

FLORIDA

HOMES AND TRAVEL

February 2006

Don't Throw Away Your Envelope Yet!

On your address label on your envelope is your subscriber number in the following format: ABC/1234/MMYY. You will need to remember this number this month for two reasons. Firstly, you may have noticed that we have enclosed the survey forms for this year. We are conducting this years survey slightly earlier in a bid to have the published survey as "up to date" and as "soon as possible!" We are aiming for a June publication this year rather than the normal September publication. Please take 15 minutes to complete the survey as the results really are so useful to all owners, particularly new owners, and the results really do depend on your cooperation. As in most past years you will also receive a free months subscription just for completing and returning your form. The second reason to keep your subscriber number handy is to enter a fantastic competition to win British Airways flight vouchers worth £500. As a thank you to us for writing about their services and also to promote their regular payment facility Moneycorp have organised a competition for all Florida Homes And Travel subscribers on their website. All you have to do to be in with a chance to win is click on www.moneycorp.com/fht and enter your subscriber number. The closing date for entries is April 1st with the draw taking place on April 3rd. The winner will be notified by post and announced in the May issue of Florida Homes And Travel.

Slow Business

During January we have spoken with many people about business being slow this year. Villa owners, management companies and travel agents have all found the same thing – guests are not making bookings yet. Normally January is a busy month for travel arrangements – as signified by the almost blanket travel adverts on the television, but enquiries and bookings in all areas are down. This has pushed many resale properties on to the market, completely reversing the shortage of inventory experienced in the summer of 2004. Realtors are reporting lots of listings, but not so much interest – not even speculative.

So what are the causes of this slow down? Well of course there is no definitive answer and there are many opinions on the matter – hurricanes being one, high flight prices another. Many travellers cannot quite believe the prices for flights at the moment - pushed up as they are by fuel surcharges and security taxes. Is Orlando beginning to be perceived as 'Costa de Orlando' and avoided as such? Are the immigration procedures in the U.S. still projecting a negative image – Florida and the U.S. in general has had some tough publicity over the last couple of years. Passports are presenting another problem with 20% of applications being rejected since September for various photographic

quality reasons. Is this discouraging to wavering holidaymakers?

Whatever the causes, the result is the same, bookings need to be worked for and repeats/recommendations must be our aim. New and foreign markets must be reached. On page 6 we have looked at the work of Dick Stroud who has done extensive research in to the needs and requirements of the potentially lucrative 'Silver Surfer'. This could be a year when owner and MC will have to pull together to achieve rentals.

Late Hurricane

Last years record breaking hurricane season continued right to the wire with a tropical storm in the Atlantic Ocean developing on 30th December! Tropical Storm Zeta was no threat to land and finally dispersed in early January.

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Thinking about selling your house in Florida - is now the right time?

Recent reports from media sources, economists and property experts indicate property prices in Florida are stabilising and in certain locations the top of the market may have been reached. If you are buying, now may be the time to discover that bargain as the market shifts from a sellers to a buyers market and the Snowbirds have yet to start their annual buying spree - but what if you are selling?

In some areas growth continues to fire ahead, in others a lot of properties are coming onto the market. There would seem to be a consensus amongst experts that overall, average prices may not fall, however there are some locations where a fall in prices is a distinct possibility and other locations where supply and demand would indicate a continued upsurge, albeit not in the 30 to 40 per cent range of 2005.

If you are thinking of selling your property the question is what is the outlook for 2006, particularly in relation to locations popular with Brits? The first area under the spotlight is Greater Orlando, where a number of Brits are taking advantage of the price gains over the past year or two and deciding to sell before others place their property on the market.

The number of visitors renting property needs to constantly increase in order to fill the ever growing number of rental properties in Orlando/Kissimmee – some owners have discovered that guaranteed rentals, management costs and services etc do not match the picture painted when they bought. If you need to sell in the next few months it might be better to do so sooner rather than later, particularly if the dollar starts to weaken again.

Others have found it difficult to gain the rental income necessary to cover their mortgage costs, particularly those relying on management companies for bookings or who do not have the time or inclination to manage their own web sites.

