

Sarasota's name recognition grows with top 10 lists

By [Justine Griffin](#)

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In August, Sarasota was named both the "sexiest small city in America" and the "top place to retire" in the United States.

Something of a paradox?

Maybe.

But Virginia Haley doesn't care.

"Now that we've cracked the top 10 lists, I think it subtly validates our destination — even the gimmicky ones," said Haley, president of Visit Sarasota, the county's tourism agency. "I don't think anyone is going to look at one of these lists and book a vacation, but over time, they'll remember our destination because they're hearing about it over and over again."

Meanwhile, the online ranking accolades — though often strange when combined — have continued to pile up in Southwest Florida. Sarasota, its hotels, beaches and other venues have seen a steady rise in top rankings year after year. Though some may hold more weight than others, each has a positive impact.

The serious "listing" began in 2011, when Siesta Beach was named the No. 1 beach destination in the nation by Florida International University scientist Dr. Stephen Leatherman, aka "Dr. Beach."

That coveted title, which still adorns signs on Siesta Key roadways, promotional pamphlets and tourism and hotel websites, put Sarasota County on the tourism map, so to speak.

The number of visitors coming to the community has spiked for years, and its effects can arguably still be felt today as Sarasota County continues to shatter tourism records.

July hotel occupancy and average daily room rate numbers were the best on record, topping even numbers recorded before the Great Recession.

Since then, Sarasota County beaches have continued to pile on the attention, featured in a number of top lists by travel websites like TripAdvisor and USA Today.

In October 2013, a popular social content website, BuzzFeed, listed Sarasota as the No. 1 destination on a list of 10 cities nationwide served by JetBlue Airways.

The site, known for promoting viral photos and videos relating to pop culture and news events, has a partnering agreement with JetBlue, which wrote the post.

Sarasota was named the No. 1 destination because of its "surprising art scene," opera



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house and beach activities such as parasailing and scuba diving, the site said.

Despite its promotional connection to JetBlue, the attention it garnered from the well-known website was seen as a substantial perk.

Topping lists — ubiquitous in American culture these days — is just as important as appearing in the widely distributed stories written by reporters, some tourism officials say.

The lists can promote a destination to audiences without necessarily being perceived as advertisements, and unlike JetBlue's stab at boosting the region, they usually are not paid promotional material.

“Most publicity is good publicity,” said Daniel Lesser, chief executive with New York's LW Hospitality Advisors. “Can it really hurt a property or destination? Not at all. Some of these titles may sound silly, but it's in your face.

“Whether you like it or not, people will react to it and remember Sarasota because of it.”

Lists and accolades promoting regional hotels, like the Ritz-Carlton Sarasota or the Resort at Longboat Key Club — which between the two have more than a dozen — also draw visitors.

Last year, the Resort at Longboat Key Club earned the No. 12 spot on a list of Top 40 Florida Resorts chosen by Conde Nast readers — its first time attaining that distinction. The resort also earned a AAA Four-Diamond Award for its 30th consecutive year, one of six resorts in Florida to hold that honor.

The Ritz-Carlton Sarasota also held top AAA and Forbes' rankings, and its spa was ranked as one of the top in the nation. The Ritz was ranked No. 28 on the Conde Nast Florida resorts list.

“Can it be overdone? I don't think so,” Lesser said. “Hotel rooms are perishable commodities and marketing is important.”

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