

Northwest Florida

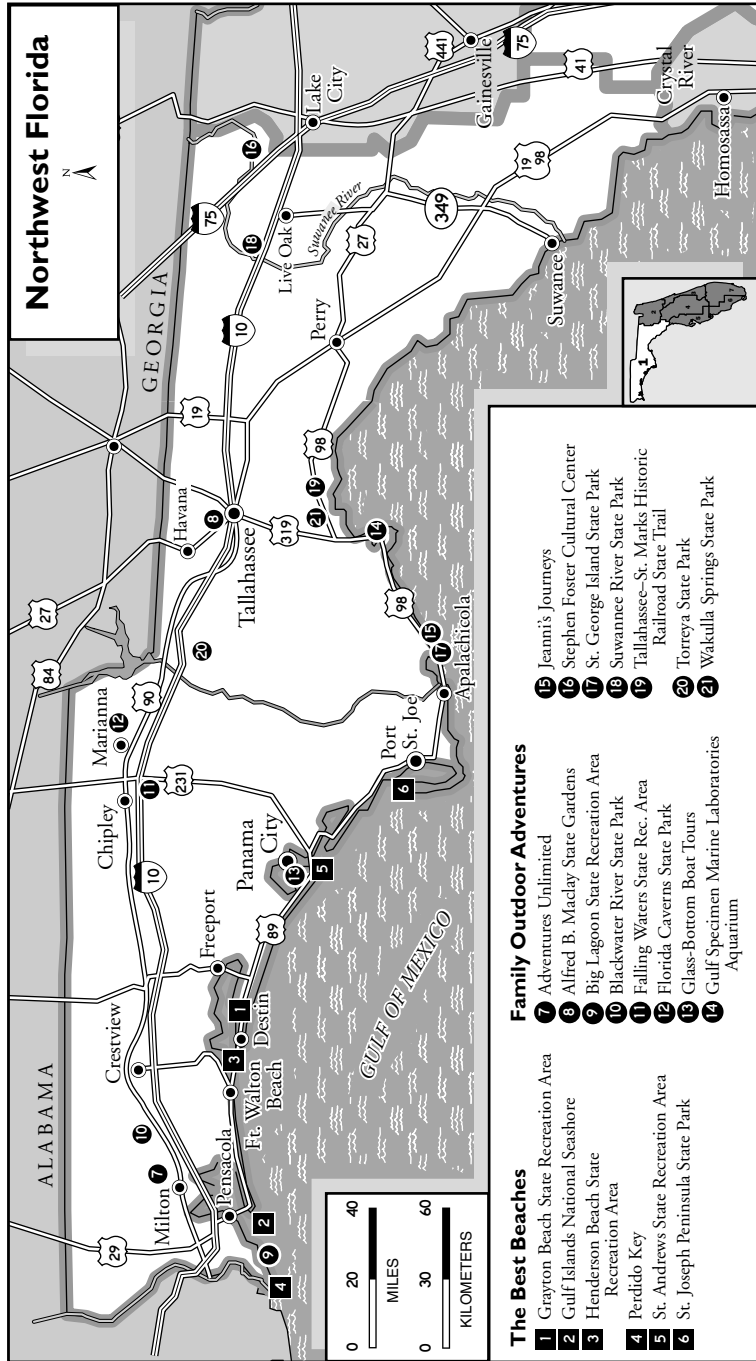
Slip off your shoes and step onto the pure, white sand of an unspoiled Panhandle beach and you're in for an unexpected delight: sand so sugary and fine it squeaks beneath your feet. Add the gentle lapping waves and you'll be reminded of the Caribbean—minus Customs and a long, expensive flight over the ocean.

The pace is slow in this part of Florida—perhaps because the Panhandle is in the central time zone, an hour behind the rest of the state.

Stretching from the historic city of Pensacola on the state's western border to the shores of the Suwannee River on the east, Northwest Florida has miles and miles of pristine beaches, much of it undeveloped and protected as the Gulf Islands National Seashore. And not only are there dreamy beaches, but also countless lakes and streams, clean rivers, and pine forests. Add a laid-back ambience, cordiality, and down-home goodness, and you've got an ideal vacation spot for good, old-fashioned family fun.

There are no big cities here, rather an armful of charming little towns, from the high-energy Panama City Beach to rustic Cedar Key (with something in between for everyone). For history, Tallahassee, the state capital, exudes Southern charm with oak-lined streets and antebellum mansions; nearby Apalachicola is full of historically significant structures that provide a rare glimpse into Florida's past.

Navarre Beach, just east of Pensacola, officially begins the Emerald Coast, named for the color of the Gulf of Mexico. Heading east, there are dozens of tiny beach communities all along the way, including Fort Walton Beach, Destin, Grayton Beach, and the nouveau-Victorian town of Seaside. But Panama City is still the mecca for Southerners in the summertime, with dozens of inexpensive beachside motels, tacky souvenir shops, fast-food joints, and colorful amusement parks. Just minutes to the east it gets quiet again, with pristine places like nearby St. Andrews State Recreation Area, one of the most beautiful beaches in the United States.



Head inland to the Blackwater, Escambia, and Yellow Rivers near Pensacola, and the Suwannee River near the eastern border for canoeing, kayaking, and boating. Stop for a walk through the eerie limestone caverns in Marianna or for a dip in Wakulla Springs. This part of the state is full of outdoor adventures.

Getting There

By Plane Oskaloosa County Air Terminal, (850) 651-7160, one mile east of Destin; Bay County International Airport, (850) 763-6751, four miles northwest of Panama City; Pensacola Regional Airport, (850) 436-5005, three miles northeast of Pensacola; Tallahassee Regional Airport, (850) 891-7800, five miles southwest of Tallahassee, and Williston Regional Airport, (352) 528-4900, one mile southwest of Williston.

By Train The Amtrak transcontinental Sunset Limited stops in Pensacola near the bayfront, at 980 East Heinberg Street, and at 918H Railroad Avenue in Tallahassee; (800) USA-RAIL or www.amtrak.com.

By Car From the east or west take I-10, US 90, or US 98.

How to Get Information before You Go

Beaches of South Walton, P.O. Box 1248, Santa Rosa Beach 32459; (800) 822-6877; www.beachesofsouthwalton.com

Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, P.O. Box 9473, Panama City Beach 32417-9473; (800) 722-3224 (U.S. and Canada); www.800pcbeach.com.

Pensacola Convention and Visitor Center, 1401 East Gregory Street, Pensacola 32501; (850) 434-1234, (800) 874-1234; www.visitpensacola.com.

Scenic Highway 30-A, www.30-a.com, Web site showcases 18-mile road along the Gulf of Mexico.

South Walton Tourist Development Council, P.O. Box 1248, Santa Rosa Beach 32459; (800) 822-6877 (worldwide); www.beachesofsouthwalton.com.

Tallahassee Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, 106 East Jefferson Street, Tallahassee 32301; (850) 413-9200 or (800) 628-2866 (U.S. and Canada); www.seetallahassee.com.

The Best Beaches

▲▲ Grayton Beach State Recreation Area, Grayton Beach Grayton, one of the oldest townships on the Gulf Coast, has 356 acres for camping (with just 37 campsites), easy-to-navigate nature trails with self-guided leaflets, and some of the best beaches around (rest rooms and showers; no lifeguards). Campfire interpretive programs are available to summer campers. Cost to camp is \$19, or \$4 per vehicle for the day. Santa Rosa; (850) 231-4210.

▲▲ Gulf Islands National Seashore This is an astounding, stretch of undeveloped beaches, islands, and keys between Destin, Florida, and Gulfport, Mississippi, protected as a National Seashore since 1971. There are historic forts and other structures and myriad wildlife—more than 280 species of birds have been spotted here. Camping, swimming, boating, fishing, and ranger-guided fort tours and nature hikes are favorite family activities.

Though much of the protected seashore is not accessible by car, there are two easy entrances; one at Perdido Key (see above) and the other at Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island (both have additional information on the entire stretch of the Gulf Islands National Seashore). On the way to Fort Pickens, you'll pass three public beaches; the first two offer parking only, and the third, called Langdon Beach, has rest rooms, outdoor showers, and a picnic area. There are lifeguards during the peak summer season.

Fort Pickens was a fortress that saw combat during the Civil War, but it's best remembered as the home of Geronimo, an Apache medicine man who was imprisoned there from 1886 to 1888. The fort and museum are open 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. April through October and 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. November through March. Admission is \$25 per vehicle and \$3 per person. Also popular is bicycling on the six-mile, round-trip, oyster-shell trail that begins and ends at the Fort Pickens Visitor Center. The fort is located at 1400 Fort Pickens Road, Santa Rosa Island; (850) 934-2635. Take US 98 and SR 399 to Pensacola Beach then follow signs west to Fort Pickens. For Fort Pickens campground reservations, call (850) 934-2621 or (800) 365-2267. A campsite runs \$20 per night.

Henderson Beach State Recreation Area This beach is sugar white and home to gulls, brown pelicans, and the protected sea turtle. There are 208 acres, with several boardwalks for easy access to the beach. There are two pavilions with rest rooms and showers. Hours are 8 a.m. to sunset daily. Entrance fee is \$4 per vehicle, per day. Camping is \$21. Entrance is just east of Destin on US 98; (850) 837-7550.

Perdido Key Fifteen miles west of Pensacola, Perdido Key is a barrier island with spectacular, powdery beaches. The eastern third of the island, known as Johnson Beach Area, is part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, with great beachside hiking on seven clear miles of pristine sand and rolling dunes. There are rest rooms and showers but no lifeguards. Hours are 8 a.m. to sunset daily. Admission is \$2 per day per vehicle; (850) 492-7278.

▲▲ St. Andrews State Recreation Area, Panama City This is one of the most popular parks in the state, where you can camp right on the waterfront. There are miles of beautiful beaches (though it can get crowded in the summer, there are no lifeguards), two fishing piers, and a boat ramp that makes it fun for families who want to get out on the

water. A nature trail leads through habitats fragrant with wild rosemary that are home to wading birds, alligators, and many small animals—even a herd of deer. There are picnic areas, a playground, rest rooms, and open-air showers. Admission is \$5 per car; open 8 a.m. to sunset. The campground has 176 tent sites, with picnic shelters, a playground, rest rooms, and showers. Cost to camp is \$24.

A ferry runs from St. Andrews a few hundred yards across the inlet to Shell Island, a 7.5-mile-long, 10-mile-wide barrier island where you can look for shells, swim, or just enjoy the solitude, peace, and quiet. The shuttle runs every 30 minutes during the summer from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; off-season, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Fare is \$10 for adults, \$6 for children ages 12 and under. 4607 State Park Land, Panama City Beach; (850) 233-5140.

▲▲ St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, Port St. Joe This beach gets high ratings, and its towering dunes make it a hiker's paradise. There are rest rooms and showers but no lifeguards. The park encompasses 2,516 acres on a 14-mile-long island off the Gulf Coast, surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico and St. Joseph Bay. Camping, cabins, hiking trails, and miles of natural beach make this perfect for families looking for an active, but quiet, getaway. Bird-watching is excellent (more than 209 species have been noted), and shelling is good. An 18-mile round-trip trail starts at the state park and runs to the end of the preserve, and the island is never more than a mile wide so you're always within sight or earshot of the Gulf. Hikers need to register, because only 20 are allowed each day in the preserve. Entry is \$4 per vehicle; camping is \$10 to \$20. Eight cabins rent for \$80 in the summer, \$65 in the off-season (minimum stay five nights in summer and two nights off-season). Campfire programs and guided walks are scheduled seasonally. Located near Port St. Joe off CR 30-E, off US 98; (850) 227-1327.

Family Outdoor Adventures

▲▲ Adventures Unlimited Santa Rosa County has been designated **♥** as the Canoe Capital of Florida by the state legislature. Adventures Unlimited, an 88-acre park at the confluence of the Coldwater River and Wolfe Creek, is a great starting place to get your family out on Santa Rosa's streams, said to have the purest water of any in the state.

