

The Boston Globe

Revitalized Bradenton brims with artistic flair

By Beth D'Addono, Globe Correspondent | November 1, 2009

BRADENTON, Fla. - Turn onto 12th Street West, and it's clear that this isn't your average neighborhood. Instead of the usual bungalows, there is a riot of lime green picket fencing, a mural that pairs Frida Kahlo with an emaciated Christ figure, and a giant cow statue painted blue. And that's just within two blocks.

Welcome to Village of the Arts, a funky collection of more than 35 galleries, studios, cafes, and shops stretching between 9th Street and 16th Street West, and 9th and 14th Street West in what was once a rough section just south of downtown Bradenton, 50 miles south of Tampa on Florida's Gulf Coast. Formerly a place known for crack houses and prostitutes, Village of the Arts started as a grass-roots attempt to reclaim the neighborhood by a few brave artists in search of cheap real estate and a community. A decade later, what began as a social experiment has become a reason for locals and visitors to spend time away from Bradenton's sandy beaches.

Bonni Brown was one of the first to stake a claim. The former New York clinical social worker opened a bakery cafe in September 1999. "We bought this place from a man arrested for shooting at crackheads. Got a great deal." Today, the 100-year-old building houses Bonni Bakes, a friendly spot to have fresh mango lassi, a curried chicken salad sandwich, and a slice of red velvet cake. "We still get locals who've lived here all their lives and say, 'When did all this happen?' We've finally got some signs up, which will help a lot."

Brenda Smoak is the newest kid on the block. She opened Alchemy, a fair trade consignment shop representing 145 artists, in early October, leaving her gallery in Silver Springs, Md., behind. "I moved here because of this place - it felt like a community," Smoak said.

Divine Excess Folk Art is definitely one of 12th Street's catchiest facades. Painted lime and scarlet, the outside of the gallery is marked by a towering live oak that doubles as a repository of Mexican milagros and Mardi Gras beads. Inside, Zoe Von Averkamp showcases top Florida folk and outsider artists, including Missionary Mary Proctor, whose work hangs at the American Visionary Arts Museum in Baltimore. "I love folk art because it's raw, real, and from the soul," said Von Averkamp, an artist who creates moody shrines and altars from found objects. "I'm here to tell you that you're never too old or too late to realize your dream."

Bradenton (population 53,000) has become the little arts town that could, harnessing existing resources and adding attractions to create a package with plenty of cultural cachet. In a recent Soul of the Community study done by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, Bradenton ranked first as a place whose citizens felt attached to their community and eager to spread the word.

Plans to revitalize downtown, adjust traffic flow, and attract more restaurants and shops are slowly taking root. "You won't recognize downtown in the next five years," said Rick Fawley, the local architect working on the transformation, which will start with a half-mile pedestrian walkway linking the river walk to the Village of the Arts, called Artisan Avenue. Monthly events like a street and craft fair with live music, an outdoor movie in the park, and the art walk on the first weekend of each month are enthusiastically attended.

"It's such a friendly place," said Jenny Taylor, who along with her husband, John, and daughter Christina own The Londoner Inn B&B and Tea Rooms, a six-room inn within a few blocks of downtown. After moving from South London, the Taylors first opened a hotel on swanky Longboat

Key. "When I had a 5-year-old ask me if we'd be going condo soon, I knew we were in the wrong spot," she said. After a nine-week stint back in England - "We really didn't fit in there anymore, and it was so cold!" - the family returned to Bradenton and bought a dilapidated house in what used to be called the Silk Stocking District. "It was quite posh at one time, before it got run down," she said.

Renovated and outfitted with six spacious rooms, the Londoner is a cheery place for an overnight stay or a spot of tea. Try the coronation chicken salad, the same recipe enjoyed by Queen Elizabeth on her big day.

After staying at the Londoner for three weeks, Winchester native Lyn Di Mambro decided never to leave. "I'm not in the mood for another winter," said the freelance puzzle writer, who went home, packed her stuff, and is renting the carriage house behind the B&B. "I can work anywhere. But this feels like home."

