



The Collier Inn



The Gasparilla Inn



The Island Inn

BOTTOM PHOTO BY LAUREN DAVIES; MIDDLE PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GASPARILLA INN; TOP PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL

Staying Power

The area's historic inns have survived everything from financial troubles to a storm called Charley

Over its 110-year history, Sanibel's Island Inn has weathered its share of trials and tribulations. A 1914 fire that destroyed a guest lodge. The lean years during the Great Depression and World War II. Changes in ownership. Swarms of mosquitoes during the island's swampy, pre-development days. And, of course, August 2004's Hurricane Charley.

But through it all, the inn persevered, developing a loyal clientele that returned year after year to swim, shell, fish, and spend time with family and friends. Though Charley wasn't the first hurricane to hit Southwest Florida, it was the first to do so in about forty years, and the scars it left behind are still fresh, both throughout the area and at the Island Inn. But as Pegge Ford-Elsea, president and general manager of the Island Inn, says, "We're still here, and we're better than ever. We've survived other storms before, and we'll keep going."

That same spirit of survival also pervades three other local historic properties: the Collier Inn, the Gasparilla Inn & Cottages, and Tarpon Lodge. Though Hurricane Charley may have left them bruised and battered, they all remain committed to preserving their place in Florida's past. And with everything from new roofs to spiffed-up guest rooms, the inns have probably never looked better.

The Collier Inn

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the island of Useppa became a hot spot for tarpon fishing. Upscale fishing retreats operated first by Chicago street-car tycoon John Roach and then by business magnate and land developer Barron Collier (who bought the island in 1911) attracted the likes of Theodore Roosevelt and Zane Grey.

During more recent decades, the island changed hands several times, even serving a brief stint as an "adults only" club. Garfield Beckstead now owns the Useppa Island Club, where Barron Collier's former mansion serves as the Collier Inn, offering luxurious suites with antique furnishings, private terraces, and views of Pine Island Sound.

Useppa and its once-lush vegetation took a beating from Hurricane Charley. A



At Tarpon Lodge, the dining room's outdoor tables overlook the inn's back lawn and Pine Island Sound.

handful of folks rode out the storm in the Collier Inn's wine cellar, as fierce winds blew in windows and doors, toppled chimneys, and damaged the roof. "Once the wind gets in, there's nowhere to go but up and out another way," says Donald Beckstead, Garfield Beckstead's son, who's helping to supervise the inn's reconstruction.

Putting the inn back together presents a number of challenges, not the least of which is logistics. As the island is accessible only by

boat, labor and materials must be transported from neighboring communities like Boca Grande and Englewood. And all of the debris has to be barged off the island, at a significantly higher price than it costs to remove debris on the mainland. "It doesn't make things impossible," says Beckstead. "Your expenditures and time tables just have

to be that much more detailed."

In addition, careful attention has

PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL



CONSTRUCTION PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL; OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE COLLIER INN

Above: The Collier Inn and one of its guest rooms, the Izaak Walton Suite, as they appeared before Hurricane Charley struck. Below: putting the inn back together in early 2005



The Gasparilla Inn & Cottages

“We’ve had everyone from presidents to royalty stay here,” says Mark Beveridge, reservations manager of the 153-room Gasparilla Inn & Cottages. What draws politicians, movie stars, prominent businessmen, and other guests to this elegant landmark on Boca Grande? Privacy, excellent service, and the island’s slower pace of life. “This is where people come to rest and relax,” says Beveridge.

Boasting a yellow exterior and inviting front porch with white pillars, the inn originally opened in 1912 as the Boca Grande Hotel. It acquired its current name in 1913. Designed in an Old Florida style, it ranks as one of the largest wooden structures in the state.

The inn operates much as it did in the good old days, opening only during the winter and spring for the Social Season, which runs from mid-December to mid-April, and the Tarpon Season, which runs from mid-April through mid-June. Guests take their meals in the main dining room, decorated in citrus-y hues of yellow and green. During the Social Season, men must wear jackets and ties for dinner.