The system of selling property is very different in Florida from the UK and you can be caught out by the type and size of commissions as well as various legal implications.

There are cases where Selling Agents are quoting unrealistically high selling prices to gain the listing. In a difficult market this can be a serious mistake with a high priced listing remaining on the market for ages, with the value falling if lower priced properties come onto the market. One Agency with an established record of attracting both American and Overseas buyers has a listing strategy which has been successful at attracting buyers through the doors.

Some are selling in Orlando to buy on the coast taking advantage of the more laid back atmosphere and pace of life. Ongoing demand from American buyers including Baby Boomers, Snowbirds and British retirees looking for the great winter escape and the proximity of the Coast indicate in the long term an ongoing demand particularly in Sarasota, Naples, and Fort Myers etc, where the market is slowing down from the large gains of previous years.

The Gulf Coast market appears to march to a somewhat different drum beat with far fewer short term rental properties available and the proximity of the beaches and relaxed pace of life always in demand from both American and Overseas buyers. Properties bought by Snowbirds who no longer want to make the journey down from the north east and needing some 'tlc' can be a particularly good buy.

Amongst other areas of concern are the sheer numbers of investors who have bought on high end condo developments particularly on the south east coast, around Greater Miami. The question is when these developments are completed and the investors put the properties on the market where are all the buyers for them?

For further information on property trends from a British perspective and details of experienced real estate agents in different locations, Andrew Bartlett property specialist and author can be contacted on 01892 547447(UK) 941 966 3426 (USA) <http://www.andrewbartlettflorida.co.uk>

Moneycorp US Dollar (in brief) 31/1/06

Many of the recent economic indicators for the UK economy have not been as bad as the pessimists might have feared. Car production was fairly horrid but the GDP number was not bad at all and Friday's mortgage lending figures delivered a 25pc increase from a year previously. The Monetary Policy Committee minutes showed that there was still just one vote in favour of a rate cut and few analysts now look for any change in the voting pattern at the meeting next week. Last week's price action suggests that Sterling will fall back towards the lows of ten days ago, below \$1.7550.

Orlando Climate Data - January 1948- 2000

(All in degrees Fahrenheit)

The average high temp is 73.8°
The average low temp is 51.3°
The highest temp (on February 20th 1988) 89°
The coldest night temp (on February 5th 1996) 26°

Mortgage Rates

With zero points	Nov 28	Dec 29	Jan 30
Fixed 30 yrs	6.37%	6.22%	6.00%
Adjustable 1 yr	5.12%	4.25%	4.50%

Note: Mortgage rates are published as a service to readers to indicate trends and must not be relied on in entering into any agreement.



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State Digest

A **bankruptcy court** in the US has approved a reorganisation plan to take United Airlines out of Chapter 11. Presiding Judge Eugene Wedoff said there was "reason to feel good about the plan" which comes three years after the carrier admitted it was embarking on a period of "profound and agonising change."

"Three years ago United Airlines was, bluntly, in danger of dying, with all its assets liquidated and all of its jobs lost," Judge Wedoff said. He added the reorganisation will enable it to have the "potential to be a profitable investment, a reliable business partner and a stable employer."

Stability is a word not often associated with US carriers in recent years. Since filing for bankruptcy protection, United Airlines has shed 25,000 jobs, those who remained saw wages and benefits cut and shareholders watched their stock become worthless.

The airline is expected to emerge from Chapter 11 on February 1.

Florida's theme parks celebrated the new year by raising prices, in what seems to be an annual event. SeaWorld started the ball rolling back in December when it temporarily became the most expensive park - at \$61.95 plus tax, an increase of 3.7% on the preceding year. Disney raised all ticket prices by between 0.8% - 5.8% depending on the length of stay, but the one day ticket price is now \$63 plus tax. By contrast, a seven day "Magic Your Way" ticket would work out at \$29.14 per day, if all seven days were used. Universal Orlando have raised its prices to \$63 plus tax. Universal has also unveiled a deal allowing free entry for children under 9 when an adult purchases two-day multi-park pass on the internet for \$99 including up to 3 more free days for consecutive use. The one day pass can also include up to four additional days at the same park for consecutive use if booked over the internet. Cypress Gardens, the newly revamped Polk County attraction which will celebrate it's 70th Anniversary this year, has not announced any increases. A one-day ticket there costs \$39.95 plus tax, and an annual pass just \$64.95 plus tax.

