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SPRING 2016 MAGAZINE

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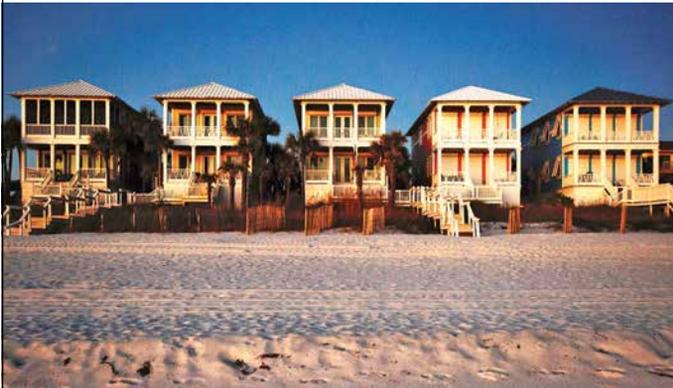
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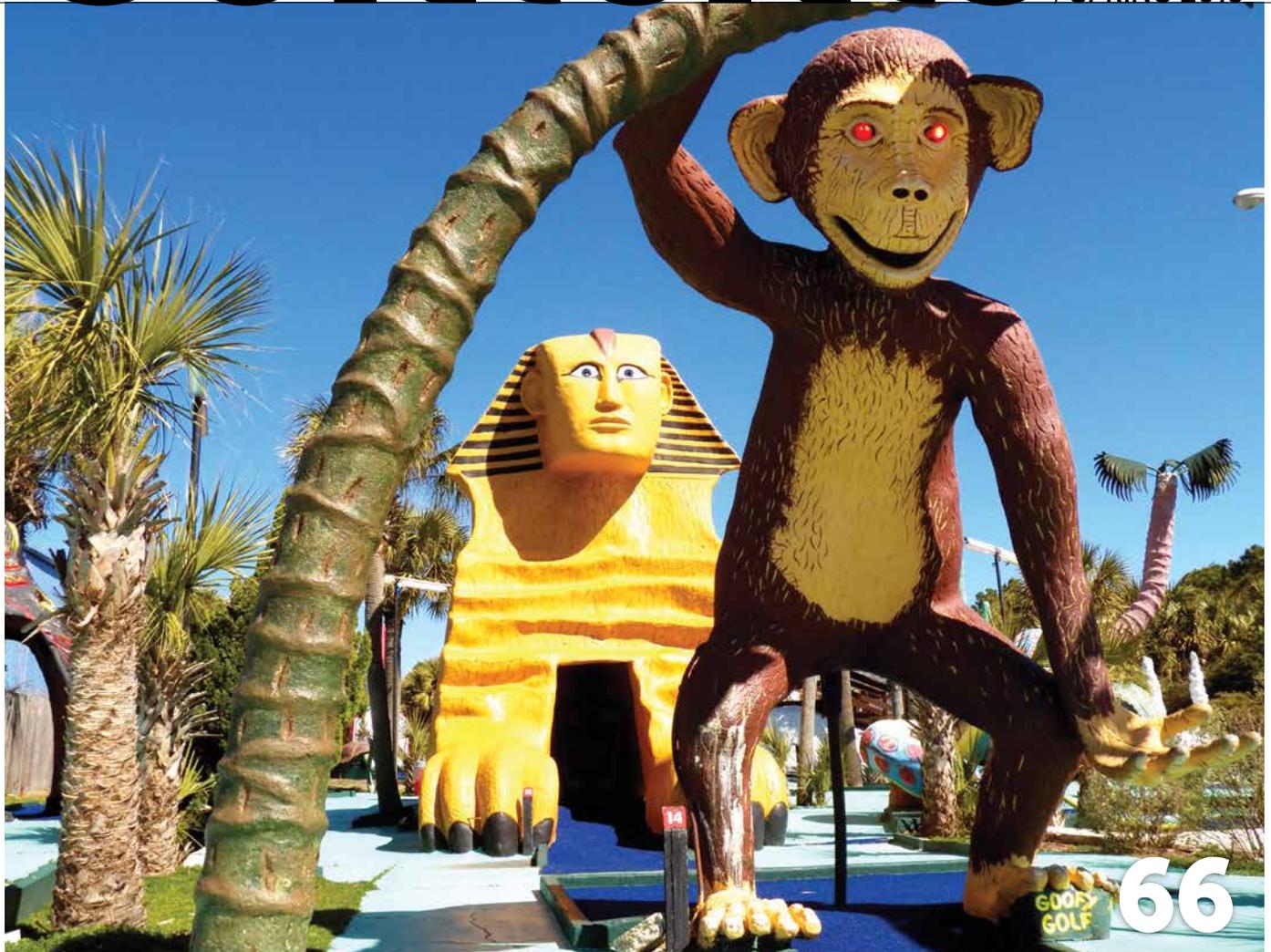
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SPRING INTO BY THE SEA RESORTS!

Contents

SPRING 2016



GOOFY GOLF

FEATURES

52 CAJUN CUISINE

Louisiana restaurateurs are finding their way to Panama City Beach, and their businesses are thriving. Find where these famous Cajun flavors meet the beach.

58 FISHING FROM THE WATER'S EDGE

Catching a scrumptious seafood dinner doesn't require a trip offshore. Whiting, pompano and redfish lie within casting distance of the sand.

62 A LITTLE BERTIE

For decades, Bertie Reynolds has dispensed valuable advice to visitors as the senior-most employee of the Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce.

66 JUST PUTTING AROUND

Panama City Beach is home to miniature golf courses both historic and cutting edge. For putters of all ages, they provide a delightfully "holesome" activity.

68 TRENDING TOWARD TONY

As the demographics of beach visitors changes, the business world adapts. Many new Panama City Beach businesses target affluent consumers.

74 GEOCACHING

Armed with smartphones versus treasure maps, geocachers hit the trails, accumulating points and zeroing in on prizes.

78 THE PERFECT SETTING

Like real estate, a great photo is often about "location, location, location." Meet a man whose job puts him in just the right spot for sunset pics every night.

80 TAMING THE LIONFISH

Off Panama City Beach and all along the Gulf Coast, spearfishers are doing their part to eradicate an unwelcome invasive species, the lionfish.

Contents / SPRING 2016



DEPARTMENTS

SPOTLIGHTS

24 GOLF Veteran duffer and sports writer Pat McCann chooses his Elite 18, a challenging collection of golf holes deemed to be among Panama City Beach's finest.

30 SHOPPING Whether you're on the hunt for chic coastal jewelry, surprising household finds, organic produce or a new addition to your tackle bag — the shops in Panama City Beach have you covered.

32 FISHING Spearfishing requires an angler's knowledge of fish habits and a hunter's game eye. Wrecks off Panama City Beach play host to a variety of targets.

36 ATTRACTIONS Paddlers both seated and standing frequent creeks, rivers and crystal clear springs located just a short drive inland from the beach. Both guided and unguided trips are popular.

40 WATER SPORTS An outing aboard the Paradise Adventures catamaran involves much more than just a boat ride. No matter your preferred activity level while on vacation, there is something for you — and the children.

44 ECO-SPOTLIGHT Learn while walking. Personnel at Camp Helen and St. Andrews state parks and Panama City Beach's Conservation Park make it possible for you to expand your knowledge of North Florida ecosystems while getting some exercise.

48 DIVING SPOTLIGHT Bridge spans that once carried traffic across Bay County's bays now attract marine life, including groupers and barracudas, which in turn attract SCUBA divers.

IN FOCUS

86 EVENTS A spirit of renewal energizes springtime events on Panama City Beach as winter visitors depart for northern climes and a younger crowd arrives.

92 SPORTS Beach volleyball is growing in popularity on Panama City Beach, which enthusiasts say is destined to become a mecca for the sport.

96 UNDISCOVERED PCB After serving for 28 years in the Air Force, Paul "Buster" Busuttill now serves up beer and bait in the Aloha Village, a collection of shops he's opening in the Grand Lagoon area of Panama City Beach.

98 FOOD Among Panama City Beach's iconic restaurants is one marked by a 20,000-pound steer dubbed Gus. At Angelo's Steak Pit, both the food and the atmosphere make for a memorable experience.

EVERY ISSUE

16 AREA MAP

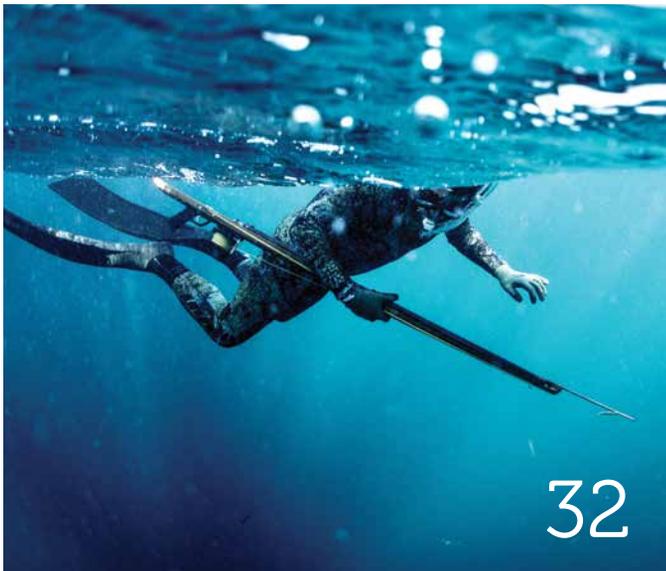
18 FISH

21 BIRDS

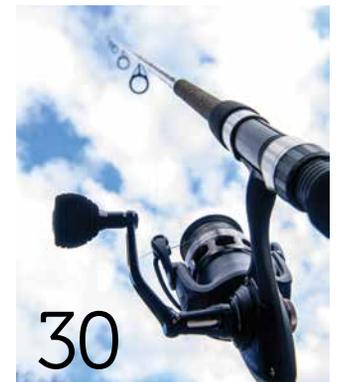
23 SHELLS

103 BEACH SAFETY

105 BEACH ETIQUETTE



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What's your favorite spring activity or event?

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Fishing the flats for redfish and trout with my son. — **Chip Seal**



Listening to music at the Seabreeze Jazz Festival. — **Barrie Ainslie**

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Admiring the efforts of the dedicated athletes in the Gulf Coast Triathlon. — **Shruti Shah**



Enjoying the sights and scents along the Conservation Park's trails. — **Sara Goldfarb**



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SPRING IS AN exciting season in Panama City Beach, one when we all seem to want to get outside and do everything at once! As the weather begins to warm, we dip first one toe in the water, then dive in to a whole range of activities, from exciting concerts to just relaxing on the beach.

You'll see that amazing variety of activities on display in this spring issue of Panama City Beach Magazine, and you'll also see the theme of growth and rebirth that we often associate with the spring season. Inside the pages of this issue, you'll learn about new businesses opening in Panama City Beach, as well as the locally famous shops opened by residents who brought a little Cajun flavor to our community when they migrated to the beach from Louisiana.

We're also going to share Miss Bertie's story with you — a longtime local who's worked with the Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce for decades. She's seen the beach grow and takes us on a trip down memory lane.

For those ready to embrace outdoor opportunities, we'll tell you about guided tours available in our local state parks and conservation areas, our new Geocaching GeoTours and showcase one of the many great ways to see Panama City Beach from the water.

This spring is a new day for Panama City Beach, but one thing that won't ever change is our commitment to being a Real. Fun. Beach. all year round.

Sunny regards,

Dan Rowe, President and CEO

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>> LIVE WEBCAM

When you can't be in Panama City Beach, you can still keep an eye on the world's most beautiful beaches thanks to a new high definition webcam mounted on the M.B. Miller Pier. Just go to **VisitPanamaCityBeach.com** to access the webcam, and even take control of the camera for up to 40 seconds at a time!

You can choose from 10 pre-set views to check on the waves and the water, or take a look down our white sandy beaches in either direction.

As an extra treat, you'll be able to save and share images from the webcam, or see a time-lapse replay of the previous day's sunset. Check it out! It's the next best thing to actually getting the sand between your toes.



Even if you can't be here in person, you can catch a glimpse of Panama City Beach from anywhere in the world! Check out the white sand, emerald green water or last night's sunset!

[WATCH LIVE](#)



Visit our website to find out about current beach conditions!

VisitPanamaCityBeach.com/Beaches/Beach-Warning-Flags

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While you're planning, check out the photos that other visitors have already posted. **#RealFunBeach**



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Panama City Beach

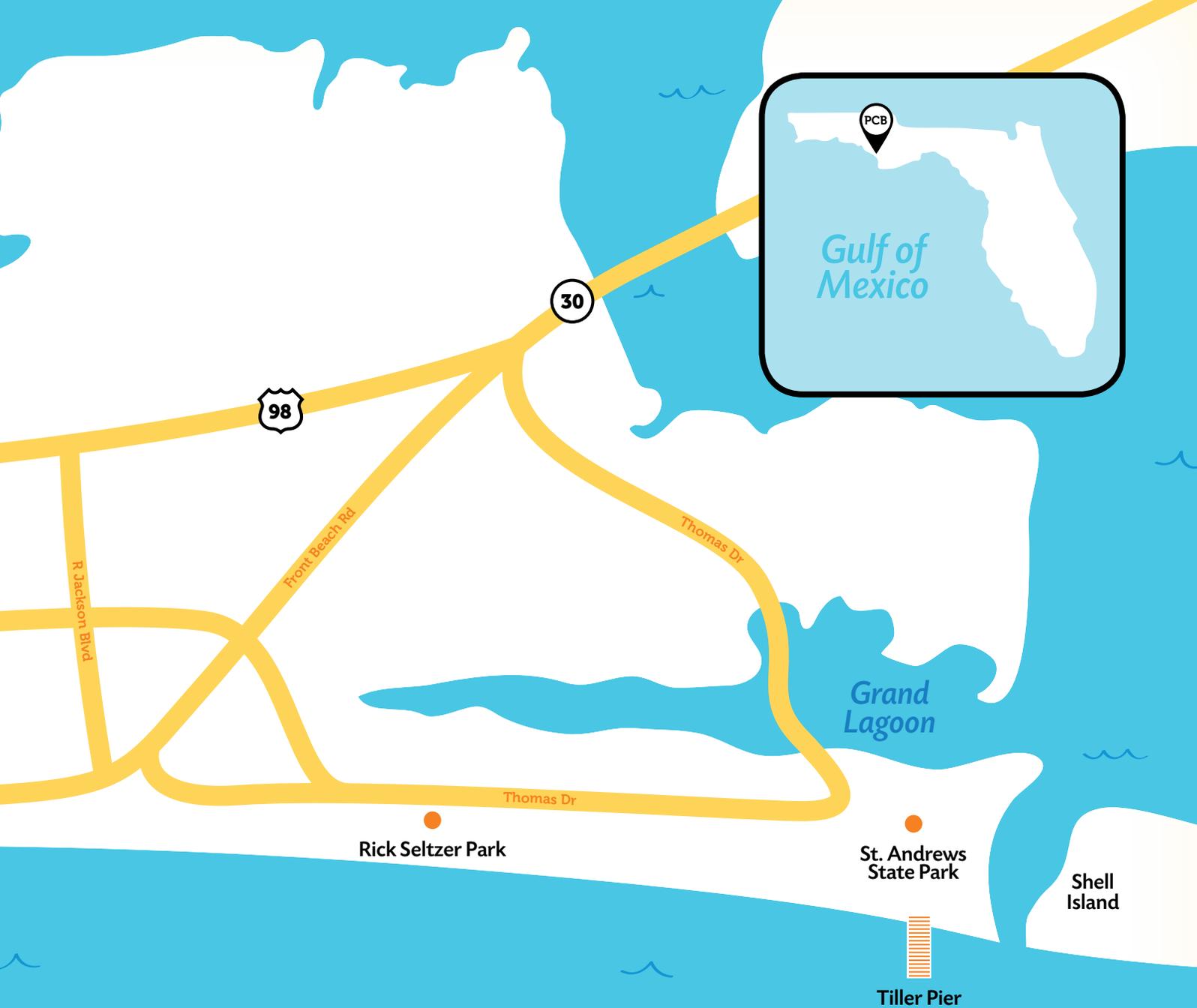
Talk Like a Local

- "Back Beach Road" Panama City Beach Parkway
- "Middle Beach Road" Hutchison Boulevard
- "City Pier" Russell-Fields Pier
- "County Pier" M.B. Miller Pier

**NOT DRAWN TO SCALE

Major Road

Bike Path



Distance Chart

Atlanta, GA	297 mi	470 km
Birmingham, AL	280 mi	440 km
Dallas, TX	751 mi	1,310 km
Houston, TX	639 mi	1,034 km
Montgomery, AL	186 mi	206 km
Nashville, TN	476 mi	744 km
New Orleans, LA	305 mi	513 km
Orlando, FL	340 mi	617 km
St. Louis, MO	745 mi	1,243 km
Tallahassee, FL	98 mi	171 km
Tampa, FL	339 mi	546 km

Exciting Fishing Adventures Await!

WHETHER YOU'RE AN experienced angler, a family ready for the “next big adventure” while on vacation or a father passing on his love of the sport to his children, fishing the waters of Panama City Beach will not disappoint. From the sandy marshes and tidal flats of St. Andrew Bay to the depths where the continental shelf plunges to the ocean floor, our waters abound with a variety of marine life sure to entice the adventurer in you!

Today, pros and amateurs alike continue to catch an array of species, including amberjack, bluefish, cobia, flounder, grouper, king and Spanish mackerel, mahi mahi, marlin, pompano, redfish (or red drum), red snapper, trout, wahoo, sailfish and yellowfin tuna. Two of our premier locations to fish are the Russell-Fields Pier (or City Pier) and the M.B. Miller Pier (County Pier). An admission fee will include a license to fish from that pier for the whole day.

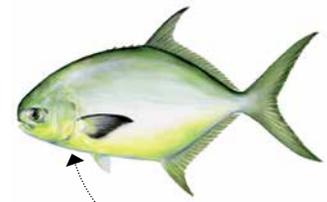
Many locals say that spring and fall are their luckiest seasons, but a knowledgeable angler will be rewarded any day of the year. The cool fall temperatures, for instance, stimulate fish to feed. That's when redfish and trout aggressively go after bait near the top of the water. With pompano and others schooling along the beach, fishing near the shore also improves.

As winter arrives, trout and redfish occupy the deep holes in the bay or seek refuge in

creeks and rivers. Flounder, pompano and cobia, however, swim toward the shoreline for food. The warmer shores, in fact, lure larger fish throughout the cold weather. At the onset of spring, Spanish mackerel, bluefish and cobia can be caught off the piers and in the bay, while trout and redfish populate the grass flats to feed. By summer, deepwater fishing rebounds with wahoo, yellowfin tuna, sailfish and marlin. The season for red snapper, abundant and prized in the Gulf, begins at the first of June. Redfish and trout are more likely to bite in the bay during the early mornings or evenings of summer.

For trolling and bottom-fishing offshore, deep-sea excursions range from private crew charters on luxury yachts to large group experiences on party boats. Small boat rentals are also available. For pier fishing, public sites include the Russell-Fields Pier (City Pier), the M.B. Miller Pier (County Pier) and Tiller Pier in St. Andrews State Park.

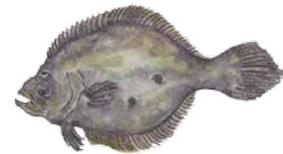
Information and resources for fishing expeditions are available from the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau website at visitpanamacitybeach.com under Ecotourism. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission publishes fishing regulations and license applications online at myfwc.com, and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council posts federal and state regulations on their website at gulfcouncil.org. Find additional information on fishing and charters at visitpanamacitybeach.com/things-to-do/fishing-charters.



Pompano



Redfish



Flounder



Mahi Mahi



Grouper



Cobia



Red Snapper



King Mackerel



Sea Trout

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The Best Birding, Naturally

NATURE ENTHUSIASTS have much to explore in and around Panama City Beach. Birding is a hobby that is growing in popularity on the Gulf Coast, and with our diverse ecosystems of coastal dunes, salt marshes and freshwater wetlands, a wide variety of birds can be viewed in their natural habitat.

The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail (GFBWT) is a program of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission designed to conserve and enhance Florida's wildlife habitats by promoting birding and wildlife-viewing activities and conservation education. At its core is a network of nearly 500 sites throughout Florida selected for their excellent bird-watching, wildlife-viewing or educational opportunities. Miles of this self-guided trail run right through the Panama City Beach area.

St. Andrews State Park is featured on the GFBWT. Lush nature trails wind through the park, providing an excellent opportunity for birding. Or, take a kayak out and explore the coast for a more unique vantage point. Also, from

St. Andrews State Park you can take a boat tour to Shell Island, a 700-acre island populated with a variety of wild birds, including pelicans, sandpipers, gulls, egrets and snowy plovers.

