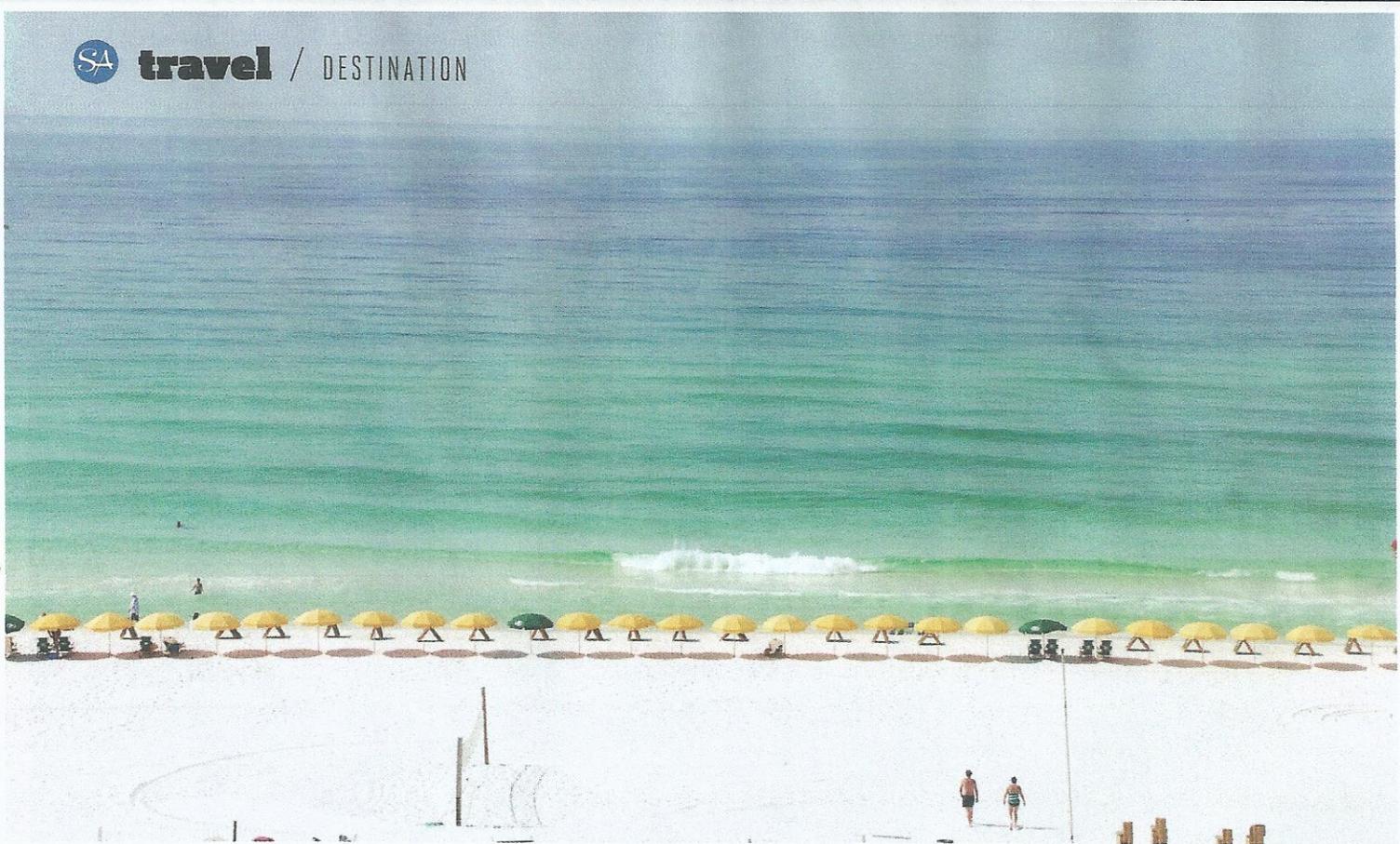


# travel

## Endless Possibilities

➔ From the idyllic, 1950s vibe of Seaside to the pristine nature at Dune Allen, the 16 Beaches of South Walton located along 26 sun-drenched miles of Florida's panhandle have something for every lover of surf and sand. Choosing whether to spend a few languid days gazing at the turquoise water from a cottage in WaterColor Beach or getting lost amid a sea of yellow beach umbrellas in Sandestin is what we call the perfect summertime problem. *Cont. page 70.*