Did you wonder what had happened to your tomatoes if you were in Florida for Christmas? Usually a staple of fast food restaurants, tomato crops were ruined by Wilma, pushing prices sky high – a 25 lb box is up from under \$10 to \$50! Most restaurants have responded by making tomatoes a 'request' item. Prices are expected to come down as the new crop reaches harvest later this month.

Regional Roundup

A bank robber was killed on 10th January by Osceola County police snipers after he and a female accomplice attempted to rob a bank on US 192 about half a mile west of Disney. The US 192 was closed either side of the mercantile Bank for most of the day as police tried

to negotiate with the armed robber who had 4-bank employees hostage inside. Eventually, at around 6.30pm the robber tried to flee the scene with a hostage, but was prevented by the roadblocks. He was fatally shot when he tried to take another vehicle to effect another get away. A Kissimmee man is also facing up to eight years in prison for allegedly assaulting a twelve-year old British tourist in a hotel elevator.

Firehouse Subs, a Jacksonville based takeaway restaurant has announced plans to expand further in the Orlando area with 12 new franchise shops. The chain has found success with its 'pile them high' & hot sauces since launching in 1994.

Dougie's Bar-B-Que and Grill, a 12-year-old New York chain of glatt kosher restaurants famous for its smokin' ribs, chicken and burgers, has arrived in South Florida. Address: 468 41st St., Miami Beach. 305-604-8800. As this is a kosher restaurant, call ahead for hours, which vary by season due to sundown restrictions.

Expedition Everest, a \$100 million attraction at Walt Disney World featuring an encounter with a giant robotic Abominable Snowman, or yeti, had a soft opening of this week, limited to Disney Annual Pass holders and vacation club members. The ride's grand opening is set for April 7.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs is seeking (or has collected) fines totaling \$46,000 against nine service stations on suspicion of price-gouging in connection with the four hurricanes last year. Among them are three stations in Polk County and one in Sumter. Under state law, merchants selling essential items such as food, water, gasoline, lodging and storm-recovery materials during a state of emergency are prohibited from charging excessive or exorbitant prices for their goods.

Average Daily Hotel Room Rate

Area	December	January
International Drive	\$116.58	\$121.47
Lake Buena Vista	\$140.57	\$123.55
Kissimmee East	\$85.41	\$87.92
Kissimmee West	\$72.19	\$54.38

Florida Lottery Winning Numbers

Date	Numbers
01/28/2006	20-26-28-30-32-45
01/25/2006	08-12-16-23-38-41
01/21/2006	05-24-25-33-38-43
01/18/2006	13-26-30-32-37-42
01/14/2006	08-21-29-35-41-43
01/11/2006	15-22-29-31-35-51
01/07/2006	01-03-06-11-14-50
01/04/2006	07-10-29-33-34-41

Numbers are obtained from the Florida Lottery (www.flalottery.com) as a service to readers. We cannot accept liability for any errors.



