



meetings

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IN BUSINESS

Post hurricane, the communities of Southwest Florida are ready to show off their main attractions

BY JENNIFER JUERGENS

Hurricane Irma came to Florida in September with a vengeance, even sending this reporter to an Orlando hotel for several days with power outages all over the city.

Southwest Florida, however, was even harder hit, with more than 100 homes destroyed by the hurricane, according to a story in the *Miami Herald*. Damage to the entire state, according to Bloomberg, is expected to cost over \$50 billion.

Thankfully, hotels, beaches and attractions around Naples have reopened, with one notable exception. The Naples Grande Beach Resort as of a report on Oct. 3 will reopen Dec. 15 after an extensive clean up.

"The Paradise Coast is clear," said Debi DeBenedetto, group sales and marketing manager for the Naples Marco Island Everglades CVB.

"Most of the attractions and hotels are back open and on-line," she continued. "A few are still under clean-up and renovation but 2018 will be fully open and ready for all group meetings business, and better than ever. With many of the hotels already under renovations prior to Irma, resorts will be offering a new product."

Similarly, the Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach area was mostly spared, with the

exception of two hotels with some water damage, according to Lora Steiner, director of tourism, Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach CVB.

"One reopened shortly after the hurricane and the other should come back on-line very soon," she said. "Restaurants and retail reopened within days of the Hurricane. The very popular Fishermen's Village shopping and dining area along with its marina are also open. Accommodations on our beaches and Islands are accepting reservations," she said.

Pamela Johnson, deputy director of the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau, said, "The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel suffered minimal damage due to Hurricane Irma. We are 100 percent operational for group business. We are excited to welcome meetings and groups to the Greater Fort Myers area to show everyone that the natural beauty of the destination still exists."

Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

The region is more than ready to host groups, not only showcasing outdoor highlights, but also focusing on the area's

vibrant arts scene, including many art galleries, historic homes and cultural institutions.

Lee County, which includes the cities of Fort Myers and Cape Coral, has made a commitment to the history of the city, according to Johnson.

"We're lucky so many homes and other structures have been preserved so visitors can experience the history of these cities," she said.

To learn about the Calusa Indians, who inhabited the area 2,000 years ago, the 1921 Mound House in Fort Myers Beach was built on top of an ancient Calusa Indian shell mound. Its three new galleries tell the story of its people.

Events can be booked at the house, including in the museum and its patio, overlooking the natural surroundings of Estero Bay. The maximum capacity is 200 for events on the grounds and the main museum has an occupancy of 130 for events.

The Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center is another Fort Myers cultural gem. The site was originally a Native American Calusa settlement and in the mid-1800s became home to the original fort of Fort Myers. In 1933 a post office replaced the fort, however the building still attracted visitors who came for its unique architecture, including walls embedded with coral and seashells.

"Not only are we centrally located in the heart of downtown, groups love events here because it's a lovely and extravagant setting," said Angela Patane, marketing manager.

The 1901 Burroughs Home & Gardens in



Latest + Greatest

FORT MYERS

- **DiamondHead Beach Resort** (<https://sunstream.com/fort-myers-beach/diamondhead>) in Fort Myers Beach recently completed a \$2.5 million renovation of its 124 one-bedroom suites, the final phase of a collection of resort-wide enhancements.
- Fort Myers Beach-based **GullWing Beach Resort** (<https://sunstream.com/fort-myers-beach/gullwing>), with 66 condo suites, and **Pointe Estero Beach Resort** (<https://sunstream.com/fort-myers-beach/pointe-estero>), with 60 condo suites, each remodeled their guest room facilities.
- **Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina** (www.pinkshell.com), on Fort Myers Beach, is now employing naturalist Vince McGrath to offer resort guests morning wildlife walking and kayaking expeditions to explore the eco-zones of the local marine environment.
- **Port of the Islands Everglades Adventure Resort** (<https://sunstream.com/everglades/port-islands>), in the Florida Everglades, recently upgraded its guest rooms. The property offers 42 cottage suites and studios.

SANIBEL

- **Sundial Beach Resort & Spa** (www.sundialresort.com) on Sanibel Island announced the completion of a 12-court pickle-ball stadium, adding to its lineup of resort amenities and public offerings.

CAPE CORAL

- **The Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village** (www.starwoodhotels.com) announced the expansion of its meeting and event facility, set to debut in early 2018. The facility is a \$15 million, 30,000-square-foot space featuring a ballroom that has the capacity to divide into six distinct spaces.

NAPLES

- The **Naples Grande Beach Resort** (www.naplesgrande.com) is slated to reopen Dec. 15 following a clean up and recovery from the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. It recently completed an \$8 million project to its Naples Grande Golf Club. The grand makeover

includes a new clubhouse as well as a complete re-grass of the golf course.