Folks congregate in the main lobby, with its white furnishings and two fireplaces, to socialize, read, or play games. An adjoining bar and lounge exudes a refined, tropical vibe. Guest rooms feature bright-colored fabrics and Bermuda plantation-style furniture.

Though the inn maintains a Jazz Age feel, some upgrades have been made over the years. Central air-con-

ditioning has replaced unattractive window units. Wireless Internet access is now available. Televisions have recently been added to the rooms. And the eighteen-hole, palm tree-studded golf course underwent a recent redesign. The approximately 180-acre property also features amenities like a spa, two swimming pools, tennis courts, and a gulf-front soccer field that doubles as a helicopter landing area.

Fortunately, the Gasparilla Inn suffered no major structural damage from Hurricane Charley. The inn did experience some water damage, and roofs needed to be replaced on the main building and several outbuildings. “We also lost about 75 percent of our trees,” says Beveridge, pointing to a century-old banyan tree that was replanted and now shows signs of coming back to life. But despite the storm, the inn opened in time for the 2004 Social Season, thanks to the dedication of its staff, who picked up chain saws and rakes to help clear the property, according to Beveridge.

These recent changes and improvements should help ensure “that the inn will be around another ninety-something years,” says Beveridge. “Here in America, the atti-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GASPARILLA INN



The Gasparilla Inn serves as an elegant landmark on Boca Grande, maintaining an historic ambience in interior spaces like the lobby (above) but also offering modern amenities such as a gulf-side swimming pool (left) and a spa.

tude often is, ‘If it isn’t new, get rid of it.’ But I like something with a little history behind it. The people who come here appreciate the ambience and the feeling that the inn has, compared to a new resort.”

The Island Inn

The Island Inn got its start in 1895, when Sanibel pioneers Harriet and Will Matthews began opening their home to visitors in order to make ends meet. Over the years, the inn became something of a Sanibel institution and now boasts a multigenerational guest list. Many families return to the inn annually, just one thing that contributes to the property’s old-fashioned appeal.

“There’s a sense of history here,” says Ford-Elsea. “When you walk in, you feel camaraderie. I always say that friendships are made at the Island Inn.” In the main building, historic photos and paintings document the life of the hotel. A welcome board still lists the names of current guests, so return visitors can seek out familiar faces. And every Friday night during the season, folks congregate on the beach to watch the sunset and mingle. “I just don’t think that you find that at a pool bar at a modern hotel,” says Ford-Elsea.

Made up of cottages and lodges, the inn itself serves as an architectural timeline of its 110-year existence. The two-bedroom Matthews Cottage, where the Matthews family lived while operating the inn, dates from 1910. The Seagrape and Sandpiper cottages were built in 1948



HISTORIC PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ISLAND INN; OTHER PHOTOS BY LAUREN DAVIES



Not much has changed at the Island Inn since the early twentieth century, when guests like Ben Phister (above) stayed there; the lobby (left) contains a collection of historic photos documenting the life of the inn.

guests to the ten-acre gulf-front property. “After the hurricane, the staff formed a stronger bond than we’ve ever had here,” says Ford-Elsea. “Everyone is still in the team spirit. No one’s saying, ‘That’s not my job.’”

Tarpon Lodge

Overlooking Pine Island Sound, Tarpon Lodge’s sweeping back lawn begs for an Adirondack chair, a good book, and a cool drink. In this peaceful setting on Pine Island, it’s easy to hear birds chirping, the breeze blowing through palm fronds, and the water gently lapping against the docks. Perhaps this is why the Wilson family, which made its money in the meat-packing business, chose to build a retreat here in 1926.

Or maybe it was due to the area’s excellent fishing, something that still lures guests to the inn today. Or the fact that folks can escape modern life here in Pineland, once the site of a thriving Calusa Indian village. “We know people drive down a long road to get here, and our whole goal is to provide that hands-on service I think you can only get from a small lodge,” says Robert Wells III, general manager of Tarpon Lodge.