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Homes

Pinkpavilions.com. We don't normally discuss villa rental web sites, as they are many and varied, and results are not predictable. However, we have come across this newly launched site that might be worth a look and possibly your listing. Pink Pavilions is a website based in the U.S. for Gay and Lesbian travellers to find villas to rent from 'gay friendly' owners all over the world. We contacted the founders who gave us this information: *"PinkPavilions.com was formed by partners Michele Durst and Liz Spadaro of St Petersburg and Mediamix Design & Publishing Inc. to develop and market a premier gay and lesbian friendly vacation rentals web site. In the US only, there are an estimated 15 million + adult gays and lesbians, not to mention bisexual and transgender people. Gay and lesbian travelers are usually critical of where their travel dollars are spent, and generally prefer to support travel suppliers and destinations that are GLBT friendly. They are normally looking for a long stay (1-2 weeks), and are looking for a clean, comfortable and safe home away from home. According to The Travel Institute, gay and lesbian travelers have a clear preference for "shoulder season" travel (March-May and September/October), which also happens to be spectacular weather months in Florida. In addition, the two most influencing factors for both gay and lesbian travelers was "looking for a variety of things to do" and "been there before and liked it." Most people think of the gay travel market as one comprised of mainly single men who are interested in vacationing in South Beach or Key West only. This is a very narrow view of our GLBT community, as well as, a narrow view of Florida, which has many diverse areas one can explore. There are more gays and lesbians in committed relationships, some of them retired, who come to Florida for all it has to offer in quality of life and relaxed and laid back lifestyle."* Currently showing only 11 Florida properties as we go to press and only two in Central Florida, we have arranged for Florida Homes And Travel subscribers to receive **half-price** listing for

the first year if you sign up before Feb 14th. Quote coupon code **350D8** and you will only pay **\$69.50** for the first year. If this site takes off it could be well worth the small investment.

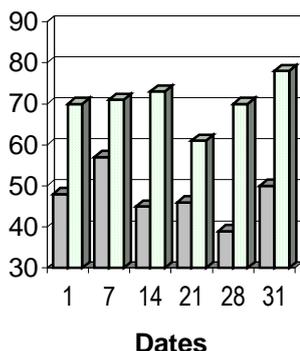
An ongoing lawsuit between Osceola County and Metro Orlando Homebuilders Association has finally ended. The case revolved around the school impact fee introduced by the county in May 2004 of \$9,708 per new home. Builders disputed the methods of calculation used to arrive at that sum. The judge reduced the amount of the impact fee to \$7,608 in December and both sides had 30 days to appeal. The deadline passed on January 12th without appeals lodged, so now the \$45 million held in escrow since May 2004 can be released. Approximately \$10 million will be returned to builders and where the costs had been passed on to homeowners, they will receive a refund once the system has been set up. The school district can now get on with using the remaining \$35 million to develop new classrooms as planned.

Lake County Commissioners are updating the 'Future Land Use Map' for the county. This document dictates how many homes can be built on properties according to designation such as 'agricultural' or denser. Much of Lake County is still very rural and its southern region is extremely desirable for developers. Normally it is time consuming and expensive to get land use designations changed, but during this updating process there is no charge, and developers have currently filed 80 requests concerning 1000 different properties. About 16,000 acres are under request for more intense development. In fact most requests are for 4- 6 houses per acre – a potential of 192,000 new homes!

Leesburg Regional Medical Center completed the sale of \$75 million in tax-exempt bonds on 25th January to refinance the expansion of The Villages Regional Hospital that should be completed by November 2007.

Sprint Nextel Corp is suing a Fort Lauderdale company, 1st Source Information Specialists Inc for allegedly stealing and selling Sprints private customer calling records. Sprint provides landline services to approximately 2.1million customers in Osceola, Orange and Seminole Counties. The suit filed in state court in Broward County asserts that units of the company 1st Source pose as Sprint customers to get information about their accounts. Sprint has asked for an immediate order banning the practice. It has already won a temporary restraining order against the same company in Georgia two weeks ago to prevent it illegally hacking into online customer records. Attorney General Charlie Crist also filed a lawsuit on January 24th against 1st Source and its officers for improperly selling confidential cell phone and telephone records through its Internet sites. An undercover investigation by the Florida Public Service Commission confirmed that the websites would offer to sell a list of calls made from any given phone number, including cell phones.

December Orlando High/Low Temperatures





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Insurance

Following the hurricanes of 2004 many Floridians and overseas owners found themselves under-insured for repairs. A task force was announced during the 2005 legislative session to see what could be done to create insurance reference tools to help homeowners when 'shopping' for insurance. The committee was appointed and began work in August 2005. The committee has created a useful reference sheet for use when comparing cover offered by different insurance companies, which will also heighten awareness of exactly what is and is not covered.

