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Full Report

On Gulf Coast, tiny fishing village offers slice of rustic Old Florida

CORTEZ, Florida -- Taking a left turn off of State Road 684 into the tiny village of Cortez is like driving back in time to Old Florida.

Gone suddenly are the markings of contemporary Florida's Gulf Coast region: The strip malls, kitschy tourist shops and mobile home parks. In their place are old bungalows, many dating back to the 1920s, along short, narrow, roads dotted with palm trees and live oaks.

Straight ahead, just before you reach the drink: The A.P. Bell Fish Co. Inc. and the Star Fish Co., commercial fish houses situated next door to one another on Sarasota Bay, where anglers dock their fishing boats and unload their catches to be sold fresh.



A sign giving information about The Village of Cortez stands near piles of crab traps. (AP)



Visitors enjoy the beautiful Florida weather as they sit outside the Star Fish Co. seafood market and restaurant. (AP)

Visitors can join the restaurateurs, locals and fellow tourists who visit A.P. Bell to purchase wholesale grouper, snapper, shrimp, stone crab and pan fish.

One can also sit at one of the outdoor picnic tables of the Star Fish Co.'s dockside restaurant and enjoy a panorama of blue water, fishing boats and seagulls and pelicans sitting atop pilons, while digging into an order of mullet or conch fritters, washed down with draft beer from a plastic cup.

Prices at the Star Fish restaurant range from \$6.95 for a half-pound of boiled peel-and-eat shrimp, an appetizer, to The Star Combination Platter for \$14.95, a combination of shrimp, oysters, scallops and fried grouper.

On a recent visit, an egret nonchalantly strolled around



Skyscraping Shizu-chan
picky about who gets to
pop her cherry

Japanofile



'Naked Tokyo' set to
open for one night only

the dining area to the delight of a group of white-haired retirees having lunch.

Billed by the Manatee County Historical Commission as the coast's "last surviving fishing village," the town's name likely comes from an early Spanish fishing "rancho."

The community was known as Hunters Point until the 1880s, when the town now known as Cortez was permanently settled by fishermen from Carteret County, North Carolina.

In the late 19th century, net fishing for black mullet and other fare made the community one of the most important suppliers of seafood on Florida's Gulf Coast, with the catch being shipped to Cuba to the South and the northern U.S.



A Blue Heron stands on top a fishing boat outside the A.P. Bell Fish Co. Inc., looking for a handout. (AP)



A sign over N.E. Taylor Boatworks adds to the local flavor of Cortez. (AP)

Cortez is not a large place. It's about 5.6 square kilometers and its population in the last census was about 4,500. You can walk through the village in a few minutes. But if you're visiting anywhere in the area, say Tampa or one of beaches nearby, it's well worth spending an afternoon here.

Mark Praught, who has lived in or near Cortez for nearly 40 years, recommends a trip to Annie's Bait & Tackle, a small, rustic hangout often missed by tourists near the bridge to Bradenton Beach where locals meet for a meal or a drink.

Besides being a one-stop shop for anglers -- Annie's sells bait, tackle and ice -- there's beer and wine and the menu includes grouper and Cuban sandwiches and even steaks.

"You sit at the bar and then you know exactly what Cortez is about," Praught said. (AP)

If You Go...

CORTEZ, Florida: Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, <http://www.flagulfislands.com> or (941) 729-9177.

GETTING THERE: Take Interstate 75 South to U.S. 301 South toward Ellenton and Palmetto. Take the U.S. 41 South exit toward Bradenton, which becomes State Road 684 West/Cortez Road. Take a left on 123rd or 124th Street just before the Cortez Causeway to Bradenton Beach. Cortez is about 55 miles (88 kilometers) from Tampa.

ACCOMMODATIONS: There are numerous motels and hotels in the Bradenton area, Anna Maria Island and Longboat Key. Rates range from \$50 to \$99 per night at the Econo Lodge East (607 67th St. Circle East, Bradenton, 941-745-1988) and Anna Maria Motel & Resort (808 Bay Blvd. North, Anna Maria, 941-778-1269) -- to up to \$250 per night at hotels like Club Bamboo Resorts (2502 Gulf Drive North, Bradenton Beach, 941-778-6671), according to the convention and visitors bureau.

A.P. BELL FISH CO. INC.: 4600 124th St. West, Cortez, (941) 794-1249.


STAR FISH CO. SEAFOOD MARKET AND RESTAURANT: 12306 46th Ave. West, Cortez;
<http://www.starfishcompany.com> or (941) 794-1243.


ANNIE'S BAIT & TACKLE: 4334 127th St. West, Cortez, (941) 794-3580.

April 24, 2006


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