

YACHTING SINCE 1907

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DESTINATIONS

Captiva Comes Back

This Pine Island Sound resort regains its paradise status

There is good news for those who cruise Florida's west coast. The unspoiled waters of Pine Island Sound and the sand and shell-rich barrier islands that protect it are back in business following Hurricane Charley's rampage in 2004. In addition, one of the region's most popular yachting destinations has re-opened. When I toured the area following the storm, I was certain South Seas Plantation on the north tip of Captiva Island had suffered a knockout punch. However, with new owners and a new name, South Seas Island Resort, the property is primping up to regain its paradise status.

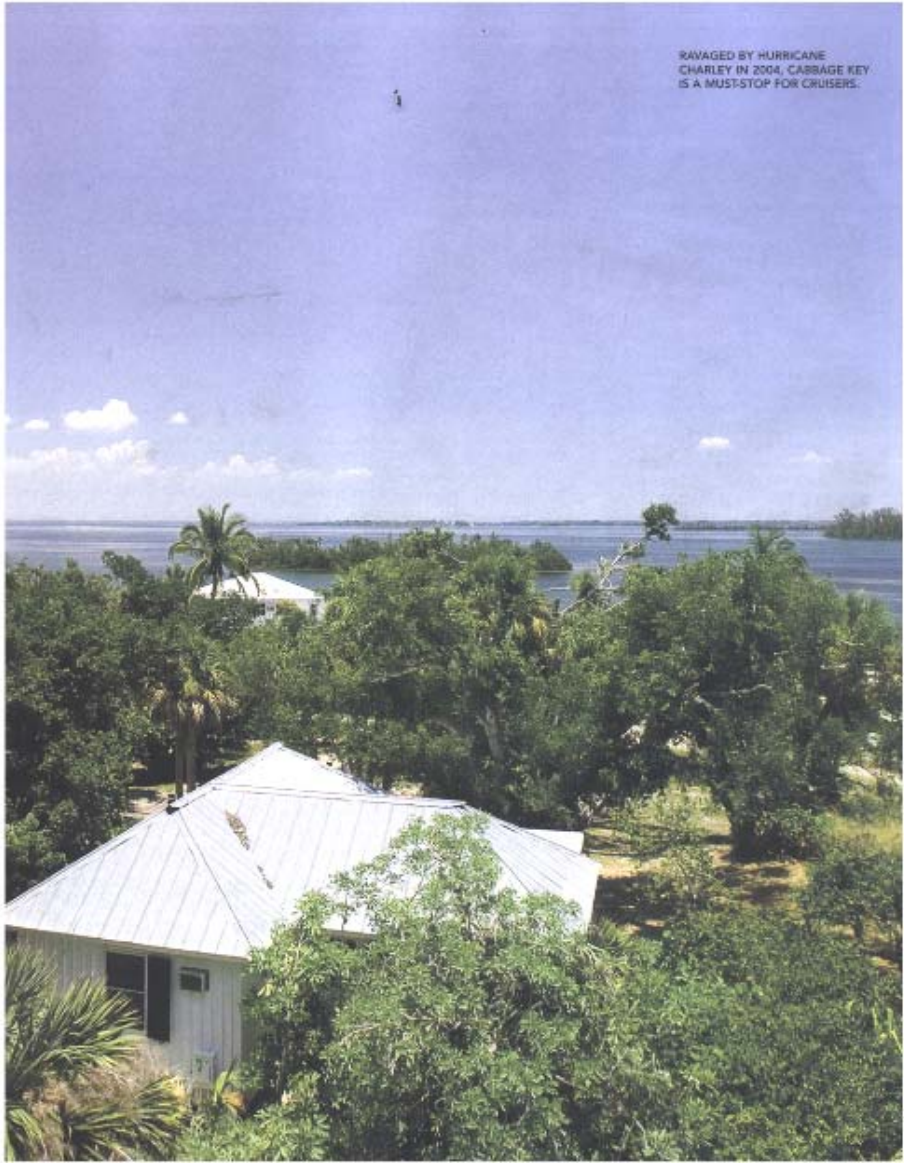
To properly take measure of the recovery, I borrowed a new Tara 3600 Open from our friends at Albee Richard Bertram's Naples sales and service facility. From the yachtsman's perspective, the resort's protected marina and its direct access to one of the best stretches of beach in Florida has always been an attraction. Its seaside golf course made the resort unique in a state where beaches are too often guarded by condominium developments. The marina can handle boats over 100 feet (6-foot draft). During our visit in June, South Seas was very much a \$140-million work in progress. Still, there is already good reason for yachtsmen to include the resort in their float plan. The new owner, LXR Luxury Resorts, seems committed to restoring the resort and improving it.

