

Escape the hustle and find the real Florida.

Bed, Breakfast & Barn: Part III

By Georgia Brown

Although Florida's population growth continues to press inland and raise densities in agricultural areas, finding an escape to the natural side of Florida is still possible.

State forests, greenways and smaller county preserves offer unforgettable riding experiences on trails shared by non-motorized recreational sports like biking and hiking. The innkeepers who live along the boundaries know they are close to paradise and are pleased to invite guests to take a piece home with them.

The World Wildlife Fund declared the Withlacoochee State Forest one of the "10 Coolest Places in North America." With a total of 128,471 acres, there are miles of all weather trails that wind through central Florida's hardwood hammocks, longleaf pine and scrub oak, through ravines and past creek bottoms and cypress ponds.

The bed and breakfast inns close to the Gulf that offer riding are hidden away in places that look nearly the same as they did in the 19th century when settlers were just beginning to trickle into the state. These innkeepers have the special honor of living in an environment that belies their proximity to cities.

When approaching the Hoving's private 10-acre farm at the end of Higginbotham Road there is little to hint at the Old Florida farmland that unfolds beyond it. On one side is a 60-acre county conservation tract that was formerly a cattle ranch, and it still has a few cows roaming its borders. On the other side are 120 acres of farmland that were homesteaded many years ago. Nearby is the Caloosahatchee Regional Park, which offers 11 miles of trails through fields and oak hammocks.

Karen and John built the secluded cottage behind the main house for guests and then decided to turn it into a bed and breakfast. It's a comfortable haven furnished with a charming claw foot tub, antique sink, handmade quilts and Old Florida furnishings. Sitting on lounge chairs on the screened porch, guests will hear nothing except the sound birds and the rustle of breezes through the palms and pines.

Next to the cottage is a shady, two-acre pasture for your horses. Karen is happy to ride out with her guests or pack them a picnic lunch. When

guests return they can enjoy the luxury of soaking in the spa or heated swimming pool surrounded by lush tropical plants.

### Buckingham Place

The Hovings, a couple who once lived on Sanibel Island, enjoy sharing this tranquil rural retreat close to the bustle of Ft. Myers with their guests. "We like meeting different people and have formed many new friendships with our repeat clients," said Karen.

It's hard to believe but true. Just 10 minutes from the Tampa airport is a country estate with a stable and a private lake that borders the Town and Country Greenway. Bridle paths in the area pass meadows and overgrown jungle areas, up hills and over canals.

The main house with Victorian appointments is new, but the stable has been occupied since this was a quiet farming area 10 miles from downtown. All the doors, including some with stained glass, were salvaged from a 1920s era home. Ken and Sandy Rouse gathered European antiques and family heirlooms to make their home an unforgettable escape from the ordinary. They imported an exquisite 1870 French hand-carved, walnut queen-sized bed that has survived two world wars. Sandy's mother, Milly, who also collects antiques, does the beadwork that is seen on original works of art in the home.

From the third floor private parlor above one of the bedrooms, guests can see Equus Meadow Pond and a dock that is a popular spot to sit and listen to the sounds of guinea hens, roosters and many colorful wild birds that make their home here. Equus Meadow

"Our hallmark is personal service. We try to do a bed and breakfast in the old fashioned way," said Sandy. She serves breakfast in the formal dining room with tall tapers in the candelabra. "I have always liked candlelight, and I enjoy serving on a different set of china each day," said Sandy. She also enjoys changing the figurines on the table as the whim or season inspires her. She asks repeat guests to fill out a questionnaire so that she has a record of their preferences and favorite foods.

Ken matches guests with one of seven horses, ranging from a Percheron to a Shetland pony, for guided trail rides. "These are our own personal horses that we've trained ourselves and we enjoy sharing them with guests," said Sandy.

"The highest compliment we receive is when departing guests say they are totally relaxed and can't wait to come back," said Sandy.

### H & L Ranch & Blueberry Farm

When Karen and Bill Harley bought the place, they didn't realize that part of their property was covered with a dormant patch of blueberry bushes. They saw only dried up shrubs and planned to clean them out. After the word spread, their neighbors came by offering to dig them up and carry them away for them. Wisely, they declined.

Today their country breakfast includes blueberry pancakes or blueberry muffins and fresh eggs from their hens. When the berries are ripe, May to early July, guests can join the U-pickers to gather their own succulent bounty.

From the ranch, guests can ride directly into the Croome Tract of the Withlacoochee State Forest. Karen and Bill will gladly act as guides or pack a trail lunch if you wish. One of their favorite pastimes is sharing stories with horse people. Some of their regular guests have bought places nearby and are now neighbors.

The secluded manufactured home surrounded by a pasture that the Harleys call "The Cabin" has two bedrooms and plenty of privacy. You can lock the gate behind your horses and listen to them munching grass under your window as you drift off to sleep.

Deer are seen frequently in the blueberry fields, and hawks, wild turkeys and eagles are also spotted. This country setting is so remote you can still ride your horse to a nearby restaurant for lunch. For the convenience of riders who drop in, there is a water trough and hitching post. Dine in or out, it's your choice.

#### Farmer Brown's

In the rolling hills of west central Florida near Dade City, Fred and Marcia built a traditional farmhouse that is the centerpiece of their bed and breakfast. On this 45-acre working farm, guests relaxing on the wrap-around porch can start to count the pine trees on the property (there are more than 1,000) and watch the friendly goats grazing in the front pasture.

"It was always my dream to be a farmer once I was semi-retired," said Fred, who was raised in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Marcia grew up on Long Island but has quickly adapted to the sound of a rooster crowing in the morning.