Camp Helen State Park, another site on the trail, boasts a wide array of bird-watching opportunities. There is no end to what the attentive bird-watcher will see at Camp Helen since it is bordered by water on three sides: by the Gulf of Mexico to the south and Lake Powell — one of the largest coastal dune lakes in the world — to the east and north.

The Panama City Beach Conservation Park was born from a desire to protect and balance our natural resources while providing outdoor recreational opportunities. Twelve trails, ranging from just over half a mile to 11 miles, provide endless opportunities, so bring your binoculars and camera and enjoy a day in nature!

For more information on birding in the Panama City Beach area please visit: BayCountyAudubon.org and FloridaBirdingTrail.com.



Bald Eagle



Brown Pelican



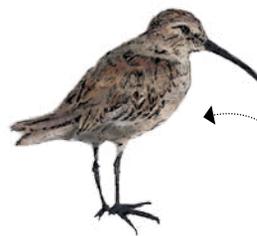
Osprey



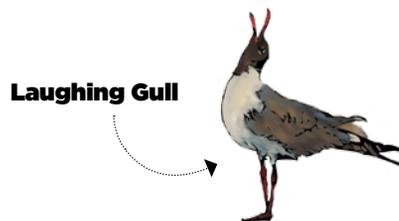
Red-Shouldered Hawk



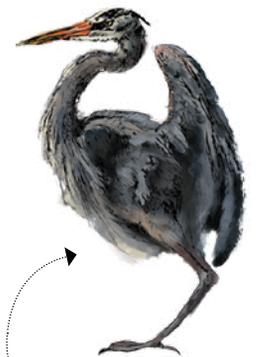
Sandpiper



Dunlin



Laughing Gull



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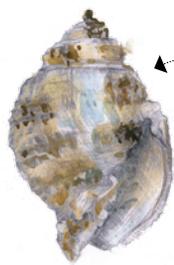
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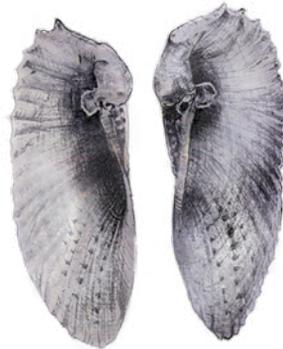
Discover Seashells by the Seashore

DISPLAYED ON WINDOW SILLS, end tables and bathroom shelves all over the world are samples of nature’s handiwork plucked from the sugar sands of Panama City Beach and the bay bottoms and nearshore waters of Bay County’s Gulf Coast. Anyone who says they will stop for nothing surely hasn’t walked anywhere between St. Andrews State Park and Camp Helen the day after a heavy surf deposits sand dollars and the latest raft of seashells on the

sand. Shells can be found along the entire 27-mile length of Panama City Beach — make sure you pack a mesh bag along with your towels and sunscreen whenever you hit the sand — and especially on the uninhabited and aptly named Shell Island, accessible by shuttle boat from the state park. Serious collectors gather their most spectacular shells while snorkeling or diving. The species below represent a sampling of those that are indigenous to our area.



**Common
Nutmeg**



Angel Wing



Alphabet Cone



True Tulip



Lion's Paw



**Atlantic
Giant
Cockle**

Calico Scallop



**Lightning
Whelk**



**Florida
Fighting
Conch**



A Mecca for Golfers

FOR THE SERIOUS

GOLFER — or the lucky beginner — there could be no Panama City Beach souvenir more precious than a golf ball retrieved after it rattles the flagstick and drops into the cup for a hole-in-one. Courses here offer easy-to-reach par 3s that make just such an achievement possible. There are plenty of driving holes, too, that will tempt you to take the big stick out of the bag. And, hey, if your sand wedge is a little rusty, there's no better way to sharpen your sand play than to practice at the beach before hitting the links. Panama City Beach's eight-course golf menu includes:

BAY POINT, offering two layouts, the only Nicklaus Design course in the region and a more subtle Walter Byrd layout.

HOLIDAY GOLF, home to both a regulation 18-hole layout and a lighted par-3 executive course.

HOMBRE, three courses each provide a distinctive challenge and lots of water.

SIGNAL HILL, delivering a varied 18 holes, open on the front side, but dicier on the back.

Panama City Beach's best 18 golf holes offer scenic challenges

Linked, they add up to a dream round

BY PAT MCCANN

IT DOESN'T TAKE A FICTIONAL

Roy McAvoy staring down his destiny to create a memorable golf hole.

Some are distinctive because they are feisty and have withstood the test of time, such as the par-4 Road Hole on the Old Course at St. Andrews.

Others, such as the tricky par-3 No. 12 at Augusta National, are devilish in the acumen and steel they demand from those seeking to wear a green jacket.

The par-5 No. 16 on "The Monster" at Firestone is legendary for its length, enough said. The panoramic ocean holes at Pebble Beach are prominent given their natural majesty.

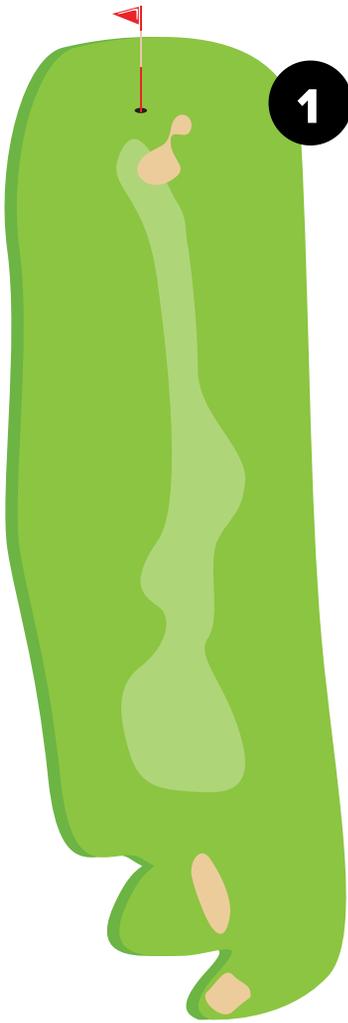
And some golf holes, including those listed here as part of an "Elite 18" selected from courses in Panama City Beach, follow the lead of those legendary, larger-than-life holes and dominate conversations after the bags are put up and the beverages poured.

Our list comprises holes found at the Hombre Golf Club, Holiday Golf Club, Shark's Tooth, Signal Hill Golf Course and the Nicklaus and Club Meadows layouts at Bay Point.

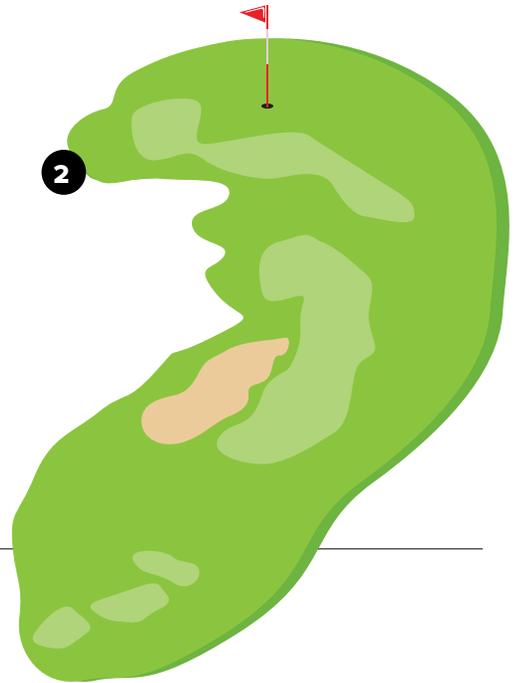


Some might argue for other holes, feeling that they are especially noteworthy and memorable for the way they complement the natural beauty of the area, but in the opinion of club professionals, directors of golf and some of the regular folks who just enjoy a long walk spoiled, these holes equate to a dream round of golf in Panama City Beach. All yardages are from the tips, and the Hombre holes mentioned are on the "Bad" and "Ugly" nines. ●

IN COMBINATION, THE ELITE 18 PLAY TO A PAR 71.



HOMBRE, THE BAD, 1,
575-YARD, PAR 5
The starting hole is the longest hole on the course. If you decide to lay up your second shot on this par 5, good luck. It has one of the tightest landing areas on the entire course.



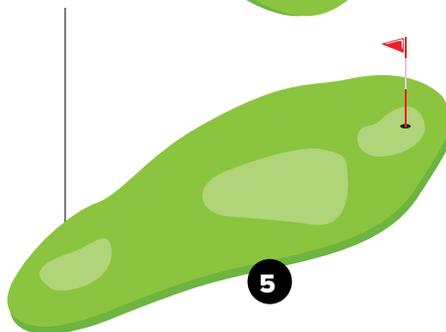
SHARK'S TOOTH 6,
526-YARD, PAR 5
The No. 1 handicap hole borders Lake Powell on the left and features a continuous bunker framing the left side. The drive has to carry a natural preserve for a decent approach. The entire back of the green abuts a corner of the lake and provides a spectacular setting.



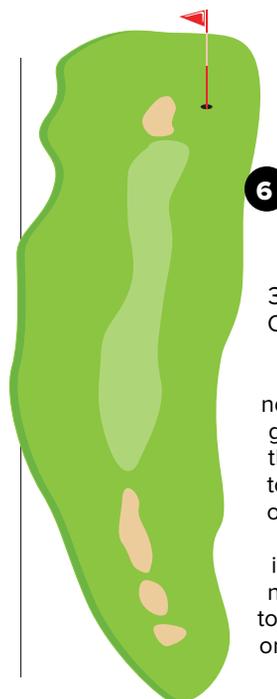
NICKLAUS 5,
398-YARD, PAR 4
The most scenic par 4 on the layout with a view of St. Andrew Bay. It is a target golf hole as you hit across the marsh to an island fairway, then back across the marsh to the green.



SHARK'S TOOTH 5,
231-YARD, PAR 3
This long par 3 plays to a two-tiered green that is more than 5,000 square feet in size. It requires a shot over a natural preserve and it borders Lake Powell, a scenic natural feature that accents their round.



HOLIDAY 4,
195-YARD, PAR 3
The four-section green is huge and offers a variety of pin placements. Because the green was moved during a recent course renovation, a creek now comes into play on the right.



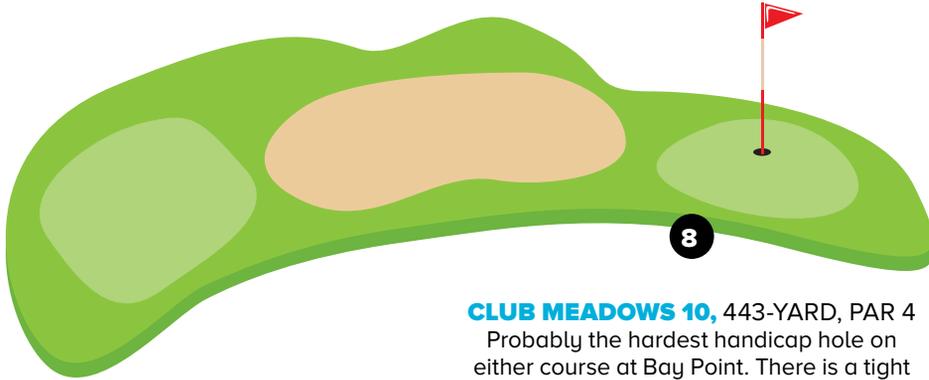
HOMBRE, THE BAD, 5,
363-YARD, PAR 4
One of the shorter par 4s on the course, with a narrow three-tiered green guarded by three bunkers. Try to take advantage of the short length of this hole, and it can go from the ninth hardest hole to the toughest hole on the course in the blink of an eye.

NICKLAUS 12, 522-yard, par 5

This hole gives the player an option whether to go to the high side of the fairway or low side. The high-side option gives you a shorter second shot, but beware the drive to get there is a big carry and a slight miscalculation results in time spent trapped in one of the multiple fairway bunkers.

7

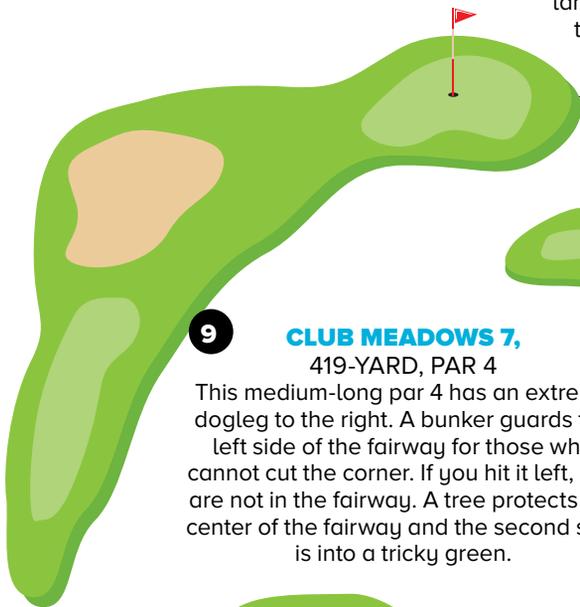
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8

CLUB MEADOWS 10, 443-YARD, PAR 4

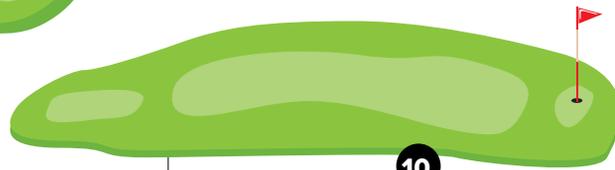
Probably the hardest handicap hole on either course at Bay Point. There is a tight landing area off of the tee and water on the right and trees on the left. Long!



9

CLUB MEADOWS 7, 419-YARD, PAR 4

This medium-long par 4 has an extreme dogleg to the right. A bunker guards the left side of the fairway for those who cannot cut the corner. If you hit it left, you are not in the fairway. A tree protects the center of the fairway and the second shot is into a tricky green.



10

HOLIDAY 12, 383-YARD, PAR 4

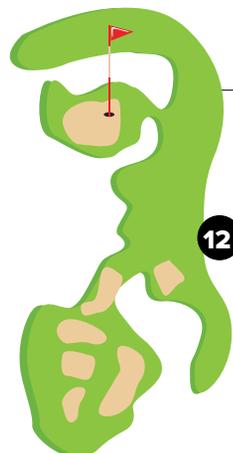
This hole was stretched by moving the green back 25 yards toward the water. Once simple, now not so much. The green is very undulating and guarded by a bunker on the right front.



11

NICKLAUS 10, 168-YARD, PAR 3

Beautiful from the back tee as the player hits over water to a narrow green that is guarded by bunkers. Do not let the short yardage fool you.

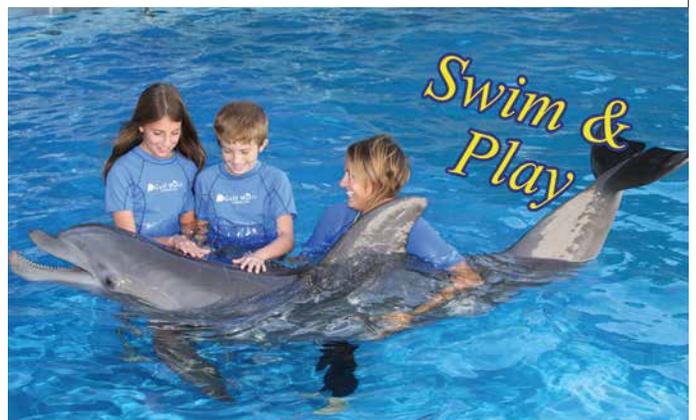
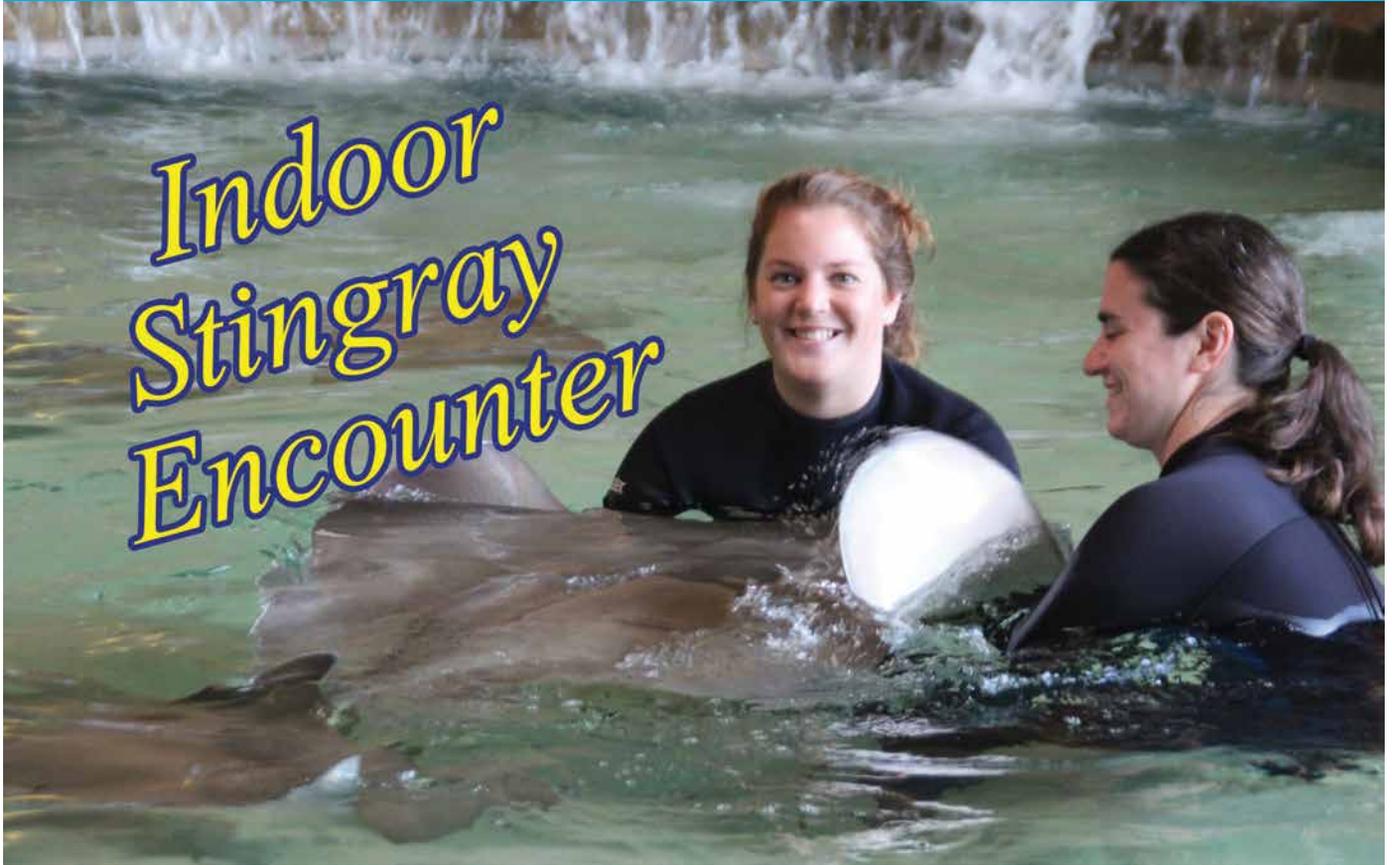


12

HOMBRE, THE BAD, 7, 153-YARD, PAR 3

The hole features an island green, and a lofted club usually is selected for the tee shot on this short hole. Wind always seems to come into play and can have its way with your ball.

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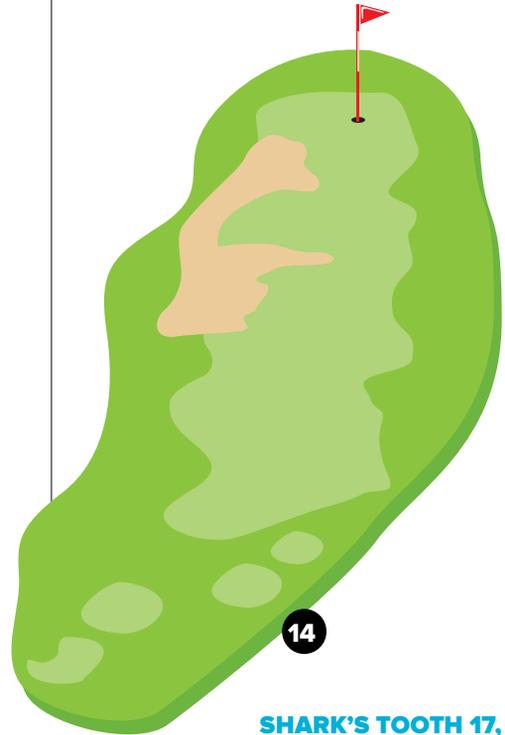
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SHARK'S TOOTH 13,

533-YARD, PAR 5

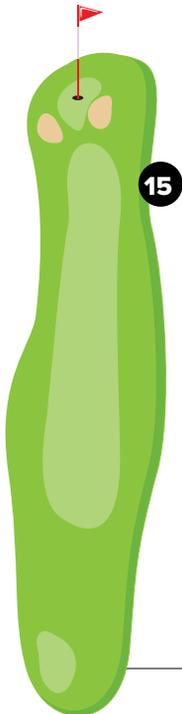
Many consider this the signature hole of the layout as it stretches to the farthest point on the property. It borders Lake Powell all the way down the right side and is framed by woods on the left. The fairway slopes in elevation to a medium-size green with bunkering on the left.



