

# St. Pete: 23 miles of sun-kissed beach

**Leigh Cort**

Special to The Recorder

How comforting being transported back to 1962 at the Sirata Beach Resort on St. Petersburg Beach — exuding the charm of fifty years ago coupled with the warmth and modern amenities that make a hotel vacation meaningful. But it was the magnificence of the shallow, warm and glistening surf of the Gulf of Mexico that tantalized my imagination when choosing a getaway to restore life's energies.

Post WW II this 23-mile barrier island was awakening from a long nap with a fascinating history of U.S. government ownership, swarthy fishermen who still boast about the plentiful 'catch, pirates and Prohibition scandal. Today it's one of the heaviest populated Florida regions that offers 300+ days of sunshine each year, nicknaming St. Pete Beach "The Sunshine City".

The Nicklaus family, owners of the Sirata Beach Resort and Convention Center, is enjoying a fourth generation of hospitality professionals who owe their legacy and vision to grandfather Harry Nicklaus. Pittsburgh roots changed course when, in 1962, he purchased the Gulf front property and opened a small 46-unit motel on the spot where the current 386 room resort now stands. Known for exemplary guest service, my first visit was no exception. From Mike's warm welcome at the front desk to a personal phone call shortly thereafter to see if everything was to my liking, I felt immediately at home.

Coffee cup in hand sitting on my balcony with a view of vigorous beachcombers, it was a beautiful beginning to the early morning. Sirata's Compass Grille was buzzing with breakfast guests — a casual restaurant that serves three meals daily with an emphasis on Caribbean and Florida local cuisine. If you've slept in and feel hungry for a poolside lunch, Rum Runners is situated directly on the white sandy beach with an unparalleled view of the blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico. On one side is the privately-owned beachfront. The other side is the South Pool with colorful cabanas surrounding the landscape. The 'Little Gangster' menu and Speakeasy Pizza tells the story. Harry's Beach Bar is a wonderful option for folks who love to be seen or become part of the local scene. It's a great place to get the 'flavor' of what makes St. Pete Beach a fun destination — especially if Joey the Bartender is keeping you informed of familiar faces or an occasional famous one!

Within a short 2-mile drive south from the Resort, visit the village of old Pass-A-Grille (Est. 1911). One of Florida's original beach communities on the west coast, this charmer is one