Just five miles long by half a mile wide, Captiva Island is mostly a wildlife preserve. If you have cruised this area in the past, the first thing you will likely notice, whether approaching from the island waterway or from offshore, is the devastating effect hurricane winds and high water had on the mangrove forests that protect the fragile shoreline. The once tall stands of red, white and black mangroves have for the most part been leveled, leaving the landscape somewhat barren. South Seas' first challenge was clearing the protected trees lost to the storm by hand (mechanical methods are forbidden) so that new growth could prosper. The effort is now complete and while nature will take its time, the stage is set for a full recovery. A \$14-million beach re-nourishment project is also nearing completion and the dune is being reinforced with 5,000 native plants. These structural improvements to the 300-acre property have been



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RAVAGED BY HURRICANE
CHARLEY IN 2004, CABBAGE KEY
IS A MUST-STOP FOR CRUISERS.



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complemented with more than 500 new palm trees and 7,000 shrubs. The golf course had opened just prior to our arrival and its fairways and greens are as perfect as any you will find. Re-designed by Chip Powell, new cart paths and water and sand features are enhanced by a Gull view that has helped earn the course's designation as one of the "top five short courses in the world."

The beach is a short walk from the marina where lounge chairs and sunshades are set up each morning for guests. Lounge-side beverage service leaves the cool Gull water the only reason to move from your seat. Water toys, which includes pedal boats, sailboats and kayaks, are available, and the Sunset Beach snack bar offers simple fare as well as an assortment of sun and fun accessories. Nightly entertainment (4 p.m. to 8 p.m.) is presented either dockside or on the beach. Captiva's beaches have long been coveted by strolling enthusiasts and the best hunting is just after sunset. Watching the sun sink into the Gull is also a Captiva tradition and South Seas' claim on the town and a half miles of white sand offers one of the best views on the island.

During our visit, construction work on the buildings surrounding the marina was nearing completion. The 2,100 feet of dockage is outfitted with new electric service and waste pump-out and fuel, water and ice are available. The self-serve laundry is open, although valet laundry service is still lacking. The marina's general store and several shops



ABOVE: THE BUBBLE ROOM, JUST OUTSIDE SOUTH SEAS, IS A FUN FAMILY SPOT. RIGHT: A SEA RAY PASSES TIME IN RED FISH PASS, ONE OF THE BETTER THINGS TO DO.

are scheduled to open later this year. One of Steve Colgate's first Offshore Sailing Schools was founded at the resort in 1975 and, while its offices are being refurbished, the boats appear to be in Bristol condition and class is in session. Captiva Cruises offers sightseeing trips and local guides are available for fishing, shelling and birding. The resort's signature pool area and the former King's Crown Restaurant are currently being renovated and are scheduled for a fall opening. Marina guests have access to the Marina Villa's pool.

There are 450 accommodations on the

property, ranging from four-bedroom homes to hotel rooms. Virtually all were damaged in the storm and have been or are in the process of being fully renovated. If the fit and finish of the Harbourside Hotel rooms adjacent to the marina are a measure, the results will indeed be first class. The rooms are attractively appointed and have large baths and balconies. Each is equipped with a large flat-panel TV and a DVD player. According to the management, this upscale theme will be followed as all of the resort's accommodations are brought

USEPPA ISLAND CLUB IS LOCATED ON HISTORIC USEPPA ISLAND, A PRIVATE ENCLAVE WITH AVAILABLE DOCKAGE.



