

Santa seen taking a break on Siesta Key

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It may be the Easter bunny's season to bask in the spotlight, but it was Santa Claus who surprised a group of young adults from Community Haven with a special appearance at their beach-side pizza party. Most people have a chance to catch a glimpse of Santa just one night of the year, on Dec. 24, when he and his eight reindeer travel the globe to deliver holiday gifts. When Santa is not at the North Pole making toys and keeping track of the naughty list, it just so happens he enjoys taking a spring break on the country's No. 1 beach.



Mr. and Mrs. Claus, also known as Kip and Janis Lackey of Fort Wayne, Ind., presumably in an effort to protect their true identities, have been vacationing at the Siesta Sands Beach Resort on Siesta Key every spring since 2001. Over the past 11 years, local residents and beach regulars have grown to expect Lackey, with his round belly and long white beard, to stroll down the beach in his signature red hat and suspenders each spring. "We have a lot of fun with it," Lackey said. "We get countless comments just walking down the beach, and it's gotten to the point that people look for us every year so that they can take photos for their Christmas cards." Lackey is no less popular in Fort Wayne, where his numerous appearances as Santa Claus in department stores, schools and day-care centers, nursing homes and television ads have earned him the distinction as "Santa's Favorite Helper" four times. He said some of his favorite Santa gigs are visits to the Alzheimer's units in skilled nursing facilities. "They appreciate it more than the kids sometimes," Lackey said. "Sometimes when they see Santa, something just clicks for them and takes them back to childhood."

Although Lackey does not generally travel with any of his Santa Claus costumes, this year was an exception. Prior to their vacation in Sarasota, the Lackeys attended the fourth annual ClausFest in Gatlinburg, Tenn., where Santas from all over the country gather for workshops and seminars, a parade, a formal ball and a fashion show. A couple visiting from Massachusetts who were staying next door to the Lackeys at Siesta Sands Beach Resort told them about their daughter, Andrea Riccitelli, who works at Community Haven.

The Sarasota-based organization serves children and adults who have developmental disabilities, Lackey agreed to don his full Santa costume and brave the Florida sun to surprise the seven Community Haven residents Riccitelli and Program Director Brad Jones brought to the resort for the pizza party April 5. Nobody expects to run into Santa at the beach especially in April so the surprise went over well, and it was smiles all around when Santa got to the party. "We try to get them out for activities at least three times per week," Jones said. "This just seemed like a fun surprise for everyone."

For now, Santa is headed back to the North Pole or, if you believe Lackey's story, back to Fort Wayne. Fans of Old Saint Nick can rest assured that come springtime next year, the Clauses will be back to soak up some sun on Siesta Beach, where the powder-white sand even reminds them of the snow at the North Pole. "We all know Siesta was ranked the No. 1 beach in the United States," Lackey said. "And for what it's worth, it is definitely endorsed by Santa Claus."