

# The New York Times

A photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sun is a large, bright orange orb partially obscured by dark, silhouetted clouds. The sky is a gradient of orange and yellow. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of two people are visible, looking out at the water. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

36 HOURS

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Sarasota, Fla.

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Often overlooked in favor of Tampa to the north and Miami to the south, Sarasota, on Florida's Gulf Coast, is a laid-back city that seems content to keep its white-sand beaches out of the spotlight. The city of 55,000 has long been home to the Ringling museum complex, set on a picturesque bay, where visitors can find artworks by Peter Paul Rubens, Titian and El Greco, and a circus museum. There's plenty for nature lovers, too: Spot alligators, manatees and dolphins; meander beneath stately banyan trees; and take a kayak for a spin through the wild mangroves. These days, the city is abuzz with developments, including an expansion of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens and the opening of a 1920s house-museum in Newtown, the city's historic Black district.

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## Recommendations

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### Key stops

- **Siesta Beach**, the pride and joy of locals, offers miles of soft sand that's great to lounge or stroll on, as well as expansive views of the Gulf.
- **The Ringling** is a complex of museums and gardens where visitors can discover such delights as a 3,800-square-foot model of an early 20th-century circus.

- **Meliora** captures the high-low spirit of Sarasota with unfussy decor and sophisticated seafood dishes.

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## Outdoor activities

- Kayak tours from **Kayaking SRQ** and **Liquid Blue Outfitters** take visitors through mangroves and Sarasota Bay, providing the chance to spot dolphins, manatees, starfish, crabs and more.
- At **Myakka River State Park**, a kayak rental will get you up close and personal with alligators.

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## Attractions and museums

- **Newtown Alive** offers trolley tours that trace the struggles and successes of residents of Sarasota's historic Black neighborhood.
- **Leonard Reid House** is a new museum in Newtown that was once the home of one of the city's first Black settlers.
- **Marie Selby Botanical Gardens** has a new gallery with living specimens from the Gardens' collection of 35,000 preserved plants, a conservatory with displays of flowering orchids and walkways shaded by banyans, ficus and mangroves.
- **Lakewood Ranch Farmers' Market** offers live music, food stands and various events for kids, like arts and crafts or storytelling.
- **Shack**, a popular fitness studio, runs jam-packed yoga and pilates classes.

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## Restaurants and bars

- **Phillippi Creek Oyster Bar** is a seafood lover's paradise, with peel-and-eat shrimp, lobster tails, calamari, oysters and, for those inclined, fried gator.
- **Project Coffee**, a vegan cafe with several locations in Sarasota, has a menu that adds a little fun to brunch classics, like a frozen açai bowl with cornflakes and black-sesame crumble.
- **Sage**, a restaurant inside a historic 1926 building that once housed the Sarasota Times newspaper, has a swanky rooftop bar with live music on Fridays.
- **Siesta Key Oyster Bar** has festive cocktails and live music nightly.

- **Gilligan's Island Bar** has a loungey backyard with swings; pop, disco and reggaeton tunes set a dancey vibe.
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## Where to stay –

- **The Resort at Longboat Key**, renovated in 2020, sits on 410 acres of land on a barrier island off Sarasota. Besides a private beach, the hotel has its own golf course, tennis gardens and a spa. Rooms start at \$999 a night.
  - **Kompose Hotel**, near the airport, allows guests to book a room at a base price and pay for customizations, like use of the pool and jacuzzi (\$5 per day), or the Peloton bike (\$10 per hour); a sauna session (\$35 per person); or accommodating a dog (\$75 per stay). Rooms start at \$250.
  - **Timberline Glamping Co.** offers luxury tents in Oscar Scherer State Park equipped with linens, rugs, lamps, electric outlets, heating or air-conditioning, mini fridges and Keurig coffee makers. The site provides hammocks, a charcoal grill, a wood fire pit and a picnic table. There's a shared bathhouse with toilets and showers. Tents from \$169.
  - For **short-term rentals**, look in the Alta Vista or Laurel Park neighborhoods for proximity to Sarasota's downtown at reasonable prices. Rentals on Siesta Key, a barrier island connected to Sarasota by two bridges, are more expensive, but offer easy beach access, free trolley service and small town charm.
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## Getting around –