SHARK'S TOOTH 17,

460-YARD, PAR 4

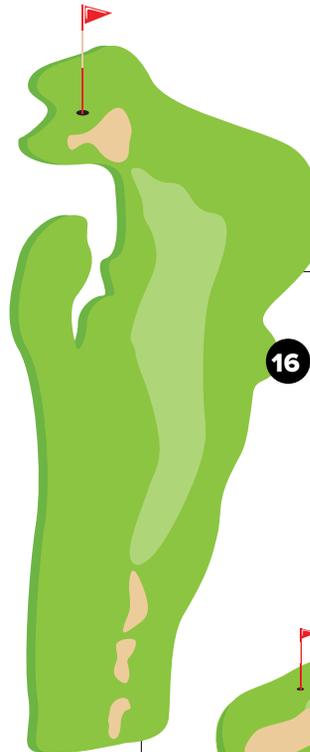
The home hole is not terribly difficult, though bunkered all the way down the right side. The view of the clubhouse, built in wood and stone that matches the natural ambiance, adds to the experience. The green is bunkered on the left and right.



HOLIDAY 14,

412-YARD, PAR 4

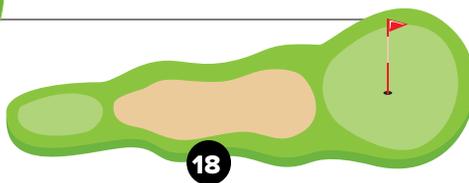
A picturesque par 4 with brand new tees offers a relatively open drive, though tighter than the previous layout. Those who favor the left side must be aware of a creek running along that stretch, and a large tree comes into play. The creek also borders the back of the green, which is multi-tiered and guarded by two new bunkers. It is for sure a second-shot hole and is the No. 2 handicap hole for men.



HOMBRE, THE BAD, 18,

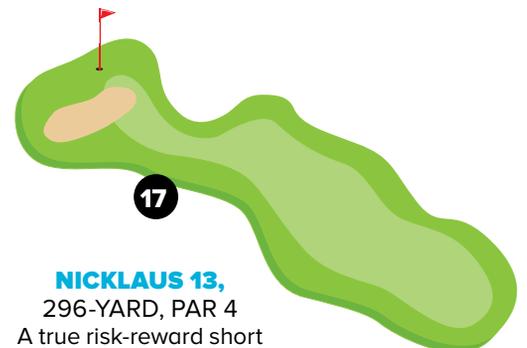
421-YARD, PAR 4

An excellent finishing hole, though not overly long. It has a forced carry over water to a small area of the green, if the hole is cut in the "Sunday" position.



SIGNAL HILL 16, 161-YARD, PAR 3

This hole provides a scenic view of both the golf course and the surrounding area. The challenge is a green framed by vegetation with danger awaiting in all directions for a shot that wanders far offline. The green rests on the highest elevation point of the golf course, with anything short and right sure to collect at the bottom of a daunting incline.



NICKLAUS 13,

296-YARD, PAR 4

A true risk-reward short par 4. Do you go for the green or lay up? Is the risk worth the reward?



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GEAR UP FOR SPRING

TAKE A BREAK FROM THE SUN and enjoy a little retail therapy in Panama City Beach's wide selection of shopping venues, from beachside boutiques to retail giants to the mom-and-pop shops that dot Pier Park — an open-air shopping, dining and entertainment destination that delights with its Key West-inspired colors and Old Florida architecture. There are plenty of places to find that perfect souvenir, beachy knick-knack or surf-inspired gift. The Beach House Market alone houses more than 20 vendors under one roof. Specialty shops throughout the beach will help you find that perfect piece of jewelry or clothing that will remind you of your beach vacation long after you've shaken the last piece of sand out of your shoes.



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Whether you're shopping for the perfect hostess gift to bring your new Panama City Beach pal or just want to add a splash of the good life to your at-home spa, quality hand soaps and lotions are a luxury worth having. At Dinah's Coastal Furniture & Boutique, visitors will find treasures both big and small (and for every budget!) to help savor their trip to the sea.

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Wild. Root.
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(850) 257-6809



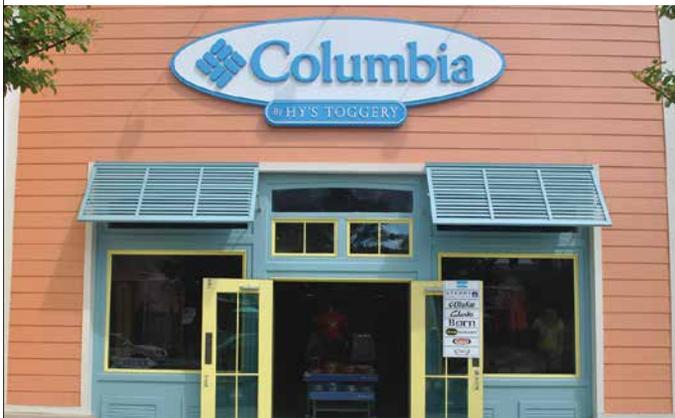
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Go Fish!

**30.1767° N,
85.8056° W.**

THAT'S THE

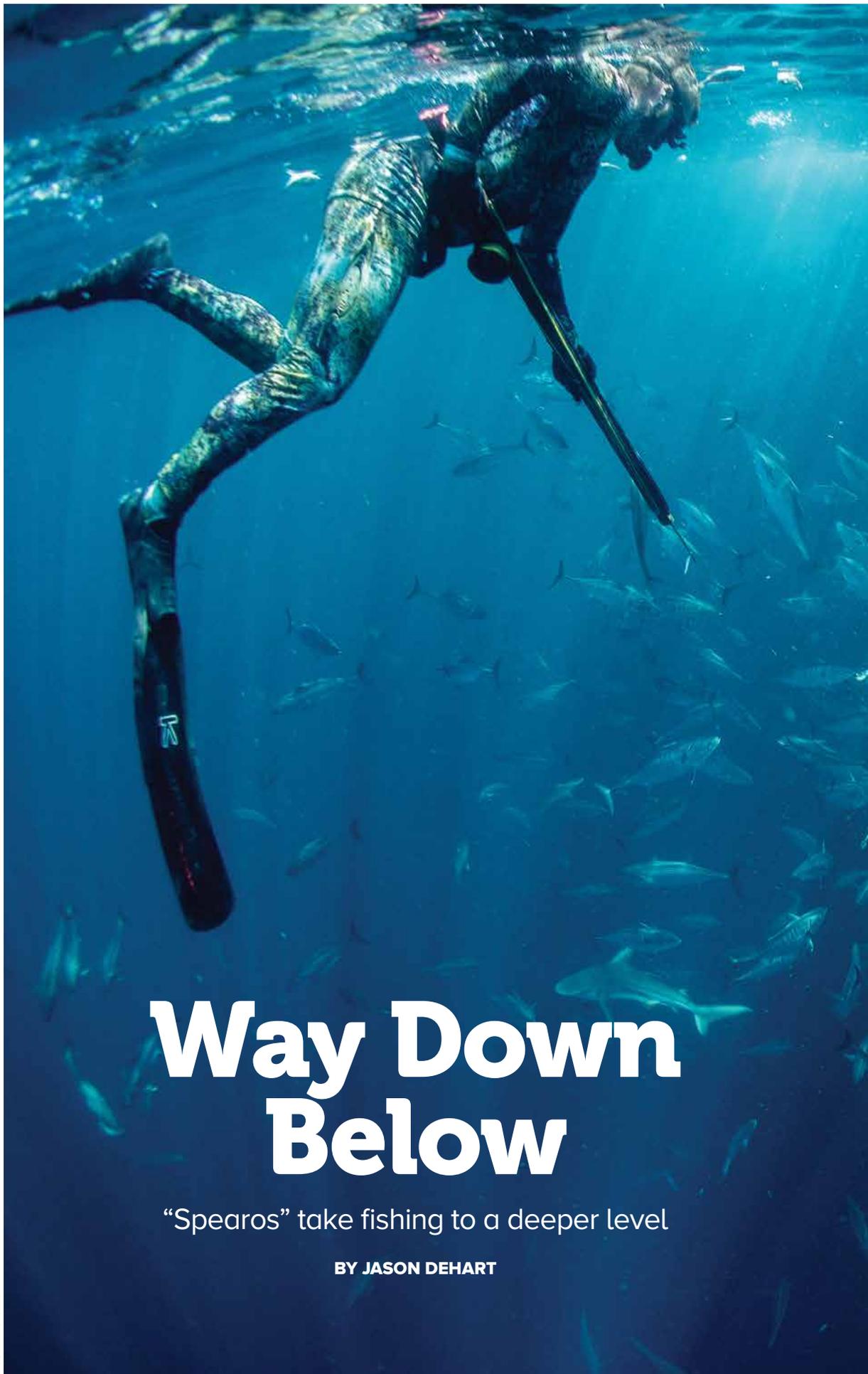
latitude and longitude for Panama City Beach, Florida, a world-class fishing destination with easy access to year-round fishing opportunities.

What do you dream of reeling in? Perhaps you see yourself chasing a big billfish, or reeling a large grouper or snapper up off a shipwreck on the Gulf floor?

In Panama City Beach, you can troll for mackerel, target redfish and tarpon on fly tackle, or just take the kids out for a day on the water to have a good time.

With three public piers on the Gulf of Mexico, lucky spots to fish from shore and countless charters available, Panama City Beach has something to offer every angler. Remember, in Panama City Beach, fishing season lasts all year long.

AUSTIN POWELL



Way Down Below

“Spearos” take fishing to a deeper level

BY JASON DEHART



THERE ARE SUBCULTURES, and then there are “subcultures.” Spearfishing enthusiasts fall in the latter category. Known to call themselves “spearos,” these experienced scuba divers enjoy going deep and testing their skills against fish and crustacean alike.

“There is a thrill and euphoric feeling associated with being face to face with the species of fish or crustacean that you are targeting,” says Aleese Maples, 26, a divemaster, spearo and Emergency First Response instructor for Panama City Diving. “It makes you feel as if you can survive on your own completely if you were put into a situation where you had to. I personally really only enjoy hunting crustaceans due to mainly being a shellfish consumer; although, on occasion I will go after a fish.”

An Indiana transplant, Maples moved to Panama City Beach in 2012 to live the dream that is the local diving scene. Aside from her diving cred, she has her six-pack

captain’s license and knows a thing or two about the water-related activities that the area has to offer. If you’re interested in spearfishing, you’re in luck. Thanks to a successful artificial reef program, the offshore waters are full of potential targets for what she refers to as one of the oldest techniques for gathering and providing food.

But like anything in the modern world, spearfishing has rules and regulations that have to be met before you can venture out into the deep. If you plan on using a spearing charter, check to see what their prerequisites are before booking. For example, Maples says Panama City Diving requires spearfishers to have an Advanced Certification, Nitrox Certification, dive computer and their own personal speargun — which can run between \$100 and \$700, depending on style and configuration.

No fishing license is required on a spearing charter with Panama City Diving.



AUSTIN POWELL

rules and regulations are almost the same as standard fishing regulations and can be found at myfwc.com, the website of the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission.

“Anyone can shoot a fish, but knowledge of the fish is what makes someone a good spearo,” Maples says. She also notes that her company hosts an introduction to spearfishing class for newbies.

Spearfishing can be considered a high-risk sport, mainly because you’re introducing a new element to the scuba experience.

“An individual must properly handle his or her gun at all times. Always have an unloaded gun entering and exiting the water. Pass the gun ‘butt’ first up to the captain or the divemaster on the boat,” she says.

Divers should be mindful of their responsibility to follow the basic rules of diving. They should watch their bottom time, make a safety stop and use a lift bag if they’re concerned about the danger posed by other species. Divers are also urged to use their head and make good judgment calls. Always keep the current in consideration, as well as visibility and other factors. Never be afraid to “call” a dive, because you are the only person who knows your particular diving limits. ●

“We have our Federal Water Permit, which covers all the divers spearing from our boat. Once again, I would double check with the company in advance before booking. Every company is different,” Maples says.

Important things to be familiar with include what you can shoot, size limits and what is in season during your trip. The



A new outdoor show based in Panama City Beach, “Chasin’ The Sun” is all about water-related adventures and aired its first episode in January on the Sportsman Channel. Maples has been picked to cohost the show, which promotes the idea that there is a lot more to do in Panama City Beach than people realize.

“There’s diving, tons of fishing, tons of sailing and all different kinds of watersports,” she says. “Half of the show is with my co-host Justin Leake, and he’s going to show everyone what the fishing is like in Panama City Beach. What I’m doing is the diving, spearfishing, paddleboarding, sea kayaking and some sailing. We want to show people what’s available here.”

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“FUN IN THE SUN” may be one of Panama City Beach’s unofficial mantras, but this booming beach town has a lot more to offer than simply world-class natural amenities. Sure, the miles of pristine coastline are what draw people in. But once visitors arrive in this vacationers’ wonderland, there are a million reasons to stay.

Sightseers in need of a reprieve from the sunshine will have an array of adventures to choose from in Panama City Beach.

On the agenda? Well, for starters how about partaking in a round of mini-golf, getting into a laser tag shootout with loved ones or making friends with a stingray? As a true, All-American seaside retreat, this beach is chock-full of fun attractions.



Paddleboarders Escape to Springs

Pristine beauty is what's SUP

BY TONY BRIDGES



WOW PADDLEBOARDS

WANT TO SPEND YOUR vacation on some of the most spectacular water the Florida Gulf Coast has to offer?

Head inland.

Within a short drive of Panama City Beach lie several of the state’s natural gems: clear, cool, sparkling freshwater springs surrounded by lush forest, including Florida’s iconic cypress trees.

“There are so many little hidden springs around this area,” says Gabriel Gray with Walkin’ on Water Paddleboards.

According to Gray, the springs are less crowded than the beaches but just as beautiful and offer some of the same activities, from snorkeling to paddleboarding and canoeing. If you need



WOW PADDLEBOARDS

Flowing waters beckon canoeists, kayakers

Shuttle service available

someone to show you around, there are guides who can make all the arrangements for your day trip to a nearby spring and even teach you to ride the water like a pro.

That's what Gray does.

He's a firefighter, but during his off-days he offers paddleboarding and kayaking tours of nearby Holmes Creek for groups of up to a dozen at a time. Gray supplies the stand-up paddleboards, lessons on how to use them, snorkeling gear and even lunch for the run up Holmes Creek to the gorgeous Cypress Spring.

You "don't have to worry about bringing anything but sunscreen and water," Gray says.

If you aren't familiar with stand-up paddleboarding, it's simple: You stand facing forward on a board similar to a surfboard and use a long paddle to propel yourself across the water. Gray said it usually takes first-timers about 15 minutes to get accustomed to riding a board, and he's taught everyone from 5-year-olds to nonagenarians.

"It's pretty easy to do," he said.

The Holmes Creek trip starts near the town of Vernon and heads upstream to Cypress Spring. Along the way, there are stops to take photos and look around, and you're liable to spot otters and turtles in the clear water and egrets and blue herons above.

The spring itself is a large cone-shaped pool formed by millions of gallons of cold water gushing up from a vent at the bottom. The cool water offers a welcome respite from summer heat and is knee-deep around the outer edge of the spring. There are rope swings in trees around the spring and handholds for climbing up into the branches and dropping into the water.

(The surrounding land is owned by Nestle, which bottles and sells Florida spring water, but visitors are allowed to use the shoreline.)

Gray said it takes about 30 minutes of "pretty lazy paddling" to reach the spring and about 15 minutes coming back with the current. For those who prefer a canoe or kayak to a stand-up paddleboard,

If you have some experience paddleboarding or canoeing and want to strike out on your own, there are several great springs, creeks and rivers to explore near Panama City Beach.

Econfina Creek is a Florida Designated Paddling Trail that runs 24 miles through the wetlands north of Panama City. The upper portion of the creek is recommended for advanced canoeists only, but the lower seven miles is perfect for beginners looking for a leisurely paddle along a creek dotted with springs.

Econfina Creek Canoe Livery will rent canoes and pick you up at the end of the roughly 3-hour trip down the creek. For more information, go to canoeconfinacreek.net.

Holmes Creek, located northwest of Panama City Beach, also offers an easy, tranquil canoeing trip with more than two dozen springs along its 34 miles from Burnt Sock Landing to the Choctawhatchee River. There are many access points along the creek, so you can customize the length of your trip.

Several of the launches and landings, including Fanning Branch and Hightower Springs, have picnic facilities available, and some have restrooms as well. A canoe livery (like Holmes Creek Canoe Livery, Snaggy Bend Outfitters or Old Cypress Canoe Livery) can provide canoes/kayaks and shuttle service.

Morrison Springs, a public 160-acre park about an hour northwest of Panama City Beach, is another beautiful spot to do some canoeing or paddleboarding. Put in at the boat/canoe launch and paddle down the spring run to the Choctawhatchee River and back.

The park has picnic and restroom facilities and a floating dock for scuba divers, but no canoe rentals, so you'll have to rent elsewhere and drive in.

Meanwhile, if you're up for a trip that's a little further from Panama City Beach, the Chipola River lies about a 90-minute drive to the east. It's a 51-mile Florida Designated Paddling Trail with multiple access points and some limited camping as well. The river takes you past high limestone bluffs and verdant swamplands, with stops at several clear-water springs.



WOW PADDLEBOARDS

“Usually people shy away from that one, but after they go, they’re blown away by it. They’ve never been to a natural spring before. After they do the trip, they tell me it’s the best time they’ve had on their whole vacation. That makes me feel good.” — Gabriel Gray

Gray can make arrangements with local canoe liveries.

The whole Holmes Creek tour takes about five hours, including drive time. That can put some visitors off, Gray says.

“Usually people shy away from that one, but after they go, they’re blown away by it,” he said. “They’ve never been to a natural spring before. After they do the trip, they tell me it’s the best time they’ve had on their whole vacation. That makes me feel good.”

Don’t want to get too far from the beach? Gray also offers sunset paddleboarding tours on the Gulf and paddleboarding tours of Lake Powell, a unique coastal dune lake within sight of the beach.

Because his schedule fills up fast, Gray recommends booking at least one to two weeks in advance. Tours are available March 1–Nov. 1. Specific dates depend on the weather and his firefighter shifts.

For more information, check out WowPaddleboards.com. ●

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Fun on the Water

WHAT'S YOUR WATER SPORT PLEASURE?

IS IT A CRUISE

at sunset, a chance to observe dolphins, or a fishing trip? Are you enticed by SCUBA diving and snorkeling adventures? How about the fast-paced thrills of jet skiing, parasailing and skimboarding? Maybe you'd like the challenge of surfing and kiteboarding, or would be happiest with a peaceful paddle along the coast.

In Panama City Beach, watersports are a way of life and you'll find the equipment, guides and lessons here to experience them to the fullest.

And the fun doesn't stop at the beautiful white sand beaches. The area is loaded with bays, lakes, rivers, bayous, swamps, creeks and lagoons — all waiting for you to explore and enjoy.

Far More Than Just a Boat Ride

Paradise Adventures Catamaran offers multi-faceted Gulf tours

BY HANNAH BURKE

LOCALS AND TOURISTS will agree that the best way to truly and fully experience the beauty of Panama City Beach's emerald coast is to get out on the water — be it through active watersports, scenic boat cruises or a snorkeling voyage.

With each possibility as enticing as the last, choosing just one excursion is no easy feat, which is why one local couple decided to start a business that rolls all those options into one fun trip.

Paradise Adventures Catamaran offers a tour of the Gulf like no other. Berthed at Pirates Cove Marina on Grand Lagoon is the Privateer. Paradise Adventure's 52-foot long catamaran hosts up to 49 passengers for one-of-a-kind sunset, adventure or dolphin-sightseeing cruises.

Owners Donnie and Tracey Coker founded their business in 2013. Inspired by a catamaran cruise they took on their honeymoon in Jamaica, the couple decided to bring the experience to Panama City Beach and add their own twist.

"We've lived in Panama City Beach most of our adult lives. Both Tracey and I have moved around the country for previous jobs, but settled back in Panama City Beach in 2005 after being away for about 10 years. We love taking our kids to the beaches on the weekends and, of course, taking them out on our Adventure Tours," Donnie Coker shares.

