

# Extraordinary (and Odd) Locales In Our Area

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HEALTH  
Charlotte County

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It might seem like you've covered just about every square foot of ground in Southwest Florida if you've lived here for a while. If you're tired of visiting the same old places, why not check out some of the lesser-known sights around the area that maybe even you aren't aware of?

We have gathered five different "locales of oddity" that might appeal to you when the wanderlust hits - we hope you enjoy them.

**1. The Fountain of Youth** - In 1513 the explorer Ponce de Leon was obsessed with finding what some of the time were calling "the Fountain of Youth." Stories of this magical spring that poured out water from deep in the earth that could take years off your life - and possibly give you eternal life - were prevalent and he was sure he would be the one to find it.

Needless to say, he never found it or he would still be here. However, there is a place in Punta Gorda where the water pours out from the ground and many think it was the origin of the story. In the 1920s the story of the Fountain of Youth recirculated and Florida visitors increased exponentially simply for this reason. During that time the fountain was visited so often that the internal mechanisms were worn out many times over.

In a form of black irony, when the EPA tested the water coming from the fountain decades later, they found it contained double the acceptable level of radioactivity and had a decidedly foul smell, which comes from magnesium sulfate. Neither of those things will hurt you and are actually good for your heart ... but radioactivity? Not so much. But officials do agree that having a drink from the fountain isn't terribly bad for you, considering the amount of radioactivity that surrounds us on a daily basis. In fact, there is a 98-year-old Punta Gorda woman named Margaret who lives near the fountain and gets enough water from the fountain every day to cook with and bathe in.

Either way, the EPA wanted to shut the fountain down but the local population created such an uproar that it was left alone. If you are feeling bold you can visit it today, at the corner of Marion Avenue and Taylor Street, kitty-corner from F.M. Don's and across from Coldwell Banker Realty. It is about three feet tall and made of stone, with a big disclaimer sign on it from the Florida Department of Health. You can't miss it.

Keep in mind that the tourist Mecca Fountain of Youth in the St. Augustine/Ponte Vedra area across the state make a big deal out of the fact that they have the "actual" Fountain of Youth, but the attraction was more so created because Ponce de Leon landed there originally in pursuit of eternal youth.

**2. Calostimucu** - If you're already headed to Punta Gorda to become immortal, you might as well check out a 20-foot-tall, 6,000-pound Indian head carving made from a monkey pod tree. Its name is Calostimucu, created by Peter Wolf Toth. It is located across from the City Center in the historic district of the city at US 41 South and W. Retta Esplanade. But that's not the first place where the "Punta Gorda Whispering Giant" resided.

Fred Babcock played a huge part in the development of Punta Gorda as we know it now. This lumber mogul who was also the owner of Babcock Ranch (also known as Crescent B Ranch) built the Holiday Inn (eventually turned Best Western) that used to stand where the PG Hotel and Hurricane Charleys are now. Prior to that it was a Bayview Inn, and even before that the waterfront property was owned by Perry and Marion McAdow.

Babcock couldn't help but notice the grand remains of a monkey pod tree on the hotel property that had been struck by lightning, a tree that was brought to this country from Asia by Marian McAdow in 1898. Many of the strange exotics around the historic district of the city are, or are ancestors of, plants that she brought back with her from her travels around the world. This particular dead tree became important to Babcock, so much so that he hired a local artist who was developing a series of similar pieces called "Whispering Giants" across the county to create something out of the stump.

For \$10,000 Toth did just that and he named it Calostimucu. It was the tenth Indian head he created out of a dead tree, with each one bearing important symbolism. Each has an animal emerging from the head, but the one in Punta Gorda is the only one he did with two heads - one side is a male Native American, on the other side is a woman. It also features a dying bison on its back and an eagle with broken wings trying to take flight out of the top of the head. He created the name by combining the Clause name with the Timucua. It was finished in 1988.

Hurricane Charley took out the Best Western in 2004 and the new owners didn't want Calostimucu ... they wanted a fountain. So this amazing work of art was moved to its current

spot in front of the Freeman House, across the street. A year later, Toth had returned to painstakingly repair the damage that had been caused in the move. He also removed the paint that someone had thought was a good idea to cover him with.

Just two years later more complaints were coming in about how the statue "detracted from the beauty of the Freeman House." Officials were trying to find a new home for the statue once again but it was eventually decided he could stay where he was, at 314 W. Retta Esplanade.

Since Calostimucu was created, the artist named Toth has created close to 100 Whispering Giants, with at least one in each state, and has moved on to create even more of them in Europe.

Finding them might be a fun trip in itself.



**3. White Pelican Island** - We have touched on this topic a few times before, but never got to the heart of the subject. This little island, badly damaged during Ian, is home



to a large colony of white pelicans in the winter. You can see it off the Boca Grande Causeway, to the north, about halfway across.

No one can say for sure why this spot right in our front yard is the chosen place for the largest colony of white pelicans in the southeastern United States, but the locals know that when the white pelicans start filling the skies, the other “snowbirds” will be returning as well.

The little spit of land is part of the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve, which stretches from Sanibel to Englewood. Located in Gasparilla Sound, these waters are well known to be rich in the foods that white pelicans love, so surely that plays a part.

The only way to view them closely is by boat and there are cruises that will take you around that way during the fall and winter months. However, your chances of seeing at least a decent handful of white pelicans pretty much anywhere around the island are high.

Just a few interesting facts: While brown pelicans are more solitary food foragers, white pelicans hunt as a collective and herd the fish into the middle of their circle. White pelicans are one of the largest birds in the country, with a nine-foot wingspan. They are quite often three times larger than our state bird, the brown pelican. You will notice the black tips on their wings as they fly but they are not noticeable when the birds are in the water.

**4. Molly the Mollusk** - Sarasota is known for many things, but did you know it is also the home of Molly the Mollusk? Molly is actually no more and is the corpse of a 37-foot giant squid that has been preserved at the Mote Marine Laboratory on City Island. She has shrunk over time to 23 feet, but she weighs an impressive 300 pounds. She was caught by a New Zealand fisherman in 1999 and donated to Mote. The exhibit was on hiatus for two years while Molly traveled with an exhibit called “Sea Monsters,” so while there is a lot to see when you visit this place, make sure to save some time to see Molly.

**5. The Labyrinth on the Hill** - If you're looking for a day of calm contemplation and reflection, you might want to check out the Lemon Bay Conservancy's newest feature, just off Placida Road. A lot of work went

into this large, seven-circuit, Baltic labyrinth archetype, which was created within the last year. The site is on top of a large berm that allows an unrestricted 360-degree look at the Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve. The berm was formed when the ponds at Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve were widened.

The two people credited for spending the hours needed to create this wonder were Lary Stuhlmiller and Tonya Bramlage. They used items collected from the property and were given guidance by Anne Bonney, a member of a group called Verditas that is part of the International Organization of the Labyrinth. In other words, this is the real deal when it comes to spirituality and labyrinths.

Bramlage, who is now an official labyrinth facilitator, said this site “offers the necessary components for both enhancing environmental awareness, while simultaneously enabling a labyrinth walking practice.”

On cursory inspection you might wonder what the big deal is with the circular paths. Walking the labyrinth is a practice that is 4,000 years old and is said to have the power to heal the mind, to enhance right brain connection and, if you're receptive and open-minded to the ritual, can give you a deep sense of peace and spiritual connection.

There's much more to it that you can research yourself. But it's right here, down the road, so why not give it a shot?

You can find the park schedule for activities at [lemonbayconservancy.org](http://lemonbayconservancy.org).

