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Life / Travel

Florida: The beaches of South Walton offer endless possibilities

Beaches, wildlife, nature trails, cute little towns and brackish dune lakes — the communities on The Gulf Coast embody a compelling variety

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NPGAL77 / DREAMSTIME

Vacationers enjoying the sun and the surf on South Walton Beach. Located in northwest Florida, Sandestin offers emerald waters and soft shores has been considered one of the finest beaches in the world.

By: **Becca Hensley** Freelance Travel writer, Published on Thu Mar 05 2015

The sand looks like snow or sugar. Along the Emerald Coast, the beaches appear frosted. Carpeted with Lilliputian pebbles of clear quartz, they line a patch of the northwestern Florida panhandle. (The stone arrived, through erosion, from the nearby Appalachian Mountains.) Here, scattered under a golden sun, 16 unique beach communities dot 26-miles of bright-white coastline on the Gulf of Mexico.

Along Scenic Highway 30A, the Beaches of South Walton communities beckon.

Varying in size, each enclave has its own personality. Some dazzle with swank. Others reflect an earthy, laid-back vibe. The newest have manicured gardens, celebrity-designed golf courses and chic shops. The older, sleepy hamlets have been the retreat for generations of Southerners looking for nothing more than soulful confabulation with friends and loved ones.

Not just for boogie-boarders, this beach area also attracts nature-lovers who bike along the 19-mile-long Timpoochee Trail, while hikers roam routes beneath trees festooned with Spanish Moss next to dunes mottled with sea oak. Kayakers and stand-up paddleboarders skim the brackish dune lakes, a geographical anomaly found only in a few places on earth. Birdwatchers flock to the area to see coveted species.

You'll see bright yellow umbrellas marking beach towels, hammocks slung between trees, artists hovering over canvasses, kids building castles in the sand, and honeymooners sipping wine from ocean-side porches.

Where should you vacation? Here are six spots to consider.

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Seaside: You saw it in the Truman Show, which was filmed here. Seaside is New Utopian perfection. Beyond its uniform, colourful cottages, picket fences and brick-laid streets, it harkens back to a simpler time. A stay means grabbing your bicycle for the short ride to the beach, neighbourhood lemonade stands or s'mores roasting over a fire. With 12 restaurants, 41 shops, a town square and an amphitheatre which always hosts an event, visitors will never be bored. Stay and embrace old-fashioned, family-centric activities from pot-luck suppers with the neighbours to star-gazing.

Sandestin: The most resort-like getaway of all the communities, this 2,400-acre playground sprawls along seven-and-a-half miles of glittering sand. Its crystalline, turquoise waters boggle the mind. Replete with four golf courses recognized by Golf Digest, a bevy of swimming pools, marinas and Disney-like pedestrian areas, awash with boutiques and eateries, Sandestin boasts the area's only full-service hotel: the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort and Spa. Those swinging for a hole-in-one may prefer to bunk at any of the many course-side condos, as trams whisk guests with ease across the property. Foodies: don't miss Seagar's, an AAA Four Diamond restaurant, one of only two in the region.

Dune Allen: Three rare brackish sea lakes mark the terrain around Dune Allen, beloved by nature fans for its untouched beauty. A lesser developed hamlet, with simple, beachside cottages, Dune Allen attracts visitors who tend to keep their cameras aimed for bald eagles, their fishing lines baited for freshwater casting, and their hiking boots on for the miles of trails which connect the lakes. With the highest dunes along the Beaches of South Walton strip, the nearby Topsail Hill State Preserve defines otherworldly. Note: Don't miss a shrimp po'boy at Stinky's Fish Cam!

Grayton Beach: As the oldest burg along Scenic 30A, Grayton Beach reigns supreme. Evoking a boho, Jimmy Buffet, laid-back cool, it has narrow, oak-lined streets. Its unpretentious, no-fuss beach bungalows set a tone that pays homage to a less complicated life. Rich in history, with piers galore for fishing, the community incorporates Grayton Beach State Park, where sport-fishing excursions leave right from the sand, camping is common, and cabins provide inexpensive, old-fashioned lodging. Touting a pine forest, magnolias bent from sea breezes and a salt march ecosystem, this place embodies the original northern Florida beach life.

Watercolor Beach: Don't forget to pack your paintbrushes! One of the newer towns, Watercolor features cozy homes with front-porch swings and whirring ceiling fans for lazy vacation evenings. Bigger than Seaside, its city plan borrows from New Urbanism's precision, resulting in an almost too-cute-to-be-true feel. The town has set aside half of its 499 acres for open space. Considered by many to be an artists' enclave, Watercolor boasts galleries, revels in open air concerts and offers a bevy of crafts classes At Watercolor Inn, a snazzy hotel overlooking the ocean, Camp Watercolor immerses kids in artsy activities from tie-dyeing to sketching. Saturday evenings mean hot-dog and marshmallow roasts for all on the busy crescent of beach.

Seagrove: You may have the entire oceanfront to yourself at Seagrove, where hickory, holly, magnolia and pine trees enwrap nature trails and tree-house-like cottages. One of the quietest communities, it attracts visitors who may never don a swimsuit during their stay. Instead, they'll be found traipsing into Point Washington State Forest. Look for the gopher tortoise and other endangered and threatened species amid the cypress swamps and sand hills of this immense park! A deer hunter's paradise, the park remains most popular with visitors who carry only their cameras into the woods.

- For more info, visit beachesofsouthwalton.com

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