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TOP LEFT: THE RESTORED COLLIER INN ON USEPPA ISLAND. BOTTOM LEFT: THE TIARA 3600 OPEN IN USEPPA. TOP RIGHT: THE SOUTH SEAS ISLAND RESORT'S GOLF COURSE. BOTTOM RIGHT: WARM, FRIENDLY SERVICE IS KEY AT THE BEACH OF SOUTH SEAS PLANTATION.

up to date. During our visit, room service was limited and in-room dining was not yet available. There are also private residences inside the resort gates, most of which have been restored. Owners are apparently bullish and the local realtor reported relatively few properties listed for sale.

Veterans of the marina will remember Capt. Al's Restaurant, a popular spot for cocktails and burgers. Renamed the Harbourside Bar & Grill, the fare is far more upscale, as are the prices. It might be easier to grouse about the pricey offerings if the chef's efforts were anything less than fabulous. Don't pass on the Kobe Beef Burger appetizer and the Steak Frites—superb! The Harbourside also serves breakfast. Executive Chef Jeffrey Lunak's résumé includes working alongside Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. Lunak is now responsible for developing and managing the resort's culinary program. While the Harbourside Bar & Grill is currently the only option on-site, the resort's trolleys provide convenient shuttle service to nearby eateries and shopping. We found good food at the Mucky Duck and for kids as well as kids at heart, the Bubble Room is a must-see.

For boaters the resort's location provides

the ideal base for exploring what I consider one of Florida's best cruising grounds. With a draft of just under four feet the Tiara 3600 Open proved ideal for visiting nearby islands. Calhoun Key is a must-stop for lunch or dinner. The bar and restaurant are perched at an altitude of 38 feet atop an ancient Indian shell mound. This foundation clearly served the former island estate-turned-boating-haunt well in the storm. The bar is still rife with character and characters and the fortune in autographed dollar bills plastered on the walls survived. The island offers free dockage to those who dine, and overnight dockage and a variety of shore side accommodations are available.

Nearby Useppa Island is a private enclave with a rich history. The Useppa Island Club is open to guests (reservations only) and dockage is available. The historic Collier Inn has been painstakingly restored since the storm and is lovelier than I had remembered it. Guest rooms are available, as are several cottages. If you visit, don't miss the fried grouper sandwich or the small museum that traces the island's rather eclectic past.

For those who love fishing, the tarpon that populate the area's waters have long been the main attraction. For generations

the largest of these prehistoric predators have congregated in Boca Grande Pass, a short run from South Seas by a skiff. While we missed our shot at a Silver King, *Ladyfish*, our 19-foot Hewes, is the ideal sort of boat for poking around Pine Island Sound and visiting the unspoiled beaches of Cayo Costa State Park. During our visit we idled past several 150 plus pound tarpon and chilled out beachside while dinner-size smook passed by an arm's length away as we enjoyed the cool Gulf waters. You can expect a visit from one of the island's resident wild boars, too.

If you're a veteran of these waters or are planning your first cruise, South Seas Island Resort wants you to know that it is back in business. While nature had its way with the area, it is nature that has always been the area's greatest asset—and this is still the case. Local interests have rallied and the resort, while not yet fully up to speed, has a lot to offer visiting yachtsmen. If you seek the perfect beach, beautiful sunsets and unspoiled waters, consider South Seas Island Resort paradise found. □

Contact: *South Seas Island Resort*, (888) 2-CAPINA, www.southseas.com

By Land

Captiva Island is linked via a bridge at Blind Pass to Sanibel Island. Sanibel Island is accessible from Fort Myers via the Sanibel Causeway. Hurricane Charley inspired the construction of a new bridge so there are occasional delays. Island life is slow-paced and this is reflected in the speed limit—be patient. It's approximately a 45-minute drive to the resort from Fort Myers International Airport.

By Sea

Captiva Island lies between Pine Island Sound and the Gulf of Mexico. The adjacent inland waterway is well marked with Naples to the south and Sarasota to the north. Those on Florida's east coast can transit the state via the St. Lucie River (Stuart), Lake Okeechobee and the Okeechobee Waterway. Vessels with appropriate draft can enter Pine Island Sound from the Gulf of Mexico via Redfish Pass.



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