Florida’s West Coast has own Amish community

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

BY KIMBERLY BUTTON
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The scene couldn’t have been more idyllic. Four women gathered around a large quilt, intent on sewing and avert 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 entwine 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 peek out from beneath his cuffs.

Driving through, Pinecraft is like a small town with a price tag. No stoplights, and the only building with the words “Pinecraft” on it is the Amish store, where you can buy up everything from a quarter pound of peanut butter to a turkey. The small store is the only place to buy groceries. You can buy fresh eggs from the store, and the local produce is sold at the farmers market.

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 bikes and pedal through neighborhoods lined with tidy houses.

Along the streets I spotted a sign nailed to a tree that reads “Welcome to Pinecraft.” You really are in a little bit of America, but in a tropical setting. It’s a great place to experience the Amish way of life.
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.


When to Go: October to April is high season.

WHERE TO STAY


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.; 941-955-7777; www.yodersrestaurant.com. Sandwiches $3.95 to $7.50; dinner entrees $8.50 to $16.95.


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, Krupa 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.