

# 10<sup>top</sup> AT THE BEACH

IN OUR SPECIAL LITTLE BEACH AREA OF FLORIDA'S EMERALD COAST, THERE ARE NO BIG-BOX STORES, DANCE CLUBS, AND CHAIN RESTAURANTS. SOME PEOPLE WANT THAT FROM THEIR BEACH VACATION, AND TEND TO STAY IN THE BIGGER TOWNS OF DESTIN AND PANAMA CITY BEACH. BUT FOR FOLKS WANTING SOMETHING DIFFERENT, THEN SOUTH WALTON COUNTY IS THE PLACE FOR YOU. WE'RE FOR THE VISITOR WHO'S NEVER HEARD OF SALLY'S IN BLUE MOUNTAIN BEACH AND HAS NO CLUE THAT SALLY'S HAS THE ABSOLUTE-BEST FRIED CHICKEN THEY WILL EVER EAT, BUT AFTER A TIP FROM AN INSIDER LIKE ME, YOU'LL GO HOME WITH THAT LITTLE GEM TUCKED AWAY FOR FUTURE VACATIONS.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MURRAY BALKCOM

My list of 10 hidden gems follows (in no particular order), and I highly recommend all of the places on this list, along with encouragement to find your own secrets on the Emerald Coast. For more information on what to do, where to eat, or just to meet some other lovers of our area, visit [www.SoWal.com](http://www.SoWal.com). It features input from many people: locals, second-home owners, and visitors. Be sure to sign in (free) and look in the "Forum" section. It is the best resource for all there is to know about this stretch of paradise.

**1** Whether you are surf **fish-ing** from the beach or chartering a small boat from Grayton Beach to take you out to deeper water, there are plenty of fish to be caught. A great source for fishing supplies, charter boat reservations, kayak sales and rentals, as well as bicycle rentals is **Yellowfin Ocean Sports**, with two locations along Scenic Highway 30A. [www.YellowfinOceanSports.com](http://www.YellowfinOceanSports.com).

**2** In the architect's dream community of Rosemary Beach, you'll also find a great place for casual and gourmet foods. **Wild Olives** market, café, and deli is also a place to people-watch as you sip a glass of wine, beer, or even an imported lemonade. [www.wildolivesmarket.com](http://www.wildolivesmarket.com)

**3** **Kayaking** on one of the 15 rare Coastal Dune Lakes, or in the Gulf, should not be missed. Western Lake is one of the largest Lakes and perhaps the easiest to access, and you can follow it all the way to Grayton. For a guided kayak tour and nature walk, make your reservations with Matt Labo at **Blue Sky Kayak Tours**. [www.BlueSkyKayak.com](http://www.BlueSkyKayak.com)

**4** The comfy Italian restaurant **Trattoria Borago** mixes classical and traditional Italian dishes with robust portions. You cannot leave without trying one of their fabulous specialty martinis—they also have a great wine list. Borago is open for din-

ner only, and reservations are strongly encouraged, as this gem was long ago discovered by locals and visitors alike. [www.BoragoRestaurant.com](http://www.BoragoRestaurant.com)

**5** My favorite hidden gem in South Walton is unknown to even many locals, but slowly they are discovering it. **Hibiscus Coffee and Guest House**, nestled under the live oaks of Grayton Beach, offers a romantic getaway and delicious vegetarian breakfast. Be sure to get a hug from Cheri! [www.HibiscusFlorida.com](http://www.HibiscusFlorida.com)

**6** The 20-mile stretch of Hwy 30A in South Walton has a multi-use paved path running parallel to it, providing a great way to burn off some of that delicious food and take in the scenery. There are also miles of trails to hike or bike in the Point Washington State Forest. Bring your own bikes, or for rentals, sales, trail maps, or full-service repairs, give the guys a call at **Big Daddy's Bikes and**

**Beach Sports**, located in Blue Mountain Beach. Free local delivery. [www.bigdaddysrentals.com](http://www.bigdaddysrentals.com)

