

Boats are moored on a calm summer day at Burnt Store Marina.

The livin' is easy

Boaters know that Burnt Store Marina is the place to go to kick back and have some fun.

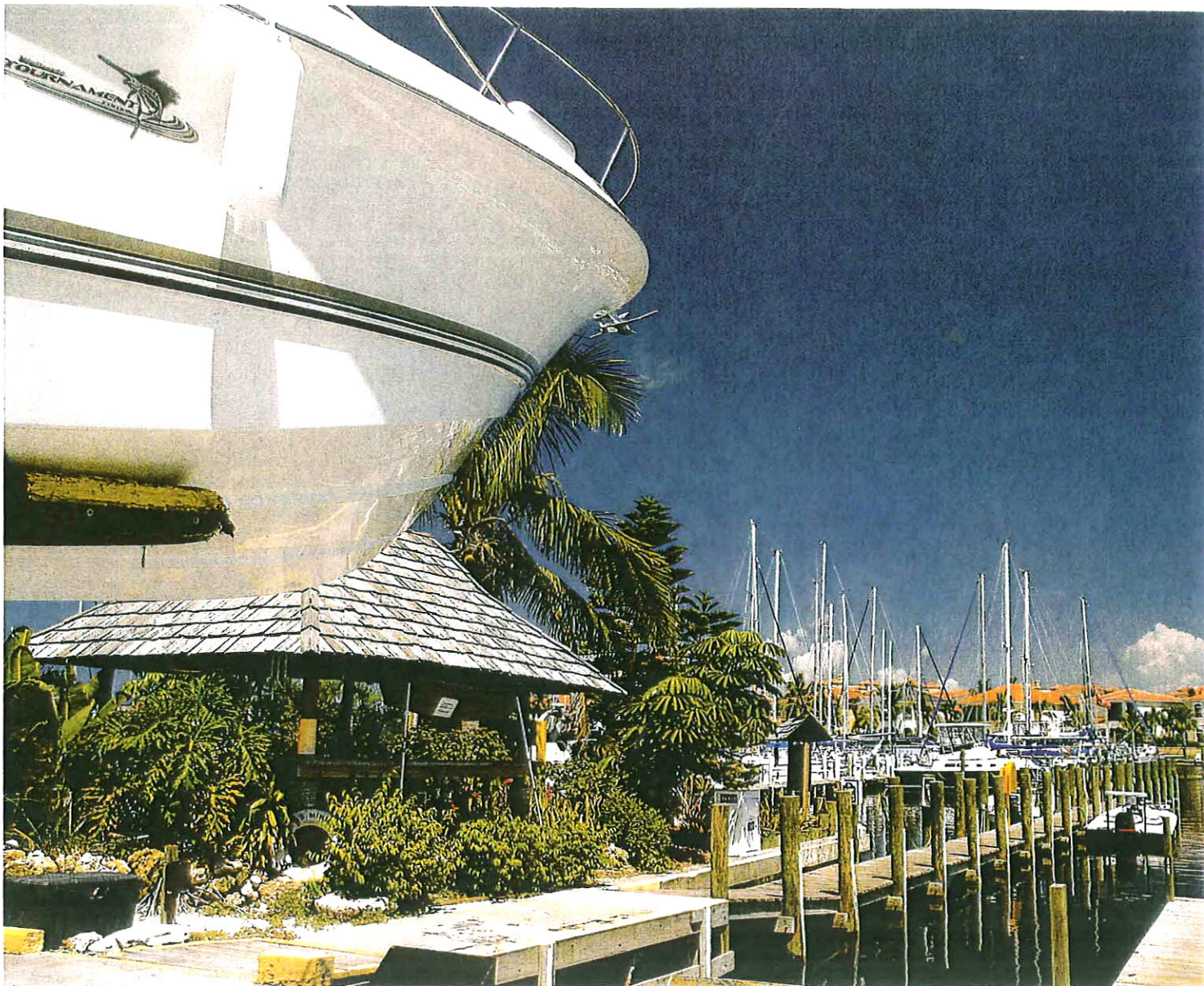
BY JILL TYRER / PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER BUNN

Perspiration from the summer heat beads on Cecil Wood's face as he steps into the air-conditioned office, where harbor master Don Thompson barks a hearty greeting and draws him into a con-

versation. Soon, Jeanne Potgieter stops by for her mail, a few more people trickle in, and suddenly the little office is alive with voices and laughter.

