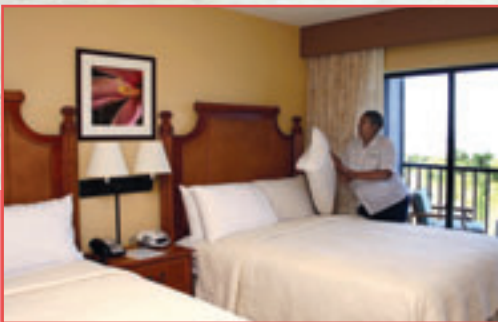


# Checking In



When they're not lounging on the beach, guests at the Sanibel Inn can relax in the recently redone, environmentally inspired rooms (housekeeper Sandy Faust prepares one at left) or order refreshments by the pool from bartender Audrey Kassem.

Sanibel Inn



# A year after Hurricane Charley, many hotels and condos on Sanibel and Captiva have a brand new look

By Jim George / Photos by Jim Anderson

What a difference a year makes! One year ago, on August 13, 2004, Hurricane Charley thundered off the Gulf of Mexico across Sanibel and Captiva, leaving in its wake a devastated hospitality industry. The “jewels” of the Lee County coast had been mortally wounded, or so it seemed. Of the five thousand hospitality rooms on both islands, literally all were shut down following the storm. The more than 130-mile-per-hour winds had blown out windows and ripped off rooftops, allowing torrential rains to soak carpets, furnishings, and interior structures.

The islands were inaccessible to all but residents for almost a month following the storm, while emergency crews cleaned up fallen trees and downed power lines. Electricity was not restored to many parts of the islands for weeks. Lee County tourism officials could only speculate on the long-term effects of the storm.

Three more hurricanes would make landfall in Florida over the six weeks following Hurricane Charley, all of which hampered repair efforts and kept the typical influx of tourists at bay. Without the visitors normally provided by the hospitality industry, Sanibel and Captiva merchants faced a bleak fall and winter.

Forty years earlier, Hurricane Donna had swept through the islands on almost the same path as Hurricane Charley, but that was before the construction of the causeway, when there was little development on the islands. Much of the hotel, motel, and condominium construction was still years away. But by 2004, Sanibel and Captiva had become world-class resort destinations, due to their twenty miles of white, sandy beaches, outstanding accommodations, and reputation as a sanctuary. So when Charley spun out of the Gulf, it found ready targets along the well-developed beachfront.

# Jensen's Twin Palms Resort & Marina

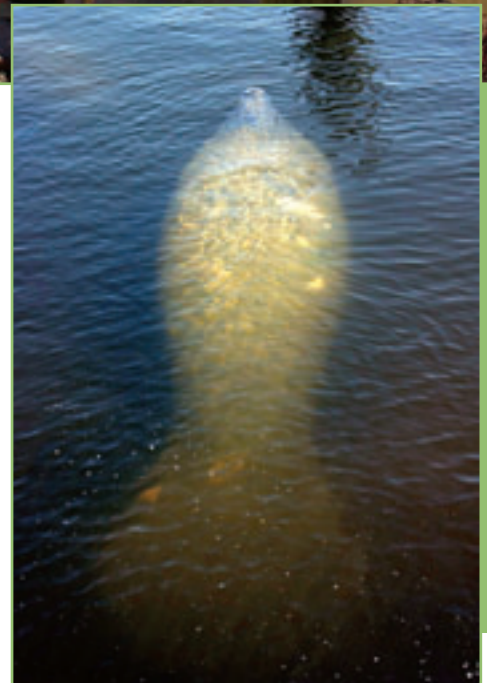


Brothers John and Jimmy Jensen (left) welcome guests to Jensen's Twin Palms Resort & Marina, where brand new docking facilities await boaters (below), who just might spot a manatee swimming by (bottom right).



## South Seas Resort

Hit hard by Hurricane Charley, South Seas plans to have a grand reopening over Presidents' Day weekend.



## Sundial Beach & Golf Resort



From top: Scuba instructor Russell Sprotte puts budding diver Jordan Koenig through the paces; Sundial's suites offer many of the comforts of home; folks head to the beach for shelling, sunbathing, and swimming.