Called a Quick Check Guide the forms are available for download at www.flds.com/StandardPersonalLinesAdvisoryCommittee but we have also downloaded the forms for future, so if you would like a copy, either emailed or posted/faxed please just ask. We hope to keep the forms for as long as they are relevant. There are also Comprehensive Checklists of Coverage for both condos and homeowners. Obviously you would have to add your own section for checking your rental protection.

All the forms in the world will not help residents of Pasco County where changing insurance providers is unthinkable and largely impossible. Residents there have found themselves to be in possibly the hottest spot for sinkholes, and as a result NO insurer is writing new policies. Homeowners are locked in with their existing provider and at it's mercy.

We have had a personal illustration of this provided by Keith Harpham, the previous editor of Florida Homes And Travel. He tells us that for his 2 bedroom single family home in New Port Richey; his Jan 2004 premium was \$831 – an increase of about 10% from the previous year. In Jan 2005 that premium had risen 36% to \$1,131. This January when the renewal form came it was for a premium of \$2,228 – a shocking increase of 97%!

Local homeowners are finding that this is beyond their means. A review by the St Petersburg Times has shown that 25,000 out of 125,000 single-family homes are not insured in Pasco County. For some families, slight tardiness with the bills can be costly. If cover is allowed to lapse the insurance carrier then cancels it. If this happens by error and the homeowner attempts to renew - this triggers a reassessment of the property - which can put the price up.

Local residents are starting to vote with their feet and sell up – according to a local realtor who spoke with the St Pete Times, between Nov 1st and Dec 10th following the announcement of the coming increase, only one house was sold, but 100 were placed on the market.

If you have had a shocking experience with your homeowner insurance, please do write and let us know.

Moneycorp the Currency Specialists are sponsoring a series of free information based seminars on buying and selling property in Florida, which are being held in Birmingham and London on March 18th and 19th. These will be presented by independent experts, are not sales orientated and will cover a range of issues including trends in the market, selling and buying strategies, updates on the market in different locations, mortgage and currency implications etc, and where the market looks like heading in 2006 and beyond. Details and pre-registration information can be found on <http://www.andrewbartlettflorida.co.uk/Form.aspx> or phone Andrew Bartlett on 01892 547447 for more information.

Florida Tourism Industry Fast Facts

Year to date Jan – Dec 05 & % change over 2004

Rental Car Surcharge (\$millions)	140.2	+16.3%
Bed Tax Collections (\$millions)	272.7	+12.9%
Direct Travel-Related Employment (in thousands)	944.4	+3.5%
Average Daily Room Rate-Florida	\$100.51	+8.7%
Occupancy Percent-Florida	69.1%	+0.9%

Source: Visit Florida

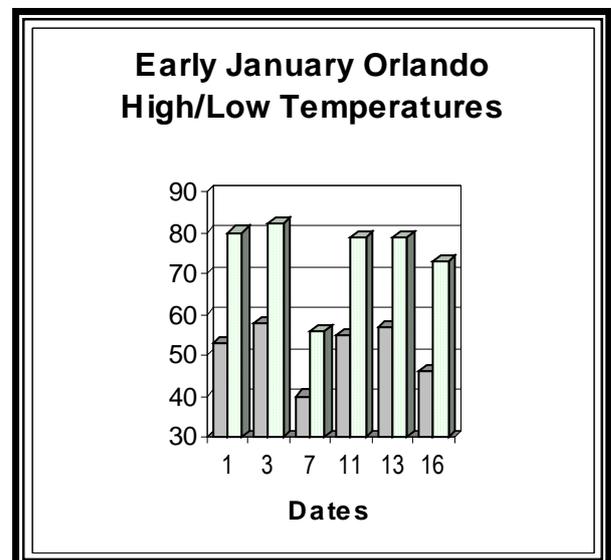
Ask Alan:

One of our friendly realtor subscribers has offered to answer any readers' questions regarding the real estate process or market in a quarterly column here. Please direct any questions you may have to Alan at fhandt@btopenworld.com.

