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FALL 2016 MAGAZINE



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EVERYTHING IS BETTER AT BY THE SEA RESORTS!

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46 A STAND-UP GUY Spending time on the water helps keep Tony Banks grounded. The retired Navy diver and owner of the Into the Blue surf shop starts every day atop a stand-up paddleboard that he happily shares with his dog, Dharma.

52 KICK IT IN GEAR Make your vacation equal parts relaxation and recreation. Panama City Beach offers an attractive assortment of things to do when not kicked back on a lounge chair: hiking, biking, diving, bicycling, golfing, paddling and more.

57 IMAGE CONSCIOUS Visitors capture countless images that reflect the essence of our destination while they enjoy fun vacations sure to be relived for years to come. Here are just a few of those memories, which were posted to Instagram.

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24 SHOPPING Three of Panama City Beach's leading clothiers highlight fashions and accessories for men and women that complement a host of activities, ranging from date night to a day at sea.

26 FISHING The redfish, one guide says, "pull hard and bite fast." They can be caught in water a few inches or 100 feet deep on lures ranging from topwater plugs to deepwater jigs. No wonder they have such a following.

30 ATTRACTIONS We take you inside some of Panama City Beach's most luxurious accommodations and spas. For the well-heeled, here are places where you can get well healed and pampered.

34 ECO Camp Helen State Park, on the shores of both Lake Powell and the Gulf of Mexico, was once a company retreat but today welcomes anyone with a desire to experience its natural beauty and varied terrain.

38 DIVING The waters off Panama City Beach are rich in shipwrecks, making it one of the most highly rated dive destinations anywhere. Five of the sites on the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail are quick trips from our marinas.

IN FOCUS

66 EVENTS For many Panama City Beach visitors, fall is the most attractive season of all. Traffic and the temperature subside, but Gulf waters remain warm and inviting, fishing picks up and the events calendar offers lots of enticing options.

74 SPORTS Panama City Beach's investment in Frank Brown Park has proved to be wise and visionary. Recent improvements to the baseball and softball diamonds will ensure that it remains highly competitive.

78 NEIGHBORHOODS When the city of Panama City acquired its downtown marina property from the state, a host of possibilities was born. Today, city officials and consultants are carefully mapping out plans for the area's future.

82 FOOD Much like the glowing creature for which it was named, the Firefly restaurant is something unexpected, a flash of creativity that produces wonderful dining experiences that honor Mother Nature.

88 UNDISCOVERED PCB For lots of folks, St. Andrews State Park is the pier and the jetties. We take you deeper into the park along trails less traveled.

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You don't have to be a professional photographer to take a great picture of Panama City Beach! Here are a few taken by our staff using their phones.



DAVID DEMAREST



DARA ADAMS

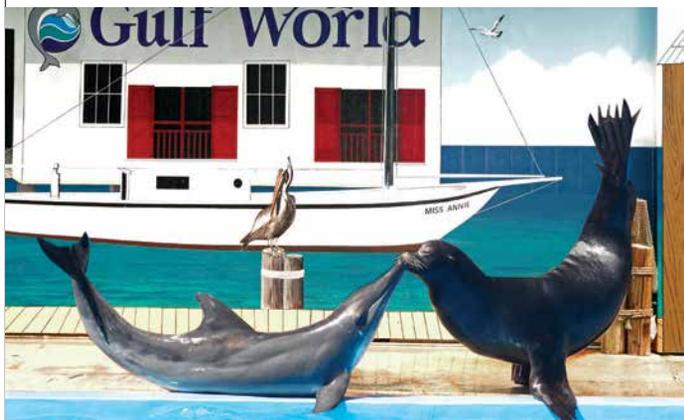


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AS SUMMER TURNS TO FALL in Panama City Beach, we enter into what has long been many locals' favorite time of year. Fall: the water is still warm, but the days begin to cool, and best of all, there always seems to be an amazing event being held in Panama City Beach. From music festivals to celebrations of local seafood, Thanksgiving family fun, or a chance to cruise the area in a classic car or motorcycle — you'll never have to look far for something to do.



In this issue of Visit Panama City Beach Magazine, you'll discover new ways to explore the area following the Northwest Florida Shipwreck Trail ("Down the Diving Trail," p. 38), learn how our nation's wounded heroes are cheered and offered a chance to relax ("Giving Back," p. 62), or take a peek at the future of sporting events in "Winning Edge" (p. 74).

There's more fun to uncover in these pages, from fishing, paddleboarding and hiking info, to opportunities to explore downtown Panama City or pamper yourself at a local spa.

However you decide to spend your fall in Panama City Beach, we're happy to have you here with us and look forward to helping you and your family make great memories that will last a lifetime.

Sunny Regards,

Dan Rowe, President and CEO

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VisitPanamaCityBeach.com

>> 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

>> SOCIAL CABANA

Check out what's happening in Panama City Beach through our range of social media: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Google Plus, YouTube and our Blog.