Santa Rosa County is thickly forested with several of the best canoeing and tubing streams in the state: Coldwater Creek, Juniper Creek, Sweetwater Creek, and the Blackwater River. Combined they provide more than 100 miles of paddling past juniper, cypress, and oak. The rivers flow over and around beautiful white sand and sand bars, so it's easy to wade or swim to a sandy bottom, with an average depth of two to three feet, and the little beaches are perfect for an impromptu picnic.

Perfect for families with small children is a two-hour, four-mile trip on the Coldwater, where the current keeps your canoe or tube moving; you only have to paddle on occasion to stay in the main current. Adventures Unlimited takes you upstream to start back towards the main landing.

A family of two adults and two children under eight years old can rent a canoe for about \$30. Reservations are advised, especially on weekends. Go in the spring or fall, and you may have the river all to yourself—and that's when the creeks and rivers are at their best.

If you want to stay overnight, Adventures Unlimited can outfit you with everything necessary except clothes and food: a canoe, tents, sleeping bags. At Tomahawk Landing, for a two-night minimum stay, they also have air-conditioned cabins with full kitchens, and the Old Schoolhouse Inn with eight bedrooms—but no phones, TVs, or clocks. Cabins start at \$39; guest rooms in the inn start at \$79. Take SR 6, 15 miles north of Milton; from US 90 in Milton, turn north on SR 87; go 12 miles and follow the signs on the right. Turn right and go four miles to Adventures Unlimited Tomahawk Landing; (850) 623-6197, (800) 239-6864; www.adventuresunlimited.com.

Alfred B. Maclay State Gardens In the hills near Tallahassee, Maclay State Gardens are just too pretty to pass up when the azaleas and snowy dogwoods are in bloom from January through April (optimum time is mid-March). The ornamental gardens are open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and they're a great place for a long, peaceful walk. You can also swim, canoe, and boat here. Admission year-round is \$3 per vehicle. To visit the formal gardens from January through April, cost is an additional \$3 for adults and \$2 for children ages 6 to 11. The gardens are a half-mile north of I-10 in Tallahassee on US 310; (850) 487-4556, (850) 487-9910.

▲▲ Big Lagoon State Recreation Area With sandy beaches and salt marshes, Big Lagoon is home to myriad birds and animals—cardinals are common in the uplands, while great blue herons frequent the marshes and the lagoon. Elaborate boardwalks and an observation tower at the east beach give a panoramic view of Big Lagoon and Gulf Island National Seashore across the Intracoastal Waterway. Activities include swimming, picnicking, and nature study. Admission is \$4. Camping on 75 sites is \$8. Located on CR 292A, about ten miles southwest of Pensacola; (850) 492-1595.

▲▲ Blackwater River State Park The Blackwater is considered one of the purest sand-bottom rivers in the world, and it is still in a natural state for most of its length. Canoes can be rented at the park, and the run is especially good for novice paddlers because of an easy current with no whitewater. Admission is \$3 per vehicle. Camping on 31 sites is around

\$8, \$10 with electricity. There are easy nature trails and decent fishing here, too. Pets are permitted. Located 15 miles northeast of Milton, off US 90; SR 1, Box 57-C, Holt; (850) 983-5363.

▲▲ Falling Waters State Recreation Area, Chipley The name comes from a 67-foot waterfall (the only one in Florida) that tumbles into a 20-foot-wide cylindrical sinkhole. The water's unknown final destination remains mysterious. Nature trails guide you through primeval Florida. There's a nice picnic area near the falls. Admission is \$4 per vehicle. Camping on 24 sites is \$8. Located three miles south of Chipley off SR 77A; (850) 638-6130.

▲▲ Florida Caverns State Park, Marianna A bizarre series of connecting caves containing limestone stalactites, stalagmites, columns, rimstone, flowstone, and draperies are found at Florida Caverns State Park. All the enchanting formations are composed of calcite, which is dissolved from the limestone when the surface water containing carbonic acid percolates through the rock and into the cave. Guided tours (45 minutes, with up to 25 per tour) are provided every day. You'll see the Waterfall Room, the Cathedral Room, and the Wedding Room—all impressive. The air is dry, there's no humidity, and it's always 65° F.

Picnicking, swimming on a man-made white-sand beach, fishing, and canoeing are available. There are two horse trails with rentals. Camping on 32 sites is \$10 to \$17. Admission to the park is \$4 per vehicle, with admission to the caves \$6 for adults, \$3 for children ages 3 to 12. Florida Caverns is located three miles north of Marianna on SR 167; (850) 482-9598.

Glass-Bottom Boat Tours This family-run charter out of Treasure Island Marina in Panama City Beach is an easy way to get out on the water for a peek under the sea, especially fun when curious dolphins swim alongside the boat. You might see puffer fish, seahorses, and other exotic marine life, and the guides even bring along a shrimp net to scoop out treasures for a closer look. The boat heads to Shell Island, where you get to spend about 45 minutes on shore collecting shells. It's about three hours round trip, and they advise you to call ahead for reservations, as the boat fills up fast, especially in the summertime. Prices are \$15, \$14 for seniors, and \$8 for children. Treasure Island Marina on Thomas Drive; (850) 234-8944.

Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories Aquarium If you make the trip to Wakulla Springs, just a few miles south is the tiny town of Panacea, where you'll find this amazing laboratory of sea life. Author-explorer Jack Rudloe owns the place, and you'll be lucky if he's around and not out scouting for more Florida marine life to add to his living collection. He'll take his time walking you through the gurgling lab, wall to wall

with open tanks teeming with unusual seal life (he also conducts research and stocks biomedical labs around the world). The meanest fish in the ocean? Not the sharks he feeds while you watch, but the innocent-looking flounder, says Rudloe, as he demonstrates their ferocious bite. Kids can touch sea cucumbers, blowfish, sea anemones, and more. 300 Clark Drive at Palm Street south of US 98, Panacea; (850) 984-5297; www.gulfspecimen.org. Open Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sunday noon to 4 p.m. Admission is \$4, \$2 under age 12.

Jeanni's Journeys Owner Jeanni McMillan returned to St. George Island after spending two years in Singapore and has been camping and exploring the Panhandle for nearly 30 years. Parents, rest assured: Jeanni is a jack-of-all-trades, with a captain's license, a divemaster certificate, a life-guard certificate, a Florida teaching certificate, and a certificate in first aid and CPR. She'll arrange family trips to the barrier island for snorkeling, shelling, and dolphin-watching kayak and canoe trips to neat places like undeveloped St. Vincent or Little St. George Island. Her kids-only trips include eco-kayaking, a dolphin encounter, night-critter identification, and a three-hour fishing adventure in Apalachicola Bay (children must be at least nine years old for the fishing trip). Kids-only trips range from \$25 to \$50; others are based on the excursion. 240 East Third Street, St. George Island, open from March 5 through December 31; (850) 927-3259; www.sgislandjourneys.com.

WHY IS THE SAND SO WHITE AND THE OCEAN SO BLUE-GREEN IN THE PANHANDLE?

The unusual whiteness of the sand is the result of quartz crystals washing down from the Appalachian Mountains centuries ago. Over time, the crystals have been bleached, ground, smoothed, and polished. Millions and millions have been deposited along this coastline.

The Gulf water appears to be green because of light reflecting off the photosynthetic, micro-algae that are suspended in the clear water. The blue hues in the Gulf that usually are at greater depths are the result of all the colors of light, except blue, being absorbed by the water.

▲▲ Stephen Foster State Folk Culture Center This state park is worth a stop if you are in the vicinity just to learn a little about Mr. Foster, the composer who penned "The Old Folks at Home." The 247-acre center honors the memory of Foster and serves as a gathering place for those who perpetuate the crafts, music, and legends of early and contemporary Floridians. The center is most enjoyable when there are special events, so check as you plan your trip.

It's fun to get out on the river made famous by the song, the beautiful Suwannee. For families it's a great biking spot, too, with an easy, four-mile ride that's part of the Florida National Scenic Trail. You may spot deer, turkey, gray foxes, or gopher tortoises. Camping on 32 sites is \$16. Admission to the park is \$4 per car, and there are additional fees for some events. Located in White Springs, on US 41 North (three miles from I-75 and nine miles from I-10); (386) 397-2733.

The little burg of White Springs is excellent bicycling territory, noted as headquarters of the Suwannee Bicycle Association. There are more than 700 miles of clearly marked trails, from short ones up to 100 miles. For information call (386) 397-2347 on weekends only; **www.florida.stateparks.org/stephenfoster**.

▲▲ St. George Island State Park This little jewel is a best-kept secret, where you can see Florida in its almost-natural state. With nine miles of sandy shores and grass flats, it's a bird-watcher's paradise, with trail boardwalks and observation platforms for an easy hike. Though the beach is outstanding, be sure to take a little time to explore the bay side of the island, alive with birds and other wildlife. Some of the best shelling on this part of the Gulf Coast is here, and you can even harvest your own oysters. There are picnic areas, rest rooms, showers, and a campground with 60 sites. Admission is \$5 per vehicle; \$8 to \$12 to camp. Located on St. George Island, ten miles southeast of Eastpoint, off US 98; (850) 927-2111.

There are plenty of seafood restaurants on the island; we highly recommend Finni's Grill & Bar, 40 West Gorrie Street, (850) 927-3340, for burgers, pasta, or the delicious Deviled Crab Cuban. Finni's is closed on Monday.

Suwannee River State Park, Live Oak It's doubtful that Stephen Foster ever saw the river he made famous with "The Old Folks at Home," but it's a lovely spot for camping, fishing, picnicking, and canoeing; it also has five short nature trails (look for the amazing Balance Rock). The River Trail is a little over nine miles, part of the Florida National Scenic Trail, beginning on the CR 141 bridge on the Withlacoochee River, half a mile from the state park, and continuing to the park's northern boundary. Admission is \$3 per car; open daily, 8 a.m. to sunset. The park is 13 miles west of Live Oak, off US 90; (904) 362-2746; **www.canoeoutpost.com**. Camping is \$15 per night and \$2 for pets. To rent a canoe, see Suwannee Canoe Outpost on SR 129; (386) 364-4991; **www.canoeoutpost.com**. Cost per adult for a full day is \$18, for a half day is \$14, and for an hour is \$10. Children ages 3 to 12 pay half-price on all trips. Reservations are recommended. Closed Wednesday.

A CALENDAR OF FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

February

Chautauqua Assembly Defuniak Springs. Along the banks of Lake Defuniak, this event is for would-be artists, writers, history buffs, gardeners, philosophers, and more. Inspired by the Chautauqua Institution in New York, the assembly offers classes and workshops, crafts, lectures, and concerts. (800) 822-6877; www.florida-chautauqua-assembly.org.

April

Eglin Air Show Fort Walton Beach. Every other year (counting from 2003). The event includes Thunderbirds and model aircraft in flight; displays of military aircraft, including some from WWII; and food vendors. (850) 882-3933 or (800) 322-3319.

May

Arts Quest Sandestin. The area's largest event, this weeklong celebration includes gallery tours, artists at work, performances, fashion shows, and shopping tours. Culminates with a two-day art festival. (800) 277-0800; www.sandestin.com.

Florida Folk Festival White Springs. Memorial Day weekend at Stephen Foster State Culture Center, musicians and artisans pay tribute to the old arts. (877) 635-3655; www.floridastateparks.org/folkfest.

Suwanee Bicycle Festival Suwanee. The Suwanee Bicycle Festival, held the first weekend in May, is a three-day extravaganza of bicycle rides and outdoor activities. For more information contact the Suwanee County Chamber of Commerce. (386) 397-2347.

June

Billy Bowlegs Festival Destin–Fort Walton Beach. Pirates aboard flag-flying fleets 500-strong invade the harbor to “capture” the Emerald Coast in honor of local legend Billy Bowlegs. Includes treasure hunts, fishing competitions, a parade, and contests for kids. (850) 651-7131.

Tallahassee–St. Marks Historic Railroad State Trail From 1837 until 1984 the Tallahassee–St. Marks Railroad was the oldest railroad in Florida. It transported cotton and other products to the port of St. Marks on the Gulf Coast. Now an easy, 16-mile trail starts at Tallahassee and ends at St. Marks, a wide, paved path with a parking lot on SR 363, just south of Tal-

Fiesta of Five Flags Pensacola. This event commemorates the founding of Pensacola in 1559 and the five different government flags that have flown over the city. Includes parades, a Spanish fiesta, a children's treasure hunt, sand-sculpture contest, and more. (850) 433-6512.