At Burnt Store Marina, it doesn't take

long to find a friendly group of folks talking and swapping jokes, and on holidays and weekends, more than likely there's a party going on somewhere. It might be a big, organized soiree, such as the New



Burnt Store Marina, with its 800 wet and dry slips, is the largest marina on Florida's west coast.

Year's Eve celebration with live music and champagne, a cookout for a boating club stopping by, or just a spontaneous gathering at the restaurant bar or the end of E Dock. That's where tables and chairs are clustered under a sprawling shade tree, tiki torches stand at the ready and a gaudy yellow, anchor-shaped sign announces the universal cocktail-hour call: "It's 5 o'clock somewhere."

But Burnt Store Marina, the largest privately owned marina on Florida's west coast, is much more than a party spot. It's a destination for boaters from all walks of life, from throughout the Eastern seaboard and beyond. The marina is the central feature of the sprawling, eponymous golf-course community that

surrounds it. It's a base for several groups, including the Platinum Pointe Yacht Club, a private social organization; the Billy Bowlegs Boat Club, the unofficial alternative to the yacht club; and the Burnt Store Marina Flats Fishing Guides Association. It's also home to a few dozen people who live aboard their boats. And, for those—especially boaters—who know about it, it's a popular vacation destination.

Diverse as these groups might be, they have something in common when it comes to Burnt Store Marina: They love the casual ease of the place, its friendliness and relaxing atmosphere.

"I love it out here," says Donna Smithwick, who moved to the community

about two years ago from Punta Gorda Isles. "I come and just sit and look at the water." On this summer afternoon, she has the outside deck of Porto Bello at Latitudes restaurant to herself. "To me, it's like you're on vacation all the time."

"It's laid-back, it's casual, it's for someone who likes ... a little nature and not the hustle and bustle of the city," says Andree Likins. "You have nature at its best out here."

An employee in the ship's store, Likins lived in the community for nearly five years until her husband's death. Osprey raised their young each year in a nest just outside their home. Eagle sightings are common, and manatees, attracted by freshwater springs in the marina, are



The harbormaster's office is a hub of activity at the marina.

AMENITIES

- Largest privately owned marina on Florida's west coast.
- 525 wet slips for boats as long as 100 feet.
- 290 inside dry slips and outside cradle storage.
- Electricity, 30- and 50-amp.
- Free pump-out facilities for marina patrons.
- Repair services available, from canvas to engine to electronics.
- Gas and diesel available from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
- Anchor Bay Swim Club for marina patrons, with heated swimming pool, shower and laundry facilities.
- Golf course and clubhouse.
- Fitness center and tennis courts (additional charge).
- Ship's store.
- Porto Bello at Latitudes restaurant: lunch, dinner, bar, live entertainment, (941) 639-3650.
- Charters: fishing, sightseeing, sunset cruises.
- Wachovia Bank branch.
- Yacht brokerage.
- Fairfield Resort hotel: (877) 276-3300, (941) 639-4886.
- The Marina Inn Hotel, with swimming pool: (800) 859-7529, (941) 575-4488.

WET SLIP COSTS:

- Daily: \$1.75 per foot per day.
- Weekly: \$8 per foot per week.
- Monthly: \$13.50 per foot per month plus electric.
- Yearly: \$11 per foot per month plus electric.

LIVE ABOARD:

- \$120 a month for up to two people plus \$25 per additional person.