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@visit_pcb

>> Get Inspired

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



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Panama City Beach

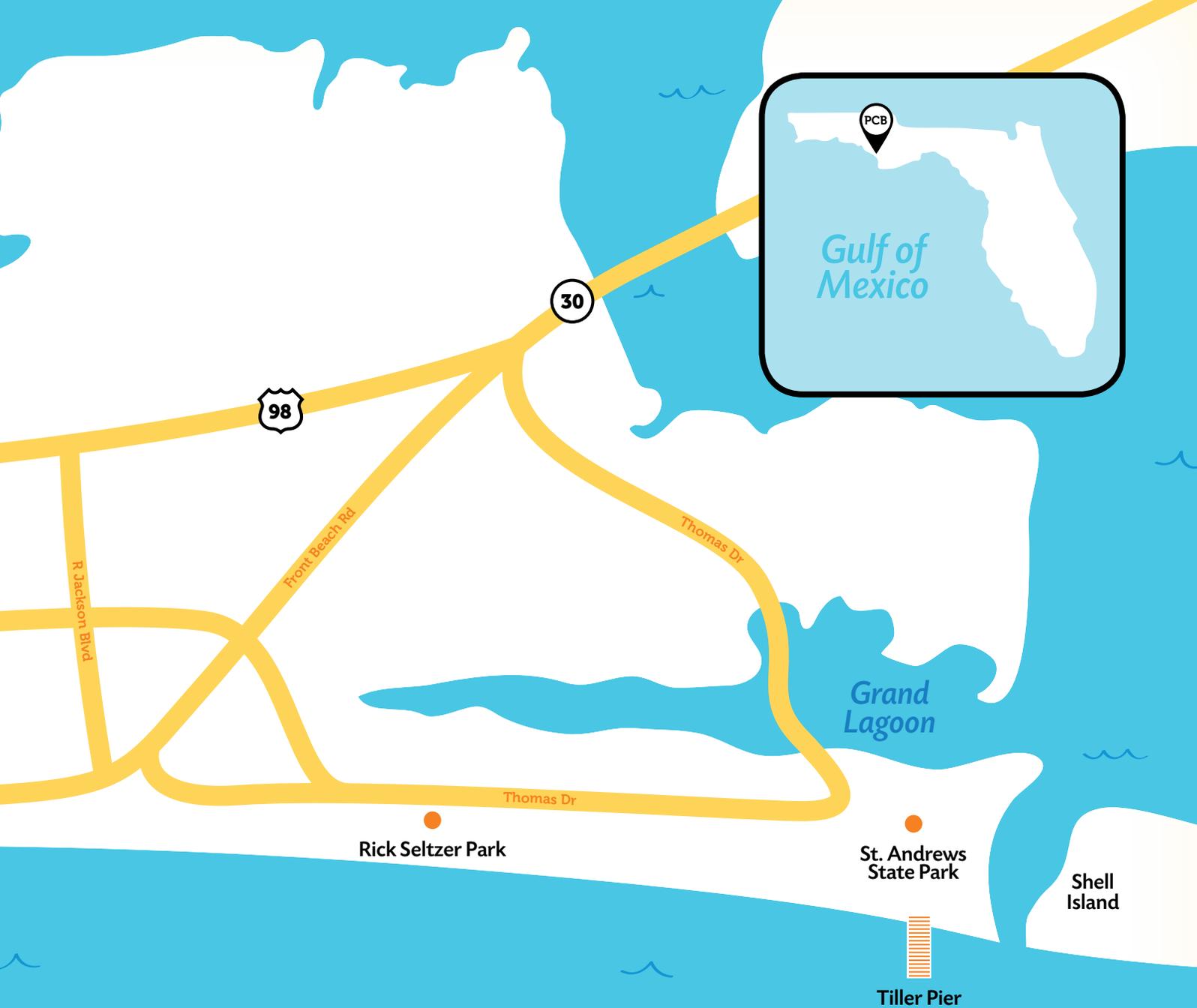
Talk Like a Local

- “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

Natural Treasures

By land and by sea, creatures enrich the Gulf of Mexico experience

BY STEVE BORNHOFT
ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RUSSO

DESERTS CAN BE made to bloom. Just add water. Doubt that? Consider, then, the sands of Panama City Beach, its surf line and the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico extending to the horizon.

Those environments attract and host myriad life forms, a mere small sample of which are represented in the drawing before you. Some, at the start of food chains, are so small as to go unseen; others are too big to be reeled in.

To be sure, all add to the experience of visiting the beach. It is possible to enjoy each on a surface level, but you may also be inclined to go granular — see what we did there? — and seek answers to the questions they invite: How do sand dollars eat? Of what advantage to snowy egrets are yellow feet? All groupers mature first as females! What's that all about?

And, hey, we haven't even gotten around to marine mammals, including that bottlenose leaper who elicits oohs and aahs whenever it takes to the air.



