



On the Hook

Anchoring Options and Strategies for Southwest Florida

By Pierce Hoover, Editor-at-Large

Each winter, hundreds of cruisers follow the compass south to Florida, seeking seasonal shelter from the cold. Depending on preferences and finances, these crews may drop the hook, tie up in a slip, or divide their time between anchorages and marinas.

Both coasts of the Sunshine State host a multitude of marinas, and it's usually possible to find a cove or at least wide spot on the Intracoastal Waterway where anchoring is allowed. But, waterfront communities from Jacksonville to Pensacola continue to attract development. It is becoming more difficult each year to find highly desirable anchorages that provide an ideal combination of solitude, adequate depth and holding, and reasonable proximity to services.

Without a doubt, the region that offers the greatest number



WALT STEARNS, OPPOSITE LEE COUNTY VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU/WWW.FORWATERSANBELLOM.COM

Many favorite anchorages in Pine Island Sound lie well outside the markers, but are reasonably easy to find. Picnic Island (left) can be reached by a deep-water channel to the east that extends south past Useppa Island, while a slight detour around the southern tip of Punta Blanca Island leads to one of the area's more secluded and sheltered coves (above).



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Outlets to the Gulf such as Blind Pass or Redfish Pass are best left to those with local knowledge.

of diverse and attractive anchoring opportunities is the section of southwest Florida's coastline that encompasses the bodies of water known as Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island Sound. Taken together, these two areas offer some 300 square miles of protected coastal cruising grounds. They are comprised of everything from wild barrier islands and jungle-clad river mouths to attractive waterfront communities and some of the state's favorite resorts.

Local Knowledge

Few people know this region better than Barb and Vic Hansen. The owners of Southwest Florida Yachts, they are also avid cruisers who have spent more than 25 years exploring the area. Through their business, the couple has introduced thousands of charter clients to the waters of southwest Florida. After all these years, the region still remains their favorite cruising ground.

"It's a unique part of the state," says Barb. "Along most of the East Coast and parts of the Gulf Coast, there's a lot of development, and all the cruising destinations lie up and down the ICW channel, on a north-south line.

"But in Pine Island Sound and Charlotte Harbor—not to mention the adjacent rivers—we have a much broader area to explore. You could cruise here for years and never cross your own wake."

Southwest Florida is also a region of great natural beauty,

Barb says. Because much of the shoreline is protected or state owned, cruisers who anchor can enjoy a natural setting without actually being far from civilization. "For example, the back side of Sanibel Island is protected mangrove jungle," Barb explains, "so even though you are just a mile or so from all the bustle, you have a very different perception of the island than people who come by car."

For those cruisers who want to temper the solitude of life on the hook with a few shoreside diversions, she says there are dozens of first-class marinas and resorts within easy hailing distance.

"You could be watching birds and manatees up the [Caloosahatchee] river one day, spend a night at the downtown [Ft. Myers] docks and enjoy a great dinner, then head up to Gasparilla the next day for a bike ride and some ice cream."

Shallow But Forgiving

The waters of Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island Sound are expansive but relatively shallow. This can be intimidating for cruisers who come from areas such as the Pacific Northwest, where deep water often begins quite near the shore, or New England, where the bottom is generally hard and rock ledges abundant.

"Getting used to the shallows took me a while," admits Bill Rigby. A retired university professor who had sailed Lake

FAVORITE SOUTHWEST FLORIDA ANCHORAGES

1. Cape Haze—This well-protected cove provides an ideal layover for cruising boats traveling to or from Charlotte Harbor.

2. Peace River—The waterfront towns of Punta Gorda and Charlotte Harbor face each other across the broad mouth of the Peace River. Depending on wind direction, both the north and south sides of this waterway provide good anchorages, with easy access to the towns.

3. Myakka River—With careful navigation, boats drawing four feet or less can work their way upstream and enjoy the solitude of one of Florida's most scenic, wild rivers.