July

Blue Angels Air Show Pensacola. The world-famous fliers do aerial acrobatics just 100 yards off the Pensacola Beach Fishing Pier. (850) 452-SHOW.

September

Baytowne Film Festival Sandestin. Promotes some of the country's most talented filmmakers, both students and independent directors. (800) 277-0800; www.sandestin.com.

Pensacola Seafood Festival Pensacola. In the historic Seville Square area. Local seafood dishes, children's area, an antiques show, and continuous entertainment. (850) 433-6512.

October

Annual Rural Folklife Days White Springs, Stephen Foster State Folk Culture Center. Demonstrations featuring cane grinding, syrup making, lye soap making, quilting, and other farm traditions associated with folk life in the South. Cosponsored by the Florida Department of State. (386) 397-4331.

Destin Seafood Festival Destin. Everything from shark kabobs to barbecued shrimp to fried alligator and crawfish cheese bread at this annual eat-in. Also music and crafts. (800) 322-3319.

Halloween Howl Tallahassee Museum of History and Natural Science. Haunted trail, tricks and treats, storytelling, music, movies, and magic shows are part of this annual event. (850) 576-2531; www.tallahassee-museum.org.

lahassee at the entrance to the trail; (850) 245-3044. You can rent bikes or in-line skates at St. Marks Trail Bikes and Blades at the north entrance; (850) 656-0001. Bikes rent for \$9 for two hours, \$16 for four hours. They'll give you a good deal if you're renting bikes for the whole family. Open Monday through Friday noon to sunset and Saturday to Sunday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

A CALENDAR OF FESTIVALS AND EVENTS *(continued)*

Monarch Butterfly Festival St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. A celebration of the butterflies' migration. (850) 925-6121.


Taste of 30-A WaterColor. State Route 30-A hugs the Gulf of Mexico with charming little towns along the way. The two-day festival features classic Southern fare on Friday night and culinary masterpieces on Saturday. Guest chefs and authors join local chefs, farmers, shuckers, and personalities to pay homage to the traditional Southern food and regional influences, such as the oysters of Apalachicola, the Creole flavors of Louisiana, and smoked fish. (888) 467-1698; www.watercolorflorida.com.

Via Colori Seaside. An Italian street-painting festival—with only colored chalk and creativity, children and local artists create masterpieces on the cement parking lot. (800) 277-8689; www.seasidefl.com.

November

Annual Florida Seafood Festival Apalachicola. One of the biggest events in Northwest Florida, the little town is packed for this all-you-can-eat extravaganza. (850) 653-9419.

Blue Angels Homecoming Air Show World-famous pilots do thrilling aerial acrobatics just 100 yards off the Pensacola Fishing Pier. (850) 452-SHOW; www.airshow.com.

 **Torrey State Park, Bristol** High bluffs along the Apalachicola River are a rare sight in Florida—steep rises 150 feet above the river are forested by hardwood trees and plants more commonly found in the Appalachian Mountains of north Georgia. So if you're homesick for autumn colors, this place ought to cure your urge to travel farther north. A moderate, seven-mile loop trail takes you past hundreds of plants more common to the Appalachian mountains—mountain laurel, wild ginger, and wild hydrangea, for instance. Wildlife such as deer, beaver, bobcat, and gray fox live here, and more than 100 species of birds have been spotted. You'll also see plenty of torrey, a rare species of tree that grows only along the Apalachicola River bluffs. Camping on 35 sites is \$12. Located off SR 12 on CR 1641, 13 miles north of Bristol; (850) 643-2674.

Wakulla Springs State Park This memorable state park is home of the world's largest and deepest freshwater springs—every minute 600,000 gallons of crystal-clear water bubble from a cave 185 feet below the surface. There's an abundance of wildlife—about 2,000 waterfowl make the

Mountain Film Festival WaterColor. An extension of the Mountain Film in Telluride, Colorado, the festival features film screenings at the outdoor amphitheater at WaterColor. There's a bonfire each night for roasting marshmallows and storytelling. (888) 467-1698; www.watercolorflorida.com.

Old Tyme Farm Days Live Oak, Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park. Celebrate rural American life and heritage with farming activities, demonstrations, vendors, music, and more. (386) 364-1683.

Seeing Red Wine Festival Seaside. More than 250 wines from around the world for tasting. Meet the guest winemaker, learn about wine crafting, also a five-course dinner paired with award-winning wines. (800) 277-8689; www.seasidefl.com.

December

Christmas Festival of Lights White Springs, Stephen Foster State Folk Culture Center. A one-day celebration of the holiday season. Features decorations, music, and much more. Highlight is the lighting of the park for the season. Donations of canned goods and small toys to be distributed to needy families are accepted as admission to the program. (386) 397-4331.

park their migratory winter home, along with alligators, deer, bears, snakes, and bobcats.

Glass-bottom boat tours operate over the spring when the water is clear, and there are also 30-minute riverboat cruises on the spring run. The guides love to tell the stories about the old Tarzan movies that were filmed here and how the bones of Ice Age creatures have been recovered from the depths of the 35-million-year-old limestone caverns. Boats run from 9:45 a.m. to 5 p.m. during daylight savings time; 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. the rest of the year. Cost is \$5 adults, half price for children ages 3 to 12 and free for those younger. The park is also great for picnicking, nature walks, swimming, and snorkeling in a designated area near the head of the spring.

Bicycling, though a bit challenging, is a real treat on a ten-mile (round-trip) trail—cyclists warn about ravenous horseflies in the summertime. Check in with the ranger before setting out, as the last three miles are a bit remote; get a map from the attendant as you pay your user fee. Located 14 miles south of Tallahassee on SR 267 at SR 61; (850) 922-3632.

If you're in luck, you can book a room at the Wakulla Springs Lodge. This beautiful old lodge features rare Spanish tiles, marble floors, and paintings of old Florida on the ceiling beams. Rooms are simple and spacious. The dining room has a wood-burning fireplace, tall windows that overlook the springs, and food that is pure Southern. You'll think time has stood still. Phones are provided in each room. No TV. Rates run \$80 to \$90 on the weekends; \$70 to \$90 weekdays. 1 Springs Drive, 14 miles south of Tallahassee via SR 61; (850) 224-5950; **www.wakullacounty.com**.

Pensacola

Warm, Southern heritage and warmer Gulf beaches are the best drawing cards any tourist destination could dream up, and Pensacola has a rich Southern history and some of the prettiest beaches in the United States. The city is in the heart of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, which flanks the city with a pair of barrier islands—Perdido Key to the west and Santa Rosa Island to the east.

Santa Rosa Island is home to Pensacola Beach, with miles of unspoiled white sand and a minimum of traffic. Much of Santa Rosa is protected from development but accessible to visitors. You'll find everything from tall condominiums to historic Fort Pickens, a Civil War fortress that is popular with campers (see Gulf Islands National Seashore on page 28).

Pensacola's restored downtown reflects much of the 400-year-old city's history—a town that has changed hands more than a dozen times and flown five flags—Spain, France, England, the United States, and the Confederacy.

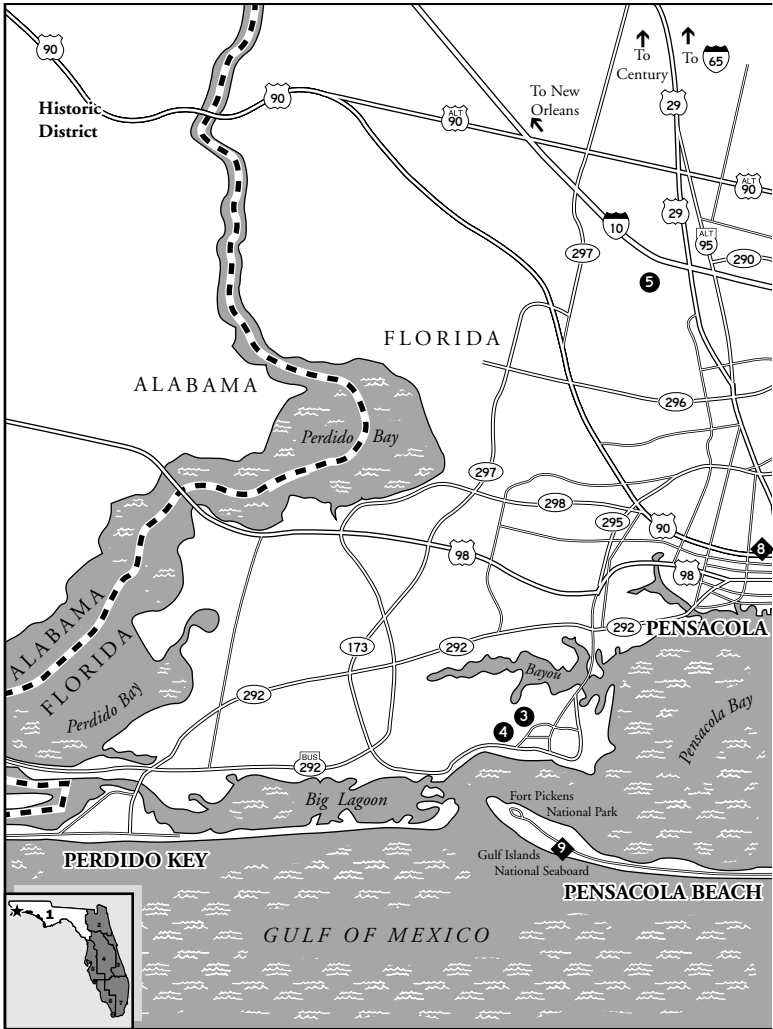
Youngsters enjoy the U.S. Museum of Naval Aviation at Pensacola Naval Air Station, known as the cradle of naval aviation for its role in the development of aviators and aircraft, as well as their use by the military. The museum is one of the three largest air and space museums in the world. And you can see the Blue Angels soar skyward off Pensacola Beach during special events in July and November.

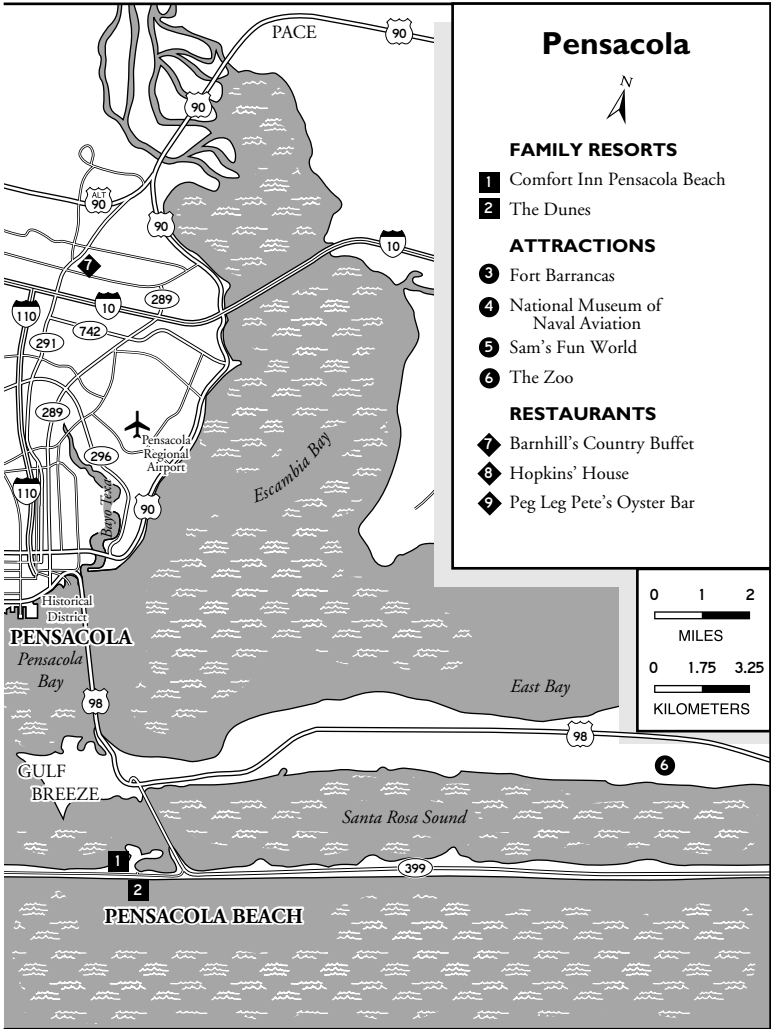
Family Resorts

Comfort Inn Pensacola Beach

40 Fort Pickens Road, Pensacola Beach; (850) 934-5400 or (800) 932-7210;
www.comfortinn.com

Not on the ocean, but across the street on Little Sabine Bay—pretty views of the Gulf from the upper floors and easy walking distance to





Pensacola



FAMILY RESORTS

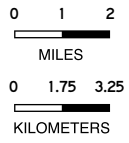
- 1** Comfort Inn Pensacola Beach
- 2** The Dunes

ATTRACTIONS

- 3** Fort Barrancas
- 4** National Museum of Naval Aviation
- 5** Sam's Fun World
- 6** The Zoo

RESTAURANTS

- 7** Barnhill's Country Buffet
- 8** Hopkins' House
- 9** Peg Leg Pete's Oyster Bar



shops and restaurants. Nothing fancy, but the price is right, with rates starting at \$70 a night, including free Continental breakfast, outdoor swimming pool, and a refrigerator in the room.