Laughing Gull



Great Blue Heron

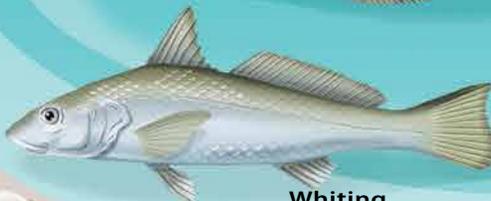


Sandpiper

Flounder



Speckled Sea Trout



Whiting



Redfish



Callico Scallop



Fighting Conch



Coquina Shells

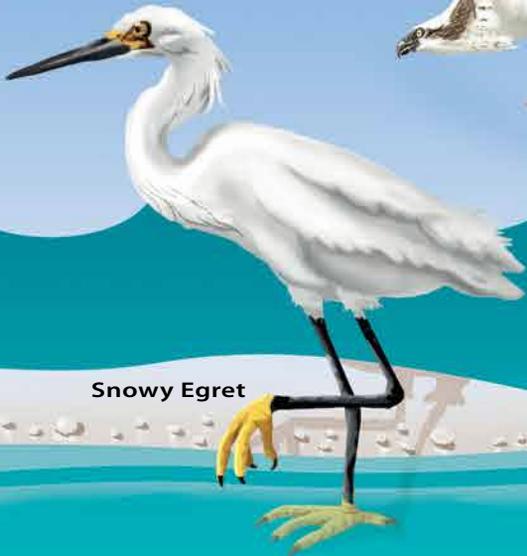
Osprey



Brown Pelican



Snowy Egret



Mahi Mahi



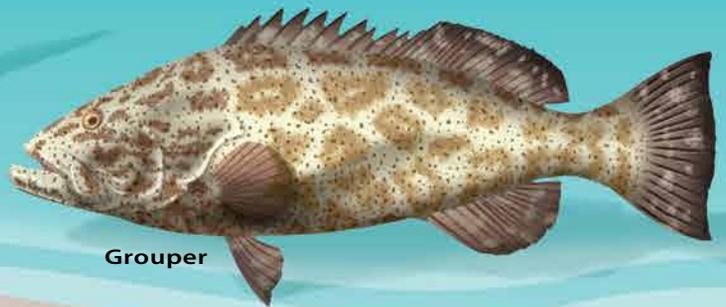
Pompano



Red Snapper



Grouper



Common Nutmeg



Florida Augers



Olive Shell



Alphabet Cone



Sand Dollar





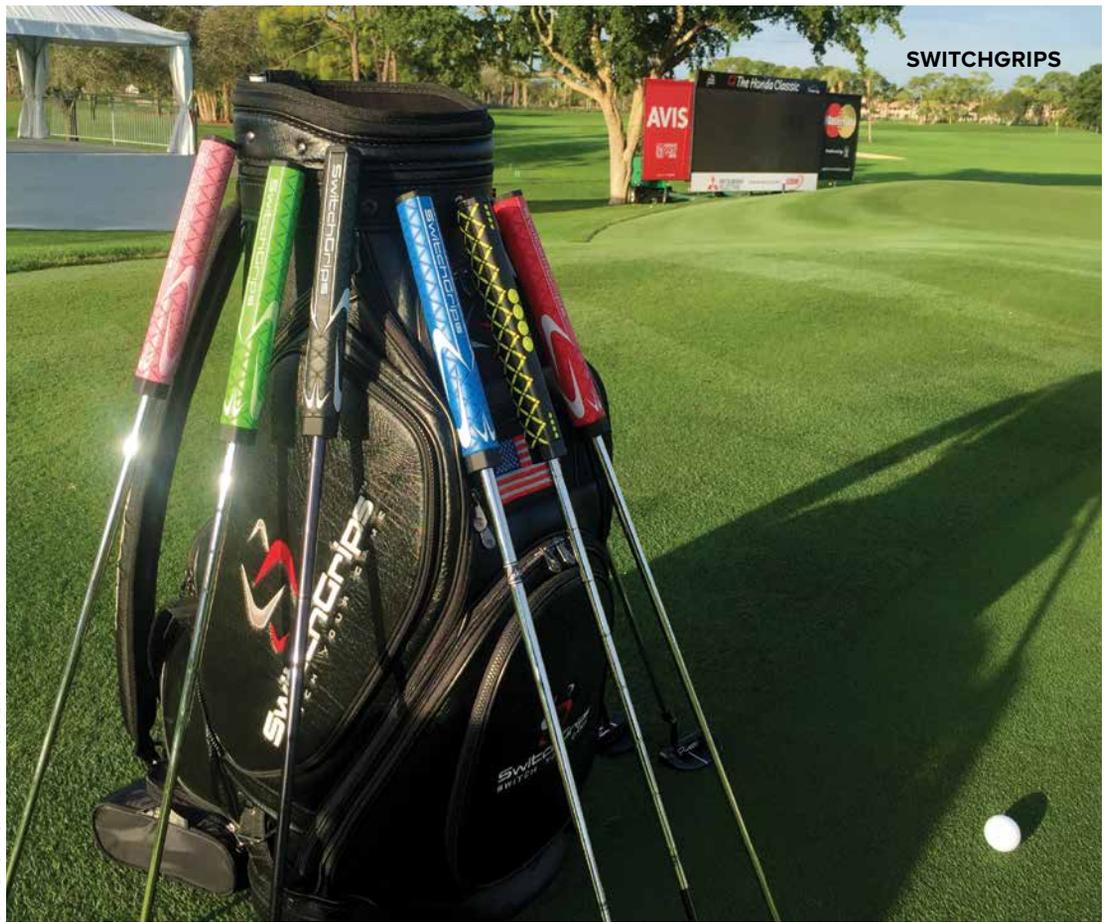
Golfers' Paradise

FOR THE SERIOUS GOLFER — or the lucky beginner — there could be no Panama City Beach souvenir more precious than a hole-in-one. Courses here offer easy-to-reach par 3s that make 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.

