

SARASOTA

Florida's West Coast has own Am

■ **Pinecraft in Sarasota has become winter vacation home for many Amish people.**

BY KIMBERLY BUTTON
Special to The Miami Herald

The scene couldn't have been more idyllic. Four women gathered around a large quilt, intently sewing and averting their eyes from curious gazes. Their plain, black dresses and hair covered in a cap identified them as Amish. Faint strains of German could be heard in their muted conversation.

Then a cell phone rang, breaking the peaceful silence. The oldest Amish woman lunged for her purse, dug around for a cell phone and, successfully finding it, screamed "Hello?" into the modern contraption.

Such is life in Pinecraft, a small community in Sarasota that has become the winter vacation home of people of the Amish and Mennonite faiths from across the country. Somehow the dichotomy of strict religious beliefs and a tropical vacation paradise entwined themselves successfully in this tight-knit community of approximately 3,000, situated not too far from the famed white sand beaches of Siesta Key.

You won't find traditional Amish images, such as barn raisings or people tending fields on horse-drawn carriages, in Pinecraft. Instead, you will find young Amish and Mennonite teens zipping down the road on foot-powered scooters, perhaps hoping to develop a Florida tan.

The colors of the Amish clothes are brighter here, with many women wearing pastel shades of blue and green instead of traditional black and brown. A thick-bearded gentleman walks by with suspenders holding up his black pants, yet a pair of leather flip flops peeks out from beneath his cuffs.

Driving through Pine-



KIMBERLY BUTTON

POPULAR: Evening entertainment is often found on the shuffleboard courts.

paper fliers. If something's going on in Pinecraft, this is where you will hear about it. The market sells fresh, local produce and the community's groceries.

I stood next to Amish families in a line that snaked out the door, waiting to be seated in Yoder's tiny restaurant, which serves up hearty Amish meals and their infamous pies. Oh, the pies. They come in too many flavors, piled alarmingly high with whipped cream and in portions that make your waistband scream. No matter, the peanut butter cream pie is an absolute must.

At Yoder's I met Sherry Gore, the editor of the community's newspaper and author of *The Taste of Pinecraft*. Sherry is of the Beachy Amish Mennonite faith and is perhaps the community's biggest cheerleader. She suggested that for a true glimpse into the community, I needed to see a benefit supper. Not content to just give me directions, she offered to show me where it was and hopped into the front seat of my shiny red



KIMBERLY BUTTON

STAR OF THE SHOW: Pie is served at the community's frequent benefit suppers.

While the fish were frying, the children played out back on the monkey bars. Older gentlemen enjoyed an intense game of shuffleboard or bocce ball. I stood frozen with my camera in

Pinecraft, and you can rent one and pedal through neighborhoods lined with tidy houses.

Along the streets I spotted a sign nailed to a tree that

Amish country

Sarasota's Amish community

Getting there: Sarasota is a four-hour drive (220 miles) from Miami. There are no nonstop flights from Miami or Fort Lauderdale to Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport. Southwest and Spirit fly nonstop from Fort Lauderdale to Tampa, and American flies nonstop from Miami, a one-hour flight, but then there's a drive of an hour or so to Sarasota.

Information: Sarasota Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-348-7250; www.sarasotafl.org.

When to Go: October to April is high season.

WHERE TO STAY

The Cypress Bed and Breakfast, 621 Gulfstream Ave. South; 941-955-4683; www.cypressbb.com. A tropical B&B with gourmet breakfasts. Rates from \$259 until April 30, from \$150 starting May 1.

Hampton Inn, 5995 Cattleridge Blvd.; 941-371-1900; www.hamptoninnsarasota.com. Conveniently located near Pinecraft. Online rates the week of April 30 start at \$109 a night.

The Ritz-Carlton, 1111 Ritz-Carlton Dr.; 941-309-2000; www.ritzcarlton.com/sarasota. Luxurious indulgence near the city center of Sarasota. Online rates the week of April 30 start at \$399 a night.

WHERE TO EAT

Yoder's Amish Village, 3434 Bahia Vista St.; 941-955-7771; www.yodersrestaurant.com. Sandwiches \$3.95 to \$7.50; dinner entrees \$8.50 to \$16.95.

Troyer's Dutch Heritage Restaurant, 3713 Bahia Vista St.; 941-955-8007; www.troyersdutchheritage.com. Sandwiches \$4.89 to \$10.99; dinners \$8.99 to \$14.49.

Big Olaf Creamery, 3350 Bahia Vista St.; 941-330-2028; www.bigolafs.com. Ice cream \$2.75 to \$3.75; homemade pizza \$9.95 to \$16.95.

WHAT TO DO

Pinecraft Park, 1420 Gilbert Ave.; 941-861-5000; www.scgov.net. Free, open 24 hours a day.

Bills Bike Shop, Kruppa Avenue; no contact information, just walk in. \$4 a day for a three-wheeler.

simply stated "Fresh Eggs." I stopped at a garage sale with the most unusual items. I stared at lines of laundry hung out to dry, the stark black dresses dramatically swaying in the wind.

For lunch, I tried Troyer's Dutch Heritage Restaurant, the second of the two main Amish restaurants. With more than 500 seats, it stands in stark contrast to Yoder's Restaurant, yet the fried chicken and the pie are just as good.

The Amish-Mennonite

community has an amazing fondness for sweets. A bakery in the lobby of Troyer's astounds visitors with the selection of pastries and pies. The message is not so subtle. You will leave with a sugar high.

I got caught up in the culinary indulgences of Pinecraft. I grabbed a chocolate cream pie to go. Then I added red velvet whoopie pies for good measure. When slowing down to enjoy life's simple pleasures, pie clearly tops the list.