The Dunes

333 Fort Pickens Road, Pensacola Beach; (850) 932-3536 or (800) 83-DUNES;
www.theduneshotel.com

The Dunes offers spacious rooms with balconies with lovely views of the Gulf of Mexico or the bay and an undeveloped dune preserve next door. There are a heated pool, a bike path, and volleyball nets on the beach. A nanny service is offered through the hotel. Rates start at \$160 in the summer, \$90 in the winter; kids ages 18 and under stay free with parents.

Take a Free Ride

At Pensacola Beach, a free island trolley runs May through September, Friday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. There are two routes: parallel to the beach on Via de Luna and Fort Pickens Road, and along Pensacola Beach Boulevard from the Bob Sikes Bridge to Casino Beach, (850) 595-3228.

Attractions

Fort Barrancas

1801 Gulf Breeze Parkway, Gulf Breeze; (850) 455-5167

Hours April–October, 9:30 a.m.–5 p.m.; November–March, Wednesday–Sunday, 8:30 a.m.–4 p.m.

Admission Free

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★	Teens ★★★	Over 30 ★★★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★★	Seniors ★★★

Touring Time Average 1 hour; minimum 45 minutes

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★; interesting history lesson

Restaurants No

Alcoholic Beverages No

Handicapped Access No

Wheelchair Rental No

Baby Stroller Rental No

Lockers No

Pet Kennels No

Rain Check No

Private Tours No

Description and Comments Fort Barrancas was started by the Spanish in 1797 and finished by American troops between 1839 and 1844. The

fort was restored by the National Park Service and is part of Gulf Island National Seashore. Kids enjoy exploring the old fort; guided tours are available.

HISTORIC PENSACOLA VILLAGE

More than 400 years of history are displayed in historic Pensacola Village, with ten restored buildings and museums in a four-block area, and a dining and entertainment complex. Now preserved by the state, the village hosts costumed characters who demonstrate crafts and daily chores. Charming boutiques and restaurants are now part of the historic area, bounded by Government, Zaragoza, Adams, and Alcanz streets. Start at the T. T. Wentworth Jr. Florida State Museum at 330 South Jefferson Street to purchase tickets.

Important landmarks include the Museum of Industry, the Museum of Commerce, the French Creole-style Charles Laval House, the Victoria Dorr House, the Quina House, and the Julee Cottage Black History Museum. The Julee Cottage Museum is located at 205 East Zaragoza Street. Admission is \$6 adults, \$5 seniors ages 65 and older and military, \$3 children ages 4 to 16, free ages 4 and under, \$13 families. Open Memorial Day through Labor Day, daily, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; closed Sundays, Mondays, and holidays during the rest of the year; (850) 595-5985, www.historicpensacola.org. Tours are given at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.

National Museum of Naval Aviation

Radford Boulevard on the U.S. Naval Air Station; (850) 452-3604

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; closed New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas

Admission Free, but donations are appreciated

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★	Teens ★★★	Over 30 ★★★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★★	Seniors ★★★

Touring Time Average 4 hours; minimum 2 hours

Rainy-day Touring Recommended

Author's Rating ★★★; great for history buffs, and fun learning for everyone

Restaurants Yes

Alcoholic Beverages Yes

Handicapped Access Yes

Wheelchair Rental Available at

Baby Stroller Rental No

no charge

Pet Kennels No

Lockers No

Private Tours Yes

Rain Check No

Description and Comments This Naval Air Station has been used by the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps since the turn of the twentieth century,

and the museum showcases more than 100 aircraft from the first biplane to the Skylab Command Module. This is one of the world's largest air and space museums, with acres of aircraft parked outside, including planes flown by the Blue Angels. Kids love to strap into cockpit trainers for a pretend test flight, sitting at the controls of a jet trainer. The IMAX theater, with a screen nearly seven stories tall and 80 feet wide, shows aviation up close. Call (850) 435-2024 for information.

Sam's Fun World

On US 29 near "W" Street, Pensacola; (850) 505-0800; www.samsfuncity.com

Hours 5 p.m.–10 p.m. Friday; 11 a.m.–10 p.m. Saturday; noon–6 p.m. Sunday

Admission Free; ticket books start at \$6

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★★★	Teens ★★★	Over 30 ★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★	Seniors ★

Touring Time Half a day on average

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★; theme park fun on a small scale

Restaurant Yes **Alcoholic Beverages** No

Handicapped Access Yes **Wheelchair Rental** No

Baby Stroller Rental No **Lockers** No

Pet Kennels No **Rain Check** No

Private Tours No

Description and Comments This 20-acre amusement park has something for everyone, from a go-cart track to mini-golf and bumper boats. Old-fashioned rides like the scrambler, the swinger and a Ferris wheel are divided among the park's three "lands," which are Terry Town, Yesterville, and Westerville. Fun for the whole family, including a 50-game arcade and lasertag.

The Zoo

On US 98 about 10 miles east of Gulf Breeze and 15 miles east of Pensacola; (850) 932-2229

Hours Winter, 9 a.m.–4 p.m.; summer, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.

Admission \$11 for adults, \$10 for senior citizens ages 62 and older, \$8 for children ages 3–11

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★★★	Teens ★★★	Over 30 ★★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★	Seniors ★★

Touring Time Half a day on average; minimum 2 hours**Rainy-day Touring** Not recommended**Author's Rating** ★★; fun family afternoon after a morning at the beach**Restaurant** Yes **Alcoholic Beverages** No**Handicapped Access** Yes **Wheelchair Rental** Yes**Baby Stroller Rental** Yes **Lockers** No**Pet Kennels** No **Rain Check** No**Private Tours** No

Description and Comments This 50-acre park is home to more than 700 exotic animals—including white Bengal tigers, gorillas, bears, tigers, rhinos, and zebras—surrounded by botanical gardens. A Safari Line train takes you through a 30-acre wildlife preserve with free-roaming animals. The farm has a petting zoo and a nursery for newborn animals. Regularly scheduled shows feature birds of prey, elephants, reptiles, and other wildlife.

Family-Friendly Restaurants

Barnhill's Country Buffet

North Davis Highway at Olive Road, Pensacola; (850) 477-5465

Meals Served Lunch and dinner**Cuisine** American**Entree Range** Lunch costs \$7 adults, \$6 seniors ages 60 and older, 55 cents times age for children 12 and under; dinner costs \$10 adults, \$9 seniors, 55 cents times age for children 12 and under**Kids Menu** No, but fried chicken and desserts are popular with the kids**Reservations** Not accepted**Payment** VISA, MC, AMEX, D

Families come for miles around to this buffet, featuring seven tables stacked with fried chicken, fish, ham, roast beef, vegetables, salads, and old-fashioned desserts.

Hopkins' House

900 North Spring Street, Pensacola; (850) 438-3979; www.hopkinsboardinghouse.com

Meals Served Breakfast and lunch, Tuesday–Sunday; dinner, Tuesday and Friday

Cuisine Southern

Entree Range Full meals \$9

Kids Menu Children ages under 12, \$6–\$8

Reservations Not accepted

Payment No credit cards

You might have to wait in the dining room for a spot, but the rocking chairs on the wraparound porch make it easy. Everyone gathers around the large dining tables to eat family style, with platters piled high with freshly cooked vegetables from area farms along with fried chicken, fried fish, or whatever is the special of the day. And everyone cleans up, just like in mom's dining room at home, except here you pay in cash.

Peg Leg Pete's Oyster Bar

1010 Fort Pickens Road, Pensacola Beach; (850) 932-4139

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine American

Entree Range \$6–\$46

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Not accepted

Payment All major credit cards accepted

This casual eatery is fun for everyone, with kid's meals—burgers, corn dogs, grilled cheese, or fried shrimp—served in a beach sand bucket. Grown-ups love the Cajun specialties or the whopping seafood-for-two platter that includes lobster, shrimp, and snow crab. Hands-down favorite is the grouper supreme sandwich, with blackened fish, sauteed veggies, and melted Swiss cheese, with a side of fries. Steaks also are on the menu.

Fort Walton Beach, Destin, and the Beaches of South Walton

More fabulous sugary sand and emerald waters are the claim to fame for these Southern sea towns—24 miles of powdery beaches, with more than 60 percent protected by law from development.

The beaches have been voted the safest in the country, with gentle waves and sloping, sandy shallows, and consistently have been named a “favorite family vacation spot” by readers of *Southern Living*. This part of the Panhandle is considered one of the top five shelling destinations in the world—but you have to snorkel (or dive) the off-coast sandbars to find them, at spots like Sand Dollar City, a pure white sandbar 200 feet off Destin Beach, that is rich with circular “sea money.”

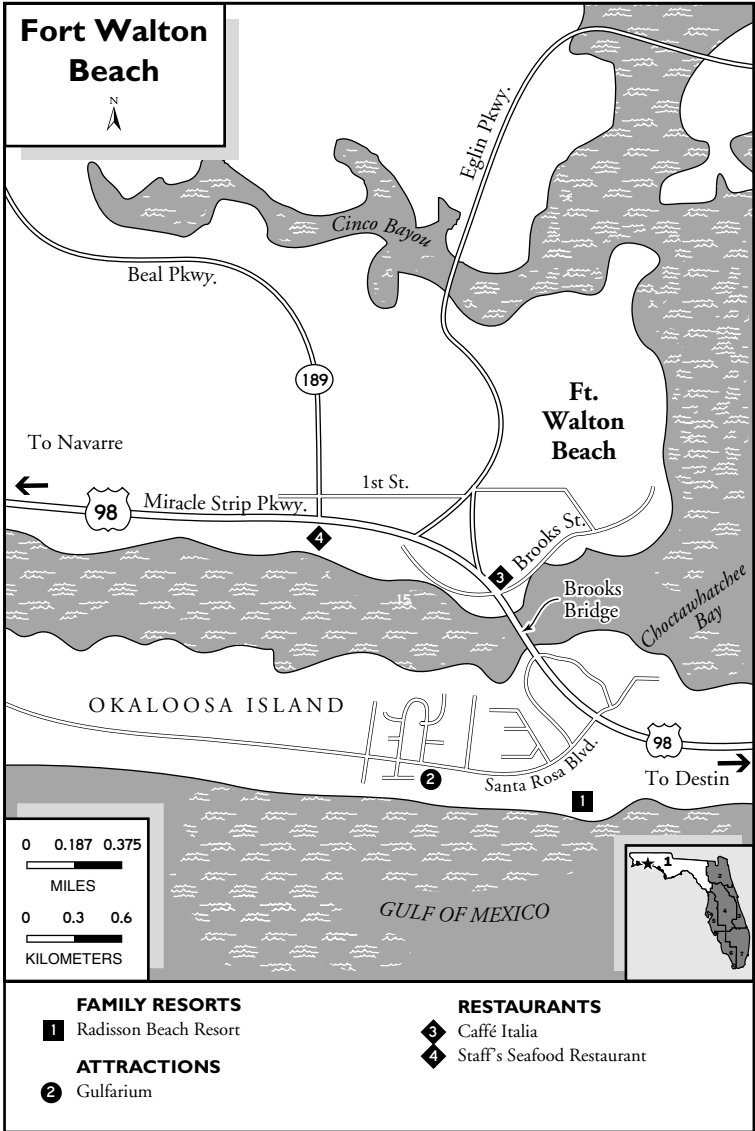
Destin has been called the “world’s luckiest fishing village,” with the “100 Fathom Curve” drawing closer to Destin than to any other spot in Florida. The proximity of the curve creates the speediest deep-water access to the Gulf, and the town has the largest charter boat fleet in Florida—with plenty of captains willing to take your family for a half-day of fishing. And your catches can be cooked for free at some of the harbor restaurants.