# Beautiful Beaches

There's a plot of sand to suit all tastes on Florida's Emerald Coast

BY BECCA HENSLEY

**L**ook at a map of Florida's Emerald Coast, a stretch of wedding gown white sand that extends down the state's northwestern panhandle for 26 miles, and you'll get that stressful feeling that comes when you first open a box of handcrafted chocolates. Which to choose? They all look so good. Can you eat the whole box?

Called the Beaches of South Walton, this patch of beach-blessed terrain lies closer to Alabama than Miami. Southern in tone and hospitality, it includes 16 picture-perfect, sugary-sand-frosted, sun-dappled communities. Each is completely distinctive, ranging from sleepy hamlets to up-market resort expanses. Some are intimate; others thronged. A few have been the haunt of Southern families for generations, while some have just arrived on the scene.

For beach lovers, a drive along Scenic Highway 30A is akin to a gourmand scanning a gourmet buffet. There are beaches to be found wedged between trees festooned with Spanish moss, behind boogie board rental shops, and as a

backdrop to hipster food trucks cooking up soulful dishes. Beachfront property has many meanings, too: everything from sleepy rental houses down one-lane roads and rough-hewn cottages to boutique and five-star hotels. Full of variety, the beaches themselves bring together sand composed of clear quartz from the Appalachian Mountains just to the north with the Gulf of Mexico's turquoise-colored waters.

Indeed, like the assorted chocolates in a beribboned box, the hamlets of the Emerald Coast all look good enough to eat. Which to choose? You can't really go wrong. Here's a run down on some of our favorites to help you select the right spot.

## Dune Allen

Eco-explorers revere this South Walton area for its 15 coastal dune lakes, which are rarities anywhere in the world. Hewed from the wind and rainstorms, these freshwater ponds hold briny water. This makes the ideal environment for a complex estuary, brimming with both freshwater and saltwater creatures. With forests nearby, Dune

Allen also embraces three salty lakes. A lesser-developed village, dotted with beach-sited cottages, this community thrives on visitors with a penchant for birding and fishing. Anglers can try their luck at Oyster Lake and Lake Allen, where they'll find a mixture of salt and fresh water fish, including Gulf flounder, largemouth bass and catfish. Seven miles of trails connect the lakes, where bald eagles and mammals galore can be glimpsed. Nearby, Topsail Hill Preserve State Park with its soaring 25-foot dunes sheltering a bevy of secluded beaches is worth a visit.

## Seaside

This is where you're most likely to find families on bicycles, playing red rover on the beach or vaunting kids with matching outfits. Children gallop through town with Beaver Cleaver-era innocence, slurping ice cream, which, though melting, never manages to soil their duds. Seaside is the epitome of a New Utopian community. If you saw the movie *The Truman Show*, which was filmed here, you get the drift: Seaside is perfection. Uniform, col-

(Opposite page) Sandestin's 7 1/2 miles of beach have an exclusive atmosphere. (This page, from top): Shark's Tooth Golf Club; Seaside's dreamy, colorful cottages; WaterColor Beach sits among acres of undeveloped terrain.

of undeveloped terrain. orful cottages, brick-laid streets, and picket fences set a dreamy mood. Bike to the beach, melt s'mores over a bonfire, participate in a village sing-along or flit about the town square, which features 12 restaurants, 41 shops and galleries and a theater.

### Sandestin

It's hard to believe that an area with so much waterfront property has just one marina. But that's just one of the things that makes Sandestin, home to the village of Baytowne Wharf, so unique. Claiming 7 1/2 miles of beach, Sandestin exudes an upscale, country club air—complete with resort-style hotels, yellow beach umbrellas, assigned lounge chairs, tropical cocktails and enough complimentary beach toys to last a lifetime.

