

An Escape Plan

Don Pedro Island State Park provides a break from life's hustle and bustle

Even with the new ferry service, the beach at Don Pedro Island State Park remains uncrowded.

by Beth Luberecki

As I step on to the catamaran pontoon boat sitting at the Fishery Dock in Placida, I can see I'm not the only one who has come prepared. Beach chairs, umbrellas, coolers, and bags of towels line the front of the boat. I put my things with the others', confident that I have everything I need to play castaway for four hours at Don Pedro Island State Park.

My husband and I, along with about two dozen other people, have reserved spots on Grande Tours' ferry to the state park. As the island is only accessible by boat, the new ferry service offers non-boaters a chance to explore the park's nature trails, swim in its turquoise waters, or lounge on its beach.

The boat pushes off at 10 a.m. and

the trip takes about half an hour, during which time our captain points out osprey nests (some with chirping babies) and tells us about the area. We pass by portions of the old railroad tracks that were used to transport phosphate from the Peace River to Port Boca Grande from 1907 to the 1970s. Today, a section of that old rail line has been turned into a fishing pier.

After cruising under the Boca Grande Bridge, a swing bridge that dates to the 1950s, we spy Little Gasparilla Island to our left. Also accessible only by boat, the island is home to residences and vacation rentals for those who truly want to get away from it all. (There are no cars, paved roads, stores, or other amenities on the barrier island.)

The community of Cape Haze is to

our right, where I notice a number of attractive waterfront homes and condos. Many residents sit outside, enjoying their front-row view of the boat traffic along the Intracoastal Waterway. The captain tells us that what is now known as Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota got its start along this stretch, when Eugenie Clark founded the Cape Haze Marine Laboratory in 1955. He also points out the site of a bridge that once connected Don Pedro Island to the mainland.

As we approach the park, we pass through a narrow waterway lined by red mangroves. An eagle nest has been built in a dead pine tree directly in front of us, but there's no sign of its inhabitants. As the captain pulls up to the dock, he reminds us repeatedly that when he returns this afternoon, we'll be leaving at 2:30 p.m. He also warns us of the con-

I can see why the motto of the park is "Where peace and solitude meet the Gulf."

sequences if we miss the boat. Once all the gear is unloaded, each group of passengers heads off to stake out a spot along the park's one-mile-long beach.

Bordered by the Gulf of Mexico to the west and Lemon Bay to the east, Don Pedro Island is located off the coast of Charlotte County between Little Gasparilla Island and Knight Island (also known as Palm Island). The three barrier islands have essentially become one these days, as the passes between them have pretty much been closed in due to past storms. The park occupies 156 acres; the rest of the land is privately owned.

Don Pedro Island State Park opened

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Above: The park's picnic pavilion offers tables and some shade for when lunchtime rolls around. **Left:** A sea grape tree arches over one of the park's nature trails.

in 1985. Prior to that, the property was owned by the Cavanaugh Community Corporation and used as a private beach for people who lived in Rotonda West. Today, it still retains some of that private-beach feel, as crowds are never really an issue. "Even with the extra visitors from the new ferry service, there is still plenty of room to spread out and enjoy a little bit of beach without tripping over fellow beachcombers!" says John Aspiolea, park manager.

And that's exactly what my husband and I do once we arrive—set up our chairs and umbrella and sit back to enjoy the view. I dig my toes in the sand and grab my book. The only sounds I hear are the waves lapping the shore and the distant hum of boats in the Gulf. I can see why the motto of the park is "Where peace and solitude meet the Gulf."

Of course, we can't spend our whole time at the park being sedentary. So we also venture down to the water, search for shells and sharks' teeth, play a little

If You Go

Grande Tours currently offers its ferry service to Don Pedro Island State Park on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. The ferry leaves the Fishery Dock in Placida (located where C.R. 775 meets C.R. 771) at 10 a.m. and returns at around 3 p.m. The cost is \$18 per person, which includes the park's \$1 entry fee. Grande Tours plans to offer the service year-round, but Schneider says the company may add

to or cut back on the service as demand dictates. For more information about the ferry service, call 941-697-8825 or visit www.grandetours.com.

Don Pedro Island State Park is open every day of the year from 8 a.m. until sunset. The park also includes a ninety-four-acre parcel on the mainland, which offers two miles of hiking trails, fishing from a small dock, and a

picnic shelter. There are restrooms, a picnic pavilion, and grills at the island portion of the park, but no commercial food vendors. Docks are for day use only and are accessible via a channel from the Intracoastal Waterway at green marker #35. For more information about Don Pedro Island State Park, call 941-964-0375 or visit www.floridastateparks.org/donpedroisland.



Above: Private boat owners can tie up at the park's bayside docks.

Frisbee, and check out the park's nature trails. The trails wind through a number of natural communities, including a coastal strand filled with salt-tolerant herbs and shrubs, coastal grasslands, and scrubby flatwoods. Signs posted along the paths offer details about the plants found here, like the prickly pear, a cactus whose fruit can be made into jam or jelly, and the Spanish bayonet, a plant with needle-like leaves that can tolerate desert-like conditions.

A number of animals call the park home, everything from gulls and terns to herons and gopher tortoises. Dolphins and manatees can sometimes be spotted in the waters surrounding the park. Every summer, sea turtles can be found nesting here. During our visit, we see lots of shorebirds as well as a highly synchronized line of pelicans flying north along the beach.

A large picnic pavilion provides a shady spot for eating lunch. Additional picnic tables and grills are located just outside the pavilion. After refueling, we walk down to the bayside docks where private boat owners can tie up. Those interested can also fish over here, where they might just snag flounder, snook, redfish, snapper, or tarpon.

As I stand on the docks, thinking about all those lucky boat owners, I'm happy that I've gotten the opportunity to enjoy this natural paradise that I

might not have been able to otherwise. "Grande Tours is providing a wonderful opportunity for visitors without boats to experience a beautiful stretch of beach that is a hidden gem among Florida's state parks," says Aspiolea. "The shelling at Don Pedro Island is comparable with any of our other local beaches, and without as many collectors. The short trails in the coastal grasslands offer opportunities to view bald eagles and gopher tortoises, thriving undisturbed in natural communities that have been

restored by the state park staff."

"I hope visitors to the island can get an idea of what all these barrier islands used to look like," says Captain Marian E. Schneider, founder and president of Grande Tours. "And I hope they will learn the importance of the islands and how we all need to become stewards of these undeveloped areas." 🐢

Beth Luberecki is a Venice, Florida-based freelance writer and features editor of Times of the Islands.

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