

Destination: Palm Island, FL

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It was time to escape *Snowmageddon*.

After enduring the second major blizzard in a week in southern New Jersey, my kids and I were elated to wake up to brilliant sunshine gleaming through our windows. With more than two feet of snow piled up on our front lawn, the day was especially bright, and the thought of escaping the worst winter in history tantalized our inner beach-loving souls – we were leaving our iceberg filled beaches for palm tree-lined shores – for a place in sunny Florida aptly named Palm Island.

We knew the temperature forecast for the island probably wouldn't be hitting 70 degrees, but it didn't matter, just as long as we could feel warm sunshine on our faces and see grass again. So we gathered our overstuffed luggage together (my rollerblades were crammed one in each of the kids' suitcases) and headed to the car. The kids, ages 11 and 8, were already tightly buckled in the back seat – their anticipation growing.

Luckily, we hit the street without getting stuck in the snowy driveway – and our escape finally looked like it would become a reality. We flew from Atlantic City International into Tampa International Airport, although Fort Myers (also known as Southwest Florida International Airport) was another nearby choice. After a short drive south we stopped at Tarpon Real Estate, located in Placida, to pick up our keys and load up on groceries at a store located right next door. (Placida features everything you could possibly need on your vacation – restaurants, stores, you name it.)

We then took a five-minute ride on a car ferry to gain access to Palm Island.

If you're a kid from the 70's, then you may remember watching Gilligan's Island – this iconic TV show was filmed on an enchantingly remote and tropical island filled with palm trees. Palm Island has a similar feel, but in place of straw huts from the TV show are multi-million-dollar, beautifully designed homes. These homes are not like the "McMansions" disproportionately situated on a spit of land like we often see at the Jersey Shore; rather, these are lavish, gracefully styled dwellings surrounded by natural greenery and of course, the majestic beauty of all types of different palm trees.

Ahh... we had finally reached *Palmageddon*.

Palm Island sits on the Intracoastal Waterway on Florida's southwest Gulf Coast, midway between Sarasota and Fort Myers. Connected to Don Pedro and Little Gasparilla, it features seven miles of beach and is 700 yards at its widest point.

In the 1960's the Army Corps of Engineers dismantled the single wooden bridge connecting the island to the mainland. Since then, the island has been accessible

only via water transportation. Luckily for those of us who do not own a private boat, the island is accessible via a public car ferry operated by Palm Island Transit and keeps a daily year-round schedule.

If you want to unplug from everyday life, Palm Island is the place to do it. The locals say the months of May, September and October are especially peaceful here. Imagine vacationing in a big sandcastle surrounded by a moat. There are no billboards, high-rises, fast food restaurants or traffic lights; only one small store and restaurant. You'll rarely even see a car drive by, as golf carts are a favorite way to cruise around the island. A local company, Hick's Golf Carts, will even deliver a cart right to your front door. You'll see plenty of strollers, joggers and even an occasional roller blader (that would be me, since I tote my blades everywhere I travel). I did enjoy a smooth and picturesque blade down the island's main thoroughfare while the kids rode bikes.

Palm Island's beach features silky, flow-through-your-toes sand and beautiful, undamaged shells of every shape, color and size. "*Shelling*" is a favorite pastime here. We found more shells than we could possibly carry during our leisurely beach stroll, and took the best ones home as prized souvenirs.

Many of the island's homes have tropical themed names – ours was called *No Particular Harbor* – yes, the Jimmy Buffett song title spin-off perfectly captures the essence of a paradise like this. This spectacular four-bedroom home was custom built for families to chill out and relax – complete with flat-screen satellite TVs, a fully-equipped kitchen, large master suite, screened porches, outdoor pool (and pool toys), adults' and kids' bikes, washer and dryer, and a 30-foot private deepwater dock with fish-cleaning station.

Fishing is fabulous here – saltwater trophies like tarpon, redfish and snook ply the waters of the gulf. Fishing charters, kayaking, water skiing and boat rentals are all located nearby and are the best way to get a close-up look at the region's dolphins, manatees and sea birds.

Captain Dick James operates the nearby Scenic Tours & Water Taxi featuring "custom" tours he designs off the top of his head. Originally from Tampa, he moved to the area over a decade ago and bought a boat with his wife. This guy really knows his stuff, as we found as we took one of our own custom tours. Along the way, he pointed out the various birds - including osprey, egrets and pelicans. He shared his considerable knowledge about the indigenous water species, wildlife, tides/currents and weather, but his talent for persuading dolphins to swim in our wake impressed us the most. He smartly got a cue from a fellow fisherman passing by as to where the dolphins might be congregating that day and quickly took us to them. It was fun to watch as they played hide and seek with us... but Captain Dick knew exactly what to do to get them to frolic and follow our boat. He slowly crept up ahead of them and then gently drove away, knowing that dolphins love to swim in a boat's cascading wake. Captain Dick did an expert job - we actually had three dolphins follow us for more than 10 minutes. What a thrill for the kids – the dolphins were so close you could almost touch them. He told us that the summer brings the manatees out, too, and spotting one of the sea cows in their natural habitat is definitely a

site to behold. You can take a ride with Captain Dick by stopping by Eldred's Marina (located on the Boca Grande Causeway before the toll) or he'll pick you up right at your dock. If you have your own boat, he'll hop aboard to give you a guided tour.

After our boating adventure, we made the short ride over to Gasparilla Island's lovely village of Boca Grande. Its charming, traditional downtown features two square blocks of cute boutique shops, art galleries and family-owned restaurants. We heard that the Loose Caboose, located in an historic train depot, was a good place for family dining and it didn't disappoint. Their creamy homemade ice cream with luscious flavors like Chocolate Overload, Rum Raisin and Mango Apricot was the perfect ending to a great meal. We also made a quick stop at the Boca Grande Historic Lighthouse, which is located right at the beach and offered another great shelling spot and a great way to cap off of our trip.

Now that we've returned to the Garden State (that moniker seems ironic with the mountains of snow all around), there are already reports of an impending snow storm. But the next time we're shoveling, we can warm ourselves by daydreaming about our Palm Island escape and humming a lyric from Jimmy Buffett's *One Particular Harbor* tune: "It's a magic kind of medicine that no doctor could prescribe."

Information:

No Particular Harbor
609-390-0600
www.palmislandstay.com

Tarpon Rental Services
Holly Haynes, Property Manager
941-697-9797
www.tarponrealty.com

Palm Island Transit
www.Palmislandtransit.com

Hicks Golf Carts
Jim Hicks
941-967-2442

Scenic Tours & Water Taxi
Capt. Dick James
941-662-6084
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Loose Caboose Restaurant
941-964-0440
www.Loosecaboose.biz

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