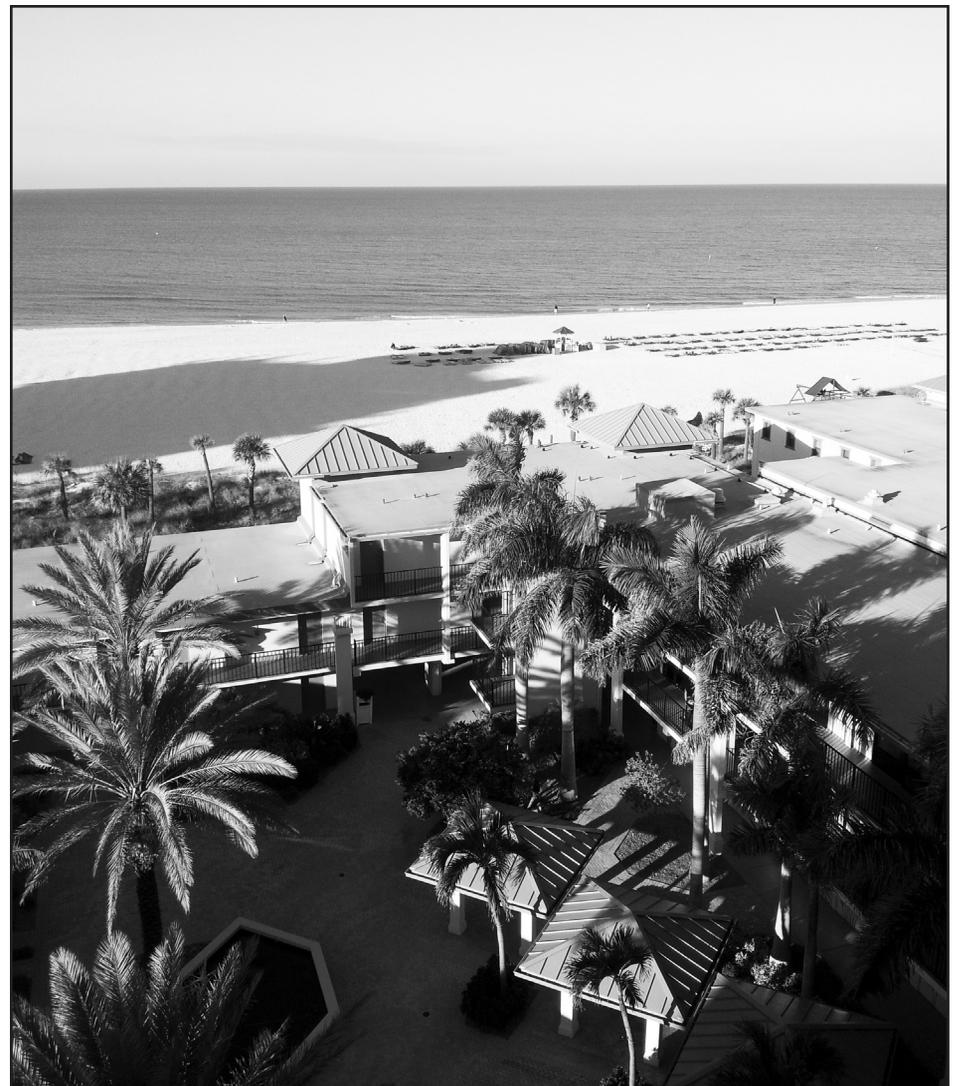
Photos provided by Leigh Cort

Sirata Beach Resort of St. Petersburg Beach, Fla., knows how to set the scene for relaxing

block wide and 31 blocks long, boasting a colorful past of pirates and smugglers, an area of history and individuality. Robert Ripley, of "Believe it or Not" fame once called 8th Avenue "America's shortest and most beautiful main street". Finding the Seahorse Tavern & Restaurant for lunch, I stepped back into the 1930's on an open air bayside deck. Nearly every dish on the casual menu is under \$9. Take time to browse the walls and tables for artwork and photos depicting events from the past: neighbors, friends, employees and disasters included!

Two doors from the Seahorse is Galene's, an eclectic shop and 1908 home where you can lose yourself in colorfully creative arts & crafts. Sea treasures are the specialty. Ask Galene about her resident ghost, Judge L.C. Schwerdtfeger, who built one of Pass-A-Grille's earliest and still standing structures. There are a few picturesque shops in Pass-a-Grille; this is a great place to begin. Leave time to photograph or stroll the uncrowded Gulf beach.

**ECO ADVENTURES:** For the more adventurous, hop aboard the Shell Key Shuttle boat at Merry Pier across from the Seahorse (on 8th Street) and plan for a dolphin, shelling, birding or snorkeling trip for \$25. They sched-



The view from my terrace at Sirata Beach Resort — a tropical setting on the Gulf of Mexico.

# Travels

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ule three trips daily to Shell Key and know how to make the excursions easy and fun, providing umbrellas and shell bags to each visitor with knowledgeable instruction about the island's offerings. Bring your own cooler and beach stuff; picnic supplies available at the Dock. The Sunset Cruise (1.5 hours) opens the door to the beauty of St. Pete Beach and the 23 mile long barrier island. It's pet friendly too! Fishing charters are popular for grouper, sea bass, mangrove and grey snapper. They provide the fishing license (priced from \$75/pp to full day private

charters \$625). And if you crave a fish dinner right from the dock, you can buy fresh catch at the pier to take home and prepare yourself. www.ShellKeyShuttle.com . Parking at meters gets pricey at \$1.50/hour so they offer a special parking pass.

One of the area's most visitor-friendly services is the www.FreeBeachRide.com. And it is true – it's free! Place a call and within minutes a driver picks you up and takes you to wherever you care to dine, shop or adventure in the Beach area. Your tip is their 'thanks'. They operate a variety of vehicles and stay out until you care to return back — services as late as 2:00am.

Although St. Pete is known for being one of the most populated Florida

cities, somehow the people I met made me feel like I fit in and that they appreciated my visit. Nobody was too busy to engage in conversation and discuss why they loved the town too. P.S. I've reserved my accommodations at the Sirata Beach Resort for next Thanksgiving. It's already a tradition!