Contacts in this issue:

www.flds.com/StandardPersonalLinesAdvisoryCommittee Insurance Checklist Form
www.moneycorp.com/fht BA Voucher Competition
<http://www.andrewbartlettflorida.co.uk/Form.aspx>

Registration for free information seminars
www.pinkpavilions.com \$69.50 villa listing





The Silver Surfer

In November I attended a seminar by Dick Stroud where he discussed marketing to the 'Over 50's'. Stroud was asked by OMD Worldwide Inc (one of the worlds largest and most influential media communications specialists) to investigate the 50-plus market in 2003. His findings are set to revolutionise marketing which has largely only targeted the revered 18 –35 year age group. He asserts that the only way forward is to be 'age neutral'.

The first part of the seminar was spent on showing how the population in general is ageing, how while those over 60 may not have made regular use of the computer at work so may not be quite so 'computer literate', but that the majority of over 50's by contrast have, and therefore computer literacy is high.

His accompanying book "The 50 plus Market" talks of a Charmed Generation – the retired, and retiring in the next 5 – 10 years as having a greater level of wealth and income than is likely to be seen in coming generations. This is a result of their pensions, property, parents and prudence. This is likely to be the last generation to receive a pension based on their final earnings. This generation is more likely to own their own home. They are more likely to benefit from inheritance from their own parents' properties, and are also likely to use their own properties to release wealth – effectively ending that parent – child cycle. Finally, very little of the enormous credit and loan debt in the country rests with the 50 plus age group. This means they will enjoy a level of living and holidaying not necessarily available to their children. Stroud says the charmed generation represents "a business opportunity that, once gone, is unlikely to be repeated."

The over 50's also love to travel, purchasing 35-50% of all travel. Back to the seminar, where we were shown many graphs and charts illustrating Internet use. Currently 55% of the 55-64 age group uses the Internet to book travel. In five years it is estimated that figure will be 70%+ in line with the average for all age groups.

For all age groups, in 2003 approximately 14% of accommodation was booked using the web, in 2005 that was expected to be 22% and growing. In 2003 17% of accommodations were researched on the Internet – in 2005 that was expected to be 30% and growing. And finally, as inspiration for holidays, in 2005 it was expected that the web would be as influential as family and friends at selecting locations, and more influential than newspapers, magazines and TV.

Well, that is all lovely, but what does it actually mean for you and me and villa marketing? In basic terms it means the 50 plus market is growing now, and to tap into that market one must have a web presence of some sort even if it is somewhere to send people when they have seen your advert in the village shop so they

can look at your photos etc. Leaving aside the complexities of getting search engine rankings, and which villa listing site to be on or not on – we are concerned here with presentation. This was a large part of the seminar I attended.

Whilst on the one hand we must accept that marketing should be age neutral – that is not to say 'fuddy-duddy' – there are some considerations when designing a web site that will interest and inform the silver surfer.

From the age of 40 onwards, eyesight can begin to deteriorate – losing the ability to read small text without glasses and making focussing on the screen for long periods harder. We have declining colour perception, and contrast sensitivity. As the icing on the cake there can be a decline in peripheral vision and increase in the level of illumination required to see properly.

Dexterity can become a problem, particularly caused by arthritis, which affects over 15% of the population with its related problems. Anything that affects finger and wrist movement will impact the amount of time that can be spent surfing.

We also have the issue of cognitive skills – Stroud shows evidence that an over 55 with the same amount of computer experience as someone younger will still make more mistakes when progressing through the same website.

Take a look at the Saga website for travel at www.saga.co.uk then click on travel. Although a website specifically designed for the over 50's this page is full of links, but no real information and no space. It is crowded and confusing. This was held up at the seminar as "what not to do". Then take a look at www.fourseasons.com to feel the serenity inspired by that site. Clear, unfussy menus, and appealing, relevant graphics.

Stroud's recommendations were to steer clear of moving graphics – they confuse the eye and distract attention. Use simple navigational structures – a constant side menu – even doubled up, side and top. Stay away from dynamic menus that involve minute manipulation and accuracy to select the correct page. Be aware that older people are wary of clicking what looks like a link in case it takes them somewhere entirely different. They much prefer to use the menu.