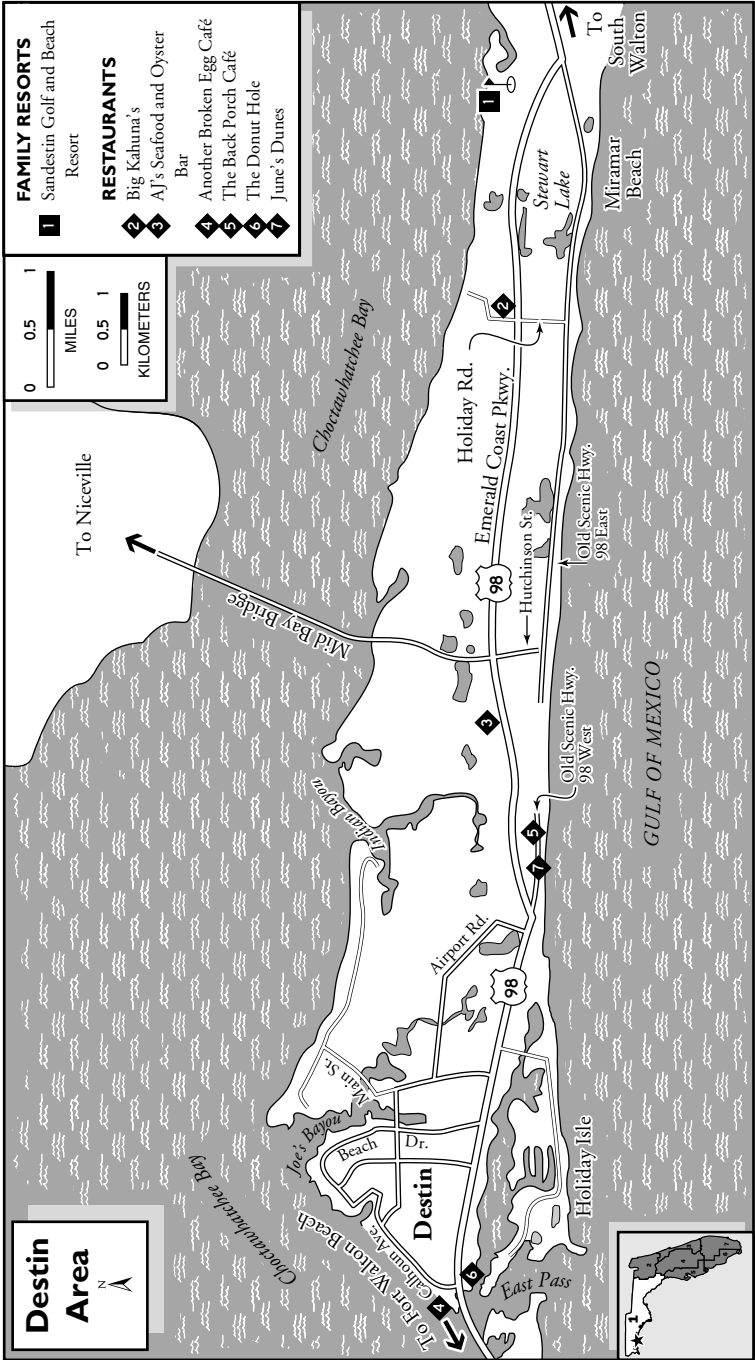
“The beaches of South Walton” is the area between Destin and Panama City Beach that includes 26 miles of beaches along Scenic 30-A, and US 98. Among the noted stops is Seaside, famed for its internationally acclaimed, award-winning pastel architecture. Grayton Beach is also here, the oldest community in the area, surrounded by Grayton Beach State Recreation Area, one of the prettiest beaches in Florida (see page 27).

Family Resorts

Radisson Beach Resort

1110 Santa Rosa Boulevard, Fort Walton Beach; (850) 243-9181;
www.radisson.com/ftwaltonfl

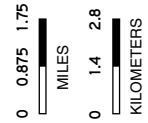
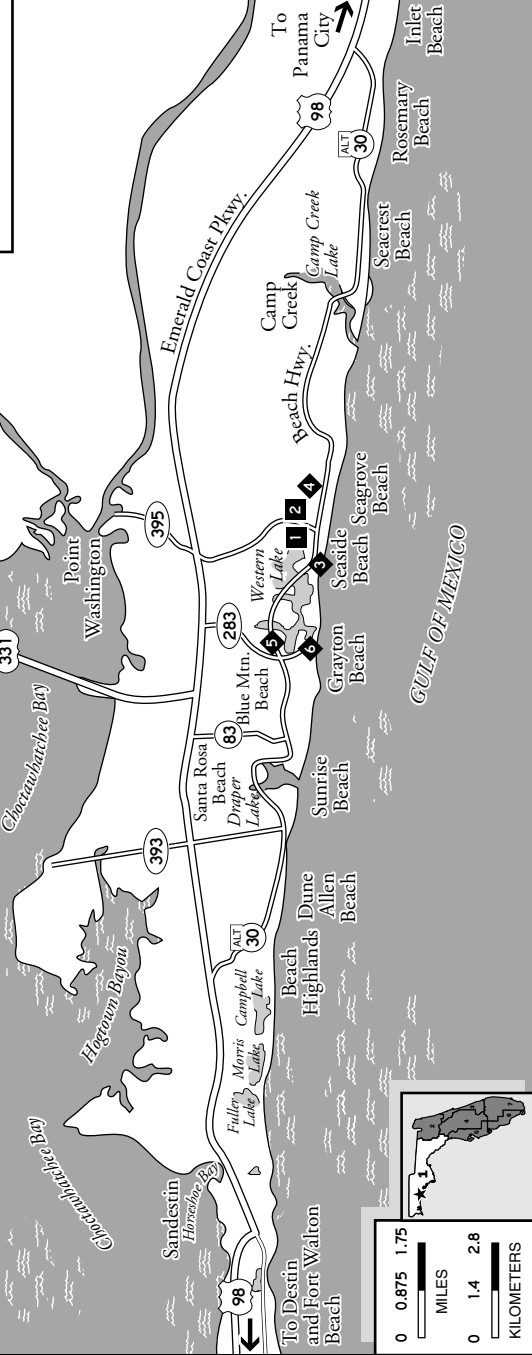




Santa Rosa Beach Area



- FAMILY RESORTS**
- 1 Seaside
 - 2 WaterColor
- RESTAURANTS**
- 3 Bud and Alley's
 - 4 Cafe Thirty-A
 - 5 Criolla's
 - 6 Picoles and the Red Bar



Recently renovated, the Radisson is on the ocean with 388 rooms. Guests can request refrigerators, given on a first-come, first-served basis. There are four swimming pools, one that's only a foot deep just for tots, and a new "Lay-Z River" water ride. On the beach are jet skis, kayaks, parasailing, and volleyball. The activities director is here on weekends, organizing free daylong family activities. Kids ages 17 and under stay free with parents. Rates start at \$150 in the summer, \$89 in the winter.

Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort

(850) 267-8150 or (800) 622-1038; fax (850) 267-8222; www.sandestin.com

This oceanfront resort has it all: a marina (with ocean kayaks, Waverunners, ski boats, and more), a health club and spa, golf, tennis, bikes to rent, and the Village of Baytowne Wharf with more than two-dozen shops and restaurants. A children's program offers arts and crafts, beach and pool games, bingo, biking, fishing, hiking, scavenger hunts, and storytelling. There's also a teen social night. Accommodations range from a room at the new Grand Sandestin signature hotel to condos and villas; rates start at \$85 in the winter and \$216 in the summer. Sandestin is eight miles east of Destin on US 98 West.

ON THE WATER

Glass-bottom boats offer underwater viewing, dolphin encounters, crab trapping, bird feeding, and nature cruises from Boogies Dock at the foot of Destin Bridge; 2 US 98 East, Destin; (850) 654-7787. \$15 adults, \$5 ages 12 and under.

Southern Star offers dolphin cruises all year from HarborWalk Marina at the foot of Destin Bridge; (850) 837-7741; www.dolphin-sstar.com. \$17 adults, \$14 seniors, \$7 kids.

For snorkeling, Kokomo Snorkeling Headquarters at 500 US 98 East in Destin offers daily trips to two locations—one for shelling, one for feeding fish. An instructor gives how-to lessons for ages four and older. Cost is \$20 per person for a three-hour trip. (850) 837-9029.

If you want to escape the busy beach and get out on the water with no hassles, settle back on one of the glass-bottom boat tours from the Treasure Island Marina, 3605 Thomas Drive in Panama City Beach. Try to time your tour during an incoming tide to see the most sea life. The friendly, informative guides take you for a three-hour trip to Shell Island for shell collecting, and to spots where you're likely to see dolphins. Cost is \$10 for adults, \$9 seniors, and \$6 ages 3 to 11. Phone (850) 234-7245, or visit www.shellislandtours.com.

Seaside

(800) 277-8696; (888) 732-7433; www.seasidefl.com.

For families looking for a comfortable place at the beach, this small retreat of clapboard cottages is ideal. Town founder Robert Davis spent his boyhood summers here and returned in the 1980s to create a town that would remind him of his own family gatherings. No two homes are alike, but there's a lovely visual harmony to Seaside, thanks to a building code that, among other stipulations, requires each cottage to have a picket fence (and no two identical fences on the same street). The result is a community of more than 200 tasteful cottages in warm colors with the architectural details of the 1920s. All have charming names, like "Jack's Beanstalk," "Savannah Sands," or "Dream Catcher," and many are available for rent.

From the cottages, the beach is a pleasant walk across 30-A, the old coast highway—where traffic slows to 15 mph. Each neighborhood has its own beach and a pavilion that serves as a gateway to the white sand.

You really don't need to ever leave Seaside; the town has a small but sophisticated grocer, good restaurants, and great shopping at galleries, antique shops, and boutiques with casual wear from around the world, even an excellent wine bar. The well-stocked bookstore just steps from the ocean is an amazing find.

There are swimming pools, but most everyone heads for the ocean, more like a big bathtub with the gentle Gulf waves and white sand. Seaside also has tennis courts, croquet, and bikes to rent. One- to six-bedroom cottages, completely and beautifully furnished, rent from \$140 per day year-round. Some cottages provide free breakfast. There's also a small motel and bed-and-breakfast. Take US 98 East to SR 283, turn right. Take SR 283 to SR 30-A, turn left and drive two miles.

WaterColor

Seagrove Beach; (888) 775-2545; fax (850) 534-5001; www.arvida.com/watercolor

WaterColor is a relatively new town in the burgeoning Panhandle, a self-contained, high-end getaway that's ideal for families who can afford its luxury. Most everything, from tennis courts to hiking trails, the beach, and a handful of restaurants, is within walking distance of the vacation homes.

