



the pearl of the panhandle

+ THE BEACHES OF 30A

PHOTOGRAPHY CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DEBBIE SNOW, AMY MIKLER, DEBBIE SNOW, AMY MIKLER



BEST BEACHES 2010

Opposite, clockwise from far left: Ceviche flights at Oriente; a 30A beach boutique; lemon sorbet from the Lemon Tree in Vero Beach; novice paddle boarders head to the Gulf at Deer Lake State Park for lessons.

BEST FOR SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY IN A TRENDY SETTING

Whatever you call this rarefied 20-mile stretch of North Florida coast - locals prefer the colloquial "30A" for the scenic road that links planned New Urbanist communities like **WaterColor**, **Seaside** and **Rosemary Beach** - its allure begins with the sand itself. Derived from Appalachian quartz, it's squeaky clean underfoot and as brilliant as bone china. When the sun strikes it in the shallows of the Gulf, the reflection shimmers through the water in hues of emerald and aqua not normally seen outside the Turks and Caicos. So clear and calm are the waters that beachgoers can spy on the abundant near-shore fish, turtles and dolphins that serve as constant reminders that right there, it's totally wild.

This helps explain the local popularity of stand-up paddling on oversize surfboards, known locally as YOLO (for "You Only Live Once"). This anyone-can-do-it activity is perfectly in keeping with the ethos of 30A; in these parts, you won't be ducking speedboats and Wave-Runners. Nor, for that matter, will you find any fast-food or chain restaurants, bright lights that would disorient nesting sea turtles or more than one building exceeding four stories. What you will find are lots of families and a surprising number of lightly tattooed young folk who know they're onto a good thing - enjoying old-fashioned beach life in newfangled developments that put the concept of sustainability first. "Every community has a choice, and this one has chosen wisely," says Thomas Estes, an ecologist for a development company. "Grayton is the genesis," he adds, referring to the funky Old Florida beach town's proud and friendly local character, which permeates the area.

Couples who don't require the space of a beach house will enjoy staying at the one beachfront hotel on 30A, the handsome 60-room **WaterColor Inn & Resort**; from there you can walk to **Grayton Beach State Park**, one of four along the coast. There's a magical little trail that winds among the dunes and along one of the 15 rare coastal dune lakes that are local points of pride.

HOT SPOTS Hop on a bike - the preferred mode of transport - and take the trail into Grayton. At **Big Mama's Hula Girl Gallery**, which houses a hilarious collection of Gulf Coast folk art, Big Mama herself may try to recruit you for a happy-hour posse; you'll recognize her unsubtle touch in the décor at the nearby **Hurricane Oyster Bar**, a local fave. Stop into the **Hibiscus Coffee & Guesthouse**, and nose around the 13-room compound of rescued buildings (including Bert's Barn, circa 1903) furnished and decorated in vintage Florida style. "Everything in here's out of the '50s, including me," says the proprietor, Cheri Peebles, your next best friend.

Of more recent vintage is **Shorty's Surfside & Topside**, which opened last year and immediately established itself as a local gem. In the upstairs dining room, you'll not only find a gotta-wear-shades blast of sun glinting off the Gulf waters, but you can taste the sea in the super-fresh fare: tangy ceviche, Nawlins-style seafood gumbo and generously blackened mahimahi.

Shorty's is a recent entry into what Dave Rauschkolb calls a local "culinary revolution." When he opened **Bud & Alley's** restaurant just behind the dunes in Seaside 24 years ago, 30A was still just an idea: "In the 'good old days,' we didn't even have a grocery store." Little did he know that he was at the forefront of a cultural boom that would nurture a robust gallery circuit and a nonstop calendar of film, music and art festivals as well as a thriving foodie scene. A trim fellow in his late 40s with the cut of a triathlete, Rauschkolb originally came here to surf ("When it's good, it's great," he says of the occasional swells) and stayed to become a true believer in the power of positive planning. Toasting sunset with a beer at Bud & Alley's Roof Deck Bar, he says of his beloved 30A, "It's a beautiful place of gathering, shelter and nourishment."

Shomehow, his statement doesn't sound chamber-of-commerce corny. Not once you've visited the place, which indeed feels like a utopia built on a foundation of Appalachian sand and Gulf Coast waters.

See the sites: beachesofsouthwalton.com; 30a.com; sowal.com