

TROPICAL ROMANCE

BY HERB HILLER • *Special to the Times*

Celebrating Valentine's Day at a charming inn or B&B may be just what Cupid ordered. A cozy room framed by sunset colors, a glass of bubbly and what happens next is up to you. • But you don't have to restrict romance to Feb. 14. These 10 favorite Florida inns and B&Bs are open year-round, and all speak the language of love.

HOTEL ST. MICHEL • Ten minutes from Miami International Airport, a low-rise corner in Coral Gables' high-rise downtown evokes provincial Spain, France and England. Though modernized in essentials after 90 years in business, the hotel leaves guests lingering in the old-fashioned cage elevator. The 28 unique rooms display random aesthetic marked by creaky teak-parquet floors, whimsical antiques and fine art posters.

162 Alcazar Ave., Coral Gables; (305) 444-1966, www.hotelstmichel.com. Rates of \$135 to \$349 include continental breakfast, complimentary use of nearby country club facilities.

CRANE CREEK INN • Savor the sidestreet hush, the poolside hot tub and hammock, porches everywhere and five tropically color-splashed creekside rooms. This 1925 Melbourne house invites door-flung-open mornings and breakfast in bed. From atop the creek bluff, guests can spot manatees seasonally and dolphins year-round. Dinner at several worthwhile restaurants is a hand-holding 10-minute walk through historic downtown Melbourne.

907 E Melbourne Ave., Melbourne; (321) 768-6495, www.crancreekinn.com. Rates of \$100 to \$199 include expanded continental breakfast (full breakfast weekends).

BOKEELIA TARPON INN • At the Bokeelia end of narrow Pine Island, far from urban scale or sprawl, across narrow bridges and beyond groves, sits this 1914 Charlotte Harbor mansion with the authority of a ship's wheelhouse. Hospitality amply extends through five spacious guest rooms of yacht-fine trim, the fireplace living room and broad porches. Walking-distance restaurants

and galleries are suitably more sedate than tourist trap.

8240 Main St., Bokeelia; toll-free 1-800-827-7662, www.tarponinn.com. Rates of \$150 to \$325 include continental breakfast, snacks, soft drinks, fruit.

RIVERDALE INN • Flamboyant Florida defers to oak-solid tradition at this mansion — one of only two remaining along Jacksonville's once formidable Row. Grandeur sets the stage for letting yourself go amidst 10 rooms and suites on two upper floors. Downstairs, in equally art- and antique-filled spaces, the show continues in the Row Restaurant and Gum Bunch Pub.

1521 Riverside Ave., Jacksonville; toll-free 1-866-608-3400, www.riverdaleinn.com. Full cooked breakfast included in rates from \$145 to \$185.

SWEETWATER BRANCH INN • Two Queen Anne mansions and six cottages bridge space and time, mansions set back from Gainesville's main east-west road, cottages surrounded by gardens and along a picket-fenced neighborhood street, all 18 guest quarters juxtaposing modern bathrooms and modern kitchens with grand beds beneath high ceilings. Through the grounds, fountains burble, benches line garden walks, bridges cross waterways. Cats slink.

625 E University Ave., Gainesville; toll-free 1-800-595-7760, www.sweetwaterinn.com. Rates of \$90 to \$245 include cooked-to-order breakfasts for all guests.

CASA MORADA • Here in the sensual Middle Keys, a couple of Islamorada houses that were first tailored by three women into vacation digs for friends have been newly transformed again. Deeper pockets have helped turn them into 16 magazine-sleek white apartments with impeccable gardens and drop-dead views between pool, bar and sunset-indulging Florida Bay. Hammocks, cushioned benches, a bit of a beach: Perfect!

136 Medeira Road, Islamorada; toll-free 1-888-881-3030, www.casamorada.com. Rates of \$239 to \$659 include continental breakfast and Wednesday-Sunday yoga.

STEINHATCHEE LANDING • Exceptional comforts endow this enclave of 43 Cracker and Victorian cottages (houses, really) with atypical Big Bend sophistication. Doors, floors and mantels have been rescued from falling houses and churches throughout Georgia and are set off here by brawny furniture. Paddle the Steinhatchee River, trek rare rocky wetlands, discover cove beaches. Bring sacks of favorite foods and, evenings, cook for romance in a picture-perfect kitchen. (Hire someone to clean while you stroll the night.)

203 Ryland Circle, Steinhatchee; (352) 496-3513, www.steinhatchee-landing.com. Rates of \$140 to \$667 include continental breakfast and fitness center use.

COURTYARD AT LAKE LUCERNE • Ditch the mouse ears. Romance rules in a garden and fountain compound set among four grand domiciles that include Orlando's oldest house (1883). Relish the bedside-tub rooms, grand Victorian palazzo, river-gambler-style mansion, and its finest art deco apartment block. There are 30 rooms and

suites furnished by one of Orlando's legendary antiques collectors.

211 N Lucerne Circle East, Orlando; (407) 648-5184, www.orlandohistoricinn.com. Check-in curio of wine, cocktail hour, expanded continental breakfast included in rates from \$120 to \$225.

SUNNY HOUSE DOWNTOWN • Delray Beach succeeds because its new celebrity chic remains tied to an established residential community. Stand-out among spruced-up buildings is the 1902 mayor's house, which today is the finest Queen Anne B&B between Key West and St. Augustine. An entire acre harbors gardens and gazebo plus 11 rooms, suites, restaurant and bar variously decorated with terra cotta tile floors, French doors and ceiling draperies, all of which are more worldly than merely tropical.

101 S Swinton Ave., Delray Beach; toll-free 1-877-439-9601, www.sunnyhouse.com. Winter rates from \$349 to \$669 include continental breakfast, shuttle bus to beach.

THE PENSION AT ROSEMARY BEACH • Especially winter, after walks along near-empty beaches, the mood in the 11 Italian-styled rooms is divinely cozy, warmed by ovens of the happening restaurant below. Rosemary Beach has the most interesting architecture among the new communities of south Walton County. From window hardware and garment hooks to stylish lamps and colorful cushions against white block walls, contrast satisfies expectations of something wonderfully different.

78 Main St., Rosemary Beach; (850) 231-7790, www.cottagerentalagency.com. Rates from \$128 to \$388.

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Steinhatchee Landing Resort