They encourage you to bring the whole family aboard, too. While parents enjoy tropical music, the full bar and lounging in the sunshine, children can take advantage of the onboard waterslide, rock-it raft or floating trampolines offered as part of the adventure cruise.



PARADISE ADVENTURES CATAMARAN



PARADISE ADVENTURES CATAMARAN



"It's hard to pinpoint one activity that is more popular than the others. I would say that the banana boat rides seem to be the one activity that stays the busiest throughout the trip," Donnie says of the inflatable yellow float that riders sit atop for a fun (and bumpy) ride as it's pulled by a jet ski.

For those looking for a quieter outing, the Privateer's other cruising options may

"It's hard to pinpoint one activity that is more popular than the others. I would say that the banana boat rides seem to be the one activity that stays the busiest throughout the trip. The inflatable yellow float that riders sit atop for a fun (and bumpy) ride as it's pulled by a jet ski." — Donnie Coker

be ideal. The dolphin sightseeing tour provides an educational, serene sail on the Gulf as guests learn all about the playful dolphins that inhabit the Gulf of Mexico. These marine mammals are also active during Paradise Adventure Catamaran's renowned sunset cruise. Watch them

leap from the sun-kissed waters while you enjoy a beverage with your friends or loved ones aboard the smooth-sailing catamaran.

The Coker duo strives to make Paradise Adventure Catamaran tours distinct from any other attraction in the area.

"We offer a lot of fun options for our guests to enjoy for one low price. When you consider what someone would pay

to rent a paddleboard, kayak or do a banana boat ride, they would spend upwards of \$150 per person. We provide our guests the opportunity to do all of these activities, plus snorkel, visit Shell Island, jump on large water inflatables and do some dolphin

sightseeing for less than \$60 per person — we are all about providing fun at a great value!"

It's not difficult to see that the Coker family is very passionate about their business.

"We definitely feel very blessed to be able to do what we do each day! We work

very hard to make our business successful, and we love having the opportunity to work together. It is always a treat to go to work at a marina every day," the Cokers say.

Their love and enthusiasm for what they do is contagious to all who board the Privateer, leaving guests with an experience that's sure to be a highlight of their waterfront vacation.

Spring breakers looking for up-tempo fun can enjoy the College Spring Break Party Sails offered during the first three weeks of March.

"Our Spring Break Party Sails give our spring break guests an opportunity to do something fun and different when they're visiting Panama City Beach," Donnie says. "Our two-hour sails allow the students a chance to see PCB from the pristine waters of the Gulf of Mexico, listening to music and spending time with friends. Our spring break guests are always very respectful and seem to really enjoy the chance to do something different during their stay. We love our spring breakers!"

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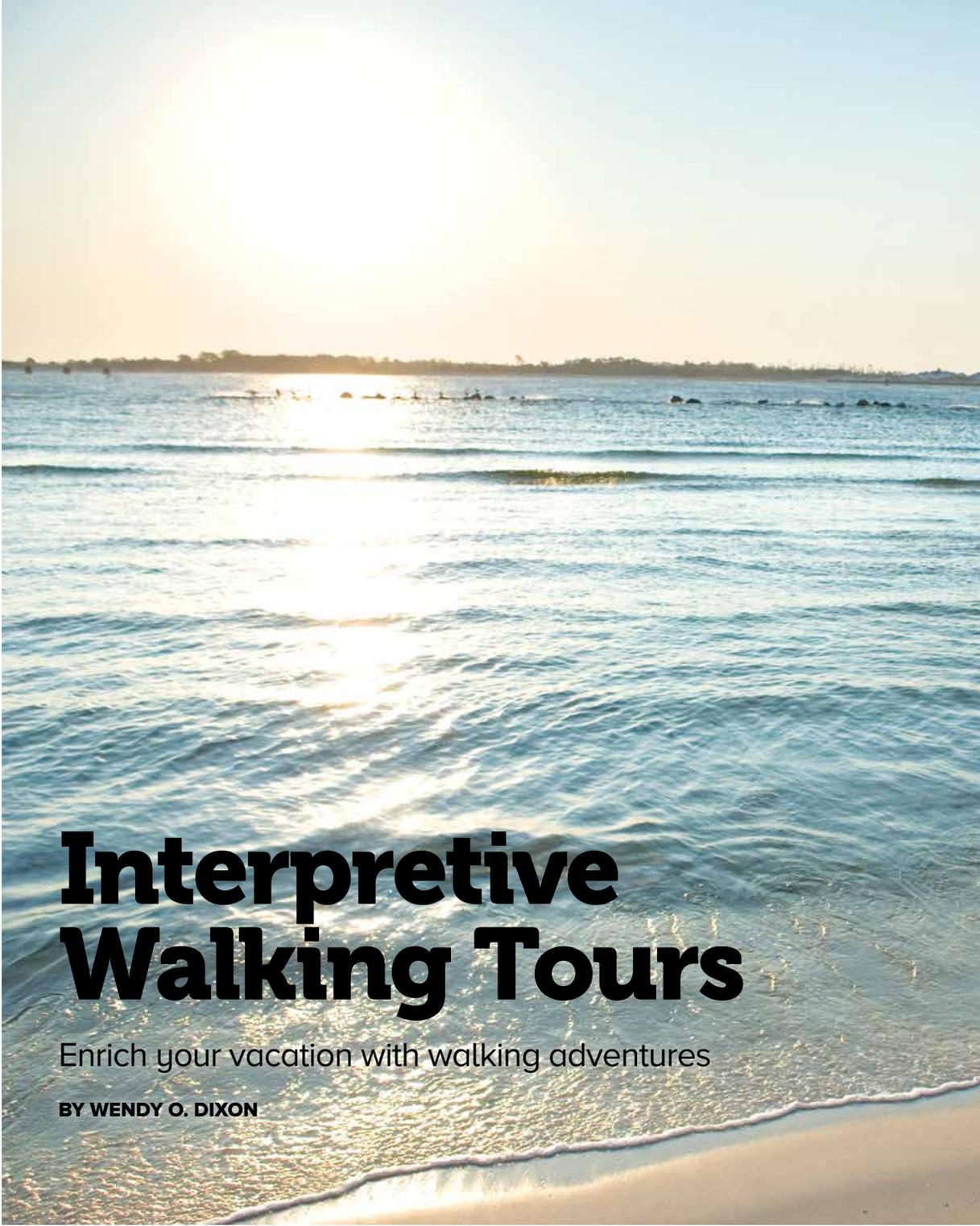
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explore “the last undiscovered Florida coast” and find out firsthand how diverse and rare animal species and plant life make Panama City Beach a nature lover’s wonderland. With 27 miles of beach, a multitude of parks and forests and a 700-acre natural barrier island, eco-tourists have their choice of wonderful adventures, from hiking and biking to kayaking and canoeing. You don’t have to go far to enjoy a swim, look for shells or just log some great bird watching time.



Interpretive Walking Tours

Enrich your vacation with walking adventures

BY WENDY O. DIXON

IF YOU WANT to get more out of your vacation by going beyond the beach, consider taking a walking tour to learn about the area’s diverse ecosystems. Panama City Beach offers a fun vacation experience for nature lovers who want to step off the beach and learn about the indigenous plants and native wildlife that make Florida so special.

Interpretive walks at Camp Helen State Park, St. Andrews State Park and the Panama City Beach Conservation Park serve as a learning experience the whole family will enjoy and offer the best way to discover the variety of animals, trees and flowers in Northwest Florida.

ST. ANDREWS STATE PARK

Located on a peninsula at the eastern edge of Panama City Beach, St. Andrews State Park brings together the best of both on- and off-the-beach activities.

In addition to the pristine beach and emerald water, wilderness lovers and birdwatchers can explore the natural settings by trail, where you’ll see migratory birds, waterfowl, deer, alligators and small animals.

The 1,200-acre park has two trails to choose from: Heron Pond and Gator Lake trails. The Heron Pond Trail takes you on a hike through the flatwood pine forest and past the Turpentine Still. The Gator Lake trail provides a scenic lakeside view of alligators.

ST. ANDREWS STATE PARK



CONSERVATION PARK

Judith Scott, a volunteer naturalist with the park, offers guided interpretive walks on Tuesdays, free with entry into the park.

Scott offers three different kinds of walks:

Who's Eating Who — Scott shows guests common insects used as an alternative protein source. "You can certainly taste the insects," she says. "We also look at the insects that feed on us."

Edible and Medicinal Plants — Learn how early settlers survived using native plants as food and medicine. While it varies from season to season, visitors can expect to taste wild celery and several plants used for seasoning and discover plants used in clothing, pottery and shelter. "We'll learn about the Paleo Indians of thousands of years ago," Scott says, "as well as the modern native settlers, cracker houses, early farming and park development."

The Teddy Tour — Teddy the Hermit was the first known full-time resident of the land now occupied by the park. Norwegian-born sailor Theodore Tollofsen was left homeless when his 26-foot boat was wrecked and cast ashore on the south bank of Grand Lagoon by a hurricane in 1929. Teddy decided to homestead where the remains of his boat had been left, and he remained there for 25 years until his death in 1954 at age 74.

4607 State Park Lane
Admission is \$8 per vehicle
(850) 233-5140
FloridaStateParks.org/park/St-Andrews



CAMP HELEN STATE PARK

PANAMA CITY BEACH CONSERVATION PARK

Located west of the intersection of U.S. 98 and State Road 79 and north of the Panama City Beach Parkway, the Panama City Beach Conservation Park is a vast pine plantation and cypress dome restoration area. With interpretive loop trails ranging in length from 0.5 to 11 miles, the park features nearly 3,000 acres of protected land with mostly level paths, boardwalks, restrooms, picnic areas and outdoor classrooms. A guided map leads visitors along a dozen trail distance possibilities. The park is perfect for families, groups, bird watchers, flora and fauna fans, bicyclers and serious hikers. See if you can spot the various native wildlife roaming freely, including eagles, alligators, woodpeckers, wild boar, whitetail deer, snakes and coyotes.

Part of the city's Conservation Park Project and connected to the Panama City Beach Conservation Park, Gayle's Trails at Frank Brown Park is made up of nine miles of linear paved trails perfect for walking, jogging or biking.

100 Conservation Drive
Admission is free
(850) 233-5045, PCBGov.com

CAMP HELEN STATE PARK

Long before condominiums and multi-million-dollar homes lined the Gulf Coast, Robert and Margaret Hicks purchased 185 acres of land in 1928 to be used as a family summer retreat. After Robert died, Margaret sold it to Avondale Textile Mills, which renamed the park Camp Helen and used it as a resort destination for vacationing employees. It became a state park in 1996 and is now known as Camp Helen State Park. The original family lodge, cabins, water tower and horse stable remain.

Sitting on the western border of Panama City Beach, Camp Helen State Park is an ecological playground for nature lovers of all ages. Lake Powell, located on the park's eastern and northern borders, is one of the largest coastal dune lakes in the state, providing visitors with a unique look at the coast's diverse environment.

The park has a variety of upland, wetland and shoreline vegetation communities. Along with beach access, the park offers fishing areas, interpretive exhibits, three nature trails, biking, picnic areas and wildlife viewing areas, including a nesting area for nine protected species of birds.

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Chasin' the Sun explores the diverse fisheries found in the emerald waters off the coast of Panama City Beach. Hosts Justin Leake (professional guide) and Aleese Maples (dive master) provide an in-depth look at Panama City Beach's irresistible coastal lifestyle, highlighting the region's rich culture and revealing why its popularity as a fishing and diving hot spot and family vacation destination has exploded in recent years.

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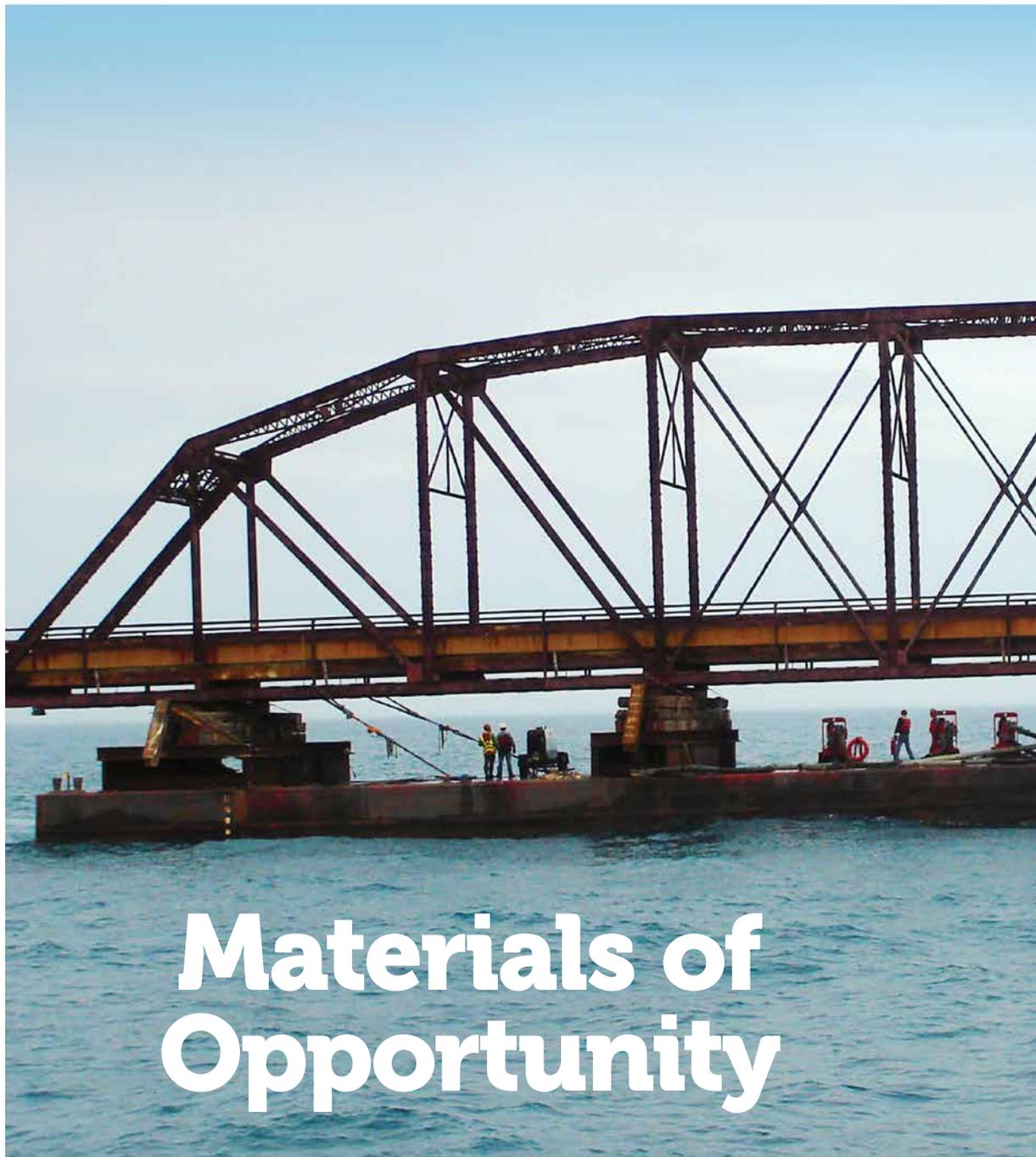
Diving Panama City Beach

THE NUMBER ONE destination for scuba diving in the Southeast is right here, or to be more precise, offshore in the calm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

There are six dive shops in the area and a number of independent dive charters, a testament to the world-class diving that can be found in Panama City Beach.

Artificial reefs, made from decommissioned ships, old bridge spans and other structures give divers from all over the world a chance to see a wide variety of undersea wildlife.

An artificial reef off Panama City Beach is like an oasis in a desert, because this part of the Gulf sea floor is 98 percent sand and the wrecks help attract and support sea life. The wrecks themselves can be found at depths starting at 60 feet and as far down as 110 feet, providing opportunities for novices and experts alike.



Materials of Opportunity

Sunken bridges add depth to the local diving experience

BY JASON DEHART

RECREATIONAL DIVERS ARE flocking like schools of butterfly fish to the submerged bridge spans that have been home to Bay County marine life for decades.

Allen Golden, Bay County's artificial reef coordinator, says there are almost 20 bridge spans off the shore of Panama City Beach.

"Some are flat sections, some are trusses and some of them are like probably 200 feet long and 35 feet high and 50 feet wide," Golden says. On average, they're in about 70 feet of water. "We

build our reefs with at least 50 feet of navigational clearance so it doesn't come into contact with ships in the area."

Notable among the spans are the 14 sections of the old Hathaway Bridge, which were sunk in 1988, and the Dupont Bridge, which was dismantled and turned into an artificial reef in 2008. Golden says there are documents related to artificial reefs dating back to 1978, but in the old days the seafloor here probably saw its share of undocumented material as well. According to



Dupont Bridge span in Large Area Artificial Reef Site A

BAY COUNTY ARTIFICIAL REEF ASSOCIATION

the University of Florida, fishermen used railroad cars, school buses, car bodies and even household appliances to make artificial reefs in the 1950s and 1960s. It wasn't the best situation for the environment, and that's why Bay County now has strict oversight on what goes down.

"We have to have a permitted area before we deploy them. We can't do it at random," Golden says. "We have to remove all paint and asphalt and any hydrocarbons. There's a list of prohibited materials we go by. You have to be careful."

The preferred materials for any artificial reef are concrete and steel, Golden says. The county is able to procure bridge structures via donations from the Florida Department of Transportation.

"The DOT calls them surplus materials that they donate to a local government entity for use as artificial reefs, and once we get them we call them materials of opportunity," Golden says.

Whatever they're called on the surface, on the sea floor they're called "home" by a multitude of marine organisms, including coral, mosses and sponges. These in turn attract turtles and a great variety of fish, Golden says.

"There are all kinds. Amberjack, barracuda, even octopus, starfish, grunts, angelfish are bountiful on those spans, goliath grouper, gag grouper, flounder, it goes on and on," he says. "The bridge spans are tall enough to attract pelagics — wahoo, mackerel, dolphin, cobia and marlin — and fishermen troll across there while divers enjoy the reefs because of the abundance of marine life."

BAY COUNTY ARTIFICIAL REEF ASSOCIATION



F-101 Fighter Jet being Deployed into Small Area Artificial Reef Site C

So far, the artificial reef program has performed well economically, Golden says. “We get about \$134 returned on investment for each dollar we spend on artificial reef construction and deployment.”

Meanwhile, plans are in the works for more of these man-made reefs. Golden says he has a thousand tons of material in storage waiting to be used. This includes concrete pipes, culverts and connection boxes for stormwater drainage.

“That will make a fantastic artificial reef,” he says. There is also a plan to use prefabricated concrete modules embedded with limestone, which allows marine vegetation to “attach” and take root faster, thus speeding up the reef-building process in a generally flat and sandy region.

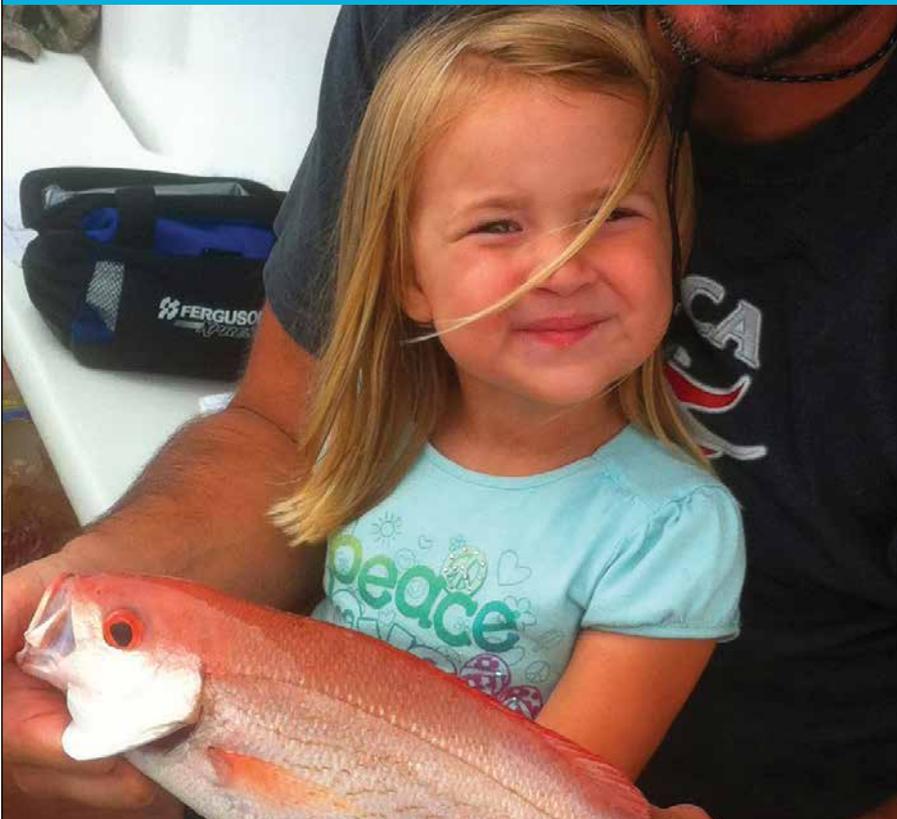
As the success of the reef program grows, it’s only natural that the county would want to collaborate with local stakeholders — the charter boat captains, divers and others that have a business interest in the construction of artificial reefs. Golden says a new organization, the Bay County Artificial Reef Association, is being set up to help participate in the process. The Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association, another local reef-building organization, has deployed 150 artificial reefs since its founding in 1997. ●



BAY COUNTY ARTIFICIAL REEF ASSOCIATION

“We get about \$134 returned on investment for each dollar we spend on artificial reef construction and deployment.” — Allen Golden, Bay County’s Artificial Reef Coordinator

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Cajun Cuisine

LOUISIANA FLAVORS ARE RIGHT AT HOME IN PANAMA CITY BEACH

STORY BY ROSANNE DUNKELBERGER // PHOTOS BY HOLLY GARDNER

Gumbo, jambalaya, etouffee, boudin and andouille. Just hearing the French words perk up the taste buds and conjure up visions of something exotic and deliciously unique — Creole and Cajun food.