**7** Looking for a relaxing massage, organic groceries, home-made soaps, a tasty smoothie, or just a friendly welcome? **For the Health of It**, located in Blue Mountain Beach, has it all. Locally-owned and operated, this store is one of the best treats around. It's like a little Asheville at the beach. [www.ShopForTheHealthOfIt.com](http://www.ShopForTheHealthOfIt.com)

**8** After Hurricane Katrina tracked through New Orleans, the owners of the New Orleans restaurant, **Fire**, moved to South Walton, and many of their staff also followed. They reopened **Fire**, just north of Grayton Beach. Sunday brunch is a favorite of many locals, and I'm positive that it has nothing to do with the bottomless glass of champagne that comes with the meal! [www.RestaurantFire.com](http://www.RestaurantFire.com)

**9** **Raw and Juicy**, located directly on Hwy 30A in Seaside, is a great source of some of the best fresh organic juices and smoothies and delicious raw foods made to order while you wait. You will begin to feel healthier just waiting in line. Look for the small silver Airstream trailer near the Post Office overlooking the amphitheater.

**10** If you are looking for that intimate evening and a great dining experience, make your dinner reservations at **Café Tango**. I have too many good things to say about this place, and not enough room to write them all. I will guarantee you that you will remember Café Tango long after you leave the beach. Reservations strongly encouraged. Located near Blue Mountain Beach just off of 30A on 14 Vicki Street. 850.267.0054 🌿

For 10 more hidden beach gems you don't want to miss this year, visit [thicketmag.com](http://thicketmag.com)

# go west

Don't miss the communities west of Grayton on Florida's Highway 30A.

**SO, WE'RE GRAYTON PEOPLE.** ACTUALLY WE'RE GRAYTON-TO-SEAGROVE PEOPLE, MOSTLY. OUR BEACH TRIPS USUALLY INVOLVE A REGULAR BACK-AND-FORTH ALONG 30A BETWEEN THOSE COMMUNITIES, WITH FREQUENT STOPS AT WATERCOLOR (FISH OUT OF WATER, WESTERN LAKE), SEASIDE (BUD & ALLEYS, GELATO, SUN DOG BOOKS), SEAGROVE (BREAKFAST, GROCERIES), AND OF COURSE OCCASIONAL FORAYS INTO ALYS BEACH AND ROSEMARY AND REGULAR STOPS AT HIBISCUS CAFÉ, GRAYTON MARKET, AND RED BAR (NOW SERVING BREAKFAST!) AT OUR HOME BASE.



A bit tricky at first, Yolo boarding is easy enough that even a young child can master it. It's a great workout and a great way to tour the area wetlands.

But we recently were invited by friends to spend the weekend down at Redfish Village in Santa Rosa, and our eyes were opened to the quiet charm of 30A's westernmost neighborhoods. Clearly, we have been missing out.

Our weekend was a quiet one, taking place in the late fall rather than during peak season. But I like the shoulder seasons better, anyway. Spring and fall mean fewer crowds, less heat, and yards and yards of open beach interrupted only by the occasional walkers or fishermen. We stayed in a beautiful unit at Redfish Village that was ideal for our family—as was the heated pool, shaded playground, neighborhood coffee shop (PJ's Coffee Shop of New Orleans—with a great Cajun breakfast sandwich), and boardwalk out onto Redfish Lake. The kids were happy as clams. There was a grassy lawn (where we roasted s'mores on a chilly evening). There were bikes to rent. We were across the street from the beach. It was pretty perfect.

## EXPANDING HORIZONS

In addition to staying in a community that we'd never visited before, we also did lots of things we'd never done before. Top on my list was **Yolo Boarding on Western Lake** with guide Tom Losee. Yolo stands for You Only Live Once, and although the concept is simple enough (it's like a wide surfboard you stand or kneel on and paddle), the experience is pretty amazing. A bit tricky to manage at first, Yolo boarding is very easy once you get the hang of it, and the boards allow you to get back into the wetlands and creeks feeding the area's beautiful dune lakes. It's quiet, it can be done with a group or alone, and it teaches you a new skill. My seven-year-old son even mastered it. For more information, visit [www.yoloboard.com](http://www.yoloboard.com).

