



The Gasparilla Inn & Club on Boca Grande

## The Gasparilla Inn & Club on Boca Grande *The Grand Dame stays contemporary without losing its old style charm*

**I'VE NEVER STAYED** at this grand dame of southwest Florida though I've driven by the Inn a few times when I visited the island and thought it right out Chatham, Massachusetts, or some tweedy place in Maine.

The Inn may be the oldest hotel of its sort on the west coast of Florida (opened 1913), but it is the only resort of its kind on Gasparilla Island by far. The seven mile long island has stately old style homes, modern beach homes, some funky older homes, a few shops and just a half dozen or so restaurants.

Boca Grande is a small residential community on Gasparilla Island in southwest Florida. Gasparilla Island is a part of both Charlotte and Lee counties, while the actual village of Boca Grande, which is home to many seasonal and some year-round residents, is entirely in the Lee County portion of the island.

Why visit the Gasparilla Inn? In a word, solitude. And you can get that solitude without a long drive or flight as the drive from Sarasota is about an hour and a half. The island is so quiet it's hard to find a place in Florida to compare it to. Maybe Longboat Key in the '40s or '50s?

The other reason is the beauty and charm of the place. The Inn has a comfy grandeur and is steeped in tradition. Men wear jackets to dinner and no cutoffs, please. Snobby? Well I've stayed in places that charge up to \$1000 a night and the way guests dress it's hard to tell who forked over the \$\$\$ and who is hauling the trash.

It's old school at The Inn and it's packed.

No moss grows on their wicker, however. The hotel has maintained its chintz and wicker decor atop gleaming pine floors. As for accommodations, you can stay in the main building or in one of the 18 private cottages and villas featuring king, queen or two twin-bedded rooms. All cottage and villa accommodations are steps away from the main Inn and provide the option of parlors, lanais, or kitchenette.

The Inn's newest accommodations are its Sharp Houses. They still have the same 'Old Florida' charm found throughout the resort and are also steps away from the Inn. The houses include both three- and four-bedroom options, and range from 2,300 to 3,850 square feet and feature kitchen, dining and living areas with an open layout as well as amenities such as a washer and dryer and front porch. A number of guests seemed to be in large family groups and the cottages are perfect for that.

For my visit, I was on the first



The Inn is beautiful and offers many dining options including on their open air porches.

floor of the main building in a high-ceilinged room with paneled doors like you'd see in homes up north built in the 1940s or earlier. I had a king-sized bed and the room has a color scheme of white, yellow and pink. There's a spacious bathroom stocked with lovely L'Occitane products in the bath.

I liked being in the main building

and situated close to the sitting areas, dining room and entrance. Next time, I'd choose a higher floor or a room at the end of the hall as folks leaving dinner are having such a good time they continue it walking down the hallways.

In keeping with the old style, but upscale theme, there's no coffee maker, fridge or microwave in the room which is fine with me. You're here to get outside or be pampered with great food experiences while inside. The place exudes a cozy beach house feel with a dollop of Lily Pulitzer.

While there, I saw the construction of their new beachfront accommodations, the first of their kind on the property right on the water. With options for 2, 3, or 4-bedroom homes just steps from the Gulf of Mexico, the homes will include full kitchens and will have a central pool and cabana for guests to mix in a more private setting.

Getting your bearings takes a while. The Inn has in its backyard a beautiful golf course that continues

over a narrow waterway all the way to an island that faces Charlotte Harbor. However, the pool, fitness center, James Griffith Salon, spa and lap pool are on the Inn's west side and are on the Gulf of Mexico.

So, does the Inn face the Harbor or the Gulf? The answer is yes. So if you add the main building, the cottages, the golf, the pool, spa et.al, it's no wonder they offer golf carts. But truthfully, it's all easy to navigate on foot, too.

Guests varied in age, lots of post 50s couples, a few young families with children and more than a few family tribes. Lots of blue blazers due to the dress code (I imagine many men keep one for nostalgia sake or for protocol emergencies). So no bathing suits in the building without a coverup and no cutoffs. It's clubby, but not stuffy. The young staff are all pleasant and unobtrusive, but enjoy talking with you if you take the lead.

Golf is a big draw, but so is fishing. What if neither are your preference? Then there's the spa, fitness center (looking out on to the Gulf), croquet (white clothes only), kayak or paddle board. Explore the island by golf cart (most people do) and discover its quiet, uncrowded beaches and see the historic lighthouse and its museum. Or, you might just find your own special place inside the Inn in a drawing room, or on a porch or under an umbrella to read.

I enjoyed the old photos on the walls showing men and women in their finery - men in jackets and straw hats, women also in hats and

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## travel feature continued



One dining option is... The Dining Room at The Inn which features local seafood in an elegant setting.

covered from ankle to neck in a long-sleeved dress. The photos are charming and all seem so happy. While the dress code has changed a bit, the smiles are still abundant in this lovely place.

### Dining Options

Guests can opt for various dining plans such as the European Plan (no meals) or American Plan (meals). But of course, you can still dine at any of the restaurants.

#### \* The Dining Room

For an elegant experience, there's the Inn's Dining Room which serves breakfast and dinner daily. Though I didn't dine there, the breakfast menu had items like shrimp and grits as well as lobster scrambled eggs. Dinner selections change every day, but I heard the pompano is especially good. They have steaks and lots of local seafood which is what I'd recommend. Jackets required for the menfolk at dinner during peak season typically @ December 20th to April 12th.