- **Bellasera Resort** (<https://sunstream.com/naples/bellasera>) in downtown Naples earned its second palm designation from Florida Green Lodging.
- **La Playa Beach & Golf Resort in Naples** (www.laplayaresort.com) now features a new Gulf Tower, including a lobby, Baleen Restaurant and renovations of all guest rooms.
- **Park Shore Resort** (<https://sunstream.com/naples/park-shore>), in Naples, featuring 60 condo suites, recently refurbished its guest rooms.
- **The Inn on Fifth and Club Level Suites** (www.innonfifth.com) in downtown Naples completed renovations and refreshments to its meeting rooms and added a new banquet kitchen. The 119-room Inn, including 34 suites in the Club Level Suites, refreshed all common areas as well.

MARCO ISLAND

- **The Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort and Spa** (www.hilton.com) recently completed a \$50 million renovation of the lobby, all public and meeting space, the pool and restaurants. The hotel is currently closed due to renovations of all of its guest rooms and suites, and is scheduled to reopen in early 2018.
- **JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort** (www.marriott.com), which opened in January after an 18-month, \$320 million transformation from the Marco Island Marriott Beach Resort, is finishing its new Lanai Tower, to debut in spring 2018 with 100,000 square feet of meeting space.

BONITA SPRINGS

- **Shangri-La Springs in Bonita Springs** (www.shangrilasprings.com) completed its spa renovations, including sauna, eucalyptus steam room, couples massage room and private courtyard.
- **Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort and Spa** (www.coconutpoint.hyatt.com) in Bonita Springs renovated its 82,500 square feet of meeting space.

downtown Fort Myers is a Georgian Revival mansion once owned by Nelson Burroughs and his wife Adeline. It was the scene of many social events that played host to the Fort Myers elite, including Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. Antique furnishings and historical artifacts are on view.

"Groups of up to 50 can have a meeting or lunch in the home itself, or on the dancing porch, or for bigger groups we also have the Waterside Pavilion for up to 250," said Carol Ekonomou, director of special events. "All are welcome to take the 30-minute tour of the home and grounds with one of our docents."

The Alliance for the Arts promotes art and culture in Fort Myers. Nestled on a 10-acre campus, there are many opportunities for meeting planners to utilize their space, including a theater, a classroom and most

notably the Alliance Gallery, which houses artwork by Florida artists and can accommodate up to 200 for receptions.

Another artists' haven runs along the 17-mile stretch of Pine Island, about 30 minutes from Fort Myers, including the community of Matlacha Island.

"It's an eclectic community with small, brightly colored buildings that house art

galleries, shops and restaurants that groups love to visit," Lee County's Johnson said.

Renowned artist Leoma Lovegrove calls Matlacha Island home and can be seen throwing paint on canvas daily at her international headquarters, Lovegrove Gallery and Gardens, located in the heart of the tiny island.

Lovegrove welcomes guests to paint and mail a real coconut postcard back home, or partake in a paint-a-long of her exclusive designs in the gallery's waterside garden.

"We have had several groups, usually up to 50 works best, from a few of the waterside resorts like The Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village and Sanibel Harbour Marriott Resort & Spa," Lovegrove said. "Visitors enjoy live entertainment and the homemade Love Boat ice cream we serve in a coconut shell you get to take home to



ALLIANCE GALLERY, FORT MYERS

remember your experience of exploring all that Matlacha Island has to offer.”

Charlotte County

North of Fort Myers, Charlotte County, which comprises Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach and the Charlotte Harbor Gulf Island Coast communities, gives visitors a taste of old Florida.

“We’re the quiet side of Florida and we tell visitors our best side is outside, but you’ve got to come out of the sun to see all that’s here,” said Tish Sheesley, executive director, Arts and Humanities Council of Charlotte County.

Art galleries, festivals and exhibits, performances from the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra and theatrical productions offer visitors artistic and cultural experiences year-round.

History buffs can soak up the rich past at its varied museums, including the Blanchard House Museum of African American History and Culture of Charlotte County. Exhibits tell the story of Punta Gorda’s early African-American pioneers.

The Military Heritage Museum in Fisherman’s Village in Punta Gorda, and the Visual Arts Center across from Fisher-



VENUE NAPLES

man’s Village, are both unique venues that can be rented out to groups, according to Sheesley. The Art Deco Visual Arts Center’s First Federal Gallery and Goff Gallery are available for up to 170 guests for rental after-hours and on weekends.

Naples

According to DeBenedetto of the Naples Marco Island Everglades CVB, there is varied culture in her neck of the woods as well, including the Southwest Florida Performing Arts Center in Bonita Springs, which opened in June 2016.

“The center brings in all kinds of shows, including bands and improv troupes,” DeBenedetto said. “It is a really nice venue for groups and it holds quite a few people.”

The venue has a 1,000-plus capacity and

more than 20,000 square feet of function space.

Another spot for groups, Venue Naples, launched earlier this year. Culinary Institute of America graduate Brian Roland owns Venue Naples—a place that brings together art and the art of food—including the Gallery of Amazing Things art space.

“Corporate groups love hosting events here because of our flexibility and the freedom we give groups to change the look of our space,” Roland said.

The Naples Art Association offers a creative twist on event and meeting space at the Watson Gallery, with space for up to 250-plus for receptions. Rental of the gallery includes use of the lobby and Young Plaza, which is the back deck that overlooks Cambier Park. [m](#)

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