

One of Florida's Best-Kept Secrets

A miniature donkey named Isabella is just one of the surprises you'll find at friendly Rialto Harbor Marina

by Libby Boren McMillan

Bus and Nifty Hamilton might just own the sweetest piece of waterfront land on the mainland. Located at mile 119 on the Okeechobee Waterway in Southwest Florida, on a protected oxbow lined with moss-draped oaks, their Rialto Harbor Marina is winter home to several cruising yachts and a popular respite for the lucky few who have found it.

"We rent out docks to seasonal people," says Bus Hamilton, who oversees the sub-contractors hired to complete each boat owner's list of maintenance chores. He's also a seasoned yacht broker specializing in 35'-70' cruising yachts,

and his loyal winter clientele keeps him busy buying and selling on their behalf.

Rialto Harbor Marina is not your average port of call. In addition to its gracious "alongside" docks—each with its own garden area—the property sports a historic guest cottage, a cushioned tennis court, heated pool, postcard-pretty workshop, two stables, five horses, one charming donkey, fifty chickens, and Bus Hamilton's wife and daughter. A trusted caretaker named Frank—an Immokalee-born snake hunter and wildlife expert—has been the live-in caretaker for twelve years.

The property's red barn is an office

and workshop supporting the maintenance of the property, but also serves as carriage house. The architect who designed the barn, the charming guest cottage, and the Hamilton family home maintains a small, quiet office on the side of the cottage. An able office assistant and Bus Hamilton's in-laws round out the friendly crew you'll meet on a visit to this memorable "Old Florida" compound.

Hamilton bought most of his land prior to 1986, when he moved in an unfinished hull he refurbished on-site. He lived aboard a sixty foot wooden boat while he did the work, before building a home on the property. "I bought the place from Pop Lanyon, and none of the houses were livable," he says. "This was called Lanyon's Landing at the time. Pop was in his 80s, a character and a half," says Hamilton, with a smile. Hamilton's former project is the bright green boat utilizing one of the docks at Rialto, a welcoming landmark to all who enter.

"Boats are here for months at a time," says Hamilton of the many large vessels



(Top) The view from the dock at Rialto Harbor Marina is a glimpse of "old Florida." **(Left)** One of two stables on the property that Bus Hamilton bought from Pop Lanyon prior to 1986.

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at his shaded docks. “The owners are from New England, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Aspen, Charlotte . . . it’s been all word-of-mouth now for a long time. Our key is to give people really good service.” Hamilton guides his clients through the gauntlet of purchasing a boat. “Once you really know what you need, and what you’re planning to do,” he says, “a good broker can help guide you as to better investments, pros and cons, maintenance, differences in insurance, all the stuff that goes along with buying the boat.”

Rialto’s bucolic setting inspires many boat owners to invite family or friends out for a stay in the charming guest cottage while they’re aboard their yachts. “They’re here on their boat,” says Hamilton, “and they want their grandkids to come and see them, or their kids.” The cottage is available for nightly

(Top) Bus and Nifty Hamilton in front of the guest cottage. (Below) Janjan Hamilton hugs Isabella, the miniature donkey.



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(Clockwise from top left) The red barn—office and workshop; Janjan Hamilton with curious friend, Bus, Nifty, and Janjan Hamilton.



rentals, with or without a friend at the docks, and is perfect for special occasions. “Many people get married right here on the property,” says Hamilton. Rialto has that hard-to-find quality of slowing down time. All who visit are mesmerized by the beauty of the land and a lifestyle that’s far from frenetic.

During the past few years Hamilton has been traveling more than usual. “My wife and 13-year-old daughter do competition carriage driving,” he explains, of a sport which involves precision driving and cross-country marathons: fording streams, traversing hills, and more. “It’s the main focus of our family,” says

Hamilton of this little-known sport. The Hamiltons keep five horses and Isabella the donkey in their two stables. “Tommy is the sixteen-hand saddle horse,” says Hamilton. “We have three Morgans we’re actively training, and a modern Shetland-Hackney cross, a very fancy little show pony. She has a little two-wheeled cart. She’s only forty-six inches at the shoulder. My mom is eighty and she’s driving him.”

“I’ve been around horses my whole life,” Hamilton continues. “My mom was in the saddle horse business—training, showing, and selling. My wife’s family messed around with horses, too. Six or seven years ago, we decided we wanted to

play with horses.” Hamilton’s wife, Nifty, announced she wanted to “drive a pair down the road,” which led to the first carriage purchase. “The neighbors love it,” says Hamilton, of his wife’s unique pastime. Bus and Nifty host an annual fall hayride. “We get all the kids that we know,” he says, “and we have a little hitch wagon that we hook the pair up to.”

While friends and neighbors anticipate this yearly treat, no one could have predicted that Tommy, the sixteen-hand horse, would fall hard, for tiny Isabella, who stands about two feet tall. But she’s his girl; romance is just in the air at beautiful Rialto Harbor Marina. 🐾



Each of Rialto Harbor Marina’s “along-side” docks has its own garden area.

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For More Information

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