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The southwest Florida city of Naples contains everything from white sand beaches to shopping boutiques, making it a popular destination for Long Island residents.

BY SHERYL NANCE-NASH
Special to Newsday

Claire O'Keefe vacationed for years with her family at her aunt and uncle's home in Naples, Florida. Her mother was also a snowbird there. O'Keefe, who grew up in Huntington, loved Naples so much she moved there 15 years ago.

"It's slower-paced, less stressful, with beautiful beaches, great golf, restaurants, shopping. I have no regrets about leaving Long Island," she said.

Naples is nicknamed "Paradise Coast" for a reason. Dennis Vong raves about the beaches and waterfront

YOUR TICKET TO 'PARADISE COAST'

Naples offers pristine beaches, nature, shopping and more

restaurants like **The Dock at Crayton Cove**.

"It immediately puts you in that relaxed Naples mindset. Sitting outside with fresh seafood while watching the boats come and go never gets old, and it's usually the moment visitors start to understand why so many people fall

in love with the area," said Vong, who spent more than 20 years in Huntington.

During January through March from 2021 to 2024, he was in Naples. But since last year, he has spent a great deal of time there.

The similarities between Naples and Long Island are a

plus for Long Islanders. "I was surprised by how many former Long Islanders I met in Naples. There really is an unofficial Long Island network throughout southwest Florida, which made the transition feel very natural," said Vong. He touts Naples as a vacation spot as well.

"I never get tired of taking a walk along the beach at sunset," said Vong. "Those evenings were a big part of why I eventually decided to spend much more of my time in Naples after snowbirding for several years. It's peaceful, beautiful and a great reminder that sometimes the simplest moments are the most memorable."

NEXT STOP: NAPLES

Denise Nowak grew up in Syosset and left St. James for Florida a few years ago.

"I fell in love with Naples. There is so much nature. You can watch blue herons dip in the water and come back on land and eat fish," said Nowak,

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Llars finding 'PARADISE' in

NAPLES from C13

who counts among her Naples favorites **The Village Shops on Venetian Bay**, a waterfront venue for dining and eating, and the city's parks — **Freedom, Baker and Cambier** — that host holiday choir performances and a live Nativity scene on Christmas Eve.

There's no shortage of fond memories for Christina Cush, who grew up in Manhasset and left Long Island in 2014. She said the 15 months she lived in Naples were special.

"There was quite the social scene with CEOs, entrepreneurs — a very vibrant community, with the ballet, symphony, community theater," said Cush, who was the editor-in-chief of Naples Illustrated, a monthly luxury lifestyle magazine.

She shopped retailers like **Marissa Collections**. "It's family-owned and -operated, super high-end clothing and accessories — like shopping in Manhasset on the Miracle Mile, but Florida-style — in a pink building," said Cush.

GETTING THERE

If all this Naples talk has you ready to pack your bags for a vacation, book a flight from MacArthur, Kennedy or LaGuardia airports to Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers (about a three-hour flight; about a 45-minute ride-share to Naples). You'll thank yourself later, when you're lounging on the beach.

THINGS TO DO AND EXPLORE

Naples is all about the great outdoors. Wildlife lovers will want to make their way to **Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary**, with its 2.25-mile-long boardwalk that takes you through wetlands and pinelands. The sanctuary protects the largest baldcypress forest in North America. Expect to see alligators, otters, deer, turtles and more. You can join a ranger-led hike (admission: \$17; \$6 ages 6-14; free 5 and younger).

Another great option is the **Rookery Bay Reserve and Environmental Learning Center**. The center offers interactive exhibits and an aquarium. Take a guided kayak tour through mangrove tunnels, oyster reefs and mudflats where you're likely to



The water garden at Naples Botanical Garden, which contains plenty of tropical plants as well as educational programming for families.



Pair sailing adventures with picture-perfect sunsets in Naples.



Kayaking is a fun activity in Naples, situated on the Florida coast.

glimpse dolphins and manatees, or for a land adventure, there are several hiking trails, including one along a mangrove-fringed shoreline (admission: \$10; \$5 ages 4-12; free 3 and younger). Guided boat tours and kayak tours require separate bookings and fees.

Explore tropical plants at **Naples Botanical Garden** (admission: \$27; free ages 17 and younger), and families can join educational tours and programs (crafts, music, nature play spaces).

When it comes to beaches, choose among several. There's no wrong choice. **Naples Beach** is not only beautiful, it's 10 miles long, steps from downtown shops and restaurants, and free.

Parking is \$5 per hour. You also might like **Lowdermilk Park**, a beachfront park with access to the beach, sand volleyball courts, a playground and picnic tables. There is no admission fee, and parking is \$5 per hour.

There's more to the Naples story. Get your fill of arts, culture, extraordinary cuisine

and world-class shopping. For fine art, **The Baker Museum** is a must for modern and contemporary art (admission: \$10; free ages 17 and younger). Fifth Avenue South is where you'll find art galleries, as well as in the **Naples Art District**, where some 100 artists work, exhibit and teach in studio spaces and art galleries.