



Greasepaint and Alligators

Sarasota offers a peek at life in the circus and the great outdoors.

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Ah, January. The month of snow days and salt trucks, mud and misery. This 31-day eternity makes many people long for the hot, hazy, humid days of summer or, better yet, for a quick vacation to Florida. Fortunately, this month's big event—the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday—provides the perfect opportunity for a quick, three-day jaunt to the Sunshine State.

Florida offers lots of vacation options, of course, but you have to be careful. Very careful. People in Kentuckiana love to spend spring break on the Panhandle's beaches, for example, but January can be an iffy proposition that far north. Although average January temperatures in Destin range from 37 to 61 degrees, the record low for the month is just 4 degrees. (Granted, that's a whole lot better than Louisville's January record of minus 28, but it's not exactly balmy.) The Panhandle also gets its share of precipitation in January—about twice as much as Louisville, in fact.

For a January vacation that doesn't feel like January, you need to head farther south. One great option is Sarasota. Positioned midway between Tampa and Fort Myers on the Gulf Coast, Sarasota is easily accessible from both cities' airports. It offers lots of kid-friendly attractions and lets you experience the "real" Florida without leaving civilization behind. And if you ever wanted to run away and join the circus, Sarasota is the place to go.

Like most coastal communities, Sarasota got its start as a fishing village. But in 1927, greasepaint replaced fishing gear as the fuel for the town's economy. That was the year the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus established its winter quarters in

Sarasota. Although the winter quarters are long gone, the city remains the home of many circuses and circus performers, as well as the Ringling Estate. This 66-acre jewel along Sarasota Bay includes the Cà d'Zan Mansion, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (the state's official art museum), and—most significantly for the under-12 set—the Ringling Museum of the American Circus.

Established in 1948, the Circus Museum displays everything from handbills and art prints to props and parade wagons. But the collection's highlight is the world's largest miniature circus, which will have its premiere on Saturday, Jan. 14. Dubbed the Howard Bros. Circus, the model was built by Howard Tibbals over the past 50 years. It includes eight main tents, 55 railroad cars, 152 circus wagons, 1,500 performers and workers, 700 folding chairs for spectators, and more than 500 animals. The model, which takes up 3,800 square feet of space (enough room for 11 school buses), is the centerpiece of the new Tibbals Learning Center, which doubles the museum's exhibit space.

Other Sarasota attractions connect you to the great outdoors. On Longboat Key are a pair of facilities that share a common goal: taking care of Florida's native species. The Mote Marine Laboratory studies sharks, manatees, and other sea creatures, while the Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary cares for thousands of injured birds each year; both attractions let you get close to many of the native species Florida is famous for.

The bird sanctuary is the permanent home to representatives of 70 species, including brown pelicans, white ibises, great blue herons, and roseate spoonbills. Throughout the day, you can learn how birds are raised in captivity, watch the staff care for baby raptors, or even feed a pelican yourself.

Across the street at the marine lab, you'll find exhibits on sharks, dolphins, manatees, and sea turtles. If you dare, you can touch a stingray! (Don't worry, the barbs have been removed.)

The Mote Marine Laboratory is also the jumping-off point for two-hour eco-tours through Sarasota Bay. During one of these pontoon-boat cruises, run by the Sarasota Bay Explorers, a marine biologist will tell you about the area's ecology, take you on a nature walk around an uninhabited island, and help you look for dolphins and manatees. When the guide pulls up a sample of marine life with a trawl net, your kids can handle such curious critters as puffer fish, seahorses, and stone crabs.

You can also get close to nature at Myakka River State Park, about 18 miles east of downtown. One of Florida's oldest and largest state parks, this 45-square-mile property offers scenic drives, miles of hiking trails, and ample opportunities for canoeing and kayaking. At the park, you can sign up for an airboat tour of Upper Myakka Lake or a tram tour of the backcountry.

As a mid-sized tourist-friendly city, Sarasota offers plenty of lodging options, especially along Interstate 75 and US-41 (Tamiami Trail). As for dining, the choices are surprisingly varied. There's plenty of seafood, of course, but you'll also find restaurants with Amish, Asian, Italian, Latin, and Middle Eastern influences.

For a truly magical meal, consider Houdini's Showplace, magician Vince Carmen's magic dinner theater. Carmen has toured internationally and worked for years at Circus Circus in Las Vegas and Reno. Now, he and his wife have created a dinner theater that

combines comedy, large illusions, and audience participation. Don't be surprised if he stops by your table for a close-up trick or two.

The only trick Carmen can't perform is transporting Sarasota's weather to Kentucky. After your whirlwind trip to the coast, you'll have to return to the cruel reality of January. Take heart, however; spring is just a couple of months away.