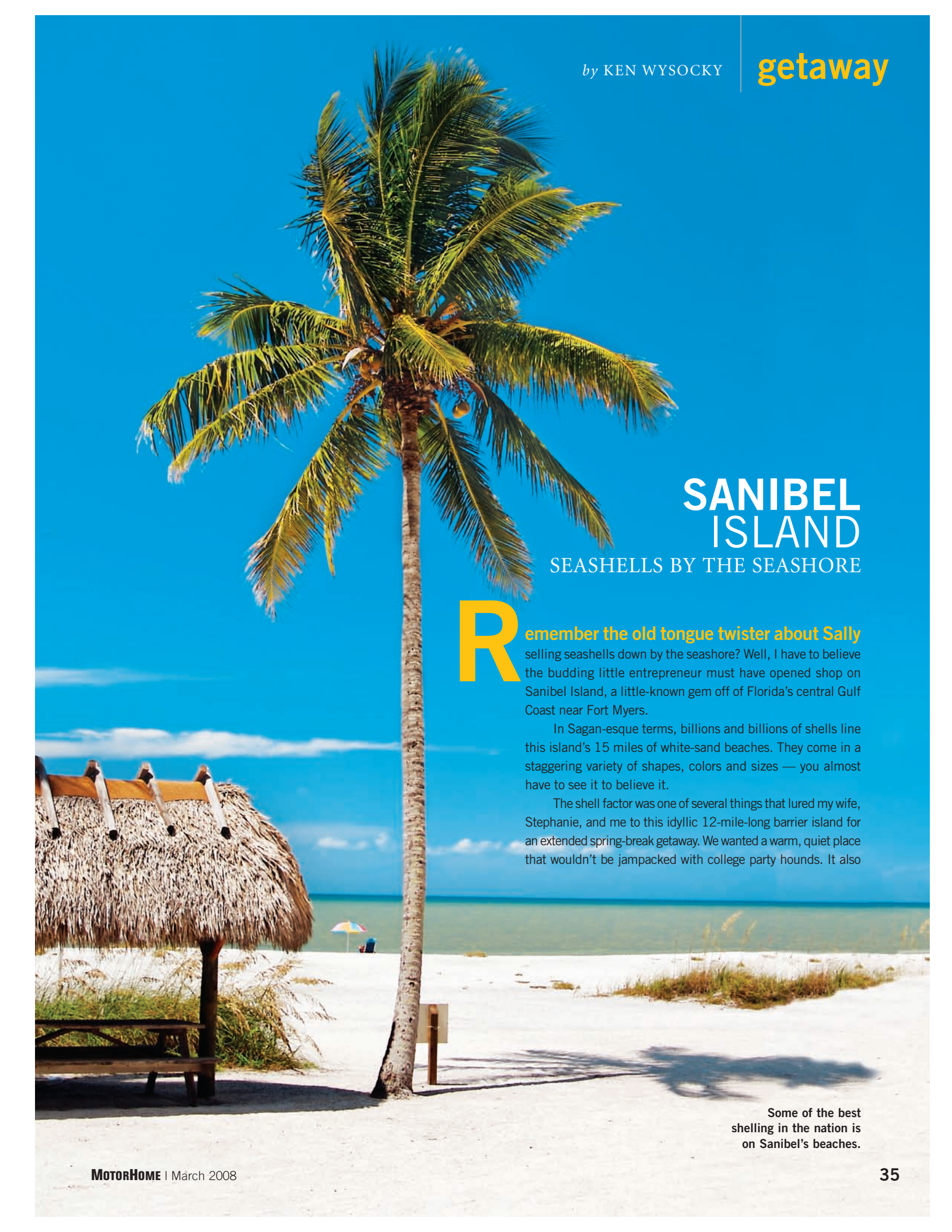




by KEN WYOCKY

getaway

SANIBEL ISLAND

SEASHELLS BY THE SEASHORE

Remember the old tongue twister about Sally selling seashells down by the seashore? Well, I have to believe the budding little entrepreneur must have opened shop on Sanibel Island, a little-known gem off of Florida's central Gulf Coast near Fort Myers.

In Sagan-esque terms, billions and billions of shells line this island's 15 miles of white-sand beaches. They come in a staggering variety of shapes, colors and sizes — you almost have to see it to believe it.

The shell factor was one of several things that lured my wife, Stephanie, and me to this idyllic 12-mile-long barrier island for an extended spring-break getaway. We wanted a warm, quiet place that wouldn't be jampacked with college party hounds. It also

Some of the best
shelling in the nation is
on Sanibel's beaches.

THE MAIN ATTRACTION ON SANIBEL IS WORLD-CLASS SHELLING, WHICH IS THE RESULT OF A GEOGRAPHIC QUIRK.

UNLIKE MOST BARRIER ISLANDS, SANIBEL — WHICH IS 5 MILES ACROSS AT ITS WIDEST POINT AND SHAPED SORT OF LIKE A SHRIMP — RUNS MOSTLY EAST AND WEST

had to appeal to our 5-year-old daughter, Maddy, as well as her 17-year-old sister, Jenny, who wanted to shop and sunbathe.

Sanibel — visited by Ponce de León in the early 1500s during his ill-fated search for the fabled “Fountain of Youth” — was a perfect compromise. This former pirate haunt isn’t the overdeveloped Florida in which you may be accustomed. In fact, more than two-thirds of the island is protected from development, thanks to land-use restrictions approved in the mid-1970s.