What to see

Farmer's Market Every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Old Main Street, the market features local produce, joined by artists selling everything from jewelry to antiques on the third Saturday of the month. Live music. 941-544-8077

South Florida Museum This gem of a museum covers local history, offers a state of the art digital planetarium, and is home to Snooty, the world's oldest known manatee (he turned 61 last summer). 201 10th St. West, 941-746-4131, www.southfloridamuseum.org

ArtCenter Manatee This vibrant haven for artists for more than 75 years attracts impressive exhibits and fosters local (and visiting) talent in workshops and classes in pottery to jewelry making and watercolor. Nice gift shop. 209 9th St. West, 941-746-2862, www.artcentermanatee.org

Where to shop

Village of the Arts www.villageofthearts.com (Note: Many galleries are open only a few days a week, so call before you visit.)

Hearts Desire Local jewelry designer and graphic artist Vicki Rollo spotlights art to wear, interesting textiles, and her own work. 1221 12th St. West, 941-302-1069, www.heartsdesirefl.com

Alchemy An eclectic mix of 145 artists' work, from sculpture to oils to painted leather and more. 1215 12th St. West, 941-746-3508, www.artandalchemy2.com

Divine Excess Surprisingly affordable outsider and folk art. 125 12th St. West, 941-747-1320, http://www.villageofthearts.com/show_member.php?id=37

Where to eat

Bonni Bakes Homemade baked goods, wraps, salads, and blintzes served for lunch Tuesday to Saturday, \$4-\$7.50. 930 12th St., 941-746-6647, bonnibakes.blogspot.com

Ristorante Ortygia In a homey bungalow, chef/owner Gaetano Cannata creates authentic Sicilian specialties like sweet red peppers stuffed with provolone, tomatoes, pine nuts, and black currants. If you're lucky, Joseph Spinella will be singing Italian folk songs and the chef may just break out his harmonica. 1418 13th St. West, 941 741-8646, ortygiarestaurant.com

SOMA Diner SOMA, which stands for South of Manatee, is the latest from chef/owner David Shiplett, who brings chic comfort food to the table, including a killer four-cheese mac and cheese and a parmesan-crust chicken schnitzel, \$5-\$22. *616 10th St. East, 941-748-0002*

Mattison's Riverside Just one of local chef Paul Mattison's eateries, this spot offers river views, live music on the weekends, and a Mediterranean inspired menu that focuses on seafood, lamb, duck, beef, and sushi, \$7.95-\$29.95. www.mattisons.com, 941-748-8087

What to do

Manatee Players This national award-winning community theater group delivers crowd-pleasing musicals with plenty of spunk. A new playhouse is in the works. *102 12th Street West, 941-748-011, www.manateeplayers.com*

Around the Bend Nature Tours Naturalist Karen Fraley and her guides offer interactive and interpretive outdoor adventures in places like the 487-acre Robinson Preserve, with its nest of federally protected bald eagles, and Emerson Point Park, a birders' paradise and home to the largest remaining Native American temple mound on Tampa Bay. Fun activities for groups, families. 941-794-8773, www.aroundbend.com

Manatee Segway Tours This is a fun way to see Bradenton, gliding along the River Walk past the South Florida Museum and onto Old Main Street, or on tour in Village of the Arts. Pick up at your hotel, \$35-\$45. 941-224-8079, www.manateesegwaytours.com

Horse Surfing Great World Nature Tours offers horseback riding in the sand and water, a gentle experience of riding bareback and swimming in balmy Palma Sola Bay outside Bradenton. www.beachhorses.com

Where to stay

Courtyard Marriott Newly renovated business hotel includes 153 rooms, pool, and onsite bistro/bar with a riverside address, from \$149. *100 Riverfront St., 941-747-3727, www.marriott.com/srqbd*

The Londoner Inn B&B Stylish B&B geared to Anglophiles and creatures of comfort. Airy, comfy rooms, full English breakfast, and optional afternoon tea. *304 15th St. West, 941-748-5658, from \$120 per night. www.thelondonerinn.com*

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