- The best way to get around Sarasota is by **car**, whether it's a rental or via **ride-hailing apps** like Uber and Lyft. An on-demand ridesharing service called Breeze OnDemand runs in downtown Sarasota, on Siesta Key, on Longboat Key and on Lido Key, and costs \$2 per person; book through the app. Free **trolleys** run along Siesta Key and Lido Key, and between Lido Key and downtown Sarasota. Track the Lido Key trolleys with the Bay Runner app. The Siesta Key Breeze trolley runs approximately every half hour.
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# Itinerary

## Friday

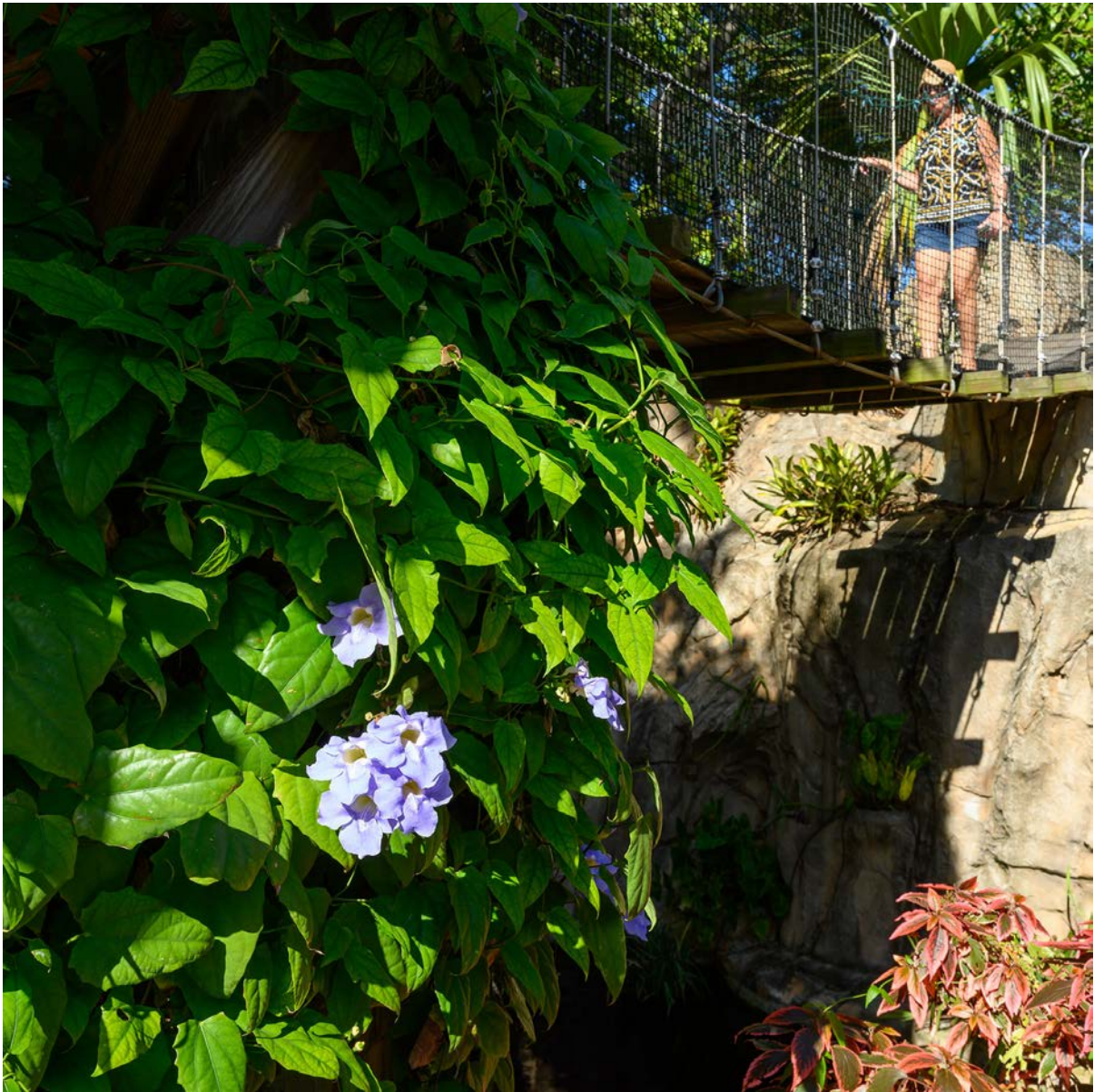
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3 p.m. **Wander among banyans and ficus trees**