Panama City Beach is now home to no less than five restaurants featuring the Louisiana cuisines that have been around since the 18th century but gained worldwide popularity in the 1980s with the restaurants and cookbooks of the late, famed Chef Paul Prudhomme.

We've taken a tour of the area's cajun/creole restaurants and offer some palate-pleasing possibilities for you to try.

RED RAE'S RESTAURANT

Close your eyes, and the sounds and smells of Red Rae's are sure to transport you to New Orleans. This restaurant, located in a shopping center on Back Beach Road, has a slightly different take on cajun/creole food. "We really specialize more in the breakfast/brunch aspect of the Cajun scene, which is nonexistent here" but in New Orleans there are restaurants devoted to just breakfast and lunch, says Sarah Evanko, half of the couple that owns Red Rae's. The walls of the restaurant are covered with local art, most of it for sale.

"We try to get as many Louisiana-based products as we can," says Evanko. "Gambino's bread, Community Coffee, Camellia red beans and Cajun Country Jasmine Rice grown by the LSU agricultural center somewhere in Louisiana."

The Food: Chef Tim Burke whips up waffle batter from scratch daily. You can't go wrong with the Sweet Potato Waffle served with candied bacon. The Bayou Breakfast is NOLA on a plate. Homemade jalapeno cheddar cornbread is topped with boudin cakes and fried eggs smothered in Cajun andouille gravy, with a side of Cajun potatoes.

Having a hard time deciding which dish to eat? Try the sampler. You'll get a taste of red beans and rice; chicken, sausage and shrimp jambalaya; and chipotle gouda grits topped with blackened shrimp (they are a bit spicy.)

While shrimp and oyster po' boy sandwiches are a staple, true Louisianans are also fond of the beef version of the sandwich. Burton makes his own roast beef and serves it with "debris," a thickened au jus with tasty bits of beef from the bottom of the pot.



When Hurricane Katrina forced Trudy White of Dat Cajun Place out of New Orleans, she brought her family's gumbo recipe with her to Panama City Beach.





BAYOU ON THE BEACH

Dave and Donna Buxton moved to Panama City Beach and opened the area's first Cajun restaurant on the curve of Thomas Drive in 1999. Bayou on the Beach has moved and grown and even went out of business for a few years, but it has settled in nicely at its Middle Beach Road location and is now run by the couple's youngest son and his wife. Rest assured, Donna's favorite recipes and Original Bayou Seasoning are still featured throughout the menu.

The Food: You might just want to make a meal out of two appetizers on the menu. The Boudin Balls

— a “labor of love,” says Chef Stephanie Bishop — are orbs of deliciousness made of pork and rice, the Holy Trinity and spices. Unimpressed by another restaurant's tossed-in-sauce shrimp appetizer, Bishop created her own version, called Who Dat Shrimp. The breaded and fried popcorn shrimp are piled high, topped with shredded pepperjack cheese and covered with a tangier sauce that patrons also use as salad dressing or a sauce for chicken, tuna ... even gator!

Donna Buxton crafted a crowd-pleasing Seafood Muffaletta, combining fried shrimp, oysters, fish and crawfish, topped with

homemade olive salad and melted provolone cheese.

Oysters get the royal treatment with Baked Oyster Imperial, as oysters on the half shell are topped with lump crab meat, a four-cheese blend and béarnaise sauce.

One last tip: Bayou on the Beach offers a hook and cook option, meaning that if you bring in your fresh-caught filet, they'll cook it up for you!

DAT CAJUN PLACE

It was an ill wind — named Katrina — that brought Trudy White and her now-husband to Panama City Beach 10 years ago. Their homes in New Orleans were

This page: Bayou on the Beach, in all of its kitschiness, appeals to locals and is a popular gathering spot for winter visitors. **At right:** Displaced New Orleanian Trudy White's Dat Cajun place has evolved from a small sandwich shop to become a 5,000-square-foot eatery.

ruined by the hurricane and, at first, they thought they'd rebuild and return to the Crescent City. Instead, White decided she liked her new home just fine and brought the Louisiana spirit to the beach. Dat Cajun Place started out three and a half years ago as a small sandwich shop. But “my little hobby ... kind of took a turn of its own” she says, and



Red Rae's Restaurant

12011 Panama City Beach Parkway, Panama City Beach
 (850) 249-7858;
 RedRaesPCB.weebly.com
 Open daily at 8 a.m.–5 p.m. Monday–Thursday, 8 a.m.–8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 8 a.m.–3 p.m. Sunday

Bayou on the Beach

11115 Hutchison Boulevard, Panama City Beach
 (850) 249-3478;
 BayouontheBeachcafe.com
 Open at 11 a.m. for lunch and dinner Tuesday–Saturday. Closed Sunday–Monday.

Dee's Hang Out

10440 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach
 (850) 249-4264;
 DeesHangOut.com
 Open daily 11 a.m.–9 p.m. Closed Sundays.

David's Sno-Balls

13913 Panama City Beach Parkway, Panama City Beach
 (850) 236-1998;
 DavidsSnoBalls.com
 Open Tuesday–Saturday, 9 a.m.–9 p.m.; Sunday, noon–9 p.m. and Monday 11 a.m.–9 p.m.

Dat Cajun Place

8501 Thomas Drive, Panama City Beach
 (850) 588-5314;
 DatCajunPlace.com
 Open daily 11 a.m.–10 p.m.

quickly grew to a sprawling 5,000-square-foot restaurant that includes two bars, live music, multiple televisions, a dance floor, a “Mardi Gras” patio and an extensive menu of Cajun classics and casual food favorites.

“It’s a bar atmosphere, but at the same time we try to keep it as family-friendly as we can,” says White. “Even on a Friday night when we’re slam busy, and the band is playing, we’ll have 10 or 12 little kids on the dance floor.”

The Food: White’s version of shrimp and grits features creamy Southern-style grits made with tasso ham and gouda cheese, and grilled

shrimp and Cajun gravy. The bowl is topped off with a steamed lobster claw.

The Nawlins Po’ Boy features her husband’s recipe for flank steak, sliced thin and piled high, and served with the restaurant’s homemade Voodoo Sauce.

Every Friday night there’s a seafood boil — crawfish when they’re in season (about the first six months of the year) and shrimp the rest of the year.

DEE’S HANG OUT

Panama City Beach-born-and-raised Chef Dee Brown got an education in Southern cooking in his grandmother’s kitchen and another one in

haute cuisine at the Culinary Institute of America. After his graduation in 1988, he started a catering business, and seven years ago decided to open a “little sandwich bar” on the beach. There was a dearth of Cajun restaurants at the time, so his café has evolved, with a “Southern/coastal/Creole/Cajun” menu featuring gumbos, etouffees and po’ boys served on Leidenheimer Brother’s French Bread.

The Hang Out is casual and small, so there might be a wait to get in during busy mealtimes, but chances are good that Chef Dee will stop by your table to see how you’re enjoying your meal.



The Food: She-Crab Soup. Delicious. Baked oysters on the half-shell come in parmesan, three-cheese, jalapeno and Cajun flavors. Or get a mixed dozen Oyster Medley and try them all!

The shrimp are falling out of the roll on the Hang Out's Po' Boy. They come in 6-inch "shorty" or 10-inch large sizes "dressed" with mayo, lettuce, onions, pickles and tomato and are served with Zapp's kettle-cooked potato chips — made in Gramercy, Louisiana.

DAVID'S SNO-BALLS

Actually two Davids (Bulger and Ellingson) own David's Sno-Balls. They became best friends in New Orleans when they were 9 years old and lived in the same neighborhood. When Hurricane Katrina destroyed Ellingson's home, Bulger convinced him to come to Panama City Beach to open up a café serving sno-balls. Not to be confused with the sno-cone, which features more granular ice that allows much of the



Chef Dee Brown, with his Hang Out, was among the first restaurateurs to occupy the Cajun niche on Panama City Beach.

flavoring to sink to the bottom of the cup, the shaved ice of a sno-ball is fine and fluffy. It started out as a warm-weather treat in Louisiana (David's has a pictorial history of the sno-ball on its walls) that is now served year-round.

In the years since they opened, the Davids have added other Louisiana favorites to the menu, including Café du Monde beignets, po' ploys and muffalettas (if you want to sound like a native, pronounce that moo-fa-lotta).

The Food: Sno-balls, of course. David's has more than 60 syrup flavors. For a special treat, get yours "stuffed" with soft-serve ice cream.

Red beans and rice loaded with sausage and ham is served only on Mondays. Traditionally the washing day for Cajun moms, it was easy to throw together early and stir occasionally throughout the day. "It takes me every bit of six hours to make ours," says Bulger.

Bring a friend, or two, or three if you're ordering a muffaletta sandwich — they're that big. David's version includes smoked ham, salami, provolone cheese and olive salad on a Gambino bread round. "Our 9-incher is four pounds and feeds four people. And we have a 5-incher that'll feed two," says Bulger. "It's a very hefty sandwich." ●

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The surf off Panama City Beach often holds desirable species including redfish, pompano and whiting.





SURF FISHING 101

WHITING, POMPANO AND REDS, OH MY

BY JASON DEHART

Joe Cline says there's an old truism in saltwater fishing: "If you don't have a hook in the water, you don't catch fish." Basically, it translates to "You can catch something most any time of the day around these parts, the important thing is to just get out and cast away."

Cline, the owner of Bay Breeze Adventures, a bait and tackle shop in Panama City Beach, knows a thing or two about having a hook or two in the water. And one of the least complicated ways of doing that is by fishing from the surf. It's something a lot of locals and tourists like to do, and for good reason. It's relatively simple, and the three basic quarry — whiting, redfish and pompano — are plentiful.

"This year we had a redfish invasion coming into the bay. They had a helicopter filming the reds coming into the bay, coming in rows, as far as you could see." — Joe Cline, Owner of Bay Breeze Adventures

"Whiting (Gulf kingfish) are out there all year 'round. There were so many whiting when I was a boy you didn't have to bait a hook," Cline says. "When you can't catch anything else, you can catch whiting. Pompano usually come in middle to late April, and they'll run through the summer. When it gets hot, they'll back off. This year was unique in that we've had pompano all year. The problem is they've been small."

When it comes to redfish, you have the option of fishing from the beach or inside the bay. Redfish action starts to build in March and will usually run through the summer before backing off around September, Cline says. Interestingly, 2015 saw a bumper crop of redfish.

"This year we had a redfish invasion coming into the bay. They had a helicopter filming the reds coming into the bay, coming in rows, as far as you could see," he says. "That's the first time I've seen it like that. I really don't know why; they probably come in like that anyway but it looked like an army, in rows, so many reds coming in."

In the summer there's no particular time of day you should go hit the beach,



but Cline says a lot of fishermen like to catch the incoming tides.

“I like to fish in the afternoons because I like to see the sun go down. In the summer you can catch fish all time of the day,” he said.

You can fish quite well from the beach, Cline says. Bait is fairly straightforward.

“Most people use a two- or three-hook pompano rig. There are three primary baits: sand flea — which is natural bait — frozen shrimp and cigar minnows. If you’re fishing with bait, some like to use live shrimp,” Cline says.

“That pretty much covers you for beach fishing. You put the rod in a sand spike and wait for them to hit. This is good for all three species. Now, if you’re fishing with artificial bait, big spoons are good. Two- or three-ounce spoons are good. Good for redfish, and a pompano jig for pompano and whiting. Tip them with a tad bit of shrimp, and you bounce it off the bottom if you are fishing off the beach for those particular fish.”

Most of the people who fish from the surf use either an 8-foot or 10-foot pole, Cline

“Usually the preferred bait in the bay could be a lure, live shrimp or a popping cork. There are a variety of lures in the bay because you’re fishing for speckled trout and reds whereas in the surf you’re fishing for (reds, pompano and whiting).”

— Joe Cline, Owner of Bay Breeze Adventures

on either side of the first sandbar.

“There is no difference in the bottoms, so you can fish anywhere on the beach,” he says.

Fishing on the bay side is a bit different, because the main quarry in that case is redfish or speckled sea trout.

“Usually the preferred bait in the bay could be a lure, live shrimp or a popping cork,” Cline said. “There are a variety of lures in the bay because you’re fishing for speckled trout and reds, whereas in the surf you’re fishing for (reds, pompano and whiting).” ●

says. The 10-foot pole is popular because it offers better casting distance. On the other hand, some fishermen — like out-of-towners — might use freshwater poles.

“That’s a lot of fun if they hook a big redfish,” he says.

As far as finding the best place on the beach to set your pole, there really isn’t one, Cline says. Just pick a spot and look for the “dark spots” or “holes” in the water where fish might find shelter. You might also have some luck fishing the troughs

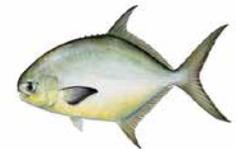
AT A GLANCE

REDFISH



- » **Scientific name:** *Sciaenops ocellatus*
- » **Legal size limit:** Not less than 18 inches and no more than 27 inches total length
- » **Bag limit:** Two fish per person per day
- » Red drum in Florida can reach lengths of 45 inches and weigh up to 51 pounds.

FLORIDA POMPANO



- » **Scientific name:** *Trachinotus carolinus*
- » **Minimum size limit:** 11 inch fork length
- » **Bag limit:** Six per fisherman per day
- » Florida pompano can reach up to 18 inches (head to fork length) and maximum weight of six to eight pounds.

WHITING (GULF KINGFISH)



- » **Scientific name:** *Menticirrhus littoralis*
- » **Minimum size limit:** Unregulated species
- » **Bag limit:** 100 pounds per person, per day
- » Whiting average a little less than a pound but have been known to reach over 2 pounds. Maximum length is about 18 inches, but most are smaller.



Once baits (which may include sand fleas and shrimp) are in place, anglers are free to put their feet up and wait for a bite.

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VISITORS TO
GOOD TIMES

BY STEVE BORNHOFT

Bertie Reynolds attended art school as a young woman, acquiring skills she would use in her father's shell shop.

“Turquoise water, beautiful,
beautiful beaches and gorgeous sunsets.
All my life, it’s been that way and I trust
it always will be.” — Bertie Reynolds



Bertie Reynolds, tucked behind the counter that defines the reception area at the offices of the Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce, spies a fellow Chamber employee fully 60 years her junior and calls to him, “Young man, would you please catch the phone for the next little while?”

The millennial cocks his head as if unsure that he heard what he just heard, and Bertie repeats her request.

“Sure, I guess so,” comes the response.

“He doesn’t understand that we have important business to conduct,” Bertie twinkles and winks.

I have come to interview the Chamber’s senior most employee. Bertie Reynolds, 87, has worked for the Chamber for 28 years and earlier worked for another Bay County promotional organization, the Hotel and Restaurant Association, for six years.

Throughout, she has touted Panama City Beach’s timeless assets.

“Turquoise water, beautiful, beautiful beaches and gorgeous sunsets,” she recites them. “All my life, it’s been that way and I trust it always will be.”

Bertie was just two years old when her parents decided to move from Birmingham, Alabama, to Bay County with Bertie and her two older brothers.

Bertie’s father, James T. Peterson, had first traveled to Bay County as a young man who signed on to work on the Panama Canal project. Ships bound for the project left out of Panama City, Florida. Immediately, he was enamored of Bay County’s brilliant beaches and resolved one day to live nearby the Gulf of Mexico.

When he finally made the move in 1931, Peterson reinvented himself. A handy man, he set about making dolls and knick-knacks from shells he found on the beach and selling them to nickel and dime stores.

Bertie was in high school when the Petersons sold their house on Airport Road and moved to Memphis — Bertie attended an art school there — but they didn’t stay away for long. James Peterson could no more resist the Gulf of Mexico than the tides of the Gulf can resist the gravitational pull of the moon.

Upon the family's return to the water's edge, Bertie would graduate Bay High School (class of 1948) and her parents would establish and operate a souvenir shop on Front Beach Road. In 1950, Bertie married a World War II veteran and paper mill employee, Olen C. Reynolds of Westville. When Bertie's mother died, Mr. Reynolds left the mill behind and purchased the shop from James Peterson. There was more money in shells than paper.

The couple was married for 23 years and reared three daughters before Olen succumbed to heart disease at age 48. Daughters Debbie, Denise and Teresa all still live in Panama City Beach.

For decades, Bertie has lived in a modest home on South Thomas Drive. She recalls when the place was surrounded by little more than sand dunes. The beach has grown up around Bertie as its popularity and renown has exploded.

In the late 1970s, her husband departed, Bertie opened a restaurant, La Bon Appetite, the first in the area to serve quiche and crepes, and won a seat on the Panama City Beach City Council. Her four-year tenure there coincided with that of Mayor Dan Russell, he of the Russell-Fields Pier and the man who saw to the consolidation of several beach hamlets.

Russell was a generous man, she recalls, who helped residents out with their light bills and conducted complimentary fish fries at City Hall.

While a city official, Bertie joined Russell and fellow council members William Gray and Bill Fields in traveling to Cuba for a 10-day tour that mayors and council members from throughout the country had been invited to attend.

"We flew into Havana," she remembers. "It was beautiful, just like people think it

is. Banana trees, palm trees. Most of the houses were open and didn't have windows. We saw the bunker that Fidel Castro lived in. There were guards on every corner. I have a Cuban dollar bill that Mr. Castro autographed for me."

Bertie shook Castro's hand and spoke with him for a moment.

"Though he speaks beautiful English, he spoke Spanish," Bertie says. "I told him his island was beautiful."

One night, Bertie went to the famous Copacabana in Havana and danced until she developed blisters on her feet. Still, she managed to complete the island-wide tour, which included a stop at a large sugar factory.

"Wherever we went, there was a band playing for us," she remembers. "One evening a storm was coming in, so our tour hosts brought the Cuban band and entertainers to us at the hotel."

Bertie reflects on her life in Panama City Beach and scarcely can believe the growth and transformations it has undergone. She credits city officials through the years and current Panama City Beach mayor, Gayle Oberst, in particular, with doing a good job of managing growth and says that growth management will remain an issue for the indefinite future.

"Sometimes, the beach seems like it may be at risk of being loved to death," Bertie finds. "But even at our worst, we're the best."

Over recent months, Bertie has been breaking in a new boss, Panama City Beach Chamber president and CEO Lance Allison, who values her continuing contributions to the Chamber's mission.

"It's an honor to have Ms. Bertie working with us," Allison says. "She has been with the Chamber from its inception. Her wealth of knowledge of Panama City Beach and its business community is priceless and irreplaceable. She is simply a fascinating

woman, and we get compliments from visitors around the world on how helpful and sweet she is."

Always, Bertie has been fascinated by Hollywood stars. She was beside herself upon spying Clark Gable at a Harrison Avenue drug store in Panama City when he was stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base in 1942.

Thirty years later, Bertie and friends heard that actor Ray Milland was in the area filming "Frogs," a sci-fi thriller directed by George McCowan and co-starring Sam Elliot. The film tells the story of an upper-class Southern family victimized by all manner of birds, reptiles and amphibians.

"My friends and I drove out to Eden State Gardens, where it was being filmed, and watched Mr. Milland," Bertie vividly recalls. "It was such a thrill!"

But the sun will never cease to be Bertie's foremost star. Almost daily, she crosses Thomas Drive to a dune walkover opposite her home to watch the center of the solar system kiss the Gulf.

A visitor approaches seeking information about state parks.

Bertie mentions St. Andrews State Park and the visitor is satisfied at that and abruptly leaves.

"I didn't even have the chance to tell him about Camp Helen or say goodbye," Bertie sighs. "I have a beautiful way of saying goodbye. Some of the ladies here in the office try to imitate it."