4. Gasparilla Basin—Located slightly north of the Boca Grande entrance channel, the basin can accommodate several dozen cruisers. Local anchoring etiquette calls for bow and stern anchors set in the center of the waterway and against the eastern bank, respectively. The charming seaside town of Boca Grande lies just across the channel.

5. Pelican Bay—Undoubtedly the region's most popular anchorage, the bay is big enough to accommodate a crowd and is a dinghy ride away from the state park on Cayo Costa, which is one of Florida's last uninhabited barrier islands.

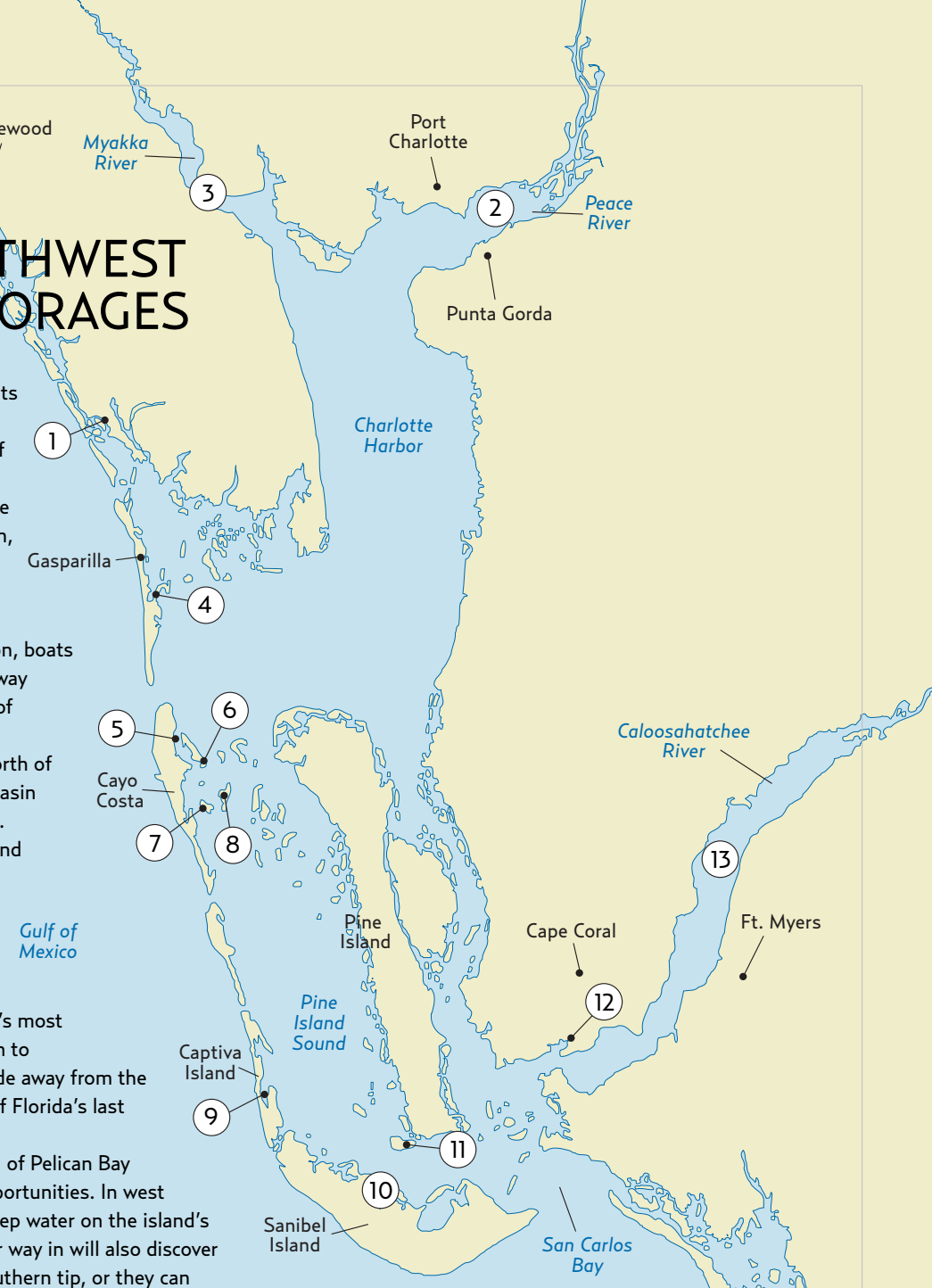
6. Punta Blanca Island—The area south of Pelican Bay provides several attractive anchoring opportunities. In west winds, cruisers can take advantage of deep water on the island's western shore. Those willing to feel their way in will also discover a delightful little cove on the island's southern tip, or they can ease carefully toward the deep water near Primo Point.