New for us this holiday was also seeing more of the area by

bike. My older son went with his dad on a guided mountain bike ride through **Point Washington State Park** with naturalist Christian Wagley, while I took my own ride—with the toddler in the trailer—down the pathway running parallel to 30A. We headed down to Grayton Corners for a snack and returned for a nap while the other two learned all about the rich ecosystem of Point Washington. I don't know that I'll travel by car as much anymore. There's just too much to see.

## EXPANDING PALATES

We also enjoyed a few phenomenal meals, including sushi—yes, sushi—at Basmati's, a wonderful, small Asian restaurant in Dune Allen. After all, if you're going to eat fresh fish, why not Gulf fresh nigiri? It was a nice break from the same-old same-old you get at many area restaurants (platter of something, basket of something).

Phillip McDonald, a Destin native and local chef with a deep resumé (including stints at Fish Out of Water and Criolla's), has begun a personal chef service called **Table Five**, and he prepared a delicious autumn dinner for a few families in the Redfish Village library. Crabcakes and champagne for appetizers and seafood stew with a spicy mixed-greens salad for dinner was festive and warming during our Thanksgiving-week stay. Phillip paired a robust red wine with the meal and answered all of our questions about the food (all local) with charm. It's a great service for groups sharing a house this spring or summer—he'll customize the menu for you and do all the cooking in your own kitchen while you relax. For more information and menus, visit [www.tablefivechef.com](http://www.tablefivechef.com).

My family learned a lesson this year—we need to head west to experience more of the beautiful communities and ecosystems of the South Walton region. I encourage you to do the same. 🌿

BY ANN WILLIAMS  
PHOTO BY MURRAY BALKCOM

# deep sea drama

Head out to open water for the thrill of saltwater fishing.

STORY AND PHOTO BY ALAN CLEMONS

**WHETHER THE TIDE IS MOVING IN OR OUT, DOESN'T MATTER, THE SURGE RUNNING ALONG DIXIE BAR'S EVER-SHIFTING SANDBAR WALL CREATES CURRENTS THAT CAN STIR THE FISH INTO A FRENZY.**

One moment you may be drifting along on the boat, contentedly watching rods in holders. At the end of the line are tantalizing treats for brutish redfish all coppery and muscular. Or perhaps a shark, maybe a speedy jack, either of which will tear through the water with astounding speed.

These treats include smelly artificial baits named Gulp! or Samurai Shad with proprietary fish-attracting molecular con-

struction. Or maybe a colorful plastic cocahoe minnow in shades of chartreuse and avocado and electric chicken. They include live baits, too, which dart too and fro as you drift or bob at anchor.

Then, a bite. A thump. The rod bends, the line goes taut, the reel begins its give-and-take as you set the hook once, twice, and hang on. Your legs quiver, your body sways with the ebb and flow of the boat, your mind races with anticipation and hope that you



Reeling in a redfish on the deep side of the Gulf's Dixie Bar sandbar is an experience you'll never forget, long after you're back on dry land.

don't do something stupid to lose whatever tantalizes you submerged under the salty wash.

It could be a few moments, depending on how the captain runs the boat and your angling skills. It could be longer, perhaps an hour with a big fish, as you play it carefully with encouragement from buddies. Soon, a glimpse of copper or gray at boat side...a net goes in and you guide it to capture.

Photos and smiles. Memories

that won't go away, even years from now when that snapshot gathers dust on the bookshelf or is lost in an iPhoto folder. You remove the hook, the fish slaps a briny goodbye with its tail, and you make plans to return to the spot for chance with another Gulf critter that likes what you're offering.

For information on fishing at the Gulf, contact Capt. Bobby Abruscato at [www.ateamfishing.com](http://www.ateamfishing.com) or visit [www.gulfshores.com](http://www.gulfshores.com). 🌿



Twelve miles from the last stoplight, things change. The sky is brighter, the sand warmer. A village and a club, where every wish can be followed footstep by footstep, hand in hand.

Get a little farther away this time. Connect with a concierge at [www.cometothebeachclub.com](http://www.cometothebeachclub.com) | 866.913.3962

THE *Beach Club*  
GULF SHORES  
Where you've always belonged.