Accommodations range from one- and two-bedroom lofts in the downtown area to spacious oceanfront cottages with up to six bedrooms. (There's also a 60-room WaterColor Inn, but it's more suited for couples.) All homes are completely furnished. Amenities include one

hour of tennis court time daily, canoes, kayaks, boogie boards, and unlimited use of bicycles. Catamarans, trail bikes, bicycle trailers, baby joggers, beach chairs and umbrellas are available at additional cost. Camp WaterColor for children ages 5 to 12 offers scavenger hunts, nature walks, sailing, swimming, tennis snorkeling, scuba diving, canoeing, kayaking, boogie boarding, and arts and crafts. Rates start at around \$500 a night for a one-bedroom loft.

Attractions

Big Kahuna's

1007 US 98 East, Destin; (850) 837-8319; www.bigkahunas.com

Hours 11 a.m.–midnight seven days a week, except in winter when the park closes

Admission \$32 for adults; \$30 for seniors 62 and over and children under 48"; free for children ages 2 and under

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★★★	Teens ★★★	Over 30 ★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★	Seniors ★

Touring Time Average 5–6 hours; minimum 2 hours

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★; something for everyone when you're bored with the beach

Restaurants Yes

Alcoholic Beverages Beer

Handicapped Access Yes

Wheelchair Rental No

Baby Stroller Rental No

Lockers Yes (\$5 plus \$5 deposit)

Pet Kennels No

Rain Check No

Private Tours No

Description and Comments If your family wants action, there's plenty in this water park with more than 50 slides and attractions, including "the world's largest tube river" and Bombs Away Bay with a real B-25 bomber. Also miniature golf, arcade games, go-carts, dune buggies, and a Vertical Accelerator that drops ten stories—but they all cost extra and it adds up quickly.

Gulfarium

On US 98 just east of Fort Walton Beach; (850) 244-5169; www.gulfarium.com

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–6 p.m.

Admission \$17 for adults, \$15 for senior citizens ages 55 and older, \$10 for children ages 4–11

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★★★	Teens ★★	Over 30 ★★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★	Seniors ★★

Touring Time Average 3–4 hours; minimum 2 hours

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★; fun for a beach diversion

Restaurants Yes **Alcoholic Beverages** No

Handicapped Access Yes **Wheelchair Rental** No

Baby Stroller Rental No **Lockers** No

Pet Kennels No **Rain Check** No

Private Tours No

Description and Comments Opened in 1955 and a little worn on the edges, Gulfarium is one of America's original marine parks. The "Living Sea" exhibit is a panorama of undersea life, from a 600-pound gray seal to a two-ounce clownfish. There are also performances by trained dolphins; sea lion shows; marine life exhibits featuring seals, otters, penguins, and a host of other sea animals.

Family-Friendly Restaurants

AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar

116 East US 98 (1/2 mile east of Destin bridge), Destin; (850) 837-1913;
www.ajsdestin.com

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$9–\$24

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations No

Payment VISA, MC, AMEX, D

Overlooking Destin Harbor, this casual eatery is a terrific spot to watch the sunset. At the upstairs oyster bar try the baked Oysters AJ with jalapenos, bacon, and cheese. Downstairs the restaurant has fresh catches from the Gulf steamed or fried, as well as chicken and steaks, burgers, and pasta.

Another Broken Egg Café

104 East US 98, Destin; (850) 650-0499; www.anotherbrokeneegg.com

Meals Served Breakfast and lunch

Cuisine American

Entree Range \$5–\$10

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Yes

Payment All major credit cards accepted

This cozy little eatery specializes in omelets—you name it, they'll make it. And try the grits sweetened with blackberries.

The Back Porch Café

1740 Old US 98 East, Destin; (850) 837-2022

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$9–\$20 (sandwiches start at \$6)

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Not accepted

Payment All major credit cards accepted

This quintessential seafood shack sits near the western boundary of Henderson Beach State Recreation Area, with lovely beach and Gulf views. Fish and burgers are grilled over coals—the local favorite, amberjack, is the house specialty.

Bud and Alley's

2236 East C 30-A, Seaside; (850) 231-5900; www.budandalleys.com

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Gourmet American and continental

Entree Range \$10–\$23 lunch; \$18–\$19 dinner

Kids Menu Yes, \$7–\$10

Reservations Accepted

Payment VISA, MC

Go early, because this casual Seaside eatery, named after a dog and a cat, gets crowded. Everything is fresh and creatively prepared, from tempura fried soft-shell blue crab to a simple blackened grouper. For kids, it's as basic as noodles with butter and cheese (\$5) or as sophisticated as chicken breast with fresh grilled vegetables (\$7).

Caffé Italia

189 Brooks Street, Fort Walton Beach; (850) 664-0035

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Italian

Entree Range \$8–\$18

Kids Menu No

Reservations Recommended

Payment VISA, MC, AMEX, D

Located in a quaint old house near the Brooks Bridge, Caffé Italia has a fabulous view of the Santa Rosa Sound and offers a wide selection of authentic Northern Italian cuisine as well as seafood and pizza. Dine on the patio or in the cozy dining room. Excellent pizzas and pasta dishes—but dine the traditional Italian way and order meat or seafood, too. Desserts are worth the calories.

Café Thirty-A

3899 East C30-A, Seagrove; (850) 231-2166; www.cafethirtya.com

Meals Served Dinner

Cuisine Contemporary, eclectic

Entree Range \$21–\$32

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Accepted

Payment VISA, MC, AMEX, D

Café Thirty-A is trendy and upscale, but families are welcome. Go for the rich, fried soft-shell crab if it's on the menu; otherwise, whether it's lamb, fish, or beef, Café Thirty-A does a splendid job.

Criolla's

170 East C 30-A, Grayton Beach, near Seaside; (850) 267-1267; www.criollas.com

Meals Served Dinner

Cuisine Gourmet, Creole-style

Entree Range \$19–\$31

Kids Menu \$7–\$13

Reservations Accepted

Payment VISA MC, AMEX, D

This award-winning restaurant is pricey, but worth a special family night out. You won't be disappointed with any fish, and save room for the from-scratch desserts, like Aunt Irma's banana and pecan beignets. The

upscale children's menu offers grilled tenderloin (\$13) and grilled or fried fish (\$9).

The Donut Hole

635 US 98 East, Destin; (850) 837-8824

Meals Served Open 24 hours

Cuisine American

Entree Range \$5–\$10

Kids Menu No

Reservations No

Payment Cash only

Who needs a kid's menu when the menu has burgers, shakes, freshly baked donuts, and breakfast is served all day long? Omelet fans will love the Destin omelet, with fresh local crabmeat, peppers, onions, and cheese. Be prepared for a wait.

June's Dunes

1780 Old US 98 East, Destin; (850) 650-0455

Meals Served Breakfast and lunch

Cuisine American

Entree Range \$4–\$10

Kids Menu No, but there are items on the menu that kids like

Reservations Not accepted

Payment No credit cards

This is one of those "junk food" places the locals favor, where you eat beachside on picnic tables. The menu is on a chalkboard and includes hearty breakfast favorites like waffles and biscuits with sausage gravy. Good burgers for lunch. And, yes, June is usually there.

Piccolo and the Red Bar

70 Hotz Avenue, Grayton Beach; (850) 231-1008

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$8–\$19

Kids Menu No, but appetizers include chicken fingers, fish sticks, and pizza bread

Reservations Not accepted

Payment Cash only

This casual eatery bustles with activity—a lively bar is just inside the front door, and most of the restaurant seating is on a big screened porch right on the beach. The locals love this place, and it's definitely a lively crowd on the weekends. Try the chicken with lemon caper sauce or the crab cakes.

Staff's Seafood Restaurant

24 Miracle Strip Parkway Southeast (US 98), Fort Walton Beach; (850) 243-3482

Meals Served Dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$12–\$30

Kids Menu Yes, 10 and under, \$5–\$6

Reservations Not accepted

Payment All major credit cards accepted

The Staff has been around since 1913, and its delicious home-baked wheat bread has been made with Pop Staff's recipe since the 1920s. The seafood gumbo is excellent; another house specialty is the Seafood Skillet, brimming with grouper, shrimp, scallops, and crab cooked with plenty of butter and cheese.

Panama City Beach

If you're looking for nonstop entertainment and action, you can find plenty to do in this high-energy, affordable beach town. You name it, you'll probably find a place to do it here, from bungee jumping and parasailing to jet skiing, wind surfing, even oceanfront minigolf.

The locals boast that the sun shines about 320 days a year, and the "sand is like a bar of Ivory soap—99.44 percent pure quartz," according to Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, a.k.a. "Dr. Beach," from the University of Maryland. The pretty beach is, however, lined with hotels, motels, and beach houses.

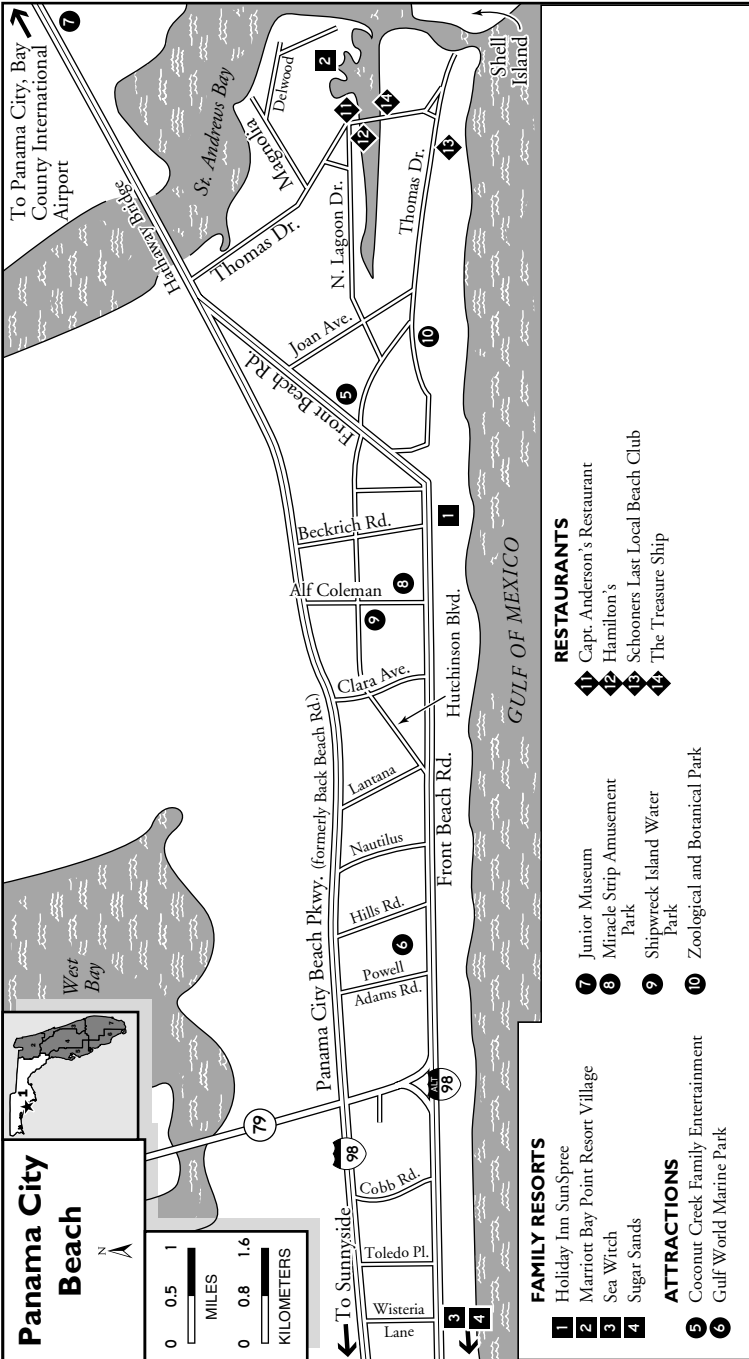
Be forewarned: This is the beach for high school spring breakers from neighboring states, and it's also full of teenagers in the summertime. And as Panama City beach has grown up, there has not been a lot of thoughtful planning—just more T-shirt shops and more fast-food joints and more little motels crowded along the oceanfront. Still, it's full of energy, and if you don't mind sharing your space with other revelers, this can be a pretty fun place. If you're looking for peace and quiet, head farther east.

