bar & Grill; <https://www.docfords.com/menu/> They offer a seafood based menu which is quite extensive and are reasonably priced.

Fresco's Waterfront Bistro; <https://www.frescoswaterfront.com/food-menu> Lots of seafood, but also pasta dishes, steaks and handhelds.

Teak <https://teakstpete.com/dinner/>; Located on the 4th floor at the end of the Pier, elevated casual dining.

Pier Teaki <https://pierteaki.com/>; rooftop bar that overlooks the water. A full service, high-end bar with light appetizer fare that you might be able to turn into dinner.

Driftwood Cafe – <https://driftwoodcafestpete.com/>; serves sandwiches, pizza, breads, muffins & pastries with mochas, lattes, teas, and 20 flavors of shaved ice.

Spa Beach Bistro <https://www.spabeachbistro.com/menu> No spa in sight, so no foot rub while you dine. This is an outdoor cafe in the middle of the pier serving pizza, specialty fries, salads and desserts.

Or you can wander across the street, but no more than a couple of blocks from the Pier and find these spots:

Bella Brava bellabrava.com/cena; They serve pizza and fine Italian meals. Don't look at this menu if you are hungry....it has pop up photos of the entrees!

Parkshore Grill parkshoregrill.com; A bit more upscale in menu and pricing

Stillwaters Tavern stillwaterstavern.com; Dinner fare and 20 brews on tap

Tryst Gastro Lounge dinetrust.com; Mediterranean fare; farm to table philosophy, prime beef sliders....the menu is making me very, very hungry.

We'll make sure that you have plenty of time for dinner and maybe even dessert, before we hop back onto our buses and head home.