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Get a view of Sarasota's sweeping bay from the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens downtown campus, where walkways are shaded by towering banyans, tunneled ficus and tangled mangroves (entry, \$26). The Gardens recently completed the first phase of an expansion. Additions include a welcome center that mimics a tree canopy; a restaurant, the Green Orchid, that uses produce from a rooftop garden maintained by veterans; and a gallery with specimens from the Gardens' collection of 35,000 preserved living plants, some more than 100 years old. At the onsite Museum of Botany and the Arts, the exhibition "Yayoi Kusama: A Letter to Georgia O'Keeffe" explores the artists' mentor-mentee relationship via letters they exchanged, photographs and one of Kusama's original artworks (through June 30).





Marie Selby Botanical Gardens

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6 p.m. **Try new Floridian flavors**

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Part of Sarasota's charm is the high-low vibe: Picture a retiree wearing a Rolex happily working through a bucket of icy Coronas on the beach. Meliora captures that spirit with its unfussy decor of plain wood tables and prints of fish on the walls. Show up in a Hawaiian shirt and no one will bat an eye. But the food is complex and inventive, like a recent special of cured, pickled and grilled mackerel from the Gulf of Mexico (\$21). Menu regulars include Japanese milk bread in the form of pull-apart buns (\$8), and a



cabbage salad brightened with Meyer lemon vinaigrette and cheese that's soaked in beer before aging (\$14).



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8 p.m. **Escape the downtown noise at a rooftop bar**

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Sarasota's downtown might be small, but on weekend evenings, bars fill up with young people in their finest partywear, whether that's teetering heels and a skintight minidress, or sneakers and a



Tampa Bay Buccaneers jersey. Escape the rowdy crowds at Sage restaurant's rooftop bar, on top of a 1926 building that once housed the Sarasota Times newspaper. String lights and a fire pit set a cozy scene, and classic cocktails are enlivened with small tweaks: A Sazerac receives an infusion of banana liqueur (\$19), and an Old Fashioned is mixed with mezcal and chocolate bitters (\$18). Live music acts perform every Friday, starting at around 6 p.m. Check Sage's Instagram for details.



Siesta Beach has soft quartz sand that stays cool in the sun and vistas of the Gulf of Mexico, where you can sometimes spot dolphins frolicking.

## Saturday

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9 a.m. **Spot wildlife and stretch out on the soft sand**

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Soak in the rays at Siesta Beach on Siesta Key, an eight-mile barrier island connected to Sarasota by two bridges. The public beach has soft quartz sand that stays cool in the sun; vistas of the Gulf of Mexico, where you can sometimes see dolphins frolicking (to get closer, check out the two-hour LeBarge Dolphin and Manatee Watch Cruise, \$38); and clean showers and toilets, volleyball courts and free parking. One end of the beach to the other is about three miles, and a free trolley shuttle runs along the island from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. There are several bike rental shops on the island, and Robin Hood Rentals offers a fleet of scooters shaped like miniature coupes (\$159 for 24 hours).



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11 a.m. **Nosh on a vegan brunch**

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Project Coffee, a popular, fully vegan cafe, has three locations in and around Sarasota. In the downtown one, hanging plants and a disco ball adorn the minimalist-industrial space with concrete floors and light wood tables and counters. Cheery yellow tables and chairs provide seating outside, in the sun or beneath a bright-red awning. For brunch, try a salty-sweet frozen açai bowl topped with blueberries, bananas, corn flakes, coconut cream, tajin (the tangy, spicy Mexican seasoning) and black-sesame crumble (\$13.25). For



a housemade to-go option, grab a cinnamon brioche bun (\$6) or tahini marble coffee cake (\$5.75).



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12 p.m. **Take a trolley ride through a historic Black neighborhood**

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Twelve years after Sarasota was incorporated as a town in 1902, its Newtown neighborhood was born — 40 acres of land designated for Black people. Since 2016, Newtown Alive has recorded the neighborhood’s oral history. One life story that emerged is that of Leonard Reid, one of the city’s first Black settlers: His restored 1920s house opened as a donation-based museum in Newtown in



January. Newtown Alive offers trolley tours (\$45 per person) where guests learn about the local Black community's struggles and successes, including Sarasota's "wade-ins," when activists organized group trips to the beach in the 1950s to protest being barred from Florida's beaches (this continued until the Civil Rights Act of 1964). The trolley tours don't operate on a regular schedule and depart from different locations; send an email inquiry.



