

# Crikey! Aussies come to town

## Friendship Force brings people from across the globe together

By **RUSTY PRAY**  
SUN CORRESPONDENT

They came from a place where it's never the same day as here.

Still, they weren't so strange that they couldn't sit down to breakfast at Sue and Rob Linehan's house in Punta Gorda Isles.

A half-dozen Australians were among a group of 10 who visited Punta Gorda with folks from the Friendship Force of Southwest Florida. One

visitor was from San Diego, two from Winnipeg and one from exotic Orlando.

The Friendship Force's mission is to "promote global understanding across barriers that separate people." It's an international organization with more than 300 clubs, including a chapter in Southwest Florida that covers southern Port Charlotte to Naples. A solid cross-section of its membership resides in Punta Gorda or Punta Gorda Isles.



PHOTO BY RUSTY PRAY

From left, Friendship Force of Southwest Florida members Joanne Collins of Punta Gorda Isles, Phyllis Steele of Bonita Springs and Cheryl Phelps of Fort Myers chat before a breakfast welcoming a group of visitors that included six people from Australia.

The members take part in hosting visitors from other countries or other locales in the United States. In turn,

they are hosted by families in other locations.

**AUSSIES | 3B**



PHOTO BY RUSTY PRAY

Sue Linehan and her husband, Rob, hosted the welcome breakfast in their Punta Gorda Isles home.

## AUSSIES

FROM PAGE 1B

"When we travel (as part of the Friendship Force program) we learn a lot about ourselves," Sue said. "We learn a lot about another country, but you learn more about yourself and your culture."

"When people come here, ideally you want to learn something about their culture. And you do. But then you compare it to the way you do things, and you go, 'Hmm, maybe there is another way to do this.'"

The group was treated to a welcome breakfast Feb. 25 that included a presentation by Nancy Johnson, CEO of TEAM Punta Gorda. Not long after they arrived Sunday, a local Friendship Force member treated them to a Charlotte Harbor sunset from a pontoon boat.

Sunsets are a specialty around here.

The visitors' itinerary included trips to various places of interest such as the Edison Ford Estate in Fort Myers, the Randell Research Center in Pine Island, a meeting with Punta Gorda Mayor Nancy Prafke and shopping at Fishermen's Village. A farewell dinner was scheduled for March 2 at Vivante.

Cathie and Chris Stone put the trip together for the Australians, who hailed from Gosford, a

suburb about 47 miles north of Sydney and 9,261 miles west of Punta Gorda.

"It's simply perfect," Chris said. "I didn't expect the canals."

"The whole atmosphere is nice," Cathie said.

Punta Gorda was the sixth stop in a tour of North America that started in early February, included Toronto, Niagara Falls, Chicago and New York City, and is scheduled to conclude at the end of March with a visit to Las Vegas. Say what you will about our Aussie friends, they know how to fill out an itinerary.

The Southwest Florida chapter of Friendship Force cooked them breakfast. Everybody brought something. "Florida brunch food," said Joanne Collins, a Friendship Force member and PGI resident.

Cheryl Phelps of Fort Myers brought the bacon. Betty Botsaris of Bonita Springs made the breakfast casserole. "I cut the green peppers, I cut the red peppers," she said, ticking off the regimen to her recipe.

"The idea is that when you sit at someone's table and share a meal, it's hard to drop a bomb on them," Sue Linehan said of the Friendship Force's mission. "It's working for world peace one smile at a time."