The casual ease of Burnt Store Marina is reflected in its waterfront decor.

abundant.

"It was fun to get up early in the morning, when they congregate around the freshwater springs, to go watch the manatees," Likins says.

"For me, the whole thing with Burnt Store is the casualness," says Jan McLaughlin, who moved to the community in 2001 with her husband, Bob Bot-

tel. "The people are great; they're people you want to be around, and they're from a fairly diverse background."

A getaway destination

Once cattle land and gladiolus fields, the marina basins were dredged in the 1970s by developer Al Johns. Legend has it the "Burnt Store" name came from the Seminole Wars, when Billy Bowlegs and

his men retaliated against U.S. troops by burning down a local trading post. Over the years, the subdivision Johns started, with a Punta Gorda address, but located just south of the Charlotte County line, has evolved into a sprawling, golf-course community with single-family homes, townhouses and high-rise condominiums, much of it developed by WCI Com-



Besides the full-service marina, Burnt Store is a resort with condos, two hotels, golf and a fine-dining restaurant on beautifully landscaped grounds

munities and its predecessors. In 2000, Realmark Group, developer of Cape Harbour in Cape Coral, bought the marina and expanded it.

Harbormaster Don Thompson says Burnt Store Marina, with 800 wet and dry slips, is the largest on the west coast of Florida. More than 1,000 cruisers and sailors pass through each year, and with the closing of several other marinas around Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island Sound, "we became the only large-scale marina that could handle large boats on Charlotte Harbor," says assistant harbormaster Mike McCartan.

A full-service marina, Burnt Store is also a resort destination. Visitors who arrive by car or who don't want to stay on their boats can spend the night — or a week or month — in one of two hotels, The Marina Inn Hotel or the Fairfield Resort. Hotel and marina guests can use the golf course, swimming pool (Marina Inn guests have their own pool), and, for an extra charge, they can get in a workout or a game of tennis at

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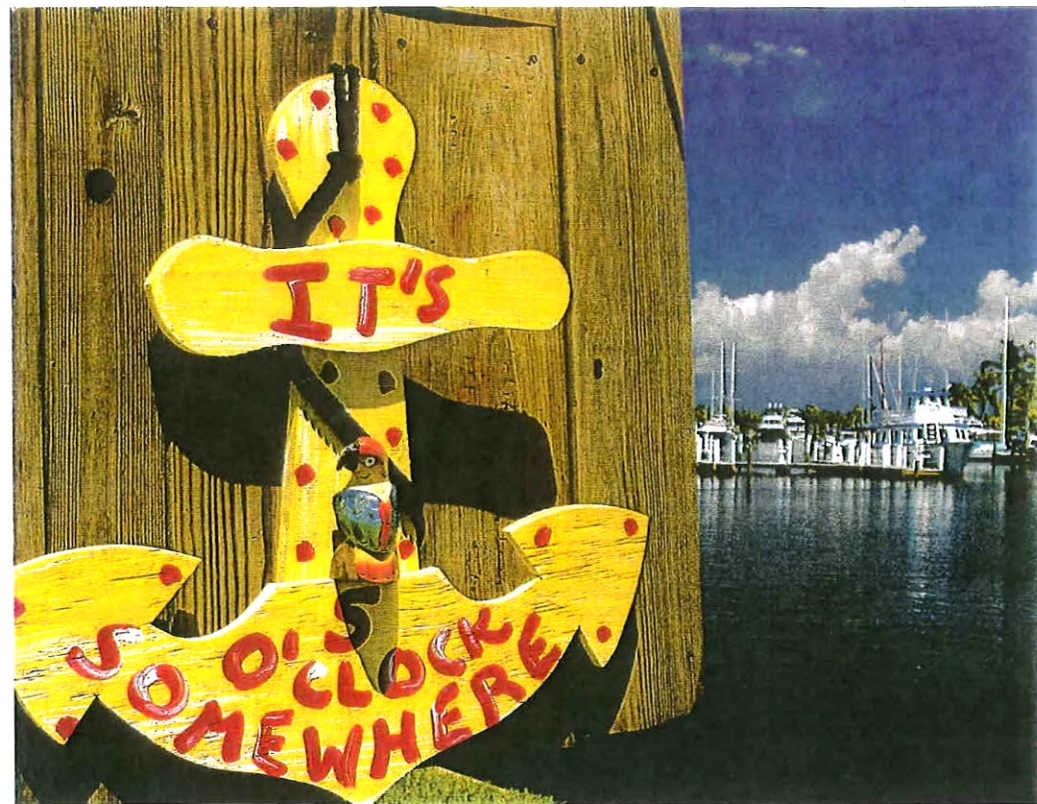
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The universal cocktail-hour call goes out: "It's 5 o'clock somewhere."