Wells grew up on nearby Cabbage Key, where his parents run the famous Cabbage Key Inn. His family purchased the Tarpon Lodge property several years ago and set out to return it to its fishing-lodge days. The original building now houses the dining room, bar, and nine guest rooms, while a second, newer structure contains twelve additional rooms. “We opened in 2001 and were open for

by a Matthews family descendant and a longtime inn staffer. The three lodges date from the 1960s and early 1970s. Rooms are decorated in a casual, beach-y style, with chintz fabrics and white furnishings. “We want to make people feel comfortable, like they are in their own homes,” says Ford-Elsea.

Thanks to Charley, many of those rooms got a recent redo. Though the cottages fared well during the storm, suffering only minor damage, the three lodges weren’t so lucky. Both Matthews and Starky lodges needed new roofs, while Kimball Lodge had to be completely gutted. Ford-Elsea estimates that it will take until this summer to finish work on Kimball Lodge, which holds twenty-eight of the inn’s fifty-seven rooms. (The rest of the inn has been open since the end of December.)

Despite the renovations, the inn’s historic flavor remains. In fact, the original floors in the main lobby and six of the cottages were uncovered during the process of removing water-damaged carpets. “Charley helped turn back the pages for us,” says Ford-Elsea. “[Finding the floors] really brought a piece of history back.”

And the inn’s employees stand ready to welcome



POOL PHOTO COURTESY OF TARPON LODGE; OTHER PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

Above: Thanks to Hurricane Charley, everything from the roof to the dining room got a face-lift at Tarpon Lodge. Right: though many guests come for the area’s excellent fishing, some stay at Tarpon Lodge simply for a little R&R.



about three years,” says Wells. “Then we had to rebuild again after Charley.”

The hurricane ripped off the roof of the lodge’s main building, shattered eighty-eight of its windows, and flooded the dining room. All of the inn’s docks were destroyed and have since been rebuilt. Two dock houses barely survived the storm, but Wells plans on restoring them.

After a lot of work, Tarpon Lodge’s restaurant reopened on December 15, and the inn reopened over the New Year’s holiday to host a gathering for former President Jimmy Carter and his family. “A fresh coat of paint certainly doesn’t hurt things,” says Wells, standing in front of the historic white pine lodge with its new metal roof. He points out that much of the building’s original crown molding has been preserved, even in spots where damaged ceilings needed to be replaced, and he says he’s always pleasantly surprised to hear that some people can’t tell

that the inn suffered significant hurricane damage.

Wells appreciates the role he has in keeping a piece of the Sunshine State’s past alive. “It seems now that there are fewer and fewer of these Old Florida places,” he says. “Due to the price of Florida waterfront real estate [today], it doesn’t make a whole lot of financial sense to build [new] places like this. Every year that goes by makes a place like this more different.”

Beth Luberecki is a freelance writer and the editorial director of Times of the Islands.

Want to Go?

Despite damage from Hurricane Charley, Southwest Florida’s historic inns still maintain their old-fashioned charm and have even found that Charley’s dark clouds contained some silver linings. “We now have a great view of the new North Captiva pass on clear days,” says Tarpon Lodge’s Wells.

“It’s a cool opportunity to be a part of history,” says Beckstead of the Collier Inn

and Useppa Island Club, of the chance for the inn’s twenty-first-century stewards to make improvements and add features that will hopefully be around for years to come. “We’re preserving the history but also making our own.”

For more information, including room rates and availability, please contact:

The Collier Inn, Useppa Island Club,

Useppa, 239-283-1061, 888-735-6335, www.useppa.com

The Gasparilla Inn & Cottages, 500 Palm Ave., Boca Grande, 941-964-2201

The Island Inn, 3111 West Gulf Dr., Sanibel, 239-472-1561, 800-851-5088, www.islandinnsanibel.com

Tarpon Lodge, 13771 Waterfront Dr., Pineland, 239-283-3999, www.tarpon-lodge.com