Font size is also important and should not be below 12 points. Unjustified text is preferable – although that can affect the look of the page. If the website is particularly confusing, or complex, that can result in frustration and rejection as the surfer moves on to find something more suitable.

Stroud's points can also be applied to brochures but (in summary) – designing your website and communications with over 50's in mind will not alienate the young. However, designing for the young may well alienate the over 50's.



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Space Odyssey

Florida's Space Coast spans the area from just south of Daytona to just south of Melbourne. This small area holds enough interest to be worthy of more than just a day trip.

During March there are several festivals taking place along this coast that can easily be combined with the more obvious attractions.

Straight across from Orlando on the recently renamed Beachline Expressway one can reach Cape Canaveral in three-quarters of an hour to an hour. After you have visited the Kennedy Space Center take a trip into neighbouring Titusville.

Named after founder Colonel Henry Titus this village was unheard of before NASA began operations in the mid 60's. It is now a favourite place for watching rocket launches. The space connection is continued at the U.S. Space Walk of Fame Museum where the daring exploits of the first 44 American astronauts can be relived. Unique simulators allow visitors to feel the forces of gravity and experience aerial acrobatics. After squeezing into a Mercury Spacecraft and practising landing the shuttle a walk along the U.S. Space Walk of Fame could be just the thing. This walk on the banks of the Indian River, overlooking the Kennedy Space Center celebrates America's space history with public art, sculptures, memorabilia and bronze markers.

The TICO Warbird Airshow at the Space Coast Regional Airport, Titusville, off U.S. 1 takes place on March 10th, 11th & 12th. Features include: Dogfights; Strafing; Bombing; Skydiving; Military Jets; World War I; World War II; Korea; Vietnam; Desert Storm (according to availability); B-25; B-17; P-51s; TBM; T-34s; FUJIS; T-28s; T-6; C-45; F101; F14; T3; S2 Tracker; Mohawk; Messerschmitt; Fockewolfe & C-47 along with vendors flea/fly market; food booths & seating. 321-268-1941, www.vacwarbirds.org

If all this space gazing leaves you craving a little down to earth nature – you could take a boat trip with Space Coast Nature Tours for an 'up close' 90 minute narrated boat tour of the Indian River Lagoon. Underwater microphones mean you could hear dolphins communicating in their natural environment. Titusville Municipal Marina, 451 Marina Road, Slip #A-23. 321-267-4551. www.spacecoastnaturetours.com

Titusville has accommodation in the usual chain hotels, but for a more unique experience try the Dickens Inn Bed and Breakfast. Built circa 1860, the Dickens Inn was the "Original Manor House" of an active and thriving citrus plantation in Mims, Florida. "Black Hawk" Davis of Barlow, Kentucky, purchased it in 1913 from James Wilcox of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. In 1950, Lester Cantrell, a citrus grower, bought the property because, like the others, he wanted the land to grow oranges. Today, the Dickens Inn B&B still sits

amid luscious orange and grapefruit trees, totally renovated to its original elegance and offers a range of accommodations to suit needs and budgets. The "Original Manor House" 2398 North Singleton Avenue, Mims, (321) 269-4595. www.dickens-inn.com

Following a leisurely breakfast head off down the A1 to Cocoa. Cocoa itself is an historical little town that has its roots in the early citrus growers who migrated down the Indian River. There is a large mansion alongside the river built by one successful grower that is now open to the public at 434 Delanroy Avenue. Stroll around the historic village center before heading across Merritt Island Causeway and the Banana River for the white sands of Cocoa Beach.

If it were not for the Kennedy Space Center then this stretch of coast would probably be called the 'Surf Coast'. A long continental shelf takes the sting out of the swells making it an excellent place to learn the skill. Cocoa beach has many surf rental shops as well as the world famous Ron Jon's Surf Shop, or you could join the Cocoa Beach Surfing School to learn the basics – along with marine safety. Just down the coast the Annual Globe Sebastian Inlet Pro Surfing Tournament is heading for its third year – so more challenging waves can be found.