They offer three rooms, each with private entrances. Two on the second floor have outside stairs and their own private porches overlooking pastures. The third is handicapped accessible with a wood burning fireplace, kitchenette and private bath.

Guests join Fred and Marcia for the fellowship of a hearty country

breakfast where a fresh country eggs are always on the menu. A morning trail ride can begin by following the fence lines, which is a good way to get a horse used to the sight of sheep, chickens, ducks and geese. "They can get up close and personal with our farm animals, or they can relax and take a nap in the hammock under the pine trees," said Marcia.

The farm has hayfields, a 10-acre grove of Hamlin juice oranges, and protected wetlands that are home to many wild creatures. Fred doesn't use herbicides on the grove, instead he bought an old John Deere tractor with a sickle bar to trim the vines and brush around the trees.

The Trilby trail head of the Withlacoochee State Trail is located nearby. North of SR 50, across the horse trail bridge, the State Trail continues through the Withlacoochee State Forest, passing near Floral City, Inverness and Citrus Springs, to the end of the trail just south of Dunnellon at Gulf Junction.

#### Cypress House

Cypress House is located on 10 acres of oak thickets and grassy meadows. From the highway the mile long road passes cows and horses grazing in pastures and a few homes on acreage.

Have you ever thought about turning the ranch into a bed and breakfast? Jan Fessler has proved it is a very rewarding way to retire. Her years as an elementary school teacher in Fort Lauderdale gave her many tools that help in managing a small inn. "This is actually easier than dealing with principals, parents and the system," she said.

The mile long driveway is the first leg of a relaxing journey to a totally different part of Florida, full of tall oaks and meadows whose edges are alive with wildlife. Riding horses on the various horse trails of the Withlacoochee State Forest is the main attraction. Jan's horses are extensively trail ridden and in summer are used for lessons for a local girls camp. You can choose one of her Paso Finos, Tennessee Walkers or American Quarter Horses. She also offers pasture board for your own horses.

Breakfast is served buffet style with a selection of breads, teas, fresh cut fruit, which could be melon or citrus in season. The main dish changes every day and may be Jan's egg casserole, a vegetable quiche or hearty pancakes with sausage. Once Jan gets to know you she will remember whether you drink coffee or tea. "Regulars are like old friends, except they pay you," she says.

There are three rooms with private baths and two rooms that share a bath

in the hall, which are sometimes used by family groups who visit the Florida National Cemetery nearby. Her granddaughter helps with laundry and is learning the innkeeping business.

### Bayer's Lair

If driving is your passion, the Lair's location on the edge of the 53,000-acre Goethe State Forest gives direct access to miles of wide gravel carriage ways that were formerly logging roads. Narrow sandy trails through woods of pine, oak and magnolia attract endurance riders from October to April. The trails pass through old growth forest shaded by oak and magnolia trees as well as planted pine tracts. The self-guided map is easy to use, and the trails are well marked.

Innkeeper Beryl Bayer is an equine artist known for her fluid watercolors, which she describes as a blend of expressionism and impressionism. "My work is most famous for its action and the multiple ways I express it," said Beryl.

Her brand of hospitality is ideal for those who prefer privacy and roomy accommodations, and the s The Carriage e large walk-in closets and luxurious baths. Guests with House e large suite with a private dog run just outside, and a s as a kitchenette and a large, private screened porch entrance

Beryl provides an elaborate ast for guests in the morning, and each room is a with a coffeemaker, microwave and small refrigerator for longer stays.

This quiet, 10-acre farm has four separate paddocks with run-in stalls for your horses, and it's wise to make reservations early. Beryl has a steady stream of guests in the winter because of her proximity to the 250-acre Black Prong Equestrian Center.

### Beryl Bayer Painting

The camaraderie of horse people reaches a peak in the winter season. Morriston is an extremely horse-friendly, rural community where the neighborhood restaurant, Willard's, offers a country pub atmosphere that attracts trainers and owners. If you don't mind the 20-mile drive to Ocala, there are other dining establishments, but most evenings you'll find the horsemen eating dinner at Willard's.

In September 2005, Pam and Ray Knisley traded the bustle of Fort Pierce for 80 acres of solitude in the rolling hills of the Nature Coast. Their new home, sprinkled with oak trees, pastures and clusters of woods, is a quiet retreat for those equally in need of a little peace.

The Knisley's offer two guest bedrooms in the main house as well as a three-bedroom duplex surrounded by the quietude of the farm. "What our guests enjoy most is looking out the window and seeing horses grazing. It makes a nice picture," says Pam.

Guests at the duplex have satellite television, dining room, living room and kitchen where they can prepare their own breakfast if don't want to join the other guests at the main house where Pam serves a continental buffet. A five-stall barn with turn-out paddocks is available for guests who bring their own horses. In addition to wandering the trails on the Knisley's property, riders can trailer the short distance to the Goethe State Forest for a change of scenery. For show-goers, the Carriage House is only 25 minutes from Black Prong Equestrian Center.

Non-riders will enjoy the Suwannee River hiking trails only three miles away. A dinner excursion to Cedar Key, a mere 25 minutes away, offers fresh oysters, outstanding Gulf Coast cuisine and seasonal art and seafood festivals.

Georgia Brown is a freelance travel writer who frequently writes about horses. She raised horses for several years and learned many life lessons while competing in dressage and distance trail riding with a gentlemanly Arabian stallion that lived to the ripe old age of 33. She currently lives in Sarasota, Florida