



Coconut palms dot the Florida landscape, but these sweet tropical fruits turn into missiles in hurricane season!

# Marco Island

## Florida's Paradise Coast

By Derrick Sobodash

Florida is a tourist state. There's no question about that. With 18 percent of its population over age 65 – swinging up to 21 percent when the 'snowbirds' arrive – it's definitely a place people go to get away. One of the state's best kept secrets, at least outside of certain circles, is the City of Marco Island.

Originally named La Isla de

San Marco by the Spanish, Marco is the largest of Florida's Ten Thousand Islands, a chain of mangrove islets off the coast of southwest Florida, with its area of 6,215 hectares, and a great starting point for exploring the other 9,999.

As the island chain is mostly an ecological reserve, there are countless birds and fish native to the area that can be spotted when

channeling about the islands, including dolphins, manatees, and many rare birds – even the bald eagle, the formerly endangered US national bird.

The island itself has a maze-like canal system designed to let homeowners have an outlet to the ocean. For a visitor, how locals so effortlessly navigate the canal system is downright puzzling.

For people seeking a winter

retreat or even a nice place to summer, Marco is a great spot to bum around the beach, go shelling, fishing, experience fine dining, or try out other hobbies like bird watching or sailing.

### Practicalities:

The nearest airport for Marco is Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) in Fort Myers. Most flights require you to connect elsewhere in the USA.

No buses run from Fort Myers to Marco, so you will need to rent a car to travel an hour down I-75 expressway to exit 101.

If you're adventurous (read: insane), take a direct flight to Detroit (DTW), rent a car from Alamo, then burn across the entire USA in 22 hours to drop off the car at Marco's Alamo: a one-day rental costs the same no matter how far you travel.



From left to right: sunrise seen from the bridge to Marco, birds gather on the beach, a crab pops his head out to check if the tide is back soon, luxurious housing and a view of the wide Resident's Beach at low tide.

## Beaches

Being an island, Marco is pretty much surrounded by beaches. The three main beaches are Tigertail Beach, South Beach and the Resident's Beach.

Tigertail, named for its arcing sandbar shaped like a tiger's tail, is one of the oldest beaches on the island. The tail partially disappears at high tide, which can leave you stranded if you don't make it back to the main beach by the time the tide returns. The inner lagoon is perfect for swimming, at no more than 3m deep and with its undertow mostly broken by the sand bar. Swimming beyond the sand bar is not advised, as there's a strong undertow after the bar's drop. The waves get high enough for surfing, but chance visits from sharks make riding the waves a safety gamble.

South Beach and Resident's Beach are two divisions of the same beach, with South Beach being the public one. The beach is sprawling, and the undertow near the shoreline is weak. Unless you are staying in one of the island's most expensive hotels or condos, or if you have a resident friend with a car, you won't be able to enter Resident's Beach.

**ProTip:** You can still reach Resident's Beach without a pass by walking north from South Beach.

### Practicalities:

**Tigertail Beach:** Five boardwalks; wheelchair accessible; open daily 8am to sunset; US\$3 parking fee; entrance at 400 Hernando Dr.

**South Beach:** Open daily 8am to sunset; entrance by walkway on Collier Blvd north of Cape Marco.

**Resident's Beach:** Picnic area with Chickee Huts; open daily from 8am to sunset; Resident Permit required for entry; entrance at intersection of Collier Blvd and San Marco Rd.

## Shelling

Shelling is a great way to pass time at the beach. If resting on the powdery white sand isn't your thing, Marco has over 50 kinds of shell-life native to its beaches, many of which find themselves stranded on the beach each day at low tide. If you tire of looking for the perfect 'common' shell, you can hunt for any starfish and horseshoe crabs that the seagulls haven't found yet.

One of the best places to hunt for sealife is on 'Sand Dollar Island,' a large sand bar reach-

able if you time a trip to Tigertail right. Follow the tail out to a sandbar only exposed at low tide to find the 'island' rich in sand dollars. Go early – the local kids will clean it out before late risers ever get a chance.

The best time to look for shells is after a storm. On the next low tide, the beaches look like the ocean was churned up and tossed out. Go early before the beach crews shovel them away and the seas reclaim what's left. Severe storms can even wash in sea biscuits and other sea life from as far away as Cuba.

### Practicalities:

If you fail to find anything worth showing off, buy shells at one of the island's shell shops and lie to everyone back home.

## Fishing

If you love fishing, there's no better place to do it than an island – especially an island like Marco. The island's extensive canal system brings in hordes of fish during high tide. Dolphins can be spotted in the canals from time to time, but like the manatees, you can't fish them.

Lane and mangrove snappers, pompano and snook can be pulled in year round. If you rent a boat

and go exploring, you can find barracuda, black, gag and red grouper and jackfish. Dozens of other species migrate through Marco and the surrounding islands from season to season, including black drums, cobia, flounder, Nassau grouper, redfish, sheepshead, spotted seatrout and tripletails.

### Practicalities:

The best way to get out to sea is if you know a local: they'll have a boat or at least a friend with one. If you're on your own, rentals aren't cheap. The Cedar Bay Marina (001-239-642 6717) rents boats for US\$195 to US\$285 depending on whether you plan to rent for a full or half-day. If you want to hop on a chartered boat, call Marco Island Sea Excursions, Inc (001-239-642 6400). For multiple day rentals, it may be cheaper to rent in Naples and boat down to Marco.

## Food

Marco is home to many restaurants that serve almost anything you can think of, but it's safest to stick with fish. The local fish places are the best, and are usually the least expensive. Do not explore foreign cuisine on Marco – its Asian, Mexican and

Italian cuisine ranges from mediocre to bad, and its pizzerias are a joke. Those restaurants are there only to break up the monotony of local life.

Some of the best dining on the island is the Snook Inn, one of the top ten restaurants on the island and top 300 in the US. The Inn has outdoor seating to give a good view of the pelicans and dolphins playing by the docks, and the prices are modest – especially if you order whatever is in season. The homemade Key Lime Pie is a great dessert, and a specialty of south Florida. Most evenings, especially during tourist season, the Inn provides live entertainment in its bar area.

For curious tastes, ask a local where you can eat one of the state's mascots: the alligator. Endangered before 1987, the prehistoric-looking reptile is for sale in many restaurants that buy their meat from 'gator farms' that raise alligators specifically for food. The tail and ribs are the choice parts.

### Practicalities:

The Snook Inn is located at 1215 Bald Eagle Dr; docking room for 20 boats; parking for as many as 100 cars; no smoking; call 001-239-394 3313 for more information.



Gulls play follow-the-leader in the shallows of Tigertail beach.

Photos by Derrick Sobodash