SWITCHGRIPS INTERNATIONAL INC.



New Gear for the Links

The well-equipped golfer may wish to consider these advances **BY JOHN MOOSHIE**

EDITOR'S NOTE Golf writer John Mooshie attended the PGA Merchandise Show earlier this year. We asked him to describe the new products on display there that most impressed him.

SWITCHGRIPS

Recently selected as one of golf's "Best New Products," Switchgrips is an innovative new interchangeable putter grip system that allows golfers to customize their favorite putter. The grip shape, size, weight, and color can be changed within minutes and without assistance. A unique three-sided design also includes counterbalance technology that repositions the weight into the golfer's hands which will enhance the player's performance. Switchgrips fit on any conventionally shafted putter. SwitchGripsusa.com

BIION GOLF SHOES

Undoubtedly the busiest and hottest booth at the show, Biion had the attendees buzzing. The first time I wore their shoes on the course, a number of golfers took notice and I was given the best dressed award. They offer 32 different color and pattern combinations for their iconic Oxford silhouettes, giving a new twist to a traditional look. Comfortable would be the single best word to describe the shoes but light weight and great traction are close seconds. BiionFootWear.com

BIIONFOOTWEAR



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Holiday Golf Club

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HolidayGolfClub.com

Signal Hill Golf Course

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SignalHillGolfCourse.com

IMPERIAL COOLING TOWEL



LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

M-TRACER

M-Tracer is a golf swing analyzer that provides immediate access to swing data providing the golfer with instant feedback. It's club-mounted, easily and quickly fastens to the club's grip, and provides the key swing metrics such as clubhead speed, angle of attack, face angle, and the club path. It's highly accurate, gives a 360-degree view of the swing, will fasten to most club grips, and recalibrates with every swing. Epson.com/golf



LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

ONCORE GOLF

Golfers who can't seem to hit the ball straight may want to put an OnCore ball on the tee. Legal and approved by the USGA, OnCore balls have a hollow metal core which shifts the weight of the ball towards the perimeter, increasing the inertia and reducing the amount of side-spin. Less spin means less hook, less slice,

a straighter shot, and maybe a better score. It also putts better because the perimeter weighting gives it a more stable roll similar to "wider track tires." OnCoreGolf.com

HENRY-GRIFFITTS GOLF CLUBS

Henry-Griffitts was the first company to institute personal club fitting, and while some major golf companies now sell "fitted clubs," H-G is still the best at fittings. The key to a good golf game is being able to properly strike the ball. In order to do that, your clubs need to fit your body and your swing. H-G insures you'll have the right equipment to change your golf game for the better. They also offer a 100 day fit warranty to insure that your clubs will perform exactly as expected. Henry-Griffitts.com

PNP RAKE WEDGE SERIES

PNP is an Australian company that has patented a new line of sand and lob wedges. Their products stand out because of a Dual Bounce Rail Design that performs in sand, rough, tight lies, and hard pan. The zero heel bounce and rails on the sand wedge keep it from twisting or turning while the leading edge on the lob wedges ensures crisp contact by entering the hitting area sooner than standard wedges. PNPGolf.com

IMPERIAL COOLING TOWEL

The incredible technology of this towel, when applied to the head, neck, or any pulse point on the body, regulates body

temperatures to counteract overheating. It's perfect for keeping golfers or anyone working in the Florida heat a lot cooler. The chemical-free cooling solution becomes activated when you wet the towel, wring it out, and then wave it. Washable, reusable, and guaranteed to never wear out, the towel means drier shirts that will not cling or saturate. ImperialSports.com



LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

MISSION BELT

While there were a number of belt companies at the show, I thought the Mission Belt stood out. It features a leather crack-free guarantee and, instead of holes, it allows for quarter-inch adjustments for a perfect fit even if you lose or gain some weight — or have a big lunch at the 19th Hole. The release lever makes the belt easy on and easy off. (Which can be important when going through airport security.) But the best feature is that their buckles and leathers are interchangeable so you can mix and match for unique combinations. MissionBelt.com

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Fun Fashions for Fall

FALL USHERS IN A BRISK BREEZE, lattes and an excuse to layer sweaters over our sundresses and shorts. Whether it's for a sunset stroll, a dockside dinner, an al fresco event or beachside campfire there are ways to cozy up and still be in style. You won't need to layer on as much sunscreen, but the layering on of fall fashion trends can lead to a reinvented look. With a variety of specialty, locally owned shops and boutiques you are guaranteed to find a fashionable fall piece so that your days in the sun are uninterrupted.



LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

1



LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

2



LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

3

1 COASTAL CASUALS

A date night at your favorite beachside restaurant, a chili cook off with friends or a night out on the town with your girls calls for unique accessories and bohemian accents. A chic hat, studded bag, earthy jewelry, fringe heels and a boho dress won't go unnoticed at any event on your fall calendar.

[800 S. Pier Park Drive](#)
[\(850\) 234-1101](#)

2 THE FLORIDA HOUSE

Fall doesn't have to be limited to drab hues and unflattering fits. Sundresses are appropriate anytime of year and white doesn't go out of style on sugar white sands. Beach chic consists of lace dresses and baubles of emerald greens and aqua blues. Put on a knit sweater and cute boots to complete the fall concert look.

[200 Bluefish Drive](#)
[\(850\) 234-5544](#)

3 HY'S TOGGERY

Fishing for the ideal outfit to wear to sea, a fishing tournament or just beers with your buddies? AFTCO (American Fishing Tackle Co.) lures you in with a variety of hats and comfortable long sleeved fishing tees. A pair of Costa 580 lenses top off the look. Stay warm and look cool.

[700 S. Pier Park Drive](#)
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COMING SOON

Beall's Outlet





A Fish with a Following

Inshore anglers love redfish **BY STEVE BORNHOFT**



CHASIN' THE SUN

CAPT. MATT SMITH is unequivocal in his praise of redfish.

“It is the most valuable fish we have in the bay,” he says, “both to recreational fishermen and light-tackle guides.”

Smith, a guide himself, entertains clients from around the country who arrive in Panama City Beach with a desire to catch redfish, specifically.

They may have seen redfishing segments on fishing shows (like Chasin’ the Sun) or footage from redfish tournaments. In any event, Smith says, “The redfish is a beautiful, dynamic sportfish with a following.”

And it is one that state fish and wildlife officials have taken recent steps to protect.

Meeting April 13, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission approved an executive order reducing the daily bag limit for redfish in the Northwest Region of the state to one from two. The lowered limit went into effect on May 1.



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 cobia 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.

Commissioners fast-tracked the change by choosing to put it in place without first conducting public hearings. They were influenced by fishing guides, including members of the Panhandle Guides Association, who reported seeing and catching fewer redfish as a result of increased pressure on the resource. Many fishing guides who formerly took clients offshore have redirected their efforts and moved inshore to target species including redfish due to increasingly restrictive regulations pertaining to grouper and snapper.

Smith, of Panama City Beach, is a member of the Panhandle Guides Association — the PGA doesn't refer just to golfers anymore — which has pledged as a group not to keep any redfish anymore.

"It's like the largemouth bass," Smith said. "You don't go to Lake Guntersville in Alabama and keep five-pound bass. People recognize that those fish are just too valuable to kill. People are starting

to think about redfish in the same way. They are of tremendous value to the local economy."

For another Panama City Beach guide, Capt. Jeff Moorman of First Light Charters (CharterFishing-MoormanBrothers.com), the appeal of the redfish to anglers is simple.

"They pull hard and, a lot of the time, they bite fast," he says. "And you can catch them year-round."

Moorman likes to take clients redfishing in the pass to St. Andrew Bay. There, a preferred bait is juvenile blue crabs, which are easily scooped up as they drift near the surface with the tide.

"The bigger fish are in the pass," Moorman says, many of them exceeding the upper, 27-inch end of the slot limit for reds. Fishermen using crabs after sundown often hear big redfish blow up on their baits before they see or feel a strike.

Moorman uses live baits exclusively throughout the year when pursuing redfish. Smith



(PanamaCityInShore.com) uses live baits, only, in the summer months when feeding periods are short and he is not afforded a lot of time to experiment with artificial presentations. But he uses lures — spoons, topwater plugs and soft-plastic baits and even flies — at other times of the year.

Moorman, like Smith, supports the reduced bag limit.

“If there are a hundred fish out there, that’s now enough for 100 clients instead of 50,” he said. “We have to protect the resource so that we’ll have fish for the future.”

Redfish can range in color from a silvery white when they run in the surf to a rich copper or bronze in inshore waters. They feature one or more tail spots. Their mouths open downward, making it

seem unlikely that they would hit a topwater lure, but they do, often aggressively.

Juvenile redfish, notes the Fish and Wildlife Commission on its website, lead an inshore existence until they reach roughly 30 inches in about four years. They then migrate to become part of the nearshore population of redfish. Indeed, as Smith notes, it’s possible to catch a redfish in a foot of water or 60 feet. The state record redfish weighed 58 pounds, 5 ounces.

Redfish, or red drum, says the FWC, are “prodigious spawners that produce tens of millions of eggs. Spawning season is from about August through December in passes, inlets and lagoon estuaries around the state. During spawning season, redfish use special muscles rubbing against their air bladder to produce a drumming sound that accounts for their alternative name.”

Amanda Nalley, an FWC spokeswoman, said the commission moved quickly to authorize the executive order as a temporary measure in April “because the fishery is of such a high economic and social value in the northwest part of the state. The commission felt it was necessary to take immediate action as a stop-gap measure while FWC staff completes a stakeholder engagement process and conducts its usual, open public process.”