"How 'bout a sample?" I suggest.

"Good byyyyyy," Bertie says. Her "good" rhymes with food and she holds the "bye" like a musical note.

Hers is the most beautiful lilt from here to Birmingham. ●

"It's an honor to have Ms. Bertie working with us. She has been with the Chamber from its inception. Her wealth of knowledge of Panama City Beach and its business community is priceless and irreplaceable. She is simply a fascinating woman, and we get compliments from visitors around the world on how helpful and sweet she is."

— Lance Allison, Panama City Beach Chamber president and CEO



Red Holland interviewing Bertie in 1992 at Bay County, motel & restaurant association.



Bertie Reynolds dispenses helpful advice to visitors with a quintessential Southern lilt.

Puttin' Around

Fun Facts & Features about Panama City Beach's Mini Golf Courses

BY DARA ADAMS, VISITOR INFORMATION SPECIALIST, PANAMA CITY BEACH CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU



Along with legendary beaches, championship golf courses, resorts, shopping and amusement parks, miniature golf is part of the fabric of fun in Panama City Beach. Miniature golf (or “mini-golf,” as it’s also known) first made its mark on Panama City Beach in 1959, with the advent of Goofy Golf, a fantasy-themed creation like no other. In the decades since, a variety of mini-golf courses have appeared, each with their own unique theme and design, and each offering a real, fun Panama City Beach experience that everyone can enjoy.

EUROPEAN ORIGINS & HISTORY

Unbeknownst to all but a few true aficionados, mini-golf as a pastime was created as early as the 1800s because Europeans in those days considered it improper for ladies to take a full swing at a golf ball. Founded in 1867, the St. Andrews Ladies’ Putting Club in Scotland is the oldest miniature golf course in existence, but these “putting only” courses spread quickly throughout Europe and eventually made their way across the pond, with the

first American mini-golf course appearing in North Carolina in 1916. These early courses were classically laid out with fountains, gardens and simply landscaped walkways.

In the Depression era, designers added objects such as gutters, pipes and rubber tires to increase the challenge to players while keeping costs down. In the mid 1930s, Joseph and Robert Taylor introduced the first fantasy inspired features on courses, including castles, windmills, moving parts and mythological creatures. By this time over 4 million people in the U.S. were playing mini-golf! Lee Koplín’s amazing sculpted statues, ranging from the Sphinx to dinosaurs to space ships, arrived to form Goofy Golf in Panama City Beach in 1959. Mini-golf took another leap in the 1970s, when James Bryan and Al Tirrell incorporated landscaped hills, valleys, lakes and waterfall features into their course designs. The “Adventure Golf” moniker was coined in the 1980s by Ed Graft, paving the way for the modern mini-golf courses of today.

GOOFY GOLF: A PCB ORIGINAL

Across from the County Pier, Goofy Golf and all its glorious old-Florida kitsch style is etched in the memories of generations of locals and tourists alike. Born of the imagination and sculpted by the hands of Lee Koplín, this world of fantasy creatures, ancient monuments and spaceships is a fun and challenging course not to be missed. Peer out of the nose of an Easter Island Tiki head, crawl through the mouth of a giant Chinese dragon, or try to sink your putt past a snapping alligator. The visual delight of all the wonderful creatures is sure to crystalize family memories at these two modestly priced 18-hole courses.

Michelle Koplín, Lee’s daughter and the current owner, remembers working hard for her dad as a child, sweeping the greens and weeding the gardens. Her job description even included making concrete forms, and after she learned the tricks of the trade from her dad, Michelle helped mold the bumps on the strange creatures throughout the course. Though Goofy Golf has been in business for over 50 years, Michelle says she has no plans to close any time soon.



DARA ADAMS

COCONUT CREEK FAMILY FUN PARK

A JUNGLE THEME AT COCONUT CREEK FAMILY FUN PARK

Travel a little further east along Front Beach Road and you will arrive at Coconut Creek Family Fun Park, where you are greeted by several water-spraying elephants. Here, players will have to maneuver their putts through spindly giraffe legs, past huge hippos and over swinging rope bridges and waterfalls. This exciting double 18-hole course boasts an added feature next door, a human-scale labyrinth that is the first of its kind in America, known as the Gran Maze!

A PIRATE'S LIFE AT PIRATE'S ISLAND

With two 18-hole pirate-themed courses, Pirate's Island Adventure Golf incorporates pirate lore and history into the mini-golf experience. Storyboards at each hole detail the sagas of Blackbeard and Captain Kidd, and the landscaped, multi-level courses offer sweeping views of fellow players traversing caves, grottos and challenging holes that are fun for all ages. In keeping up with the latest mini-golf technology, the storyboards are being outfitted with smartphone-scannable QR codes, which will expand on the pirate-themed story throughout the course. Also in the works is a downloadable scoring app.

Pirate's Island assistant manager Karen Dalton says she and the business owners pride themselves on making constant improvements and upgrades. Generations of return visitors make it a tradition to play here on their vacation each year, and with a presidential visit in 2010 (yes, the whole Obama family played 18 holes), it goes to show that even the First Family enjoys the Pirate's Island challenge!



GOOFY GOLF

NOT YOUR AVERAGE SHOT IN THE DARK

Worth a mention is another unique offshoot of the mini-golf craze: glow golf. Indoor courses in darkened rooms illuminated with fluorescent paint provide the next level of challenge for those mini golfers looking for something other than the traditional outdoor fare. In Panama City Beach, you can check out this unique, weather-proof putt-putt golf at Race City Amusement Park.

Be sure to include some mini-golf outings during your next vacation to Panama City Beach — you'll be glad you did. From the classic to the state-of-the-art, you'll always have a blast "putting around" on the world's most beautiful beaches! ●

SHOP, DINE, STAY

SO MANY NEW WAYS
TO ENJOY PANAMA
CITY BEACH

BY ROSANNE DUNKELBERGER

From a spectacular \$30 million upgrade at the Bay Point Resort, to the continued expansion of Pier Park, Panama City Beach is updating and adding new businesses faster than most realize.

Here's a quick snapshot of what's been going on in recent months with the "new kids" on the coast:





SHERATON SUSHI LOUNGE



SHERATON GUEST ROOM

Poised on the shores of Grand Lagoon, Panama City Beach's gateway to the Gulf of Mexico, the Sheraton Bay Point Resort is undergoing extensive renovations that are nearing completion.

A BETTER-THAN-EVER BAY POINT RESORT. A year-and-a-half-long, \$30-million renovation at the Sheraton Bay Point Resort is scheduled to be complete in mid-2016.

Every aspect of the full-service resort will be upgraded, including the lobby area, meeting rooms, spa and sports facilities, restaurants and each of its 320 guest rooms and golf villas. "It is going to be spectacular," says the resort's new general manager, Patrick Shimon. "Everything will be touched with this renovation to Sheraton standards."

One change immediately apparent when guests arrive will be vertically arranged windows in the lobby and "living room" areas, offering stunning views of the natural beauty of the resort's private lagoon and boardwalks.

The resort at Bay Point was originally built in 1985 and expanded throughout the years, but hadn't seen a major renovation for at least seven years. It operated under several flags during that time, but its addition to the Sheraton franchise makes it the only Starwood-affiliated resort in the region, says Shimon. That makes it an attractive option for those who use the Starwood Preferred Guest loyalty program, which includes nine other hotel brands such as Westin, Aloft, W and Four Points.

The resort is located within a 1,100-acre wildlife preserve on Grand Lagoon, away — but not too far away — from the bustle of the beach. In addition to 200 guest rooms in the main building and 120 golf villas, the resort offers a number of indoor and outdoor areas, 40,000 square feet of meeting space, as well as recreation facilities including a private beach, five restaurants, three outdoor pools, a variety of watersports, two golf courses, a golf and tennis clubhouse and a full-service, luxury spa. Unique to the region's resorts, Bay Point also includes a marina, offering ready access to the Gulf of Mexico for boaters.



edward cox interiors

Sheraton photos credit by Edward Cox Interiors. Designs may not reflect final product.

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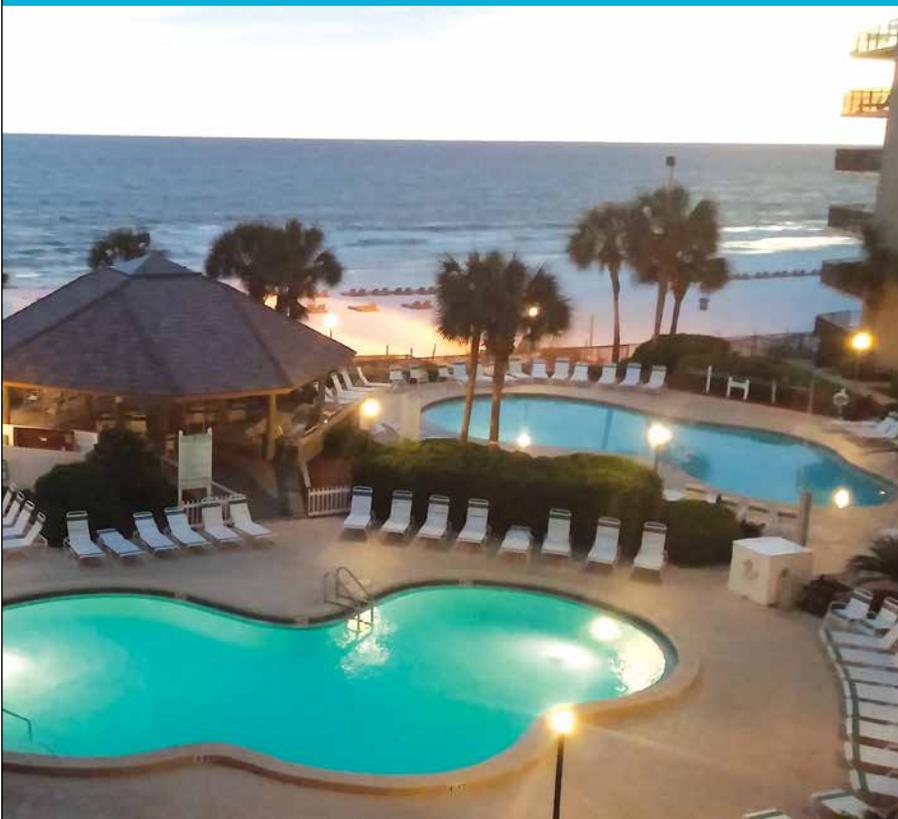
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For years, Panama City Beach Mayor — and foodie — Gayle Oberst sought to entice Fresh Market to come to Panama City Beach. The upscale grocer has arrived with extensive selections of fresh seafood and produce.

PIER PARK GROWS Big things are happening on the west side of Panama City Beach with yet another expansion of the fabulously popular Pier Park. The latest addition is Pier Park West, a newly opened collection of six more of the lifestyle center's colorful coastal-style storefronts. The five current tenants include the The Brass Tap craft beer bar, Chipotle Mexican Grill, Dickey's Barbecue Pit, Jimmy John's sandwich shop and Cosmo Nail Bar, all of which are new to the market.

New tenants have been added to Pier Park North, a 370,000-square-foot shopping center right across U.S. Highway 98 (aka Back Beach Road) that opened its first store in March 2014. In September, it welcomed the upscale grocer Fresh Market. "Panama City Beach Mayor Gayle Oberst has been trying to get Fresh Market here for five years," says Lance Allison, president and CEO of the Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce. "She really worked hard enticing them to come."

The 24,000-square-foot "European-style" grocery store includes a bakery, a full-service meat counter, a wide selection of ready-to-serve entrées, fresh seafood, more than 200 imported and domestic cheeses, as well as a bountiful produce department with more than 400 items and a large organic selection.

Other new additions to Pier Park North include a trio of popular restaurants — Texas Roadhouse, Chili's and Zoe's Kitchen.

"One thing that's really neat about Pier Park North is there are so many different (businesses) you wouldn't expect on Panama City Beach — the big box stores that are traditionally (found in) a much bigger city," says Allison. While it's fun to find unique local shops, visitors are also drawn to familiar stores and restaurants available back home, he says.

FISHALE TAPHOUSE & GRILL



JAE'S SINFUL DELIGHTS



News about the NIVOL craft brewery, set to open at the Shoppes at Edgewater, has Panama City Beach suds lovers lathered up; Jae's Sinful Delights tempts the sweet tooth in people with desserts that will have dieters looking forward to "cheat day."

THE ART OF SWEETS In the Shoppes at Edgewater you'll find sweet treats at Jae's Sinful Delights. Since the spring of 2015, pastry chef Jae Camino has been cooking up desserts and one-of-kind artistic cakes — think "Cake Boss" — in a glass-enclosed kitchen where patrons can see the magic happen.

Jae's offers a full menu of bakery products, including mini-cupcakes, breads, buns, doughnuts, truffles, pies, puddings and cake slices. There are also special delights cooked up daily. All are made with high-quality, all-natural ingredients with no preservatives and several items are available in gluten-free versions.

Patrons are also invited to sit down and enjoy fair-trade coffees and organic teas at the shop.

CRAFT BREWING COMES TO TOWN

Panama City Beach gets its first taste of locally made craft beer in early 2016 with the opening of NIVOL Brewery (that's LOVIN' spelled backwards). Leo and Selma Hill, who brought the gastropub to Panama City Beach in the form of the Fishale Taphouse & Grill, are behind this new venture.

They have recruited master brewers Doug Whitt and Mike Delf to cook up "three definitely new, yet strangely familiar ales and pilsners" for beer drinkers to enjoy. They've already given preview samplings of the Scuba IPA, 98 Roadside Blonde and Honey Dunkel brews at local beer festivals. NIVOL will also offer full brewery tours and tasting experiences at the facility, which will be located at the Shoppes at Edgewater, 473 Richard Jackson Blvd. ●

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GEOCACHING

Treasure maps have given way to global positioning software

STORY AND PHOTOS BY HANNAH BURKE

There's a clandestine community just under our noses, whose citizens walk among us without any distinguishing characteristics. They know what we do not and boldly pursue the secrets our lands conceal. These covert trackers know that loot abounds, hidden for them to discover. Durable canisters and boxes hold small prizes, and those who discover them leave a note or a replacement prize to mark their passing.

They're cachers, and the name of their game is geocaching. If you're a muggle (that's geocache speak for non-cachers), you'll likely never become aware of treasure hiding in plain sight as you go about your day. I made it my mission to infiltrate the world of caching to find out what has over 6 million people across the globe crazy about caches.

"Geocaching is a real-world, outdoor treasure hunting game using GPS-enabled devices. Participants navigate to a specific set of GPS coordinates and then attempt to find the geocache

(container) hidden at that location" says Patrick Stewart, the sports and special event coordinator for Visit Panama City Beach.

These devices can range from a handheld GPS to your smartphone. For first-timers, all it takes is downloading the free Intro to Geocaching app from Groundspeak, Inc. to your smartphone. All I needed to register for a geocaching membership was a valid email and personalized username. Upon confirmation of my account, little black dots popped up on my phone screen all around my location, revealing the sites of numerous caches in the area.

To gain some insight before I got started, I turned to expert cacher Phil Cunningham. Cunningham, who has been geocaching since 2004, has located more than 5,500 caches in 29 states.

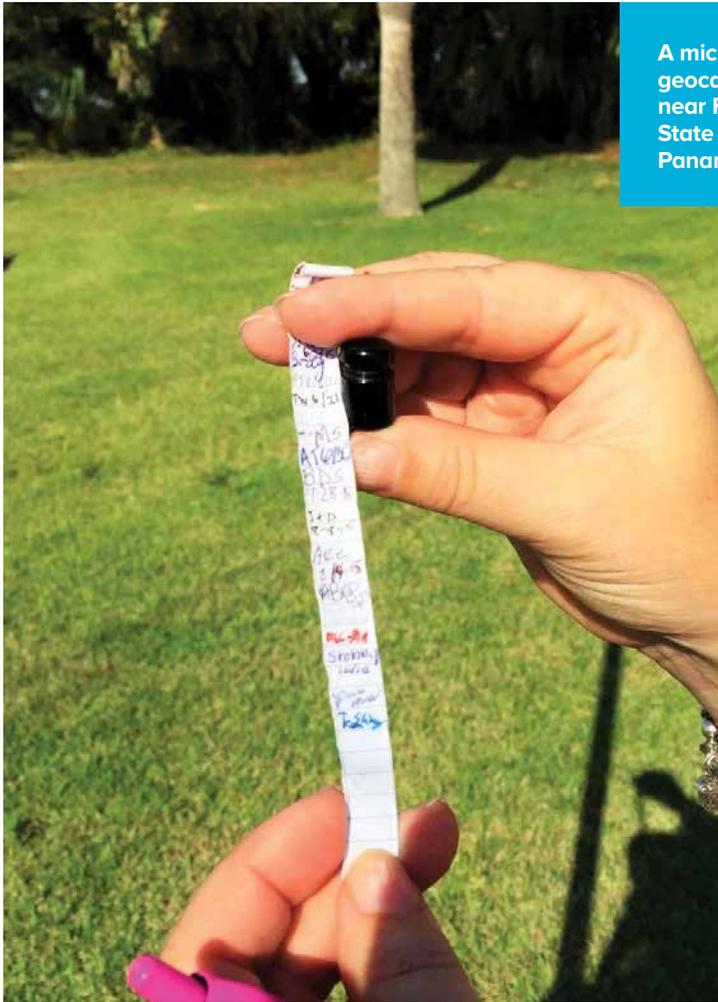
"One of the appeals is the hunt for the cache or site and the adventure that comes along

This page: (left) Phil Cunningham with a cache found in a California desert; (right) A shot of the writer's first cache.



“Geocaching is a real-world, outdoor treasure hunting game using GPS-enabled devices. Participants navigate to a specific set of GPS coordinates and then attempt to find the geocache (container) hidden at that location.” — Patrick Stewart, the sports and special event coordinator for Visit Panama City Beach





A micro-magnetic geocache located near Florida State University Panama City.

with that,” Cunningham shares. “I made a trip to the Western states five years ago and located a cache that was named ‘Phil’ in the California desert and another named ‘History, Trains and Southwest’ that marks the site of a Butch Cassidy and Sundance train robbery. I have found 76 geocaches like the Butch Cassidy one that will take you to some beautiful venue or historical site.”

Cunningham also reminds me of the importance of safety. “As with any outdoor activity, there are risks involved and care must be taken in participating in this sport. If you are not comfortable in going to the location to retrieve the container, by all means pass it up and search for others at your level of comfort.”

Geocaches operate under a 1-5 difficulty rating system, with 5 being the most challenging cache you can find. Cache descriptions also include info about the terrain you will traverse in getting to them.

“There are over 400 active geocaches in Bay County with different levels of finding difficulty,” Cunningham notes. “I would suggest you attend an event to learn from experienced cachers and to meet others with similar interests. The Panama City Beach caches are a fraction of the 2.7 million active caches worldwide. Most of the ones on the Pirates of the High Seas GeoTour are easy but will take you to different areas of the world’s most beautiful beaches. And these are family-friendly, which allows time for the family to enjoy the outdoors.”

Following Cunningham’s advice, I invited my mom, Julie Burke, to be my cacher-companion for the day. We set out early for Panama City Beach, overwhelmed by the number of caches that registered on our map. After browsing through several choices, we settled on a cache with a 1.5 difficulty and terrain rating.

Without giving away this cache’s secret, I will say that our travels took us away from Pier Park to a nearby trail that we didn’t even know existed! Following the needle of the compass on my app, Mom and I were led down a gorgeous path by the water. Yellow wildflowers dotted the way beneath tall pines. Excitement grew as we advanced and the app informed us we were a mere 30 feet away. Following the hint provided from the user who placed the cache, we were able to locate the container in no time. We took a souvenir from the cache, put one we brought in its place and signed the log beneath the dozens of other names that have made the discovery. One taste, and we were hooked. That was one of three caches we ended up going after that day.

Tempted to try for yourself? Panama City Beach has built a story into the Pirates of the High Seas Fest GeoTour to get you started with some serious fun!



YOU’RE GETTING CLOSE!

Keep in mind your phone’s GPS is only accurate to about 30 feet, so start looking for the geocache.

“There are two ways in which one could get involved with geocaching,” Stewart says. “The first way to get involved is to go to visitpanamacitybeach.com/geocaching. Once on the page, just download the GeoTour specific grid sheet and rules. From there, a geocacher can download the coordinates from the GeoTour web page. There are also a few video tutorials on the page that will help those new to Geocaching.

“As you hunt for your treasure, you will journey the very path that Capt. Dominique Youx traveled when he hid his personal treasure. Twelve caches are located throughout Panama City Beach, and clues in the caches will help Geocachers complete a treasure map that will ultimately lead them to the treasure of Capt. Dominique Youx!”