7. Cabbage Key—Although most cruisers opt for the marina, it's also possible to drop the hook in the deep water just off the channel near marker 60. Passing boats create annoying wakes during daylight hours, but traffic subsides at night.

8. Useppa Island—There are good anchorages on both sides of this private island. Deep water can be found off the southwestern shore, across from Cabbage Key at Marker 61. Those wanting a bit more elbow room can find it in the large expanse of deep water between Useppa and Part Islands.

9. Roosevelt Channel—Located just south of the popular Tweenwaters Inn, this anchorage juxtaposes the conveniences of Captiva Island with the wild beauty of Buck Key. Note, however, that Roosevelt is not a good choice in heavy northerly winds.

10. Ding Darling—Boats drawing five feet or less can enjoy the natural beauty of Captiva's undeveloped eastern shore, at Ding



Darling National Wildlife Refuge. It's considered secure in all but strong northerlies, when cruisers might want to move across to York Island.

11. York Island—When the north wind blows, the island itself shelters the large, deep basin to its south.

12. Glover Bight—The northeast corner of this protected bay provides a stretch of undeveloped shoreline within close proximity of the development known as Tarpon Point. It's a good stopover for boats headed upriver to Ft. Myers.

13. Caloosahatchee River—Though the river is known to many only as the start of the Cross Florida Waterway, the lower reaches of the Caloosahatchee offer a number of good anchorages. Notable sites include the western end of Beautiful Island and the northern side of the channel east of Orange River.



Flanked by mangroves to the east, Gasparilla Basin (above) is just a short dinghy ride from the town of Boca Grande.

Superior for many years, Bill began working with the Hansens as a charter captain when he moved to Florida two years ago. These days, he's quite comfortable with the thinner nature of his new home waters, which he describes as "generally forgiving."

"The underwater topography changes very gradually, and there are large expanses of water with uniform depth," he says. "In addition, the bottom composition is typically sand or fairly soft mud. If you do bump, you probably won't tear your keel off, as you might in other areas."

Bill says that many first-timers are hesitant to stray from the well-marked channel of the Gulf's Intracoastal Waterway, but in doing so, they bypass many wonderful cruising opportunities. "If you draw five feet or less, you can explore a lot of the areas outside the main channel," he says. "The local charts are accurate, and if you proceed slowly, you can usually avoid problems. We have a saying that we always share with our charter guests who will be scrutinizing charts: 'White is all right; blue, you should review.'"

"It's also important to know your boat's *true* draft, in order to determine how much water is under the keel in relation to what shows on the depth sounder," adds Marc Winkel. Marc has been working with the Hansens at Southwest Florida Yachts for 20 years, as both a charter captain and an instructor in the company's hands-on sailing and powerboat classes.

Author Pierce Hoover asked several power-cruising veterans to name and describe their favorite Southwest Florida anchorages. Their choices can be found on our website, www.powercruisingmag.com

"Before you follow another cruiser into unfamiliar water, you should know his vessel's draft, as well," says Marc. "Using 'FTB' [Follow That Boat] navigation is a good way to get into trouble. For example, don't assume that a sailboat at anchor means deeper water. It might have a centerboard, and the board might be pulled up."