#### WHEN YOU GO

**FLY** Three airports service the area: Pensacola Gulf Coast International Airport, Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport and Northwest Florida Regional Airport

**STAY** *Seaside* [seasidefl.com](http://seasidefl.com); **WaterColor Inn & Resort** [watercolorresort.com](http://watercolorresort.com); **Hilton Sandestin** [hiltonsandestinbeach.com](http://hiltonsandestinbeach.com) For options in all South Walton communities: [visitsouthwalton.com](http://visitsouthwalton.com)

**EAT** Dramatic coastal vistas and menus that follow the season make **Fish Out of Water** at the WaterColor Inn & Resort a special reservation for a night out. [watercolorresort.com](http://watercolorresort.com)

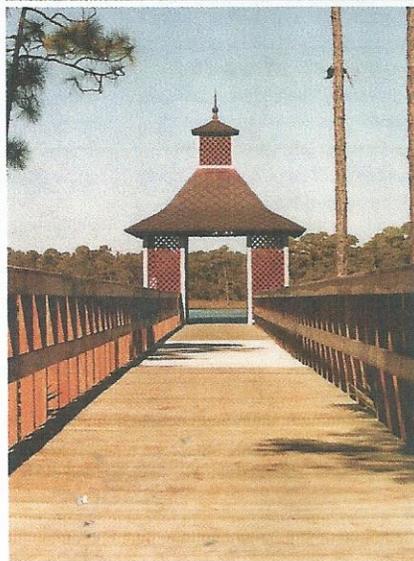
**DO** There are 16 beach communities in **South Walton**, and the ones we haven't mentioned may be your favorites. Extend your vacation in Seacrest, Gulf Place, Seascape, Blue Mountain, WaterSound, Alys Beach, Rosemary Beach, Inlet Beach and Santa Rosa Beach

Golfers may never hit the beach, as they may be too busy driving balls down the greens of four *Golf Digest*-lauded golf courses. Exploring is easy here, too. Bike paths wend between the Emerald Coast's only full-service hotel, the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort and Spa; the beach; a collection of swimming pools and Baytowne Wharf, which features a variety of upscale restaurants and boutiques along Grand Boulevard.

### WaterColor Beach

While Dune Allen retains a sleepy feel and Sandestin is a veritable resort, WaterColor Beach manages to fall somewhere in between, offering resort-like activities amid acres of undeveloped terrain. Wedged between the protected, untrammelled dunes of Grayton Beach State Park and an idyllic, Caribbean-style crescent of sandy beach, this is a place that melds seamlessly into the terrain. A 500-acre resort enclave that includes WaterColor

Inn & Resort, The Pearl and a slew of rentable vacation homes provides plenty of accommodation options. With nearly 50 percent of the resort's landscape undeveloped and untouched, this getaway draws visitors who seize solace from nature's gifts and the prodigious moodiness of the terrain's vast open spaces. The bigger WaterColor Inn evokes a cottage atmosphere, while the more boutique Pearl Hotel provides stylish panache. Houses face the beach, with sitting porches that beg repose. Wherever guests stay, they have access to golf courses, and a beach club (with attendants skilled at nighttime bonfire set-up). WaterColorInn even has a kids' activity center that offers babysitting. A new lakeside boathouse and plenty of trails provide kayakers, birders and bikers a back-to-nature heyday. ★



## THREE MORE

**Grayton Beach:** This granddaddy of the beach hamlets along Scenic 30A has piers, laidback beach bungalows and camping areas.

**Seagrove:** Pine, magnolia hickory and holly trees fringe nature trails and rustic cottages. Located near Point Washington State Forest and laden with swamps, this is an outdoorsman's delight.

**Miramar:** Like an old-fashioned beach hamlet, this burg drops jaws with its scenic back roads and Gulf of Mexico setting. From surf shops to candy stores to parasailing instructors to one of the nation's largest designer outlet outpost, Silver Sands Premium, you'll find it all here.