Moving beyond the executive order, the FWC reviewed a draft rule at its meeting in Apalachicola on June 24. That rule will be the subject of a public hearing and commissioners may then vote to make it permanent at their meeting at Amelia Island on Sept. 8 and 9.

“I hope they do,” Smith said. “The one-fish limit is the best thing that has happened to us in a while.” ●

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LAPS OF LUXURY

Opulence, decadence and, oh, the views

BY HANNAH BURKE

PANAMA CITY BEACH IS, undeniably, a resort town, attracting millions of visitors each year. Along this famously beautiful stretch of white sand beach, visitors can find a wide selection of accommodations that strive to provide the definitive vacation experience. While many specialize in family fun, some take a decidedly more luxurious approach. For the vacation when you just want to be pampered, here are a few of Panama City Beach's top resort and spas to consider.

RESORTS

En Soleil Boasting luxury under the sun, En Soleil offers guests a stay in a beachside paradise. The twin condo towers stretch 15 stories high, offering spacious and opulent interiors with premium views of the Emerald Coast. With only three apartments on each level, privacy is paramount at En Soleil. The complex is also furnished with recreational amenities, including a 24-hour fitness center, quick access to the Hombre Golf Club's courses and a beautiful pool deck overlooking the world's most beautiful beaches. Guests have 6,500



SHERATON BAY POINT GOLF RESORT & SPA



SHERATON BAY POINT

square feet of Mediterranean-style swimming pools to choose from, two hot tubs, two grand waterfall features and two circular waterfall fountains. The resort provides on-site assistance and check-in at any time of day, ensuring your visit is one of leisure and repose.

Beach Houses at Carillon Beach For those seeking a more secluded vacation space, the beach homes of Carillon Beach provide a private, tranquil beach idyll. With 104 acres of rental homes located between scenic Lake Carillon and the Gulf of Mexico, Carillon Beach is one of Panama City Beach's hidden gems. Homes are seaside-chic, complete with charming decks and breezy interiors that keep the beach vibe with you at all times. Visitors within the gated community can explore quaint trails winding

through the property that highlights Florida's natural beauty and rich history. Downtown Carillon borrows design elements from the French Quarter to provide an attractive selection of restaurants and unique shopping experiences. Visit just once, and you may decide to make Carillon Beach your home away from home.

Sterling Beach Resort Sterling Beach Resort provides the ultimate beach condo experience. Situated on Thomas Drive, guests of the resort can enjoy more than 300 feet of sandy beachfront along the south side of this 5 acres of beautifully landscaped property. For vacationing couples or larger family groups, Sterling Beach has 92 units with up to four bedrooms to meet your needs. Soak up sun in the Gulf-facing pool and Jacuzzi area, or stay active in the property's fitness center. The resort is just moments away from some of Panama City Beach's favorite seafood restaurants, chartered fishing boats and historic St. Andrews State Park.

Sheraton Bay Point Sheraton Hotels and Resorts are known worldwide for placing their guests in the lap of luxury, and its Panama City Beach site is no exception. The former Marriott property on the Bay Point Resort was purchased by Sheraton Hotels and Resorts in 2015 and since then has undergone a \$30 million makeover, with a complete remodeling of rooms, dining



BAY POINT SPA LOUNGE

areas and business centers. Sheraton Bay Point Resort will have all of its facilities available this fall and will be ready to kick off the season with a decidedly upscale approach to the resort experience. Visitors will have access to three pools, tennis courts, two championship golf courses and the Serenity Spa.

Emerald Beach Resort Located in the heart of Panama City Beach, Emerald Beach Resort puts you in the center of the action. Guests can enjoy the added amenities of an on-site Starbucks or enjoy a cocktail at Sky Bar, located in the glassed-in walkover that arcs over Front Beach Road, or in their beach side Tiki Bar. Pier Park (Panama City Beach's hottest spot for shopping and dining) is only a mile away, and the resort is perfectly positioned to take advantage of the breathtaking view of the emerald waters of the Gulf of Mexico from which it takes its name.

SPAS For a truly relaxed and luxurious vacation, a quick stop — or even a full day — in one of the area's premier spas is a must. Let your worries and tensions melt away while enjoying a massage, facial, manicure or pedicure. Spas offer the ultimate opportunity to pamper yourself, and the perfect treat to top off your vacation.

Serenity Spa at Bay Point Resort A featured jewel of the new Sheraton Bay Point Resort is the full-service Serenity



BAY POINT RESORT

Spa, a luxurious sanctuary where you can relax and enjoy peaceful pampering and treatment. A local favorite, this spa offers seven different types of massage therapy and four unique body treatments to leave you feeling rejuvenated. A popular request is the Signature Serenity Customized Facial, a treatment tailored to your skin's unique needs, then paired with a neck and facial massage.

Couples massage treatments provide a perfect opportunity to recharge before a night on the town or unwind on your way to a lazy day on the beach. Pedicure and manicure treatments are a quick fun treat, while those wanting a full makeover can select salon treatments. Guests can spend time in the spa area before and after treatments in the comfortable and private relaxation areas, take advantage of the sauna and steam rooms, or head out to enjoy the adjacent 10,000-square-foot zero-entry tropical resort pool.