Each cacher who completes the GeoTour will receive a Pirates of the High Seas Fest GeoCoin. These tokens are tradable coins that identify a specific group or individual geocacher. Finding a coin is exciting and definitely gives you some caching cred if you log it on your account. Six out of 12 finds qualify you for a bronze coin, nine out of 12 a silver and a gold coin goes to cachers who local all 12 sites.

There’s no excuse for being a “muggle” any longer. Grab your gear and get caching! ●



Pond by the trail as the cache was tracked.

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THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME... EVERY TIME

When the sun slips into the Gulf,
Schooners is the perfect setting

STORY BY DAVID E. DEMAREST
PHOTOS BY KIP CLAYTON

For Kip Clayton, capturing perfect sunset photos is a passion, but being in the right place at the right time is part of his job description. Since moving to Panama City Beach in 2013, Kip has spent six days a week working at Schooners Beach Club. He's the head of security, technically, but most guests meet Kip after he spots their camera. Irrepressibly gregarious, Kip is quick to share his own photos, which he takes using his LG G2 camera phone.

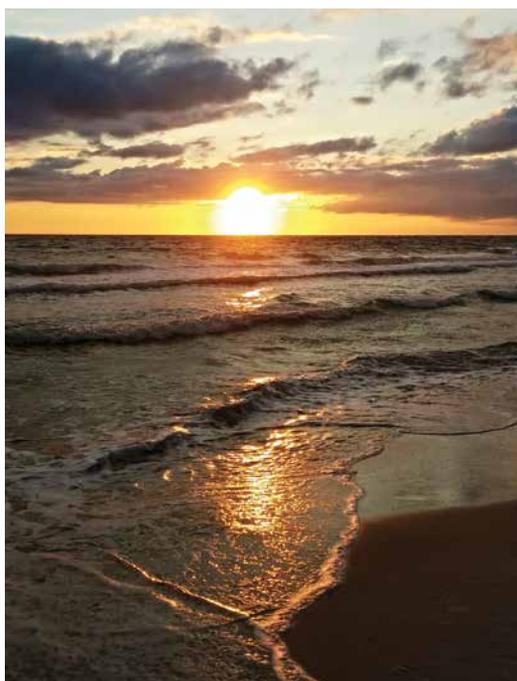
"I enjoy doing it," Kip says. "I like it best when there are a lot of clouds — the breaks in the clouds make the sunset look very dramatic. The way I think of it, God paints the picture and I just take it. I have a couple that I've had enlarged, printed up and have framed in my house."

Though never formally trained in photography, Kip is in the right spot to learn on the job. Schooners, located right on the beach, is famous for its daily salute to the sunset. Guests join in a countdown as the sun dips toward the Gulf of Mexico, and at the moment the count hits zero, a cannon is fired, the crowd cheers and all eyes linger for a moment on the sight of the disappearing sun and the clouds taking on the vibrant colors of sunset.

Kip is usually right there among them — in the moments that the crowd is frozen in anticipation, then in awe, he's clicking away. Memorializing another day in paradise. ●



Kip Clayton, the head of security at Schooners Beach Club, has made sunset photography his speciality. Equipped with an LG G2 camera phone, he favors a mix of sky, clouds and rays.





YOU'RE ONLY WELCOME ON MY PLATE

Ecosystem-disrupting lionfish
prove to be excellent table fare

BY SCOTT MORRIS

FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
COMMISSION





Panama City Beach sets an impeccably high standard when it comes to hospitality. Travelers from all over the world have long been welcome to enjoy its sugar-white sand beaches, stunningly clear water, great restaurants, premier shopping and multi-faceted recreational offerings.

But one group of visitors has been banned. In fact, those who love Panama City Beach are hunting these invaders down. There's even a campaign to recruit volunteers to join in the killing.

We're speaking of lionfish, an invasive species that threatens to wreak havoc on the Gulf's ecosystem. These predatory menaces eat juvenile grouper, snapper and many other beloved native species. They mess up the equilibrium of coastal reefs, plus several of their outer spines are full of venom. They're just all-around bad customers.

The Nonindigenous Aquatic Species website states that lionfish are originally from

the Indian Ocean and Red Sea, although they can be found throughout the western Pacific from southern Japan to Micronesia, Australia and the Philippines. The best guess as to how they got here is through the aquarium trade. This would make them yet another deplorable example — such as pythons in the Everglades — of people bringing pets from other countries and then deciding they don't want them and just letting them go.

The result in the case of lionfish is far more than them simply being a nuisance. Michelle Gerth, associate manager at Capt. Anderson's Marina, puts a pretty dire perspective on the situation:

"Their rate of growth in our area is astounding. Lionfish reach sexual maturity in just one year, with mature female lionfish having the ability to reproduce every four days. They release up to two million eggs per year. Combine that with their voracious appetite — they can consume two pounds of prey, per day."

"Their rate of growth in our area is astounding. Lionfish reach sexual maturity in just one year, with mature female lionfish having the ability to reproduce every four days. They release up to two million eggs per year. Combine that with their voracious appetite — they can consume two pounds of prey, per day." — Michelle Gerth, associate manager at Capt. Anderson's Marina



Lionfish, while not large, yield flakey, sweet fillets that lend themselves to fish tacos and other dishes.

FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

For Gerth, this means one of the best-loved fishing areas in the United States is in danger. “For all of us in the fishing industry, it’s a huge problem,” she says. “Snapper, grouper and trigger fish are the primary diet of lionfish.”

Hopefully, the tables are beginning to turn, so to speak. Why? Lionfish are delicious. Delicious enough to make the grade for Clifton Holt, owner and executive chef of Birmingham’s nationally recognized culinary hotspot Little Savannah.

“I learned about lionfish from a friend of mine who is a dive instructor,” Holt explains. “He spearfishes for them. He prepared a ceviche for me, and I was sold on the texture immediately. The meat is very light and flakey. They’re very mild with a sweetness that’s reminiscent of Gulf shrimp.”

You had me at “a sweetness that’s reminiscent of gulf shrimp.”

Holt began serving them at Little Savannah in 2013. For larger lionfish, he serves them whole and bakes them crusted in salt. With the smaller lionfish, he powders them in flour and cornstarch and then deep fries them in clean oil.

“When I first put them on the menu, I was a little apprehensive,” Holt admits. “People wanted to know about the venom in their spines. You educate them and explain that when the spines are carefully removed, there’s no danger.”

Some folks showed up already fully informed, however. “Yeah, there were customers who knew all about lionfish being an invasive species,” Holt says. “They were ready to do their part.”

Holt had eight to ten 1 pound lionfish. Not for long, though. “The first five tables decimated the menu. People taste this fish and love it!”

So one way to help the cause is to eat the things. But first they have to be speared. As it happens, there are plenty of ways to get involved safely.

Capt. Anderson’s Marina is right in the middle of the effort to eradicate lionfish, and local dive shops provide the necessary training and equipment to gear up and get the job done.

“Panama City Beach ranks second in the state of Florida for recreational diving, with the Keys being first,” Michelle Gerth says. “At Capt. Anderson’s Marina, we started promoting the harvesting of lionfish over four years ago when Capt. Ron Spriggs asked us to include them in the dive tournament that we were in the process of planning. We not only wanted to educate the public about the encroaching problem, but it was important to inform divers how to safely collect lionfish and handle them all the way through the cleaning process.”

Like Holt and his customers in Birmingham, Gerth loves the way lionfish taste. “They’re delicious!” she enthuses. “This

is something I can definitely attest to since I've eaten them cooked several different ways, grilled, fried and as a ceviche. Captain Ron has a ceviche recipe that is wonderful. The taste and texture compares to highly regarded grouper, snapper or hogfish."

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission takes the lionfish threat seriously, too, and they're making getting rid of lionfish serious fun. They now host Derby Days and tournaments to rid the Gulf of this pesky nuisance. They'll designate you as a Reef Ranger when you pledge to adopt a reef and remove lionfish from it. If you get involved with lionfish removal efforts by attending a Derby Day or other event, you are officially a part of the "Lionfish Control Team."

As the FFWC website puts it: "Be A Predator!"

In addition, this year the FWC has stepped up by adopting a resolution to designate the first Saturday after Mother's Day "Lionfish Removal and Awareness Day" (LRAD) as another way to encourage the public to remove lionfish from Florida waters. Capt. Anderson's Marina's fifth Annual Lion-Tamer Dive Tournament coincides with that date this year.

"We're looking forward to the fifth Annual Lion-Tamer Dive Tournament next spring, which will be in addition to working with the FWC during their second LRAD in May," Gerth says. "The Lion-Tamer Tournament will be part of a local festival making it fun and interesting for everybody."

Stacie Galbreath, vice president of Diver's Den, has had plenty of first-hand experience with lionfish. She and her husband and daughter are expert divers. They're doing their part to get people involved.

"They are very easy to spear," Galbreath emphasizes. "The smaller ones are a little more difficult only because of their size, but you can get a smaller spear to get them."

Whether you eat them or not, they need to be speared. This campaign needs more recruits. The consequences of not dealing with lionfish could be devastating for the long-term health of the Gulf and even waters connected to the Gulf.

Holt thinks one way to stop lionfish is to make them a culinary trend. "I really think it could catch on with chefs. Once they learn how to clean them and see how much diners enjoy them, it could happen. Chefs are always looking for the next big cutting-edge thing."

Lovers of Panama City Beach and the Gulf of Mexico, unite! This may be your one opportunity to be a Green Eco-Warrior and an Unabashed Foodie Snob at the same time. ●



FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION



State wildlife officials and private marine conservation organizations have combined to promote lionfish tournaments as a way to control populations of the invasive species.

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2016 Events

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Seabreeze Jazz Festival

April 20–24 Named a “Top 10 Jazz Festival in the USA” by JazzIZ Magazine and recently nominated as “Best Jazz Festival” at the Oasis Smooth Jazz Awards, the Seabreeze Jazz Festival combines the top national smooth jazz artists with a full weekend of fun, sun, great beaches and good times — all on the west end of Panama City Beach. The event attracts thousands of fans from the U.S., Canada and Europe for the ultimate performance-packed weekend of jazz.



Panama City Beach Mardi Gras & Music Festival, Feb. 5–6 The two-day festival and parade takes place in and around Pier Park and is one of the most fun Mardi Gras events anywhere. The event is perfect for the whole family and includes a Mardi Gras Kids Zone, float tours, street fair and live music.

Winter Resident Senior Prom, Feb. 10 Now in its fourth installment, the Senior Prom is a fun opportunity for winter residents to get out their dancing shoes. Held at Edgewater Beach & Golf Resort, the 2016 theme was “Old Hollywood.”

There’s Music in the Air in Panama City Beach, Summer Throughout the summer, visitors and locals gather for the free summer concert series at Aaron Bessant Park amphitheater, where live performances in the open-air amphitheater set the tone. The PCB Summer Concert Series takes place every Thursday night, and Groovin’ on the Green offers a scaled down version of the open-air concert series on Monday nights at the Carillon Beach neighborhood.



SpringJam

April 7-9 Country music fans from far and wide flock to the beautiful Aaron Bessant Park at Pier Park for SpringJam, a three-day country music festival. This year, the headliners are Rascal Flatts, Thomas Rhett and Chris Young along with many other talented and popular performers. Kick off spring and get ready for summer with sunshine, country tunes and good times.

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Thunder Beach Motorcycle Rally, April 27–May 1 & Oct. 19–23 Known as “The Most Biker Friendly FREE Rally in the United States,” the Thunder Beach Motorcycle Rally is held twice yearly in Panama City Beach during the first weekend in May and mid-October. Bikers from around the country enjoy scenic rides along the Emerald Coast, live entertainment and local cuisine.

Star Spangled Spectacular, July 4 Panama City Beach celebrates the 4th of July with the largest fireworks display on the Gulf Coast from the city and county piers. Families enjoy a day filled with live entertainment, children’s activities, tasty food and drinks, as well as breathtaking firework displays at multiple locations.

Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam, Sept. 2–4 This Labor Day weekend, the Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam will bring the best of today’s country music to the beach. When the sun begins to set, patrons can ride free shuttles to the headline stage

at Frank Brown Park from participating lodging properties.

Lobster Festival and Tournament, Date TBA Schooners sets the stage for the largest lobster festival in Florida, as the 27th Annual Lobster Festival & Tournament gives divers a chance to compete and attendees a chance to eat amazing lobster dishes. Tournament participants compete in a variety of categories, including spiny lobster, shovelnose lobster and Big 6. Weigh-ins begin Saturday and end Sunday with grand prizes and a Lobster Feast. The popular Sand Sculpting Contest is now in its 17th year and takes place on the beach behind Schooners.

3rd Annual Chasin’ the Sun Music Festival, Date TBA Enjoy a few bonus days of summer at a festival created to celebrate artists who wrote and continue to play classic beach songs.

Pirates of the High Seas Fest Oct. 7–9 Columbus Day weekend will

bring a wave of fun-filled adventures to Panama City Beach with the Pirates of the High Seas Fest. Taking place throughout the coastal community, the festival will include an ensemble of parades and sword-swinging showdowns, culminating with a dueling fireworks display re-enacting The Battle of the Seven Seas.

UNwined, Oct. Date TBA The Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce presents a spectacular weekend celebration of vines, steins and palate-pleasing food. Enjoy perfectly paired wine, craft beer and appetizers at Aaron Bessant Park.

Ironman Florida, Nov. 5 What began as a challenge between groups of Navy Seals has become one of the most recognized endurance events in the world. The Ironman consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run, with the Florida edition of the challenge serving as one of the most popular races on the circuit.





Jeep Beach Jam

May 11–15 Jeep enthusiasts from throughout the United States travel to Aaron Bessant Park & Amphitheater for this five-day event dedicated to all things Jeep. Industry leading companies will be present with information, seminars and merchandise. This family-friendly event includes bounce houses, obstacle courses, live music, bonfires, a parade and much more!



JEEP BEACH JAM

Emerald Coast Cruizin', Nov. 7–12
The annual event at Aaron Bessant Park is perfect for families and attracts thousands of classic cars, hot rods, custom cars and trucks. Live music will also be featured at the event.

Beach Home for the Holidays, Nov. 25–26 The lighting of a 100-foot Christmas tree and holiday music from

the Panama City POPS Orchestra kick off the holiday season.

Panama City Beach Marathon, Date TBA A 5K, half marathon and full marathon all run along the beautiful Gulf of Mexico and the world's most beautiful beaches.

Ninth Annual Beach Ball Drop, Dec. 31 Celebrate New Year's Eve on

the beach! A family-friendly countdown at 8 p.m. culminates with fireworks and 10,000 beach balls being dropped over the crowd. As the seconds tick down to midnight, thousands of revelers watch an 800-pound glowing beach ball descend to signify the start of a New Year with a second round of fireworks.

Visit VisitPanamaCityBeach.com for more details.

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Panama City Beach emerging as volleyball hotbed

Gaining popularity as a club sport

BY PAT MCCANN

SOMETHING TOLD KEVIN JONES he wasn't in Southern California anymore.

When Jones relocated to Panama City Beach five years ago, he had a difficult time finding people who wanted to play beach volleyball. That was surprising given the superior quality of the powdery soft sand here versus the granular sand of the West Coast.

Eventually, he paired up with local resident Joey Middlebrooks, won a tournament with him and was then approached about coaching some youthful hopefuls in the sport. Jones, who personified the Southern California stereotype of a kid born with a surfboard and a volleyball, immediately became a coach and somewhat of a guru, spurring the growth of beach volleyball in Panama City Beach.

Three years ago, he helped found the PCB Beach Volleyball Club, which originally had two members. Eden Hawes and Casey Justice were eighth-graders at the time, but since then the Arnold High School students have made an impact at the national level in age-group beach volleyball tournaments, though usually paired with partners from outside this area.

Jones says the club now numbers 30 members at various times of the year and continues to grow. They range in ages from 10-18 and primarily are girls, although a few boys are involved, and Jones continues to try to get more boys interested in a sport he says is in its infancy stage here.

He envisions it growing exponentially in coming years.

"Oh yeah, I think there's so much room for growth in this area," Jones says. "There's a tremendous upside. I just think

if more people are open to it, people who aren't familiar with the sport, if they just come check it out, it will bloom.

"And I think the parents enjoy it as much as the kids. The parents love hanging out and talking to each other. They say it's such a better environment than sitting in the gym all day."

One major advantage of beach volleyball in Panama City Beach is the obvious one: a lot of sand and gorgeous surroundings. Indeed, PCB sets up as a mecca for the sport.

For the sport to truly take hold, however, Jones wants to attract more professional tournaments to gain better exposure. He says that the National Volleyball League had a tournament during Spring Break, and the Extreme Volleyball Professionals were here in May.

During the late 1980s, the Association of Volleyball Professionals, the major leagues of the sport, had a regular stop in Panama City Beach that featured some of the best players in the world.

There are other built-in advantages that should speed the growth of beach volleyball here. One is that the game has become a collegiate sport, with Florida State University among colleges expanding their athletic department to include it. Another is that beach volleyball is an experimental sport at a club level stage within the Florida High Schools Athletics Association, and schools in Tallahassee are already competing.

Florida State plays its beach volleyball matches on campus, but its coaching staff brought some members of the team here in mid-November and held a clinic at Sharky's Beach Club for ages 10-18.



Nothing appears to be blocking beach volleyball's path to popularity in Panama City Beach, which sets up as a mecca for the sport with its soft sand and incomparable views.



PCB BEACH VOLLEYBALL CLUB



PCB BEACH VOLLEYBALL CLUB

“The good thing about beach volleyball is it only takes two to field a team, (so participants) have more opportunity to pair up with their age group.”

— Kevin Jones, who sees beach volleyball blossoming in Northwest Florida in coming years

Jones says that Gulf Coast State College women’s volleyball coach Kyle Peck also hosts FSU in the spring for a scrimmage against the Lady Commodores. Every opportunity attracts more people to the sport that Jones has been involved in for a quarter of a century, and he expects that FSU will add a men’s team in the coming years.

Sharing his knowledge at the club level — Jones also is a volunteer coach on Arnold’s indoor volleyball team — is essential to growing the sport from within.

“It’s a year-round activity. Right now we meet on Monday and Wednesday with after-school clinics at Sharky’s (Beach Club),” Jones says. “The monthly fee is \$120, or \$15 per day. We go for an hour and a half on the sand. We have an hour of drills, speed, agility and volleyball drills.

“The last 30 minutes we’ll play three on a side, or have a queen of the court or king of the court” where winning teams continue playing against other pairs in rotation.

Jones says that June, July and August are the heaviest months of participation.

He says that of the club’s 30 members, 16 currently compete in various age-group tournaments. Participation has increased to the extent that Ryan Culpepper has been added to the coaching staff.

“The others mostly use it for offseason training,” Jones says. “It’s great for indoor kids even if they don’t want to compete in tournaments. In beach, it’s only two people per side so they get more touches. When you’re playing with six on a side you might go through a whole rotation and not ever touch the ball.

“With a lot of kids, especially in the 10-14 range in middle school, they gain a lot of confidence just because they’re getting more reps. Serving is a huge deal in middle school. If you can serve it over, most likely you’re going to win. With only two players you’re serving every other time. The more reps helps mentally when you go to indoor.”

As the sports blossoms in Panama City Beach, it may outgrow the existing number of courts available. Jones says that currently there are 11 at the County Pier and three

at Sharky’s, with Sharky’s expected to add two more after spring break.

Jones estimates that in the next three to five years the sport should really take off here.

“I recently reached out to South Walton High School, which was a whole new market for me,” Jones says. “It’s only a half-hour to come over here for them.

“The good thing about beach volleyball is it only takes two to field a team, they have more opportunity to partner up with their age group. There’s no boys (indoor) sport, so what I’ve tried to do with two or three of the players is get their little brothers introduced to it at age 10 or 11. Otherwise, by the time they’re 16 they say, ‘Oh, that’s a girls sport.’”

Arnold student Ethan Elkins has been one of the few boys to stay with it, and Jones says that his skill level has risen to the extent he’s considering a move to California. That not only would put him in close proximity with the best players in his age group, but could open possibilities for competing at the collegiate level.

Jones says that the EVP and NVL tours will be returning next year. He says that both organizations are on about the same level, but NVL has more teams participating.

Jones’ club will host four other tournaments as well, but the linchpin could be getting the AVP to return here with one of the featured events, as it did during the late 1980s.

“One advantage for AVP is you don’t have to have permanent courts,” Jones says. “They can go east and west and put up temporary courts on the beach.”

Such elite activity could accelerate the progress of the high school sport here.

“Obviously, as it picks up we’ll have a ranking system, and the ultimate goal is to go compete with Tallahassee schools at an FHSAA level,” Jones says.

Until then, the PCB Beach Volleyball Club will continue to attract new membership and establish the sport by providing a solid foundation for growth. ●

Anyone interested in joining or gaining more information can contact Jones at (310) 357-6764 or go to pcbbeachvolleyball.com.