the community's athletic club.

The marina is popular among members of boat clubs, who arrive in groups ranging from five to more than 60 crafts. Among them is the Venice Sailing Squadron, which heads to Burnt Store for its Change of Watch Trip each year around Memorial Day weekend.

From Venice, the marina is just the right distance by boat or car. Its pump-out and fuel facilities are handy. It boasts a large pavilion for group gatherings and picnics, and it's big enough to accommodate large numbers of boats.

"They always make a full weekend of it — Saturday, Sunday and Monday," says Commodore Jim Johnson.

The gathering this past summer drew 15 boats and about 100 people for cookouts, dinghy races and the chance to simply relax or socialize.

"For a lot of people, this is a destination for one day to one month," says Thompson. "They might launch from Sarasota and

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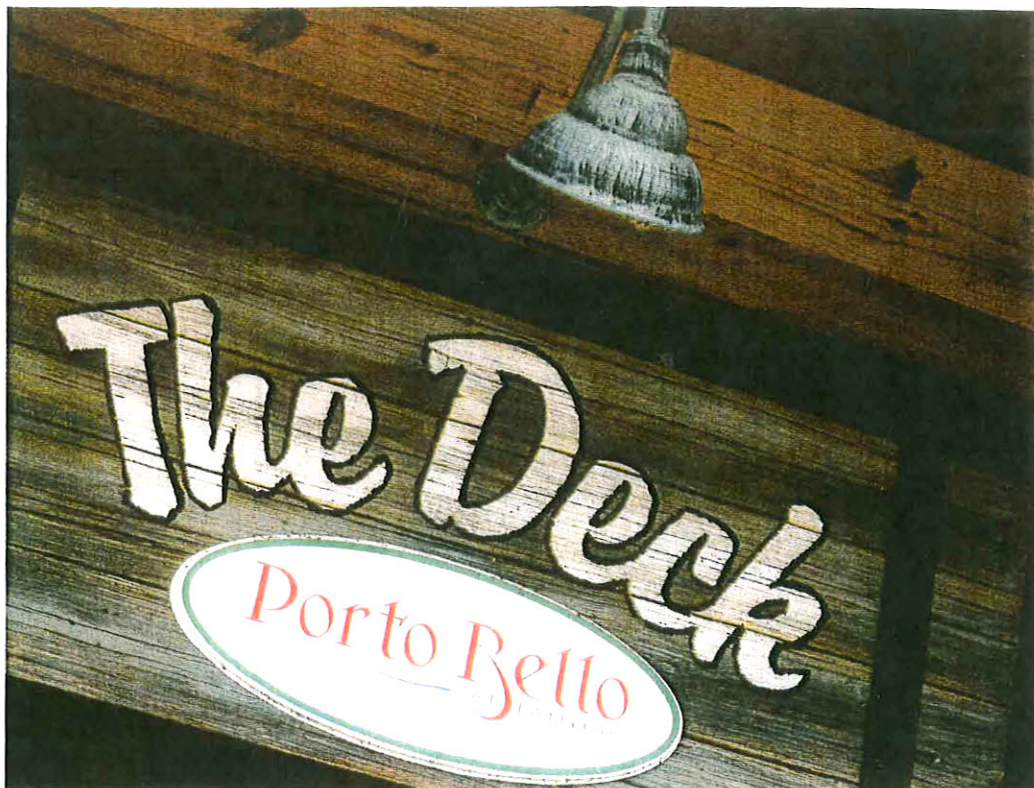
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come down for a weekend," leaving behind household duties and work worries to relax by the pool, lounge on their boat, eat at Porto Bello, maybe take a day trip fishing in Charlotte Harbor or shopping at Fisherman's Village — just shed their cares for a couple of days."