#### \* The Beach Club

Serves lunch daily on the Gulf side. There's also a Tiki Bar that serves food and you can enjoy food poolside.

#### \* The Pink Elephant

Offers lunch and dinner daily if you're in the mood for slightly more casual. Cuisine has an emphasis on seafood and is a bit more international than the main dining room.

#### \* Even more options

The Inn Bakery serves coffee, pastries and lunch daily. In the



The main building exudes charm. It was built in the 1900s.

village of Boca Grande. The Gazebo at the Golf Club serves lunch. BZ's Bar and Lounge offers drinks in a cozy room on the main floor of the Inn.

### Activities at The Inn

They print a daily sheet of activities that may include a Culinary Tour at 2 p.m., Thursday and Saturday. Tour the dining room's kitchen with a staff chef. With the Horticulture Tour you can explore the grounds Friday at 9 a.m. The History Tour comes highly recommended especially if you enjoy the building's architecture and have gazed at the many photos on the walls depicting the Inn back in the early years. Tuesday and Friday at 10:30 am.

### What to see and do on the island

Before this stay at the Inn, I used to drive to Boca Grande and ride my bike around the village and join the legions who have photographed the beautiful churches there. There are five state parks with new facilities and generous parking lots. Rent bikes.

### Ladies Day Tarpon Tournament



One of the early draw of Gasparilla Island was its tarpon fishing.

To this day this event has an average field of 40 boats, full of participants who treat Ladies Day as an annual tradition. Seasoned and new participants all come together to kick off the fishing season with the original spirit of Ladies Day—to have fun, catch and release.

Contact the Boca Grande Area Chamber of Commerce at 941-964-0568 or visit [www.bocagrande-chamber.com](http://www.bocagrande-chamber.com). Date: Saturday, May 9.

### Getting there



From Sarasota it takes about an hour and a half by car. If you have guests from out of state joining you have them fly Allegiant to Punta Gorda Airport which is 45 minutes from the Inn. The causeway to Gasparilla Island eases you into the experience much as the drive to Siesta Key does, but again, it's not crowded. There's no nightlife, no St. Armands, no traffic lines. The Inn closes June 21 and reopens October 8.

### Explore Boca Grande & Beyond

There are some clothing boutiques for people and their pets. Make sure you have lots of room on your camera phone because there's lots to capture. You can shoot in the morning to catch the morning light for some places and catch the other side in the evening. Expect gorgeous sunsets mainly unobstructed.

My past trips were about island exploring and photo-taking. I had packed my bike too, which was perfect for stopping and shooting the beautiful churches, coconut palms, banyans, birds and stately homes.



The Inn offers golf carts to maneuver its sprawling estate.

There are no gas stations in the village of Boca Grande, with the exception of a street pump at Boca Grande Marina, so many residents use golf carts as their main mode of transportation. A Lee County ordinance designates all but two streets as golf cart paths. Drivers must be at least 14 years old to operate a golf cart on these designated streets.

### A Bit of Island History

By 1910 Boca Grande Pass was already famous for its unequaled tarpon fishing among fishermen, who stayed on nearby Useppa Island. The Agricola Company, having begun to see the potential of de-

The community of Boca Grande is a bit over an hour from Sarasota.

veloping Gasparilla Island beyond the port, began to develop the village of Boca Grande.

The railroad station in what would become downtown was built; roads, sidewalks, streetlights, shops, a post office, and water and telephone service were not far behind. The railroad company built several cottages downtown, and a few wealthy families from "up north" purchased land and built winter residences. The train stopped at Gasparilla, the fishing village at the north end of the island, at the railroad depot in downtown Boca Grande, and at the south end phosphate terminal.

In 1911, the first hotel, the Gasparilla Inn, opened, and the island became a major vacation destination for the elite from Tampa, Fort Myers, and New England. Though shipping has declined substantially since the last quarter of the 20th century, tourism remains important to the island's economy.

The railroad continued to bring winter visitors from all along the eastern seaboard and upper Midwest until the Boca Grande Causeway opened in 1958. The swing bridge spans two 80-foot-wide channels on the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway at Placida Harbor.

When the bridge became operational, it was faster to fly to Tampa and drive to Boca Grande than it was to take the train directly from the Northeast and Midwest. Rail passenger service to Boca Grande ended on April 12, 1959. The rail line between Arcadia and Boca Grande was abandoned in 1981.

Thanks to Bayard and Hugh Sharp (members of the Du Pont family who had been winter residents for many years), the community purchased the old railroad bed from CSX Corp. (the successor corporation to the old Chessie and Seaboard systems) and transformed it into a new use—Boca Grande's popular bike path. The island is about seven miles long, and just one mile across at its widest. It is protected by a piece of state legislation called the Gasparilla Island Conservation District Act of 1980, which was the first designed to preserve the ecosystems of Florida's barrier islands. About 1700 live in Boca Grande year-round.

### Awards, Distinctions

Travel + Leisure's category "The Top 10 Resort Hotels in Florida (Outside of Miami Beach)" ranked the Inn number one noting, "The style here is stately and sweet, with a throwback glamour that recalls the heyday of midcentury Floridian beach resorts and nods to a slower pace of life."

The Gasparilla Inn & Club is a member of Historic Hotels of America and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

\* <https://the-gasparilla-inn.com>

■ STORY: Louise Bruderle