

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## A Florida Beach Town With Snob Appeal

With its highbrow culture and low-key charms, Sarasota persuades a choosy Parisian to make it his home-away-from-home

**BY ALEXANDER LOBRANO**

**IT'S ALWAYS** given the natives a good chuckle—how, that is, middle-aged Americans, of every generation, fall in love with Sarasota as if they were the first to discover the small Florida city an hour south of Tampa. The best way to understand the reasons for this continuously renewed cycle of affection is to do what I do on nearly every trip to Sarasota: Head for Lido Key Beach, a 10-minute drive from downtown, at the end of the day.

As the sun sinks into the horizon, hungry pelicans dive into the warm dark-green waters, while the beach's almost talcum-fine white sands cool. If the joggers and walkers who animate the water's edge assiduously suggest an interest in exercise, other members of the same tableau, seated in folding beach chairs, demonstrate their commitment to well-being by clinking glasses of chilled rose.

But it's the city's indoor attractions that give Sarasota, on the Gulf of Mexico, a distinct edge over other Florida beach towns. Circus impresario John Ringling built Ca' d'Zan, a Venetian-style mansion, on Sarasota Bay in the 1920s, and it remains a fascinating time capsule of a certain Great Gatsby lifestyle. The art museum that contains the Ringlings' collection features works by Lucas Cranach the Elder, Peter Paul Rubens and Francesco Guardi, among others—hardly your typical beach boys. “Ever since [the museum] opened in 1927, Sarasota has continued to invest in culture,” said Virginia Haley, president of Visit Sarasota County, the local tourist office. The city boasts a number of other art institutions, including the Van Wenzel Performing Arts Hall (built in the late 1960s), the Sarasota Opera (launched in 1973) and the Sarasota Ballet (1987). And the Ringling itself keeps growing—a 25,000-square foot Asian Art wing opened in 2016.

The latest generation to fall for Sarasota, the baby boomers, are putting their stamp on it. In response to a demand for walkable and bike-friendly neighborhoods, builders are beginning to fill downtown areas like the Rosemary District with projects that further that agenda, from condos to hotels.

Many of those buildings are spearheaded by local architects newly infatuated by the Sarasota School of Architecture, a midcentury modern movement known for adapting contemporary design to the Florida climate (think large awnings and natural ventilation systems). Set to open later this year, the Sarasota Modern hotel, a crisply rectilinear, retro-looking building with giant windows, is among dozens of examples of the new building boom. Then there's the Sarasota Bayfront 2020, a 75-acre site on Sarasota Bay that's slated to be redeveloped into a district with housing, shops, a concert hall and other arts venues.

I know what I'm talking about, because I've recently become one of the boomers who've chosen to become part of Sarasota's new cityscape. When I told friends in Boston, New York and London that I'd bought an apartment in Sarasota as a toehold after being an American in Paris for more than 30

years, they reacted with versions of “Sarasota! Really? Why?” My Parisian pals just rolled their eyes. “What will you do there? Is there any place to eat? Isn’t it like, well, a place for old people?” asked one especially alarmed friend from San Francisco.

I was originally tipped off to Sarasota by a novelist friend who once lived on Siesta Key, home to a beach often rated as the best in the U.S. Thanks to her, I’ve been visiting the area on and off for 20 years, but it wasn’t until a recent chance encounter with a cheese shop that I decided this was a city where I could spend more time.

My partner and I were walking on Main Street—Sarasota’s nice, old, small-town-style main drag where the art-deco facade of the long-shuttered S.H. Kress & Co. department store still stands—when we noticed a new cheese shop. I didn’t really see any point in going in, though; it seemed unlikely it would have any cheeses that could tempt two Parisians. “Come on. Let’s just have a look,” my partner implored me, so we stepped inside Artisan Cheese Company, as much because I needed an air-conditioned timeout on a hot day as anything else. Chatting with the English-born owner Louise Converse over samples of stunningly good raw-milk cheeses from unexpected places like Tennessee and North Carolina, I learned that she had been a research assistant at Harvard for many years, and that she and her Bostonian husband had moved to Sarasota several years ago after considering many other places.

“Why?” I asked. She didn’t hesitate. “It’s an already great community that’s starting to evolve in really interesting ways,” replied Ms. Converse. “It could even become similar to Cambridge, Mass., but with fabulous beaches, better weather and palm trees.” (Albeit without Harvard University.) To get a feel for the new Sarasota, she recommended I drop in at the excellent independent bookseller, Bookstore 1, a few doors down, and suggested Lila, up the street, for lunch.

The latter, an attractive little place with terrazzo floors and an open kitchen, was a real eye-opener, too, since its mostly organic vegetarian menu was such a departure from the burgers-and-salads menus that prevail at so many other casual-dining Sarasota restaurants. One of the owners, Cape Cod native and pastry chef Arthur Lopes, has lived in Sarasota since 1999. “I’ve watched [the city] grow up a lot...the farm-to-table offerings are better than ever,” said Mr. Lopes.

Ms. Haley also credits the maturing food scene, at least partially, to baby boomers’ picky palates. “Baby boomers relocating from big cities in the Northeast and Middle West and North American and European vacationers want more out of a winter holiday than just a good beach,” she said.

On the last night of my most recent visit, we went to dinner at Sardinia, a small restaurant Mr. Lopes had recommended. There an amiable chef from the same Italian island serves succulent homemade pasta alongside a list of Sardinian wines. With a large table of Parisians nearby, we felt halfway home already, and then I overheard a deeply tanned German man and his wife congratulating an English couple on having just bought a place in Sarasota. “Just don’t tell anyone else about Sarasota,” the German man said. “Let’s keep it our little secret.” Obviously more discreet than I am, the Brits vowed they would, and then the quartet agreed their favorite season in Sarasota is spring. But you didn’t hear that from me.

For details on where to stay and eat in Sarasota, see [wsj.com/travel](http://www.wsj.com/travel).

‘Baby boomers want more out of a winter holiday than just a good beach.’



## GULF STREAM

Lido Key Beach in Sarasota, Fla., a 10-minute drive from the booming downtown.

ZAK BENNETT FOR THE WALL STREET FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



**MASTER CLAN** The Peter Paul Rubens collection, among many works by Old Masters on display at Sarasota's John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

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