Family Resorts

Holiday Inn SunSpree

11127 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 234-1111 or (800) 633-0266;
www.holidayinnsunspree.com

This 15-story, 342-room hotel was chosen by Holiday Inn as its Best Family Vacation Hotel in the world. Located smack in the middle of all the Panama City Beach action, every room has a balcony on the ocean, a microwave, coffeemaker, and refrigerator. A children's playground, electronic game room, and a swimming pool with a waterfall make the kids extra happy. And there are free supervised activities in the Splash Around Kids' Club, like sand-castle building, raft racing, beach games, pirates'



lunch, storytelling, and a kid's night out with a pizza meal. Children ages 19 and younger stay free with parents, and children ages 12 and younger eat free when accompanied by a dining parent. A human-size dolphin mascot, named Splash, hangs out with the kids and will even tuck them in at bedtime. Rates start at \$99 in the winter, \$159 in the summer.

Marriott Bay Point Resort Village

4200 Marriott Drive, Panama City Beach; (850) 236-6000 or (800) 874-7105;
fax (850) 233-1308; www.marriottbaypoint.com

Recognized by *Better Homes and Gardens* as one of "America's Favorite Family Resorts," Bay Point sits on 1,100 acres with St. Andrews Bay and the Gulf of Mexico on either side. It's about a five-minute car ride to the ocean, but the resort has plenty to offer, including two golf courses, a dozen tennis courts, and four swimming pools (including one indoors). An original paddle wheeler, the *Island Queen*, takes guests around the Grand Lagoon or on a seven-mile trip to secluded Shell Island. The Village Explorers Kids Camp offers scavenger hunts, sea life exploration, arts and crafts, and beach games for children ages 5 to 12 every day, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and Friday and Saturday, 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. Cost is \$40 per child per day. Bay Point has 355 rooms and suites, with coffeemakers and wet bars; rates start at \$135 in the winter, \$185 in the summer.

Sea Witch

21905 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 234-5722 or (800) 322-4571;
www.seawitchmotel.com

This family-oriented motel is a little off the beaten path in Panama City Beach—about ten minutes away from the crowds on a quiet stretch of beach known as Sunnyside. The Sea Witch is nothing fancy but was designed especially for families with children and features suites with kitchenettes (including coffeemakers), and balconies (ask for a ground-floor unit if you have small children), a laundry, kiddie pool, and ice-cream parlor. A one-bedroom apartment is an affordable \$100 during summer months and \$60 during the winter.

Sugar Sands

20723 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 234-8802 or (800) 367-9221;
fax (850) 236-2135; www.sugarsands.com

On the west end of the beach, Sugar Sands gets high marks for its spacious rooms—the largest is 900 square feet, with a bedroom with two double beds, a living room with a sofa bed, a full kitchen and dining area. All rooms have fully equipped kitchens with microwaves. The swimming

pool is heated seasonally, and there's a picnic area with a gas grill. Rates start at \$45, \$85 in the peak summer months.

Attractions

Coconut Creek Family Entertainment

9807 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 234-2625;
www.coconutcreekfun.com

Hours Open 9 a.m., closing times vary

Admission \$14 daily special includes unlimited golf, maze, and bumper boats (valid until 5 p.m. the next day); \$8 for golf, \$8 for maze

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★	Teens ★★★★★	Over 30 ★★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★	Seniors ★

Touring Time Half a day on average; minimum 2–3 hours

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★; a good beach diversion

Restaurants No

Alcoholic Beverages No

Handicapped Access Yes

Wheelchair Rental No

Baby Stroller Rental No

Lockers No

Pet Kennels No

Rain Check No

Private Tours No

Description and Comments Coconut Creek has two 18-hole miniature golf courses, Grand Maze (a giant human-size maze approximately the length of a football field), Mirror Maze (an indoor sea adventure), and a game room.

Gulf World Marine Park

15412 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 234-5271;
www.gulfworldmarinepark.com

Hours Open 9 a.m.; last show starts at 4 p.m.; last entry at 2:45 p.m.

Admission \$20 for adults, \$13 for children ages 5–11

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★★	Teens ★★	Over 30 ★★
Grade school ★★	Young Adults ★★	Seniors ★★

Touring Time Average 3 hours; minimum 2 hours

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★; entertaining and educational

Restaurants Yes

Alcoholic Beverages No

Handicapped Access Yes

Wheelchair Rental No

Baby Stroller Rental No

Lockers No

Pet Kennels No

Rain Check Yes

Private Tours No

Description and Comments This old-fashioned marine park opened in 1969, but keeps adding new attractions, like dolphin encounters and live bird shows. Guest can learn about dolphins and even get in the water with them as part of Dolphin Encounter at the new Dolphin Stadium. By night, the 2,000-seat theater turns into a laser, fountain, and fireworks show called SplashMagic. The park still has its comic sea lions, parrots, and coral reef. Kids can touch a stingray, see sharks, sea turtles, alligators, and other water creatures.

Shipwreck Island Water Park

12000 West Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 234-0368;
www.shipwreckisland.com

Hours April–June, 10:30 a.m.–5 p.m.; June–Labor Day, until 5:30 p.m.

Admission \$25 above 50" tall; \$20 under 50" tall; under 35" tall free; \$15 for senior citizens ages 62 and older; admission for both Miracle Strip (preceding profile) and Shipwreck Island is \$35 (above 50")

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★★	Teens ★★★	Over 30 ★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★	Seniors ★

Touring Time Average 3–4 hours; minimum 2 hours

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★; fun if the beach gets boring

Restaurants No

Alcoholic Beverages No

Handicapped Access No

Wheelchair Rental No

Baby Stroller Rental No

Lockers Yes, \$2 plus \$1 deposit

Pet Kennels No

Rain Check No

Private Tours No

Description and Comments Next door to Miracle Strip Amusement Park, this ever-expanding water park has six acres of rides and picnic areas. Water rides include the Rapid River Run, the Wave Pool, the Lazy River, and the awesome Tree Top Drop, a free-fall slide. The Tadpole Hole is exclusively for young visitors.

Zoological and Botanical Park

9008 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 230-1243

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–6:30 p.m.**Admission** \$11 for adults, \$9 for seniors, \$7 for children ages 4–11**Appeal by Age Group**

Preschool ★★	Teens ★★	Over 30 ★
Grade school ★★	Young Adults ★	Seniors ★

Touring Time Average 2 hours; minimum 1½ hours**Rainy-day Touring** Not recommended**Author's Rating** ★★; nothing spectacular, but an afternoon's diversion**Restaurants** No **Alcoholic Beverages** No**Handicapped Access** Yes **Wheelchair Rental** Yes**Baby Stroller Rental** Yes **Lockers** No**Pet Kennels** No **Rain Check** Yes**Private Tours** Yes

Description and Comments This small, old-fashioned zoo and botanical gardens has more than 350 species of tropical animals from around the world—orangutans, big cats, reptiles, and other creatures. You can see newborns in the Infant Care “bedrooms” with glass windows for observation. There’s also a petting zoo with a giraffe feeding platform, walk-through aviary, and bat exhibit.

ON THE WATER

Panama City's busy thoroughfare is packed with places that get you out on the water. Here are a few of our favorites:

AAventures at Sea has pontoons, jet skis, fishing boats, and parasailing. 5711 North Lagoon Drive, (850) 236-0056.

Teenagers can kick it up a notch with kiteboarding and windsurfing at Hydrotherapy, 17644 Front Beach Road, (850) 326-1800.

Little ones like the pirate cruise on the Sea Dragon, an 85-foot ship with cannons, swords, and pirates hanging from the rigging. Games, music, even pirate treasure—and you may even spot a dolphin. 5325 North Lagoon Drive, (850) 234-7400.

Island Time has catamaran cruises for snorkeling, swimming, and dolphin watching. They depart from the Treasure Island Marina, 3605 Thomas Drive, (850) 234-7377.

Family-Friendly Restaurants

Capt. Anderson's Restaurant

555 I North Lagoon Drive at Thomas Drive, Panama City Beach; (850) 234-2225; www.captanderson.com

Meals Served Dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$12–\$40

Kids Menu \$5–\$10

Reservations Not accepted

Payment All major credit cards accepted

It's fun to watch fishers unload the catch of the day at the marina next door, but come early because this famous, award-winning restaurant gets crowded after the boats come in. Opt for whatever fish is freshest or the seafood platter, and you can't go wrong.

Hamilton's

571 I North Lagoon Drive, Panama City; (850) 234-1255; www.hamiltonspcbeach.com

Meals Served Dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$10–\$28

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Not accepted

Payment VISA, MC, AMEX, D

Dine right on the lagoon in the air-conditioned dining room. Locals recommend the Florida bay scallops and the Apalachicola oysters. All desserts, salad dressings, sauces, and soups are made fresh from original recipes.

Schooners Last Local Beach Club

5121 Gulf Drive, Panama City Beach; (850) 235-3555; www.schooners.com

Meals Served Lunch, dinner daily

Cuisine Seafood, burgers

Entree Range Lunch, \$7–\$14; dinner, \$13–\$23

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations No

Payment All major credit cards accepted

Schooners has been around since the 1960s with various owners, but each has kept it close to its original state—a laid-back beach hangout with great fried seafood (grilled too), volleyball on the beach, a cannon blast to signal sunset, and live bands that draw the locals. The seafood comes in fresh daily, and if you want to sample it all, go for the Seafood Beach Party, a platter of broiled or fried shrimp, grouper, scallops, and blue crab claws.

The Treasure Ship

3605 Thomas Drive, Panama City; (850) 234-8881; www.thetreasureship.com

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine American, Caribbean, seafood

Entree Range Lunch, \$6–\$17; dinner, \$12–\$28

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Not accepted

Payment All major credit cards accepted

Hook's Grille is open for lunch, but go for dinner when the “pirates” invade the Treasure Ship dining room to entertain the kids. Try the Calypso Grouper, Cuban loin of pork, or pepper steak Port-au-Prince.

Tallahassee

This is a great little town for walking or a trolley ride, with lush rolling hills, fragrant magnolias in the springtime, ancient oaks, and lovely springs and lakes.

Families will enjoy touring the seat of state government, including the Old Capitol, restored to its 1902 American Renaissance splendor with red-and-white striped awnings and stained-glass dome. Behind it is the New Capitol, where you can view from public galleries the legislature from March through May. The New Capitol's 22nd-floor observatory offers a breathtaking view—clear to the Gulf of Mexico, about 20 miles away, on a cloudless day.

The Old Capitol is open for self-guided tours Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 4:30 p.m. The New Capitol is open Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tour times vary. Call (850) 487-1902 for capitol tour reservations. Admission is free to both buildings.