That may irk covetous developers. But it’s a tonic for tourists — especially RVers looking to hunker down amid a laid-back vibe that evokes Jimmy Buffett searching for his lost shaker of salt. You’ll see what I mean after you fork over a \$6 one-way toll and head across the 3-mile causeway that connects Sanibel to the mainland.

As you drive down the whimsically named Periwinkle Way, the island’s main thoroughfare, you won’t see high-rise buildings, annoying traffic lights or obnoxious big-box retailers or chain and fast-food restaurants. OK, there is a Dairy Queen, but judging by the lines of people spilling out the doors every night, no one seems to mind it one bit. Instead, you’ll find a menagerie of brightly painted eateries such as The Lazy Flamingo (“If our seafood were any fresher, we would be serving it underwater”).

The island also features palm trees galore, cool art galleries, gift shops and the sprawling J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge, one of the Big Kahunas of the

PHOTOS: KATHLEEN BLASE/COURTESY OF SANIBEL-CAPTIVA COG; DAVE MEARDON/COURTESY OF SANIBEL-CAPTIVA COG



Sanibel is one of the “Big Kahunas” of the Florida birding scene.



Shell-hunters doing what locals call the “Sanibel Stoop.”

SANIBEL ISLAND

Florida birding scene. And if that's not enough to float your boat, 25 miles of smooth, paved bike paths meander around the island. Think Key West's more down-to-earth cousin, and you'll get the picture.

After you park your rig, you won't need to drive again until you leave — virtually everything is within walking or biking distance. Besides, biking is a much better way to soak up the island's ambience.

DO THE SANIBEL STOOP

The main attraction on Sanibel, however, is world-class shelling, which is the result of a geographic quirk. Unlike most barrier islands, Sanibel — which is 5 miles across at its widest point and shaped sort of like a shrimp — runs mostly east and west, not north and south. As such, the island serves as a giant shell-snagger whenever tides and winds agitate the billions of shells resting on a sandy plateau that extends far into the Gulf of Mexico. (It's best to hunt for shells at low tide when there's a new or full moon after storms.)

For RVers, three public-access beaches have parking for large vehicles (a \$2-an-hour fee applies). Once you're on the beach, you



Sanibel Island has 25 miles of smooth, paved bike paths.

can walk for miles.

I was surprised at how relaxing it was to comb through the shells. (It's advisable to wear a hat and lightweight water shoes or sandals, as some shells have sharp edges.) As you search, you're bound to see other folks doing what locals refer to as the "Sanibel Stoop" — bent over at the waist, head down, pail in hand, scrutinizing shells. (To find large shells, wade out about waist-deep in the surf and shuffle your feet along the sandbars.)

At first, we found plenty of common shells, with fanciful names like sailor's ear, lightning whelk, calico scallop, fighting conch and lion and kitten paw. After a couple of

days, though, we got fussier about which shells we'd collect. (Keep in mind that it's illegal to remove live shells.) Sneering at the more common varieties, we instead held out for real finds, like a rare junonia or an entire saw tooth pen shell. No luck in that department, but we had a great time trying.

SEE SHELLS ON DISPLAY

Of course, if shell-hunting isn't your strong suit, you can always connect with your inner mollusk at the renowned Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum, where hundreds of perfect specimens are on display. A rainy Sunday morning gave us the perfect excuse to visit

PHOTO: KATHLEEN BLASE/COURTESY OF SANIBEL-CAPTIVA COC

**SPEND MORE TIME
ON THE ROAD,
LESS IN THE SHOP.**

this nonprofit museum, named after Frank Bailey and his wife, Annie Matthews. Their three sons — island pioneers Francis, Samuel and John — donated 8 acres of land for the museum in memory of their parents.

Here we learned there's much more to shells than meets the eye. The museum offers a fascinating look at the native Calusas (who used the bountiful shells for weapons, tools and money), amazingly delicate works of art made from shells, the ecosystems in which shells live and the role of shells in modern medicine.

I couldn't help but gawk at the world-record lightning whelk shell, found in 1958. At a whopping 15½ inches long, it's the mother of lightning whelks — and after viewing hundreds of run-of-the-mill whelks that aren't more than 2 or 3 inches long, you'll truly appreciate its size.

We loved browsing through this collection of shells, and learned some interesting trivia that made us favorites at cocktail parties upon our return home. For instance, did you know that a shell's color depends on factors such as diet, inherited genes and environment? That some mollusks never grow bigger than a grain of sand? That some mol-

luskus stay in the exact same place for life? Or that an octopus is actually a type of mollusk?

HEAD INTO THE WILD

No visit here would be complete without a walk, drive or hike through the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, a 6,400-acre treasure-trove of wildlife and unspoiled wetlands. The refuge is named after Jay Darling, a Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist for the *Des Moines Register* back in the 1930s and '40s. An ardent conservationist, Darling wintered on adjacent Captiva Island.

There's plenty of parking designated just for RVs. Be sure to bring a camera because more than 220 species of birds have been spotted in the refuge, which is also home to 51 species of reptiles and amphibians and 32 species of mammals. Fall through spring is the best time for bird-watching. We rode through during the early afternoon, so the bird-watching was a bit sparser than at prime feeding time, which is about an hour before or after low tide each morning.

Nonetheless, we did spot some beautiful white ibises, as well as an alligator. Even if you don't know a roseate spoonbill from a

sea gull, the vast cordgrass marshes and dense stands of mangrove forests offer a desolate, serene beauty that's well worth the ride.

All in all, Sanibel is the antithesis of glitz. But for a family getaway that's as refreshing as Key lime pie and relaxing as a nap in a hammock — and RV-friendly to boot — Sanibel Island is definitely a shore thing. ♦

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