

## TRAVEL

## Useppa: War and peace on a small island

BY ROBERT HILLIARD  
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When we signed up for the one-day cruise to Useppa, a small island in Southwest Florida's intra-coastal inland waterway that intertwines with the Gulf of Mexico, all we knew was that it had stately vacation homes, a pristine beach, lovely walks and was once a vacation retreat for the Vanderbilts, Rothschilds, Rockefellers and luminaries such as Herbert Hoover, Shirley Temple, and Zane Grey. It wasn't until we reached the island and visited its small museum that we learned how the island had played a key role in an inter-Americas political battle that continues to this very day.

Useppa Island was the secret organizing site and pre-training base for the CIA's Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April 1961.

It appeared to be a perfect site to recruit, screen, and prepare personnel, most of whom were volunteers surreptitiously brought to the island from the Cuban expatriate community in Miami. When the CIA took over the island in May 1960, Useppa had suffered from years of neglect and was virtually abandoned.

For almost three decades beginning just before World War I, Useppa had been a prime resort for the rich and famous. Barron Collier, the real estate entrepreneur who became Sunshine State's biggest single landowner in the Florida boom years, bought Useppa Island in 1911 from John Roach, a Chicago mass-transit tycoon. Roach had purchased the island in 1898 as a private fishing preserve and built a huge winter home there. To accommodate his many friends who came to visit and enjoy the superb fishing, he converted his home into an inn and built another home for himself. Collier expanded the inn and founded the Izaak Walton Club, considered by many the best fishing club in the country at that time. When Collier died in 1939 the glory of Useppa faded and the island appeared to have died with him.

Archaeological digs on Useppa show that it has been inhabited for more than 10,000 years. The island was one of the key centers for the powerful Calusa Indian nation, which dominated that part of Florida about 500 A.D. Seafood of all kinds was plentiful and mounds still visible on Useppa and on other nearby islands attest to the tons and tons of shells piled up by the Calusa from the shellfish they ate. The Calusa were sophisticated and advanced. They built homes on top of the 30-foot shell mounds, to be cooler and to avoid ground-level insects. They built canals connected to natural waterways and conducted trade with eastern Florida and as far away as the Caribbean. The Calusa nation remained in the area until 1711, when a combination of Spanish and, later, colonial-American efforts decimated it.

Spain ruled Florida beginning in 1565, except for a 20-year period beginning in 1763, when the British held sway. The name Useppa is derived from what appears to be a misspelled Anglicization of its former Spanish name, Joseffa. Fishing from the island became a lucrative business for the Spanish. In 1821, Florida became a United States territory and Useppa was used by the U.S. Army in the war against the Seminole Indians. During the Civil War, the Union forces used Useppa as a base for capturing Confederate supply ships. It was also a haven for Floridians sympathetic to the Union.

Almost a hundred years later, it became a military base again. The Cubans brought in from Miami were carefully screened. They had to pass a series of physical, psychological and special skills tests. They even had to take lie-detector tests. Those with military



The Pink Path.

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The Barbara L. Sumwalt Museum.

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experience who were judged to be loyal and reliable were sent to Panama for training as officers of the Bay of Pigs invading force. Some volunteers and recruits remained on Useppa for radio training and use of CIA codes for communication with Cuba in an attempt to find anti-Castro rebels who could be organized into a fifth column.

The Useppa Island experience was apparently so meaningful to the participants that in April 1997 — 36 years later — 60 of them returned to Useppa for a reunion and for the opening of a Bay of Pigs exhibit at the island's small museum.

Hard hit by Hurricane Charley in 2004, today both devastating nature and war have been turned into peace on Useppa. It is a quiet fishing and relaxation paradise. Only about 100 acres in size and shaped like some of the many shells found there — round in the middle and narrowing to points on both ends — it is part of the Lee Islands group in Pine Island Sound, not far from the larger resort and retirement islands of Sanibel and Captiva. Useppa Island has about 100 homes, several of which are occupied year around, with the remainder used by their owners principally from October through April, when cold covers much of the northern part of the U.S. and Europe.