When you have worked up an appetite go down the Cocoa Beach Pier to dine in one of the four restaurants – all with stunning ocean views! Coconuts on the Beach is famous for parties as well as food – clam chowder or the freshest Florida seafood. For a more relaxed evening and the best Chinese food in the area, try Yen Yen Chinese.

Hang ten at the 42nd Ron Jon Easter Surfing festival, Cocoa Beach, April 13th – 16th.

Just a little further down the coast is Vero Beach. In 1891 Postmaster John Gifford was looking for a name to call the area and decided on his wife's name – Vero. The post office approved and Vero began – the Beach was added later. Now the home of the Los Angeles Dodgers Spring Training camp, exhibition games can be seen in March and early April at the Holman Stadium, 4001, Twenty Sixth Street, Vero Beach. 772-569-4900.

Other festivals taking place this spring include:

Greek Festival at St Katherine Greek Orthodox Church, Melbourne, February 24th – 26th. 321-254-1045

Mardi Gras, downtown Cocoa Village, February 25th. 321-633-4028

Grant Seafood Festival, Grant Community Center February 25th & 25th. 321-264-5105.

South Brevard Strawberry Festival, Wickham Park Pavilion, Melbourne, 321-255-5800

SeaFest, Port Canaveral, March 11th – 13th. 459-2200, www.seafest.com,



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The Trouble with Guests...

Continued from the last issue – here are some more stories from management companies of the strange things they have to put up with.....

Soon after starting my management company, I received a three-week booking. Wow! I had a new business and I was nervous. This was a big booking! Anxiously I made sure to place the guest in the best home I had. It was beautiful. The guest got the keys and left my office. Less than twenty minutes later, the phone rang. "Lance, I don't like this home." My heart sank. I couldn't afford to lose this booking. But I have a strict policy—if a guest is not happy with one of my homes I either fix the problem or find them a home to make them happy. Problem was, the guest could not tell me specifically what he did not like. I replied, "No problem" (but I'm thinking to myself, "what am I going to do, this is the best home I have") "C'mon back and I'll get you another home!" The guest came back to the office and I gave him keys to another home. Twenty minutes later, another phone call. Same problem. "Come on back and we'll try another home", I said. Now I'm in trouble. I have only one home left. Let's face it; every management company has a few homes that are "not the greatest." Homes where the homeowner does not want to spend any money, or the home is old, or the home is at that point where it is just about ready for a new carpet, new roof, new paint, but not quite. You know the type, a home that is "acceptable" but not "perfect." Well, that was the only home I had left. As cheerfully as I could muster, I gave the guest the keys to this home and put on a smile. "Check it out," I said, "and if you don't like it I will try to find another home or I will refund all your money." I'm thinking to myself that

a three-week booking in my fledgling company is going to be a big loss! Twenty minutes later, as I predicted, the phone rang. Caller ID confirmed it was from the home I just sent this guest to. I picked up the phone. "Lance," says an enthusiastic voice on the other end of the line, "thanks for finding us this home—it is absolutely perfect!"

We took over a neglected property from a large management company and during our spring clean we found, what looked like a child's toy gun in one of the draws in a bedside cabinet. My husband showed me this and I placed it on the kitchen table, later I picked it up and had a closer look. Stupidly I pulled the trigger and out flew a bullet, which went through the kitchen wall, bathroom wall and door. We immediately called the sheriff who took some details and admitted this weapon could have quite easily killed someone and he put a value of \$50 on it.

During cleaning of our homes we supply an initial starter pack of toilet tissue, soap, kitchen paper and trash bin liners. A few days after the arrival of a guest we received a telephone call to say that they had run out of toilet tissue and would we please deliver them some more. We politely told them that this was a vacation home and not a hotel and once the initial starter pack had been expended they were responsible for the replacement of these items.

During one of our homeowner's visits they called to say they had arrived and although they were very happy with the condition of the home they felt irritated that the pictures in the home were not straight and some were at an angle, we asked if they found the pictures to be clean and they said, 'Oh, yes' but they would appreciate it if the cleaners could straighten the pictures after they had dusted them.

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