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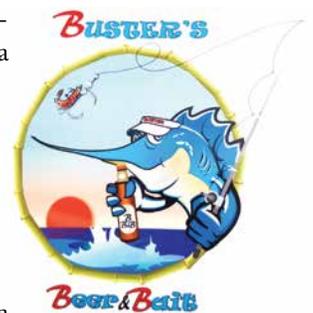
Busting at the Seams

For Paul Busutil, bar business was just the beginning

BY STEVE BORNHOFT

TUCKED NEXT to the cash register is a dog-eared notebook that has been inscribed like a guest book by many hands. It's a log book that might best be called a grog book.

On its pages, regulars, employing the honor system, keep track of how many beers they have downed at Buster's Beer and Bait. Once they reach a specified threshold (in as many sittings as it takes), customers are rewarded with a personalized china beer mug bearing a nickname assigned them by the proprietor.



This ceremony of sorts has ties to Paul Busutil's long and distinguished military career. He wasn't always "Buster." Rather, that was the call sign given him in the course of his 28 years in the U.S. Air Force in which he first specialized as an aircraft mechanic. Busutil and, hey, let's just call him Buster as he would have us do, went on to complete Officer Training School, then served as an air battle manager working with the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) and the Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS).

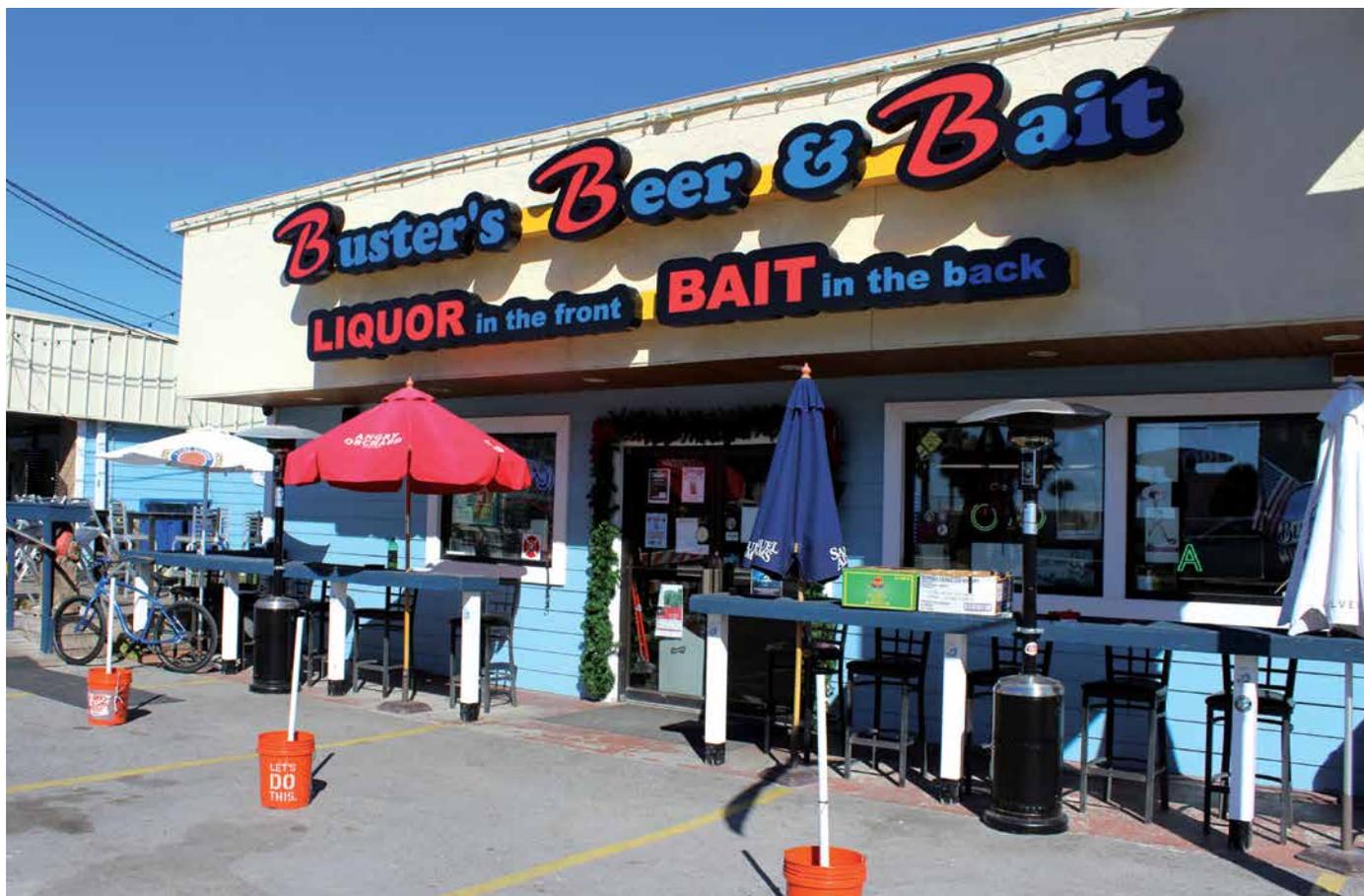
Buster discovered North Florida when stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base, but you might still ask, how does a battle manager become a bar owner?

Buster long harbored a desire to become a self-employed businessman and entrepreneur. Attending night school, he tacked a master's in business administration from Emory Riddle onto his bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland and, when he retired from the Air Force, Buster was in an acquisitive mood.

With a Veteran's Administration loan, he purchased a long neglected liquor store at 5900 Thomas Drive in June 2012 and transformed it into a cheers bar where an endless supply of war and fishing stories are swapped. In addition to the bar, Buster's includes a bait shop — you won't find another beach business where you can buy a Budweiser and a dozen bull minnows at 2 in the morning.

Buster offers this wrinkle, too: His businesses are located not far from the public boat landing on South Lagoon Drive, where parking is at a premium. Buster permits anglers to park their trucks and trailers in a fenced-in yard next to the bait shop and ferries them and their supplies to and from the landing with a golf cart.

"I got a steal on it," Buster says of the location. The twinkle in his eye, paired with a wide grin, gives him the warmth of a big teddy bear, but



his neck and biceps suggest that he could go grizzly if he had to.

His advanced degree and nearly three decades spent working for the Air Force notwithstanding, Buster found that nothing prepares you completely for going into business.

“You’re on the diving board and, at some point, you just have to go for it,” Buster says.

A growing number of customers keep Buster encouraged, serving as an extended family. As his business has gained traction, it’s begun to expand and diversify as well, coalescing into a collection of enterprises known as the Aloha Village.

Building on the success of the bar business, Buster acquired the building immediately to the west at 5908 Thomas Drive. At this writing, it is home to a restaurant, Buster’s Big Kahuna Café; Into the Blue Surf Shop — a surf, stand-up and skate store operated by a friend; Vida Health Food, run by Buster’s wife, Claudia, when she isn’t teaching school at North Bay Haven Academy; and Acies CrossFit gym.

Buster’s Big Kahuna Café features recipes that Buster picked up during his

military travels around the world. A house specialty is Buster Flat Jacks — crepes, really, but Buster favored a more burly term. Dishes feature names that make an impression — Mahi Madness, The Cuban that Went to Hawaii, Egg Central Station.

Of course, those business owners who most succeed are those who help themselves. Buster is an active networker with a strong sense of community. He has a seat on the board of directors at the Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce and is a member of the Grand Lagoon Coalition, an organization that serves to promote the interests of businesses at the east end of Panama City Beach.

“We’re not corporate America,” Buster says, putting on his Coalition hat. “And we are the gateway to the Gulf.” (Grand Lagoon extends east to the pass that unites the Gulf of Mexico and St. Andrews Bay.)

“How ‘bout a beer?” Buster suggests.

I look away from the news channel to study my 19 craft beer options. Bartender Carmin Baxter draws a mug of my beverage of choice.

“One for the grog book,” I say.

Buster busts a broad grin. ●



Paul “Buster” Busuttill realized a dream when he bought an old liquor store, transformed it into “Buster’s Beer and Bait,” and created jobs for folks.

And That's No Bull

Angelo's follows a recipe for success

BY TONY BRIDGES



When development along Front Beach Road increased the competition for motorists' attention in the 1970s, the Butchikas family felt the need for an eye-catcher. In the decades since, their 20,000 pound steer statue has served them well.



IF YOU'VE BEEN TO Angelo's Steak Pit before, you should get a sense of déjà vu from the smells and flavors that greet you on your return visit.

Giving guests a great experience every time is one of the keys to success for the Panama City Beach landmark, according to owner George Butchikas.

"Consistency is important," he said. "We do everything the same way. The steaks are cooked the same way, seasoned the same way, served the same way. People know what they're going to get when they come in here."

It's been that way since 1958.

Back then, the building that is now Angelo's was a lounge called the 98 Club. It was a speakeasy serving booze and burlesque with a little illegal gambling on the side. The actor Andy Griffith and Brother Dave Gardner were known to stop in Panama City Beach and perform sets at the club.

But the place had gotten too rowdy for the locals, so it was shut down.

Butchikas' father, Angelo Gus Butchikas, was a cook in the Army during World War II. When he was discharged, he moved to Pensacola, then to Panama City, where he started a series of restaurants, some of them with partners.

In '58, he decided to strike out on his own and opened Angelo's Steak Pit in the old 98 Club building, using recipes he'd collected while cooking for big crowds in the service. Eventually, his sons joined the family business and helped run the restaurant.

In 1970, there was talk of widening Front Beach Road, where the restaurant is located. George Butchikas and his brother were worried about what the faster-moving traffic would mean for the restaurant.

"We thought everybody would fly right past us and not even notice," he said.

They came up with an attention-grabbing plan: put a 20,000 pound statue of a giant steer in front of the restaurant where it couldn't be missed. They held a contest with a local radio station, offering a cruise for two to the person who came up with the best name for the bull. When someone from Georgia suggested "Big Gus," they knew they had a winner.

(The restaurant's motto to this day is: "Home of Big Gus, the 20,000-pound steer, and that's no bull!")

"Consistency is important. We do everything the same way. The steaks are cooked the same way, seasoned the same way, served the same way. People know what they're going to get when they come in here."

— George Butchikas,
Owner of Angelo's
Steak Pit

Restaurateurs Carolyn and George Butchikas entertain guests from throughout the United States and beyond.



HOLLY GARDNER

Angelo's has now been open nearly six decades and serves an average of 200,000 people between mid-March and the third week of October each year. (The restaurant closes during the winter months.)

Angelo's son George Butchikas eventually bought out his brothers and has been running the restaurant solo since 1989. He says the carefully prepared food — a solid steak-and-potatoes menu — keeps people coming through the door. He said the restaurant cuts its own steaks from quality beef and makes its own seasonings and dressings. The meat is cooked over an open pit fire with oak and hickory. Two big grills out front give customers a chance to see meals being prepared while they wait to get in.

Customers who can't wait until they get to Panama City Beach for a taste of the Angelo's flavor can go online and order the restaurant's signature Vidalia Onion Steak Sauce and the Steak Seasoning.

Occasionally, visitors may notice an addition to the menu. George says the restaurant has a suggestion box, and he pays attention to what his customers want. They asked for steamed vegetables, so he added them. Ditto chicken fingers and Key Lime pie.

Now he's considering putting sweet potatoes on the menu, too.

But he doesn't fiddle with the original steaks and sides. Everything is still cooked according to the same recipes his father used when he opened Angelo's.

"Exactly the same," George says. "Haven't changed anything."

That way, customers who return know the meal they order today will be just as good as the one they had last year and the year before that. The consistency generates loyalty from customers, and their repeat business has helped the restaurant grow, George says.

Those repeat customers also are quick to spread the word about the restaurant. That, and the Internet, have helped make the restaurant as popular as it is. George says Angelo's gets customers in from all over the United States and the Caribbean.

He even got a surprise on one visit to San Juan, Puerto Rico. He was standing on a bluff overlooking the water near Fort San Cristobal when he spotted something familiar.

“There’s a guy walking by with an Angelo’s shirt,” George recalls.

One night recently, George was paged to the restaurant’s lobby where he found an older man holding an infant. The man told him he’d been coming to the restaurant for years and had brought his children, his grandchildren and now his great-grandchild.

The man proudly told George, “I’ve started a tradition.”

The success of the restaurant has allowed George to support a cause that has significant personal meaning for him.

His daughter Camille was born in 1990 and was diagnosed with autism a few years

later. Dealing with the challenges that came with that moved George to help other families in similar situations.

In 1997, he started the George A. Butchikas Foundation for Autism. The foundation provides yearly scholarships to the Early Childhood Autism Program at Florida State University’s Panama City campus. The scholarships allow families that couldn’t otherwise afford it to receive intensive therapy for their autistic children. So far, the foundation has donated about \$450,000. Meanwhile, Camille has grown into an artist and children’s book illustrator.

“The money we’ve raised stays in Bay County to help autistic children and their families,” George says.

And that’s one more tradition that the Butchikas family can be proud of. ●

IF YOU GO:

Angelo’s Steak Pit is located at 9527 Front Beach Road, where you see the giant steer. Hours are 4 p.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, from Memorial Day to Labor Day. The rest of the season, hours are 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., closed Sunday. The restaurant doesn’t accept reservations, so be sure to get there early, especially during the busy summer months.

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Gulf Coast Regional Medical Center



CHOOSE QUALITY AND SAFETY

Gulf Coast Regional Medical Center is a 218-bed acute-care hospital located in Panama City. The hospital was named a Top 100 Hospital by Truven Health Analytic and recently unveiled a 42-bed critical care wing, which includes a 20-bed adult-level Intensive Care Unit and the region's only four-bed Pediatric Intensive Care Unit and an 18-bed (six Level III) Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.



449 W. 23rd St.
(850) 769-8341
gcmc-pc.com

Safety First

FLORIDA'S BEACH WARNING FLAG program uses flags in four colors accompanied by interpretive signs along the beach to explain the meaning of each color. Flags are located approximately one mile apart along the beach. Absence of flags does not assure safe waters. Current beach flag conditions can be found on VisitPanamaCityBeach.com. Sign up to receive text alerts for flag changes.



 **GREEN – LOW HAZARD**
Calm conditions, exercise caution

 **YELLOW – MEDIUM HAZARD**
Moderate surf and/or currents

 **RED – HIGH HAZARD**
High surf and/or strong currents

 **RED OVER RED**
Water closed to public

 **PURPLE**
Dangerous marine life

Wet's Up!



SHIPWRECK ISLAND WATERPARK

(855) 234-3333
12201 Hutchison Boulevard
ShipwreckIsland.com

SHIPWRECK ISLAND WATERPARK

We'll put you in the FUN on Panama City Beach. "Water" you waiting for? Our tropical theme waterpark is filled with attractions to bring smiles to every member of your family. The 20-acre park features lush landscaping, food and beverage outlets and a professionally trained aquatics staff.

**Ocean Motion Wave Pool | Pirate's Plunge Racing Slide
Raging Rapids | Zoom Flume | The Great Shipwreck
Lazy River | Skull Island | The Tadpole Hole | AND MORE!**

Leave No Trace

Take only pictures, leave only footprints

PANAMA CITY BEACH is known for having the “World’s Most Beautiful Beaches,” and we would like to keep it that way for the enjoyment of locals and tourists alike! For this reason, the “Leave No Trace” ordinance was adopted in 2012. Anything you brought to the beach with you should also leave the beach with you. Anything left on the beach overnight could be cleared off the beach by the time you return in the morning. Our goal is to protect our pristine beaches and the natural wildlife, such as nesting sea turtles, by leaving no trace of personal items on the beaches overnight. Please do your part in maintaining our beautiful beaches!

The Leave No Trace ordinance states that all personal items will be removed and disposed of if left on the beach between the hours of 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. These items include, but are not limited to, tents, chairs, toys, umbrellas and coolers. On public beaches or with the upland landowner’s permission, beachgoers may store personal belongings overnight at the toe of the dune. The toe of the dune is the area of the beach immediately seaward of the dune and beach vegetation. To be specific, it is the area of the beach that is furthest from the water that is not in a sand dune or beach access point.

Those who store their personal items overnight do so at their own risk. The county, the city, the Tourist Development Council and the beach maintenance contractor do not assume any liability for any items left on the beach.



SHARE *Your Fun*



Lisa Armbruster shared this image of her daughter playing on the beach, and we love it! Did you get a great shot of your PCB fun? Use the tag **#REALFUNBEACH** when you post it on social media – we'd love to see it!

VisitPanamaCityBeach.com

Book Direct and Save 15%!



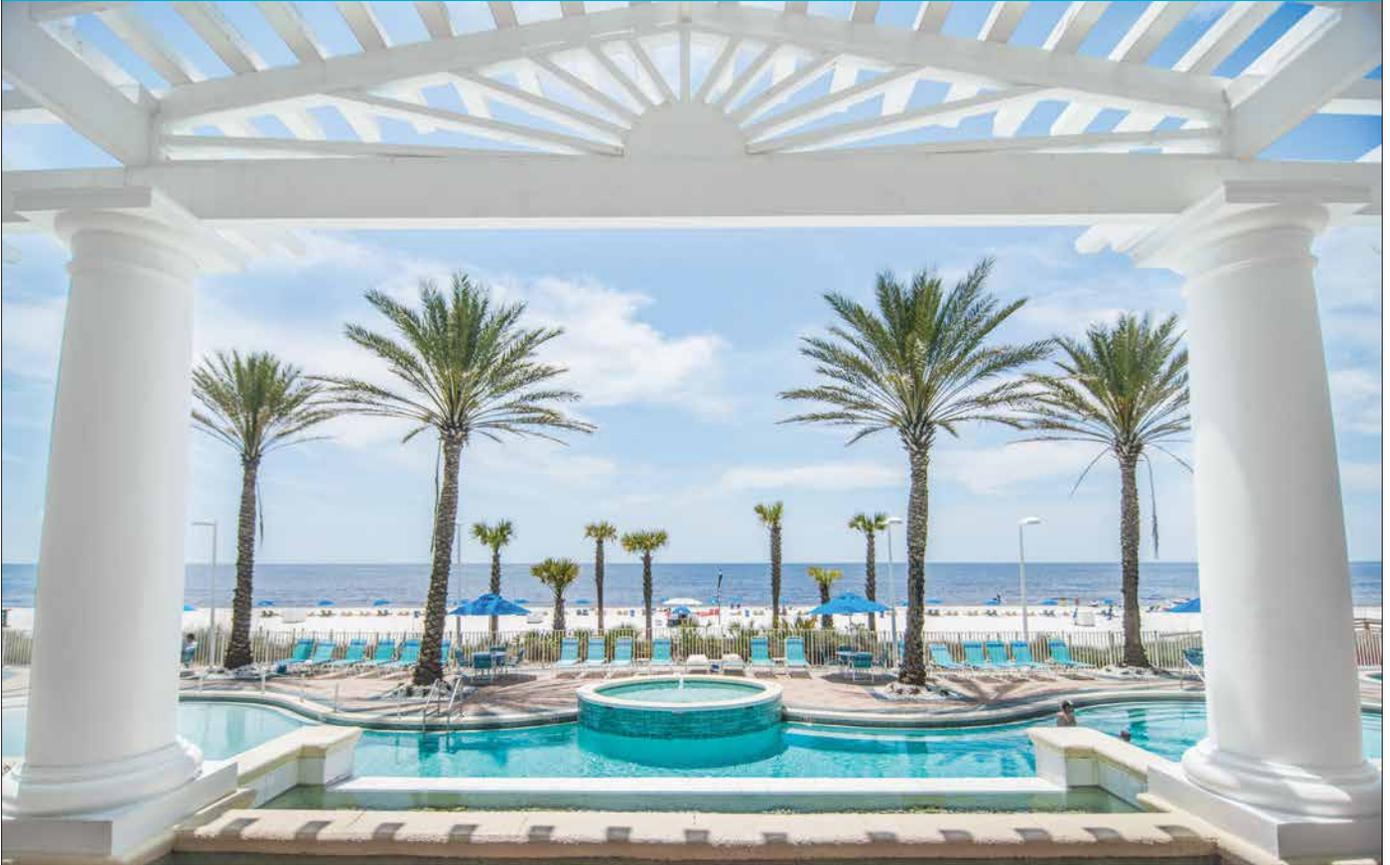
15191 Front Beach Road
(888) 607-0006
SeahavenBeach.com

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Warm Up to Spring Deals!



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(800) 224-4853
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Searching for the perfect spring getaway? You're getting warmer! When you upgrade to a Royal American beach getaway, you get 24-hour customer service, the area's best activities at the best rates, exclusive bonuses and condos to fit every need and budget.

Enjoy a FREE night and complimentary beach chairs when you stay four or more nights! Use promo code "WARM" to claim your **FREE** night and bonus! *Offer valid with travel through 4/30/16.*

*Beach services available at select properties.
Ask your agent for details. Restrictions apply.*