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The Dog Who Went To: Boca Grande

By Jane Turner



Jane Turner is the author and illustrator of [The Dog Who Went to Main Street](#), a recently published children's book celebrating adventure, a perfectly imperfect dog, and Main Streets everywhere.

One heart-tugging problem of traveling is leaving your best friend behind. But you don't have to. Our Shih Tzu mix Dozer goes wherever we go. (Sometimes our less polite Labs tag along as well.) You met Dozer in the first [Dogs Who Travel](#) story in FarewellTravels. He's a rescue, a therapy dog, happens to be totally blind, and is always ready to go. In each edition of this column, I'll share one

of our favorite dog-happy destinations along with a few details on each location's dogliness.

Boca Grande, Florida (aka Gasparilla Island) was first described to us by a fishing guide as "what Sanibel was 40 years ago." Translation: no traffic or high-rises but plenty of unpopulated beach and world-class fishing. Now we go every winter – with one to three dogs in tow.

The vibe: Laid-back, old Florida. It's the leave-your-jewelry-at-home, bring-your-fly-rod-and-dog Boca. More golf carts than cars, more wildlife than nightlife.

The lay of the island: About seven miles long and a mile wide at its widest, without a single traffic light, Boca Grande, which is a barrier island on Florida's West Coast, used to be a haven for wealthy sportsmen of a bygone era complete with rail service to the mainland. Today, the island-long tracks have become a path for bikes, runners, golf carts, and of course, dogs.

The beach: Dozer loves nothing more than sniffing his way up the beach, investigating every sand dollar and sand bar. It's the kind of beach where people missing their dogs back home ask to pet Dozer or throw a ball for Bizbee (our surf-loving Lab). Collective respect: all are mindful of keeping dogs off the beach during turtle and shorebird nesting season.



Dining with dogs: A few favorite Dozer hang-outs

- **Newlin's.** On a recent visit, owner Kim Newlin welcomed Dozer as we settled into a wicker chair outside for the best lobster rolls ever.
- **The Pink Elephant.** A local institution for more than 60 years. Lovely patio for lunch or dinner facing the bayou.
- **The Outlet.** Breakfast as you watch the boats go by. Dozer's own "worth begging for" picks – spinach omelets, blueberry pancakes... actually, everything.
- **Caffe Boca.** Sidewalk tables for a perfect cappuccino break.

"It's a dog's world" cred: Following island ritual, dogs gather at "Doggie Park" (three Gulf-side acres at 7th Street, kindly shared by The Gasparilla Inn) for a daily romp - 3:15 for small dogs, 3:45 for big dogs. Most village shops are dog-enthusiastic; many have treats handy to reward dogs just for being dogs.

Where to stay: Two great choices depending on your sensibility. Both are under the dog-loving eye of Pres./General Manager Jack Damioli, whose family dog Winnie can be seen walking the property or dining at The Outlet.



- The nearly century-old, recently renovated **Gasparilla Inn & Club** (with beach club/spa on the Gulf) offers 18 dog-friendly cottages/villas. A gracious, old school feel; think Greenbrier on an island. Dog-centricity here includes dog massages available through the spa. And hey, your dog might rest her head where former presidential dog Millie slept!

- **The Innlet** is something of a boat-el on the bayou (includes The Outlet restaurant). A casual fishermen and families place where you can park your boat and bring your dog.

If you go...have fun and tell them Dozer sent you!

Photograph directly above is of the Gasparilla Inn & Club.