**Compass Grille** — A wonderful hotel restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Don't judge this eatery by its location inside the Sirata Beach Resort. They know about good food and it shows, especially if you're starting the day with a hearty breakfast (Sirata Skillet, Stack of Chocolate Chip Pancakes or oversized Omelet). Bobbie,



Provided by Leigh Cort  
Breakfast at Sirata Beach — try the Sirata Skillet at Compass Grille.

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OYSTER PERPETUAL YACHT-MASTER II



Avenues Mall (904) 394-1390  
The Shoppes of Ponte Vedra (904) 280-1202  
Avondale 3617 St. John's Ave. (904) 388-5406  
San Marco 2044 San Marco Blvd. (904) 398-9741  
Jacksonville, Florida 32207

ROLEX OYSTER PERPETUAL AND YACHT-MASTER ARE TRADEMARKS.

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# CCPVB December events calendar

## The Recorder

The Cultural Center at Ponte Vedra Beach has a number of holiday art programs scheduled for December and January. Art camps costs \$40 for members and \$50 for nonmembers.

The Cultural Center is located at 50 Executive Way in Ponte Vedra Beach. For more information, visit [www.ccpvb.org](http://www.ccpvb.org) or call (904) 280-0614.

Holiday Arts Camps, ages 4-8  
Very Merry Me, Dec. 19

Create a collage, painting or home-made cards with pictures of yourself. Bring your favorite pictures.

Spectacular Stocking Stuffers, Dec. 20

Make a mini-Monet for mom or a tiny treat for dad for the holiday family festivities. Members \$40, nonmembers \$50.

Presently Surprised, Dec. 21

Create personalized presents for family, friends and even pets.

Snow Globe, Dec. 26

Pop into the paint pantry and pick a shiny silver or glittery gold to create art projects that glimmer and shimmer.

Scrumptious Sugar Sculptures, Dec. 27

Forget fruitcakes and sculpt a sugary igloo or build marshmallow snowmen during this very delicious camp day.

Noise Makers and Party Favors, Dec. 28

Countdown to 2013 by making hats, bubble wrap snaps and confetti creations. Bring your party favors and noise makers to the New Years Eve Balloon Drop on Dec. 31.

New Year's Eve Balloon Drop, Dec. 31, 11 a.m.-noon

The Cultural Center is bringing back the bang with the New Years Eve Balloon Drop. The event will feature pizza, cookies, a performance by Dalton Cyr and more. Hundreds of balloons will drop at noon.

The event is free for members, \$5 per person or \$15 for a family of four. Pay at the door; space is limited. No pets or strollers.

## Travels

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Manager, and staff know how to start a guest's day!. [www.Sirata.com](http://www.Sirata.com) St. Pete Beach

### Verducci Pizzeria Trattoria

Giovanni and Alex are masterful at creating sumptuous and authentic old world Italian food. With a heavy hand at abundance and flavor, every dish is made from scratch. Who can resist a dozen perfectly sautéed Little neck clams with garlic, olive oil and fresh cherry tomatoes? Or Meatball Ricottara followed by homemade Gnocchi Sorrentina? It's a family restaurant specializing in thin crust brick oven pizzas too. [www.verduccisStpeteBeach.com](http://www.verduccisStpeteBeach.com)

**The Wharf** — Come by boat, car or trolley to Pass-A-Grille's best kept secret. Drink and dine with the locals. Spectacular views of Tierra Verde and Shell Island, Very casual dining features seafood 'baskets', Tampa Bay Rockefeller, Steamed Shrimp and nightly specials. [www.wharfrestaurant.org](http://www.wharfrestaurant.org) Pass-A-Grille

**Mar Vista** — Worthy of a 30 mile drive to Longboat Key across the expansive Tampa Bay, Mar Vista is a cherished outdoor 'Old Florida' dining experience circa 1912, housed in one of the longest standing buildings on the Key. The dockside 'rustic' restaurant is known for great food and

### SIRATA BEACH RESORT

**High notes:** Friendly caring staff (285) who understand how to make guests happy The BEST white bath towels and sparkling clean accommodations. Lots of outdoor waterfront seating, tables, picnic benches, chaise lounges, bars. Children's beach play area and three beachfront pools

**Cultural adventures:** St. Petersburg has been chosen to be the hone of two outstanding artists' collections — the new Dali Museum and the Chihuly Collection. Either one or both could qualify for a primary reason to visit the city this year.