Salon Baliage & Spa in Carillon Beach Resort Salon Baliage and Spa mirrors the exclusive beach community vibe of Carillon Beach in the design of their private spa. Choose from packages like the "Island Package" — a Grapefruit Facial combined with the Coconut Lime Sugar Scrub and Coconut Lime Massage — or the "Queen for a Day" — a Swedish massage, European Facial, pedicure, manicure and hair treatment with styling. Body treatments like the "Sea Salt Glow" will leave you rejuvenated after a day at the beach, or just add an extra treat to your vacation experience.

The salon, owned by Joni Day, frequently provides specials for its resort guests, and wedding and special occasion services are provided by professional hair and makeup artists. ●



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Camp Helen State Park

History, natural beauty and a supportive community of volunteers

BY JEFF NEIDERMAN

Natural Diversions

SET OUT TO

EXPLORE local state parks and beaches 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, ecotourists 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.

UNDER A CANOPY of outstretched live oak, hickory and cedar branches — where the Spanish moss hangs like the beards of conquistadors — a modern-day traveler can drift back in time at Camp Helen State Park and also glide through dramatically different ecosystems with only the wave of a paddle.

Surrounded on three sides by water and preserved for generations to come, Camp Helen State Park is exceptional in many respects. Here, visitors can easily amble across seven distinct ecosystems within about 180-acres of natural Florida land that shows traces of at least 4,000 years of history.

For kayakers and paddleboarders, the journey extends into two distinct landscapes. Only a few brisk paddle strokes from the massive, sprawling oaks overhead at the kayak launch area, the water opens north to Florida's largest coastal dune lake, Lake Powell. In the opposite direction, the shallow, brackish water meanders past sea-oat speckled islands toward the white sand dunes of the beach

and, at opportune times when the Phillips Inlet pass is open, runs all the way out into the Gulf of Mexico.

That side of Camp Helen State Park is sparsely populated even in the height of visitor season, which is one of the main selling points, according to proponents of the park.

"The unique feature (of Camp Helen State Park) is that you can have a beach-based experience that is casual and comfortable," said Lynn Cherry, president of the Friends of Camp Helen State Park. "You don't have to be surrounded by hundreds of people. You can have your own space."

However, the natural setting and the quiet beach is not all Camp Helen State Park has to offer. While the history of the land dates back to prehistoric times of the Native Americans, Camp Helen State Park's more modern artifacts tell an interesting story as well.

In 1928, Robert E. Hicks purchased 185 acres of land overlooking Philips Inlet and built a summer home for his wife, Margaret, who named the



compound Loch Lomond. At the time, Florida's population was only about 1 million people. (Today it is about 20 million.)

Robert died shortly after, and Margaret took in renters as a way to provide an income for her daughter and herself. She eventually sold the property, and from 1945 to 1987, Avondale Textile Mills of Sylacauga, Alabama, ran a company retreat there under the name "Camp Helen." It was complete with block-walled bungalows, a cafeteria and recreation hall, skating rink and movie house, some of which is still standing.

In 1996, with the property being eyed for commercial development, a grass-roots effort forged by citizens led to the state of Florida purchasing the site for \$13.5 million.

"It was the citizens that said, 'Hey Florida, this is important,'" Cherry says. "We wanted Camp Helen to be a state park, and worked with the state park system to make sure if the state bought it they would be good stewards of the land."

Cherry was one of the local voices who led the charge to have the park protected. Helen Schroeder, another founding member of Friends of Camp Helen State Park, wrote an article to the Panama City News Herald stating the reasons the land ought to be preserved. A large group of

citizens coalesced behind their efforts to have the land designated a state park.

After a more than a year-long campaign to protect the park, the purchase of the land pushed their dream toward reality. In March 1997, Camp Helen was designated a state park. For a time, Gulf Coast State College had sights set on developing a portion of the land for an environmental education center, and the Friends of Camp Helen State Park haven't let the idea of using the land as educational tool vanish.

Because of its history of protection from development, Camp Helen State Park provides many opportunities, from fishing to hiking to biology to archaeology. In fact, the park is home to several Indian burial sites. Prehistoric shell middens and mounds found on the property indicate that humans lived in the area more than 4,000 years ago.

"What's present on the land is a great opportunity for environmental studies," Cherry said. "From biology to archaeology, it is an incredible outdoor classroom."

Camp Helen State Park is designated as an archeological and historic site. It features a walking tour of the historic structures, including the log lodge built in 1928 known as the Hicks House. And if a break is in order, visitors can relax on rocking chairs, picnic, swim, stroll along the