Leonard Reid House

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2 p.m. **See the circus in its miniature glory**

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When John Ringling (who created the Ringling Brothers Circus with his siblings) died in 1936, he bequeathed his Sarasota mansion, estate and a museum housing his art collection to Florida. Today, these properties are part of the Ringling: an impressive complex that includes gardens, a fascinating Circus Museum and a robust Museum of Art (entry to the complex, from \$25). Within the Circus Museum, see a 3,800-square-foot, gorgeously detailed model of a 1900s circus. Colorful miniatures bring to life thousands of workers, performers, spectators and animals. Spy bushels of apples and squash; clothes hanging to dry; and teeny-tiny coffee pots. Another gem in the Circus Museum is the Ringlings' private railroad car, the early-20th-century equivalent of a private jet, that had beds, toilets, plush velvet couches and a bathtub.

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6:30 p.m. **Gorge on fried gator, stone crab and lobster**

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At Phillippi Creek Oyster Bar, a plastic, kitschy, white-bearded seafarer named Captain Billy stands at attention at the entrance. Inside, paintings of boats and fake, life-size sharks adorn the walls. Outside, tables and benches are arranged on a tall dock that juts into Phillippi Creek; peek over the side to spot a roaming alligator. For a big group — or a hungry couple — a popular choice is the King's Seafood Boil, with lobster tails, peel-and-eat shrimp, sausage, potatoes and Dungeness crab legs, boiled and tossed in garlic butter seasoning (\$119.95). The restaurant is known for its fried gator chunks, like chicken meat, but tougher (\$14.95). Dip in tartar sauce or in the addictive Gator Hammock hot sauce, made in South Florida and available on request.



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8:30 p.m. **Bar crawl with tourists and locals**

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By night, Siesta Key Village, a neighborhood with chilled-out beach-town vibes on the north tip of Siesta Key, becomes a nightlife spot for different generations, who come to drink, dance or watch a game at a sports bar. One beloved standby is Siesta Key Oyster Bar, where dollar bills cover the walls, and a festive drinks list features plenty of rum and flavored vodkas, as well as an oyster



shooter (yes, with a raw mollusk, \$9). Live music acts perform nightly, and local beers are available on draft. Across the street is Gilligan's Island Bar, a tiki bar with a loungey backyard where you can relax in swings or wooden beach chairs. Surfboards adorn the walls and upbeat pop, disco and reggaeton play on the speakers.



Siesta Key Oyster Bar





The John Ringling Causeway is one of two bridges linking Sarasota to Lido Key.

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## Sunday

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9 a.m. **Find your flow, then your breakfast**

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Sarasota is no hippie beach town, but its health-conscious side emerges on weekends, with farmers' markets bursting with produce, and yoga sessions packed with sweat worshippers. Join in at a popular fitness studio called Shack, whose Waterside Place location in north Sarasota offers 45-minute "sculpt" classes,

combining yoga, strength training and Pilates in a heated room (\$30). Afterward, wander through the Lakewood Ranch Farmers' Market, open 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Grab a fermented tea in a flavor like black cherry and vanilla at Boombacha Kombucha (\$5), or a flaky blueberry-filled croissant from the Rendez Vous French Bakery truck (\$4.50). The market has live music, and a lawn next to Good Liquid Brewing Company with free arts and crafts or storytelling events for kids, and cornhole boards.



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11 a.m. **Float among the manatees and gators**

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Head to central Sarasota for a kayak tour where you'll explore mangrove tunnels while spotting dolphins, manatees, starfish and crabs. A two-hour group tour around Lido Key and Sarasota Bay with Kayaking SRQ costs \$59 per person, and Liquid Blue Outfitters in Bird Key Park offers pedal kayak tours of Sarasota Bay for those who'd rather work their legs than their arms (\$69 per person, two-and-a-half hours). To see alligators, drive a half-hour southeast of downtown to Myakka River State Park. A kayak or canoe at Myakka Outpost costs \$20 for the first hour, \$5 for each additional hour (without a guide). You'll easily see the spiky backs of gators lazily floating in the lake nestled among palm trees. Follow the Golden Rule: Treat them as you'd like them to treat you.





Lido Key