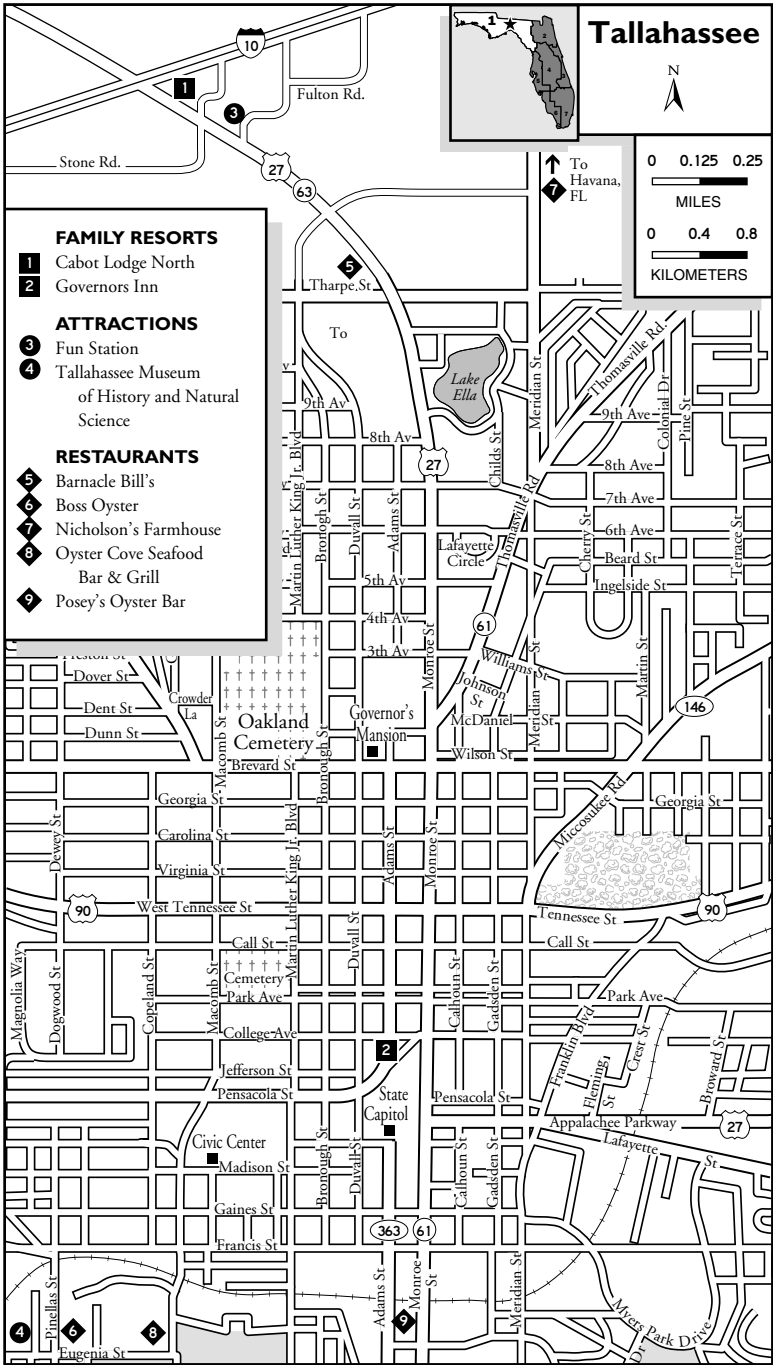
Peek in the Governor's Mansion just north of the capitol, furnished with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiques; tours are given when the legislature is in session and at Christmas. For a tour of the Governor's Mansion, call (850) 488-4661.

The Old Town Trolley is free, and you can get on or off at any point between Adams Street Commons, at the corner of Jefferson and Adams Streets, and the Governor's Mansion. The trolley runs every 20 minutes Monday to Friday, 7 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Family Resorts

Cabot Lodge North

2735 North Monroe Street, Tallahassee; (850) 386-8880 or (800) 223-1964;
www.cabotlodgenorthmonroe.com



You can relax in true Southern style in the rocking chairs on the wrap-around porch at this clapboard plantation-style house just north of downtown. The guest rooms are plain but spacious in the two-story motel buildings behind the main house, and there is a swimming pool for warm afternoons. Continental breakfast is free, as are cocktails between 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. Children up to age 13 stay free with parents. Rates start at \$72 year-round.

Governors Inn

209 South Adams Street, Tallahassee, just north of the state capitol; (850) 681-6855

The elegant Governor's Inn is right in the historic district, and though it's mostly a place for businesspeople, particularly when the Florida legislature is in session, it's a wonderful respite if you're traveling with teenagers and are in town for touring. There are 40 rooms, some with wood-burning fireplaces, wet bars, and four-poster beds. All rooms have HBO, some have mini-refrigerators and coffeemakers. Continental breakfast is complementary, and there's free limousine service to and from the airport. Rates start at \$129 year-round.

A MOON PIE AND A COLA

In Tallahassee, take time for a break at Bradley's Country Store—now on the National Register of Historic Places—where you'll likely meet one of the Bradley clan, who have run the place since it opened in 1927. Along with Moon Pie, they also make world-famous sausage—they sell more than 80,000 pounds over the counter every year. Or ask for one of Grandma Mary's seasoned sausage biscuits hot off the griddle. Bradley's is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (closed Sunday). Located on Centerville Road 12 miles north of Tallahassee; (850) 893-1647.

Attractions

Fun Station

2821 Sharer Road, Tallahassee, off North Maine Street; (850) 383-0788

Hours Monday–Thursday, 10 a.m.–11 p.m.; Friday, 10 a.m.–1 a.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m.–1 a.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.–11 p.m.

Admission Separate prices for each activity; no standard admission

Appeal by Age Group

Preschool ★	Teens ★★★	Over 30 ★
Grade school ★★★	Young Adults ★★★	Seniors ★

Touring Time Average 3 hours; minimum 1½ hours

Rainy-day Touring Not recommended**Author's Rating** ★★; plenty of action for grade schoolers and teenagers**Restaurants** Yes**Alcoholic Beverages** No**Handicapped Access** Yes**Wheelchair Rental** No**Baby Stroller Rental** No**Lockers** No**Pet Kennels** No**Rain Check** No**Private Tours** No

Description and Comments If your kids are antsy, this entertainment center has two 18-hole minigolf courses, a laser-tag arena, a 10,000-square-foot video arcade, bumper boats, batting cages, and concessions.

A COOL RESORT

If you're looking for a slice of old Florida, away from the beach and the crowds, head to Steinhatchee Landing Resort, three miles from the Gulf in the southeast portion of the Panhandle. Opened in 1990, this family- and pet-friendly resort is tucked in a 25-acre habitat of pines, moss oaks, and silver palms on the banks of the Steinhatchee River. Abundant wildlife—deer, wild boar, eagles, owls, ducks, and turkeys—roam in the surrounding acreage.

Amenities include a petting zoo with goats, duck, and chickens, a playground, a swimming pool, bicycles, tennis, archery, and canoes. Accommodations are Victorian, Georgian, and Cracker-style villas, fully furnished with kitchens. Rates start at \$220 in the summer, \$160 in the winter. You might plan your stay during the Gulf's scallop season (July 1 through September 10). With a mask and snorkel in four feet of water, it's like an underwater Easter egg hunt for kids.

Steinhatchee is on SR 51, 70 miles east of Gainesville; (352) 498-3513; www.steinhatcheelanding.com.

Tallahassee Museum of History and Natural Science

3945 Museum Drive, Tallahassee; (850) 576-1636

Hours Monday–Saturday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; Sunday, 12:30–5 p.m.**Admission** \$7 for adults, \$6.50 for seniors, \$5 for children ages 4–15**Appeal by Age Group**

Preschool ★★

Teens ★★★

Over 30 ★★★

Grade school ★★★

Young Adults ★★★

Seniors ★★★

Touring Time Average 2 hours; minimum 1½ hours**Rainy-day Touring** Not recommended

Author's Rating ★★★; one of the few museum in the country that combines historical buildings, displays of native wildlife, and a beautiful natural setting

Restaurants	Foodstand	Alcoholic Beverages	No
Handicapped Access	Yes	Wheelchair Rental	No
Baby Stroller Rental	No	Lockers	No
Pet Kennels	No	Rain Check	No
Private Tours	No		

Description and Comments History, nature, and wildlife are intertwined at the museum to tell a story about the culture and natural history of the Big Bend. Along a trail through 52 acres of woodlands, you can see alligators, red wolves, Florida panthers, and other animals—the state’s only zoological collection solely devoted to native wildlife. A collection of historical buildings, including an original plantation house from the 1840s, a church, and a one-room schoolhouse, illustrate what life was like in a bygone era. The Big Bend Farm is a re-creation of a farm typical of the Big Bend region during the late nineteenth century, with volunteers churning butter, spinning, weaving, and performing other duties on the weekends. The Hands-on Discovery Center allows close-up views of native reptiles.

Family-Friendly Restaurants

Barnacle Bill’s

1830 North Monroe Street, Tallahassee; (850) 385-8734; www.barnaclebills.com

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$6–\$20

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Not accepted

Payment All major credit cards accepted

This well-known restaurant serves about 750 dozen oysters every week, along with seafood grilled, steamed, smoked, and fried.

Boss Oyster

125 Water Street, Apalachicola; (850) 653-9364

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$10–\$25

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Not accepted

Payment VISA, MC, AMEX, D

Locals recommend Boss Oyster not just for the freshly shucked oysters with more than 30 creative toppings but also for their delicious burgers. It's the best spot on the water in Apalachicola.

Nicholson's Farmhouse

200 Coca Cola Avenue, Havana (located 30 minutes north of Tallahassee); (850) 539-5931

Meals Served Dinner, Tuesday–Saturday

Cuisine American

Entree Range \$9–\$25

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Recommended

Payment VISA, MC, AMEX, D

This is an actual family plantation, built in 1820, and so authentic that they offer boiled peanuts as an appetizer. The food is as Southern as it gets, with beef grown right on the farm and fresh-baked bread.

Oyster Cove Seafood Bar & Grill

210 East Pine Street, St. George Island; (850) 927-2600

Meals Served Dinner, closed Monday

Cuisine Seafood, American

Entree Range \$12–\$23

Kids Menu Yes

Reservations Not necessary

Payment VISA, MC, AMEX, D

Locals love the Oyster Cove for its consistently good seafood dishes, though they also go for their “famous” East Bay steak, a rib eye grilled with oysters and Spanish onions. Ask for a window seat for a world-class view of Apalachicola Bay, especially at sunset.

Posey's Oyster Bar

55 Riverside Drive, St. Marks; (850) 925-6172

Meals Served Lunch and dinner

Cuisine Seafood

Entree Range \$10–\$15

Kids Menu No, but there's pizza, corn dogs, and chicken strips

Reservations Not accepted

Payment VISA, MC

Posey's is at the south end of the Tallahassee–St. Marks Historic Rail Trail, the perfect respite after a bicycle ride. The dilapidated eatery has been there for years, serving the freshest Apalachicola oysters. If you don't like raw oysters, try them baked with cheddar cheese, butter, bacon bits, or garlic. Also on the menu are grouper, shrimp, scallops, and clams.

Side Trips

Apalachicola In the 1860s Apalachicola was the third-largest town on the Gulf, when steamboats from Georgia and Alabama carried cotton down the river to the Gulf of Mexico. Sponge fishing also was big business, but by the 1920s shellfish reigned as the most prosperous way to make a living.

Today, 90 percent of all oysters eaten in Florida are harvested here, and anglers still work the waters. But progress has passed Apalachicola by, and today it's a sleepy little fishing town, where most visitors stop for the fresh fish or oysters at the little seafood eateries found all over town. We suggest a meal at Boss Oyster, where you can sit right next to the docks and watch the oyster and shrimp boats unloading their day's catch. The food is great; if you're not in the mood for oysters, they also serve delicious burgers. After a satisfying lunch or dinner, you can take a scenic walking tour of some of the more than 200 historic sites; Apalachicola has one of the largest collections of antebellum homes in the state. One of its most famous spots is the Gibson Inn, perfect for a little fancier lunch (but not with little ones). There's not a stop light in the entire town, other than a blinking caution light at the intersection of Market Street and Avenue E downtown.

Cedar Key Not every family will find this quiet little island appealing, but we've included it for families who enjoy history and a very slow pace.

Just three miles from the mainland, Cedar Key is like a step back in time. Back in the mid-1800s it was the second-largest city in Florida, when the first major railroad in Florida ran from Fernandina Beach in the northeast to Cedar Key. After the Civil War, pencil making was big business—until the cedar forests were leveled. Today it's merely a haven for fishers.

Stop off at the Cedar Key Historical Museum for brochures that offer self-guided tours of the city. The museum is in an 1870s-era house on Second Street at SR 24; (352) 543-5549. Cycle past the picturesque city docks, one of the most-photographed sites on Florida's west coast, or stop for seafood at any of the Dock Street restaurants.

For families, the waterfront cottages at Mermaids Landing are a good bet, about six blocks from downtown on the bay. The cottages can sleep

up to four and include a full kitchen; rates are \$60 to \$70. The friendly proprietors will loan you a bike (they keep three there for guests) or help you rent one. And if you don't want to cook dinner, Cooke's Oysters is just down the road, and they'll deliver to your cottage—farm-raised clams, flounder, grouper, oysters, and live blue crabs. Mermaid's Landing is on SR 24 as you come into town; (352) 543-5949. Cedar Key is halfway between Tampa and Tallahassee; to get there from Tallahassee, take US 27 south, then SR 24 into Cedar Key.