That's exactly what Marianne and Frank Pieczatkiewicz do as often as they can. They live only as far as Cape Coral, but they're happy to make the 1½-hour trip on their 26½-foot cruiser to what has become a favorite getaway.

"We own our own business, and it's a nice way to escape," says Marianne Pieczatkiewicz. "Sometimes it's a last-minute thing."


At Burnt Store, they kick back on their boat or at the pool and go to Porto Bello for a good meal and occasional live music. "They have some great bands there, too, and we like to dance," she says. "We did go to the New Year's Eve party. That was a real blast."



One of the most popular gathering spots at the marina is Porto Bello restaurant.

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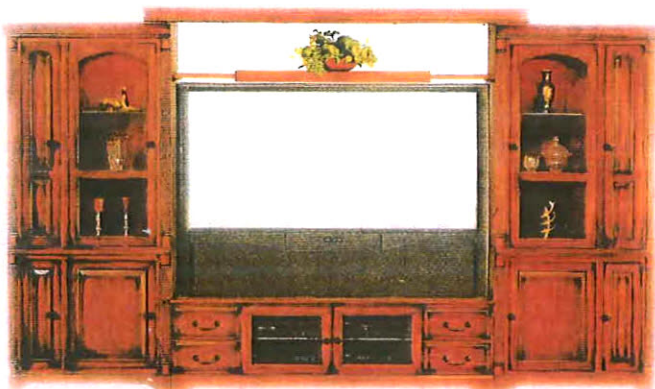
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No place like home

For some, Burnt Store Marina is more than a vacation destination. It's home.

"Live-aboards and cruising people have completely different lifestyles," says Cecil Wood, and yacht clubbers, as a rule, are different from either, he adds. Some choose to live on their boats for the casual lifestyle and the ease with which they can pick up and go, others for the affordability or convenience.

Wood, 61, and his wife, Virginia, have been living on their 41-foot Morgan Out Island sailboat for about a year and a half, waiting for their new home to be built in Deep Creek.

"It's a great place to live," he says of the marina. "It's got everything here."

While the south basin, where the transient docks are, generally is more lively, the Woods prefer the quieter north basin, but they still enjoy the familiarity that comes with living in the marina.

"It's like a little family almost," says Cecil Wood. "You know your neighbors a lot better here than a regular neighborhood. You live outside more, you're more interactive."



Wildlife, including little and great herons, ospreys, eagles and manatees, surrounds you at the marina.



Tie up your boat and stay awhile at Burnt Store Marina.

You know you have someone to depend on to help you; nobody will turn you down for anything."

Jeanne Potgieter, 25, arrived from South Africa last year to join her fiancé, who works for the Lee County School District, aboard their 38-foot Pearson Ketch at the marina.

"The camaraderie in a marina is unsurpassed," says live-aboard Bill Fell — as in Bill Fell in the Water, the name of his diving business. "The only thing that comes remotely close is an RV park, and this is better than an RV park."

When it comes to describing life at Burnt Store Marina, Fell has a lot in common with residents of the golf-course community, yacht-club members and visiting cruisers.

Says Fell, "It's like being on vacation all the time." ✧

CONTACTS

VHF Channel 16.

Harbormaster's office: (941) 637-0083.

www.burntstoremarina.com.

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