The Useppa Island Club is the focal point of the island, with use of Useppa's facilities available only to club members and their guests. Applications for family member-



The Collier Inn.

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ships are available to Useppa homeowners and to full or part-time residents of other islands in the area, with an initiation fee of \$1,600 and monthly dues of \$139. Fishing remains a key attraction. Anglers come from all over the world to take advantage of the excellent tarpon, redfish, and snook fishing and, just a short way into the Gulf of Mexico, angling for grouper, kingfish and snapper.

One can walk around much of the island on a day-trip visit. Most of the houses are white with tin roofs gleaming from the reflected sun. The beaches are clean and sandy, edging into remarkably clear water. From the dock area, one can walk on a pink path through tree-covered lanes and past an old banyan tree that stretches high across several houses and has planted new roots almost a block away. That same path leads to the Collier Inn, where one can enjoy a lunch in the charming dining room at a reasonable price with an exterior

view of the water and passing boats and an interior view of photos from when the inn was used to plan the Bay of Pigs invasion. However, only members of the Island Club have the privilege of lunching on the patio.

The Island Club is the rental agent for accommodations on the island, available to members and their guests. Rooms and suites at the inn and cottages and homes, when available, rent for a two-night minimum stay, with rates varying by season. In the high season homes and cottages are \$395 to \$695 per night, and \$325 to \$550 in the low season. At the Collier Inn, individual rooms and suites are from \$195 to \$395 per night in the high season and \$165 to \$295 per night in the low. For guests who don't wish to go fishing, there is a heated pool, hot tub, tennis, sailing, kayaking, and a fitness center, as well as an international championship croquet court and an alternate one for inexperienced players. And, of course, there is always the leisurely and often breathtaking walk around the island.

Access to the island is principally by water. Many homeowners and Island Club members have their own yachts and smaller boats and tie up at one of the many piers at the main dock. Useppa is eight miles north of Captiva Island and two miles south of Boca Grande Pass at the Intracoastal Waterway marker #63.

A must part of any visit to Useppa is the Barbara L. Sumwalt Museum, considered by many to be one of the fine small museums in the country. It's a short walk on the path past the Collier Inn, adjacent to a meticulously laid out and manicured world-class croquet court. The museum's requested \$5 donation includes use of an audio headset describing the panels and artifacts as you walk through. A substantial part of the museum is devoted to the Bay of Pigs training site, with names of participants, photos of their training, equipment that they used, and uniforms that they wore. A more recent exhibit details the destruction and reconstruction related to Hurricane Charley. The museum is open during the cruise visits, from 12:15 to 2:15 p.m. daily.

For day-trippers, the cruise leaves from South Seas Resort on Captiva Island, reached from Fort Myers and Southwest Florida International Airport via the Causeway to Sanibel Island and thence to Captiva. In the hour or so aboard ship on the Intracoastal Waterway, a ship's officer describes the history of the waterway and its ecological features, stopping occasionally to direct passengers to the rail to watch dolphins racing alongside the ship and leaping into the air just yards away from the clicking cameras. Apparently, the dolphins find as much amusement looking at the tourists as the tourists do looking at the dolphins. ■

If you go

### For day-trippers

- >>What: Captiva Cruises, 472-5300
- >>When: Tours depart at 10 a.m. and return at 3 p.m.
- >>Where: Leave from South Seas Resort, at the end of the public road in Captiva.
- >>Cost: Adults, \$35; children, \$20. Call for reservations. The cruise boat has drinks and snacks. Take a straw hat and sunscreen. A camera with a long lens is recommended for pictures of sea life; a regular lens will do while on Useppa.
- >>Info: Captiva Cruises, P.O. Box 580, Captiva Island, FL, 33924, 472-5300  
For Useppa Island Club information: 283-1061, www.useppa.com.