In the days and weeks following Hurricane Charley, the reeling hospitality industry got down to work. Even before the storm was over, work crews at many of the motels and hotels had begun clearing debris and cranking up generators to provide vital power for refrigeration, air conditioning, fans, and pool pumps. When they surveyed the damage, many properties realized that they were faced with massive renovations and, in some cases, total rebuilding.

Captiva's South Seas Resort, the largest property on both islands, was severely damaged. The eye of the storm had crossed the islands close to South Seas, and the eye wall's winds pounded the resort. "We're hoping to have some accommodations open by Christmas and have our grand opening on Presidents' Day weekend," says Chris Van Der Baars, general manager of the resort. "We're getting hundreds of calls a day for bookings, so we're anticipating a strong winter season."

In contrast to South Seas, the 'Tween Waters Inn, located less than two miles away, escaped relatively unscathed with only minor damage to buildings and vegetation. Within three weeks of Charley, the 158-room resort had reopened, enjoying strong bookings ever since.

Though most rooms on the islands were shut down for the two months following the storm, occupancy rates were up to 60 percent by the end of 2004, according to figures generated by the Sanibel & Captiva Islands Chamber of Commerce. The chamber's executive director, Steve Greenstein, says those figures are even a little misleading. "The resort properties that were open, in most cases, were 100 percent occupied," he explains. "But when the unopened properties are factored in, it drops the overall number to 60 percent." Greenstein also notes that projections concerning the number of total available rooms and occupancy rates are not an exact science. Estimates are based on bed-tax collections.

As more properties opened their doors, occupancy rates steadily increased. By March of 2005, the latest date for which figures were available as of press time, the overall occupancy rate was up to 95 percent. This is consistent with a Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau report citing a rebound in tourism throughout the county. "With all the renovations taking place,

## 'Tween Waters Inn



Located on Captiva Island between the Gulf of Mexico and Pine Island Sound, 'Tween Waters offers guests plenty of ways to cool off, whether in the Gulf or the property's Olympic-size swimming pool.



## West Wind Inn

Desk clerk Kim Blaesing registers a guest at the refurbished property, where amenities include bicycle rentals, a butterfly garden, and a heated pool.





## Best Western Sanibel Sunset Beach Resort



Set on four and a half acres, the completely renovated Best Western has one of the largest heated pools on Sanibel.



we're expecting a strong season," says Nancy Hamilton, communications director at the VCB. "People will be coming back to check us out." More than one million people visited Lee County during last year's fall and winter seasons and had a total impact of more than \$1.3 billion. Expectations are high that those visitors will find even more reasons to return this fall and winter.

Resort managers are also optimistic about the coming season. "Bookings and reservations are running ahead of last year," says Peter Adiana, general manager of the Sundial Beach & Golf Resort, one of Sanibel's largest resort properties. "Everything will be brand new, even down to changing the pool furniture from plastic to teak."

"Our guests will be treated to a brand new experience with our upgraded facilities and new furnishings and carpets," echoes Linda Logan, general manager of the Sanibel Inn and sister property Song of the Sea. "The only thing that's the same is the front door and the view; everything else has been changed. You'd never know Charley was here."

Jay Halcrow, general manager of the West Wind Inn, also expressed excitement when speaking about the renovations that have transformed her facility. She's anxious to greet former guests just to see their reactions to the renovated inn.

Greenstein speculates that the islands may lose some repeat visitors because of changes to their "look," mainly the islands' trademark canopy of trees that was lost in the storm. He says it's a phenomenon being felt all over Florida. As visitors see unfamiliar scenes in their usual vacation destinations, they are inclined to try somewhere new. "Our challenge will be to attract new visitors to Sanibel and Captiva," he says. "We have a new look within the old setting. We think with the upgrading of our hospitality rooms, visitors will find a new, improved Sanibel and Captiva experience."

Perhaps Jerry Grundel, a visitor from Illinois, says it best as he stands on the beach in front of the Sanibel Inn: "Nothing can ever change the view or the climate of these magnificent islands." 🌴

*Jim George is a freelance writer, reporter for the Island Sun newspaper, and author of the book Summer of Fury.*