

# So You Want to Live in ... Pine Island

A slice of Old Florida "country" still thrives on this lush, green isle.



**W**hen she saw two shirtless, shoeless boys gliding over a dirt trail on bikes with their arms outstretched like wings, Lisa Benton knew she had found a home on Pine Island, Florida: "I said, 'This is Mayberry.'"

In truth, it's four Mayberries. Located northwest of Fort Myers and connected to the mainland by a causeway, the island includes the communities of Matlacha, St. James City, Bokeelia, and Pineland. It's a place with no traffic lights, where you can visit your neighbors by boat. Although the island has few beaches, several exist on nearby uninhabited islands. Residents

love the neighborliness, nature trails, and renowned fishing. Relaxing, they say, can keep you busy here.

Candy-color fisherman's shacks in Matlacha (that's mat-luh-SHAY) hold galleries, restaurants, and bars where it feels like everyone knows you even if you've never met before. Locals wear "Pine Island Reeboks"—white, rubber shrimpers' boots—and call the span over Matlacha Pass "The World's Fishingest Bridge."

Overlooking the flat-water sound and mangrove islands, Pineland harbors the vintage Tarpon Lodge, where most come for fishing, food, and sunsets. But not office manager Nancy Glickman. "I'm an amateur astronomer. I was looking for stars," she says. "When the conditions are right, the skies are some of the finest anywhere."

St. James City has streets named for exotic fruit such as Cherimoya and Carambola, and mailboxes covered with shells and painted pelicans. Folks can get groceries at the St. James General Store, eat breakfast at Jackie's Family Restaurant, and share what attracted bookstore owner Liz Lutzi: "The feeling of not really being in a city." Cynthia Welch lives in St. James City and works in Bokeelia because of the "peace, serenity, and sunsets," she says. With a 15-year-old daughter, she adds, "It's a great place for teenagers. You can get on your bike and ride to your neighbor's house and mothers don't panic. That's small-town America, and you don't find that everywhere."

This "close-knit community" feeling is a powerful lure for transplants, and a hook holding locals. "They say it takes a village to raise a child," says Mel Meo, who's lived here almost 40 years. "But really it takes an island to raise a child."

That means everybody. Customers at Olde Fish House Marina Restaurant hold baby Stephen while his grandmother brings their orders. Stephen's mom, Jessi Skorupski, says her menu reflects the islanders' bond. "When I opened up, a lot of the old island women came and gave me recipes." Macy Romero left the hurry and hubbub of Miami Beach to raise her 2-year-old daughter here, among the marsh rabbits and manatees. "The nature drew us here, to spend our lives outdoors," she says. That's Pine Island's magnetism, Mel says: "We live in paradise, so there's no reason to go anywhere else."

*(published December 2007)*

**Text by Carlos Harrison**

## A Peek into Pine Island

**Setting:** Pine Island, Florida, home to four distinct communities, sits among a cluster of islands between Fort Myers and Sanibel.

**Attractions:** Fishing—the island was named one of "America's 25 Hottest Fishing Spots" by *Field & Stream* magazine for its redfish, tarpon, and snook. Pristine Cayo Costa beach, a 45-minute boat ride away, offers rustic cabins and open stretches where the only coconut oil you're likely to smell is your own. Residents rave about the island's K-5 school, winner of the state's highest ranking for the past eight years straight.

**Drawbacks:** Limited job market. "A lot of people work off-island," in Fort Myers, says archaeologist Michael Wylde. "But I think that's a sacrifice people are willing to make."

**Housing:** Options include single-family houses and manufactured homes in St. James City, condominiums and custom-built houses in Bokeelia, breezy bungalows and fisherman's shacks in Matlacha, Keys-style stilt homes and golf course townhomes in Pineland, and custom luxury homes with pools and private docks throughout. A three-story luxury home on gated Galt Island nudges \$2 million; a waterfront St. James City manufactured home, \$234,900; Matlacha fisherman's shack, \$259,000; a newer three-bedroom, three-bath with pool, \$795,000. Off-water homes range from the \$160s to \$1 million.



**Your next-door neighbors:** A patent attorney, novelist Robert Macomber, mystery writer Randy Wayne White, artists, musicians, commercial fishermen, snowbirds, fishing guides, teachers, and police.

**How you'd spend your free time:** Golfing, boating, biking, birding, kayaking. Walking nature preserves. Dancing to boomer tunes at Bart's. Enjoying Tarpon Lodge's ever-changing gourmet meals.

*(published December 2007)*

**Text by Carlos Harrison**