**Shopaholics:** Heading a few miles south of the Sirata, John's Pass is one of Florida's most visited tourist attractions. Surrounded by water, it's a quaint turn-of-the-century fishing village with 100+ merchants. There is endless retail shopping, a wide variety of restaurants, a local fishing fleet, boat rentals, parasailing and jet skiing. Lots of parking makes it one of the region's memorable shopping/dining/fun places to forget your cares.

dynamite views. Owner Ed Chiles maintains its flavor and history while serving signature dishes for lunch and dinner. Don't miss the Bud and Old Bay Steamed Shrimp with Garlic Butter, Blackened Grouper Sandwich, Steamer Pot with bountiful local seafood, Coconut Shrimp Salad and Red Curry Chilean Seabass! [www.marvista.groupersandwich.com](http://www.marvista.groupersandwich.com) Longboat Key

**Middle Grounds Grill** — Named after the famous Florida Middle Grounds, located 100 miles offshore Treasure Island... known for its abundant supply of quality fish. From chowders to fresh Gulf grouper, they serve dinner nightly. Entrees \$18-\$50. Dine outdoors or in — entertainment four nights a week. [www.middle-groundsgrill.com](http://www.middle-groundsgrill.com)

**Hurricane Seafood Restaurant** Rick Falkenstein and family have

owned this hopping, buzzing fabulous restaurant since 1977. Hurricane's offers great food at affordable prices served on three levels overlooking the entire south end of the Gulf, Bay and St. Pete Beach. From their location in the center of Pass A Grille it's difficult to choose from the open deck or rooftop bar. Open from 7 a.m. daily, their breakfast, lunch and dinner brings people from everywhere to kick of their shoes and watch the scene. The entire staff gets involved with voting on and creating the menu that appeals to every appetite. Don't miss the world famous original Grouper Sandwich. Cut daily, hand-breaded to order, lightly fried and served on a corn-dusted Kaiser bun with home-made tartar sauce! [www.TheHurricane.com](http://www.TheHurricane.com)

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\*Lease financing provided by BMW Financial Services NA, LLC/Financial Services Vehicle Trust through January 02, 2013 W.A.C. BMW 328i Sedan monthly Lease payments of \$299.00 for 39 months based on MSRP of \$38,245.00. \$299 First Month Payment. \$3,350 Down Payment. \$0 Security Deposit. \$3,814 Total Cash Due At Signing. Total Lease payments are \$11,661.00. Purchase option at lease end for \$22,947.00 excluded taxes. Holiday Credit is a \$1,000 credit against the MSRP of the final loan or lease on a 328i Sedan through January 02, 2013. Loyalty Credit is a \$750 credit against the MSRP of the final loan or lease on a 328i Sedan through January 02, 2013. 2013 BMW X3 xDrive35i monthly lease payments of \$469 for 36 months based on MSRP of \$47,945.00. \$469 First Month Payment. \$2,750 Down Payment. \$0 Security Deposit. \$3,944 Cash Due At Signing. Total Lease Payments are \$16,884.00. Purchase option at lease end for \$28,767.00 excluded taxes. Holiday Credit is a \$1000 credit against the MSRP of the final loan or lease on a X3 xDrive35i through January 02, 2013. Loyalty Credit is a \$750 credit against the MSRP of the final loan or lease on a X3 xDrive35i through January 02, 2013. \$750 Loyalty Credit available for returning BMW customers only. Total amount financed includes \$895 Acquisition Fee. Excludes tax, title, license and registration fees. Program available to qualified customers. Dealer contribution may affect terms. 2.9% APR for 36 months applies only to select BMW models and model years. Lessee must cover insurance and all items not covered under the BMW Maintenance Program. At lease end, lessee will be liable for disposition fee (\$350.00), any excess wear and use as set forth in the lease agreement and excess mileage charges of \$0.30 per mile for miles driven in excess of 30,000 miles. \*\*All BMW's come with BMW Ultimate Service and Warranty standard for 4 years/50,000 miles whichever comes first. See [bmwusa.com](http://bmwusa.com) for full details on \$0 Maintenance, certain exclusions may apply. Not responsible for typographical errors. Pictures are for illustrative purposes only.