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## **FAMILIES DELIGHT IN SARASOTA’S UNIQUE CIRCUS HERITAGE**

SARASOTA, Fla. – From acrobats to Lipizzans and colorful clowns to the center stage, Sarasota and Her Islands – located on Southwest Florida’s Gulf Coast – is steeped in the colorful character that is “The Greatest Show on Earth.” The vivid excitement that has inspired generations comes alive along the satin soft sands of Sarasota and encourages a new generation of travelers to experience the magic of the big top, master the flying trapeze and visit the Venetian “castle” that marks the legacy of Ringling.

The foundation of Sarasota’s unique circus heritage began with circus magnate John Ringling. In 1927, the circus made its home in Sarasota, bringing laughter to her shores and providing a fanciful escape – even through the great depression. Among his more eccentric contributions, Ringling built the first bridge from St. Armands Key to the mainland using his elephants. Just blocks from Sarasota’s artist colony, Towles Court, circus-lovers stroll by the houses that John Ringling custom made for the “little people” that performed in his circus.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is another of John’s greatest legacies. Housing some of the best baroque artwork in the United States, the Museum of Art features over 21 galleries, each adorned with unique décor, from an iridescent gold room featuring Flemish cabinets with scenes from the Old Testament to muted burgundy walls that cradle a portrait of St. Jerome. The most solemn pauses are found in front of the Peter Paul Rubens gallery – a collection of 17<sup>th</sup> century tapestries that capture onlookers with a larger-than-life appearance and depiction of movement.

Sprawling a magnificent 66 acres, the crown jewel of the Ringling Campus is the Ca d’Zan – the Venetian-inspired “house of John” which served as the winter residence of John and Mable Ringling. Wandering through 32 perfectly-restored rooms, six guestrooms and 15 bathrooms, visitors are transported back in time and visions of The Great Gatsby era come alive with women

and men dressed in their finest attire, sipping drinks, enjoying the view and speaking of wealth and prestige.

One of the most fascinating attractions at the Ringling Campus, The Tibbals Learning Center, delights the imagination of all visitors, by giving a glimpse into what the circus really looked like. The *Howard Bros. Circus* model is a replica of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus from 1919-1938. Complete with eight main tents, 152 wagons, 1,300 circus performers and workers, more than 800 animals and a 59-car train, the model is built in ¾-inch-to-the-foot scale replica and occupies 3,800 square feet. The “world’s largest miniature circus” was created over a period of over 50-years by Howard Tibbals, and the center boasts a variety of exhibits for children.

Those looking to learn more about the history of the circus during that time period can find it at the Circus Museum. The inside of a rainbow personified, the museum was built in the 1950’s as a tribute to John Ringling. With old newspaper clippings, black and white photography and restored original circus wagons, the museum conjures nostalgia with authentic and replica circus posters, caravans and costumes while inspiring awe amongst its younger patrons with child-size entrances to the big top and larger than life exhibits. One of the only businesses to thrive during the Great Depression, the circus recruited life-long performers, including Cha Cha Zacchini, who many times flew through the air from the thrust of her cannon, and today still calls Sarasota home.

Getting into the act of the circus is easy in Venice, where families stop by The Flying Trapeze Academy & The Flying Fantasy Circus (housed in the former winter quarters of the circus) for a lesson on the flying trapeze.

To gain a sense of Sarasota’s circus heritage, visitors can follow the footsteps of both modern and historical greats – with ice cream in hand – along the European-style St. Armands Circle and the Circus Ring of Fame. While children let their imagination run wild with dreams of sequins, stilts and stars, parents peruse an eclectic array of boutique style shops. A treasure-trove fit for year round holiday shopping, collections range from unique to outrageous – from delicate Russian-pulled glass butterflies at Leaping Lizards to ceremonial tribal masks from the former Zaire at the Ivory Coast.

Visitors can now map out their journey through Sarasota’s vibrant circus history with the new Circus Heritage Guide. The free, full-color guide features a trail that leads visitors through the magic of the circus from start to finish. The adventure kicks off at the Ringling estates and continues into the Sarasota and Venice Winter Quarters of the circus, Ringling College of Art

and Design, St. Armand's Circle, Downtown, the Sarasota Opera House, St. Martha's Catholic Church, and the Ringling Museum of Art. The trail ends at the Tibbals Learning Center. Visitors with relive the experiences of circus-insiders along the way, with stops at the Circus Bridge and the prop and design shop. The trail also showcases Sarasota's active circuses. Pick up a copy of the guide at the Sarasota Convention and Visitors Bureau Visitors Center at 701 N. Tamiami Trail. You can order the guide online at [www.sarasotacircusguide.org](http://www.sarasotacircusguide.org).

Events centered on the circus are common throughout Sarasota and Her Islands, from Circus Spectacular at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art to the area's very own Circus Sarasota – a European-style one-ring circus with performers from around the globe. Families can watch even the local kids get involved in PAL's Sailor Circus, dubbed the "Smallest, Greatest Show on Earth."

For more information on discovering the spirit of the circus along Sarasota and Her Islands, call the **Sarasota Convention and Visitors Bureau** at **800-522-9799** or visit **[www.sarasotafl.org](http://www.sarasotafl.org)**.

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