"If you do touch bottom or run aground, the first thing you should do is *nothing*," Marc counsels. "Don't rev the engine or make any hasty moves," he explains. "Take a couple of moments to look around and see what the current and wind are doing. Worst case, you can always set an anchor and wait till the tide comes up, kedging off if need be."



Ft. Myers Yacht Basin is one of many first-class marinas in the area available for those seeking an alternative to anchoring.

Barb Hansen agrees completely: "My husband always says that the first thing to do when you find yourself aground should be to go below and get a cold drink. Once you've calmed down and had time to think, you'll be in a better position to formulate a workable plan of action."

Anchoring Strategies

Once cruisers learn to trust the charts and read the water, they can greatly expand their cruising and anchoring horizons. Barb says, "Too often, people will anchor in a place just because other boats are already there. We tell our customers to explore, to get off the beaten path a little and find their own bit of solitude."

"The charts and guides have little anchor icons, which might lead you to believe that those are the only places you can anchor," she adds. "In reality, our area has an incredible variety of locations that are suitable for anchoring, though some aren't usable in all weather conditions, and others may require local knowledge."

"In the winter months, you might want a tighter, cozier anchorage," Marc says, "while in the summer, a lot of folks like to anchor out to catch the breezes and stay away from the bugs. Some drop the hook right in the middle of Charlotte Harbor, miles from shore."

"Bugs are not an issue in the winter," Barb notes. "The main factor to take into consideration in the cooler months is cold fronts, which can create several days of strong northerly winds."

In addition, says Marc, winter may bring lower-than-usual tides. "The normal range in this area is 12 to 18 inches, but after a front, tides can run a foot lower, and the northerly winds will push water out of the sound and create depths less than those at mean low water."

When the wind and waves kick up, some cruisers head for one of the region's many marinas, while others seek refuge in the various manmade basins or bays created by dredging and canal building. This, however, is not an option recommended by the staff at Southwest Florida Yachts.

"Most all of the canals in the area were dug back in the 50s and 60s, and their bottoms have accumulated a layer of silt," Marc says. "That stuff doesn't make good holding ground for an anchor. It's too soft."

Barb adds, "When you are anchored in a small basin surrounded by seawalls, you're likely to hit one if your anchor drags, and that could be costly. In contrast, when you are out in the open, dragging will likely put you on a shoal, where there's much less chance of doing serious damage to your boat."

All charter yachts in the Southwest Florida Yachts fleet are equipped with two anchors and generous lengths of chain. Marc says Bruce anchors have proven to be the best choice for local conditions, with CQR designs running a close second.

"The most important advice I give our guests is to put out ample scope," Marc says. "And, if other boats nearby are using two anchors, you need to do the same in order to limit your swing."

If you find yourself surrounded by other anchored boats in southwest Florida, it's usually by choice, not necessity, Barb says. Even in the area's most popular anchorages, such as



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The safest passage between the Gulf and Pine Island Sound is through the deep waters of Boca Grande Pass, which is flanked to the north by its namesake lighthouse (above).

Pelican Bay, there has never been an occasion when space became a problem for SFY clients.

"Most first-time charter guests tell us that they got comfortable with the depths and the channels by the end of their week," Barb says. "And, most tell us that next time, they plan to slow down, not try to see it all, and find a few more of those out-of-the-way anchorages." ❄️

RESOURCES

Southwest Florida Yachts

800-262-7939; www.swfyachts.com

Florida Sea Grant Anchorage Directory

This guide is currently out of print. Loan copies are available without charge through the National Sea Grant Library (401-8746114; nsgl@gso.uri.edu). Or, pages may be downloaded as pdf files at <http://nsgl.gso.uri.edu/flsgp/flsgph99001/flsgph99001index.html>

Cruising Guide to Western Florida and **Coastal Charts for the Cruising Guide to Western Florida** by Claiborne Young
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