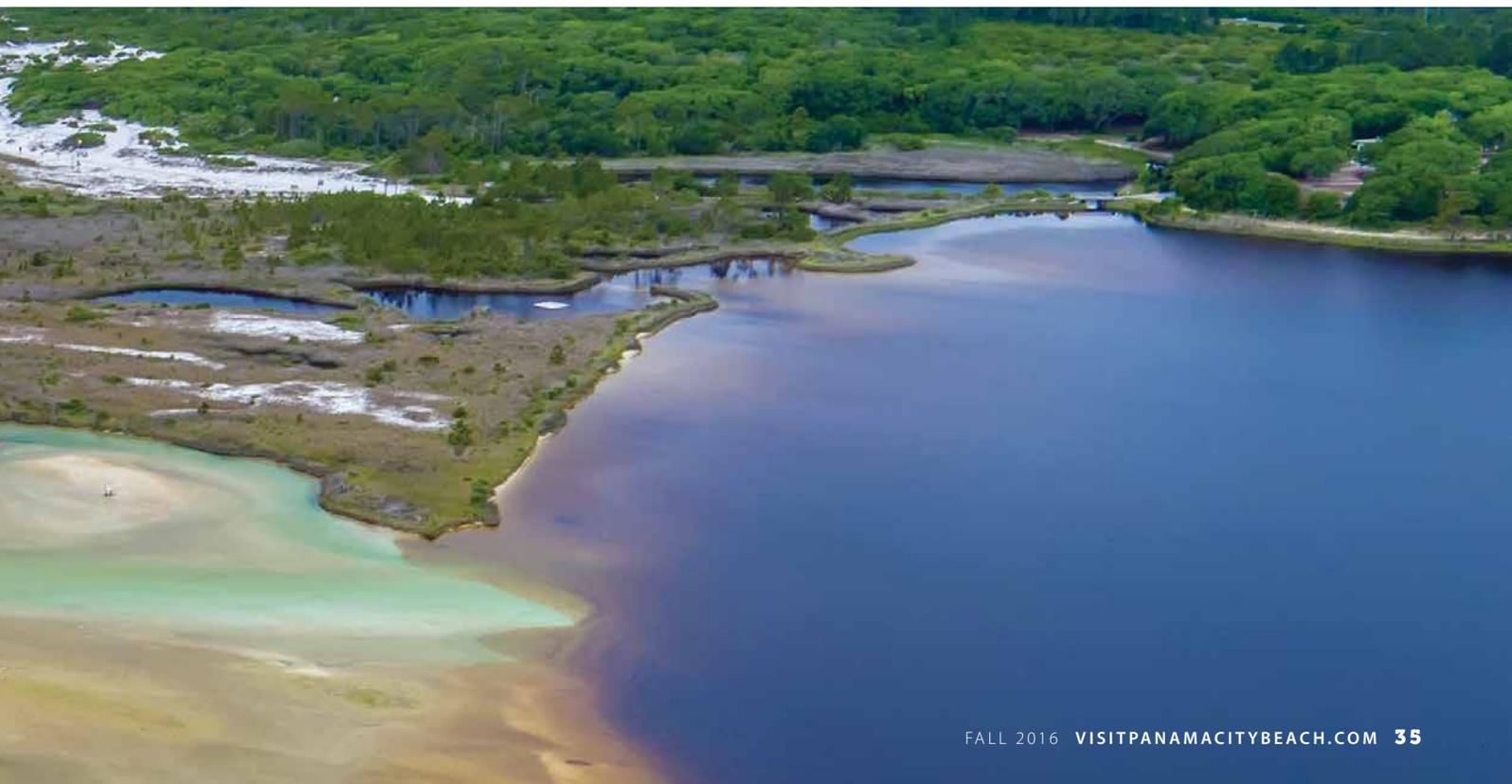
"What's present on the land is a great opportunity for environmental studies. From biology to archaeology, it is an incredible outdoor classroom." — Lynn Cherry, president of the Friends of Camp Helen State Park

beach, go bird-watching, fishing, canoeing, kayaking or stand-up paddleboarding.

Covering nearly 900 acres, Lake Powell is the largest coastal dune lake in Florida, formed by freshwater backing up behind the narrow stretch of beach sand separating it from the Gulf of Mexico. When the lake level rises high enough, it can naturally overwhelm the sand and blow out into the Gulf.

"People get really excited when that happens," said Wesley Myers, park manager. "It's almost like they wait for the right day."

The pass used to be open perpetually. When Avondale Mills occupied the camp, it opened an artificial inlet to allow passage of boats from the lake to the Gulf for deep-sea fishing. Now that the park system has possession of the land, the preferred



method of maintaining the inlet is to let it run its natural course, though the county has also occasionally used heavy equipment to keep lake levels from rising too high.

Park rangers check the lake levels daily to determine if the pass should be opened to lower the water level. Shortly after a “blow out,” some small, flat-bottom boats can even traverse the pass to take advantage of Lake Powell fishing, although caution ought to be exercised in the days following a pass opening, as the water initially runs out like a rapid river.

For fishing enthusiasts, pompano, black drum and flounder have been caught in the lake and off the beach. Bass are found in the lake’s northern reaches. Bird-watching volunteers and visitors have reported spotting as many as 1,000 gulls and terns on a sandbar at one time, as well as eagles, herons, plovers, ospreys and many more. If you keep your eyes peeled, you might also spot deer, foxes, coyotes, woodpeckers, squirrels and owls, and there have also been reports of alligators, beaver dams and what appeared to be evidence of bear traffic.

While the Friends of Camp Helen State Park grew out of an effort to preserve the land, they continue efforts to

preserve, maintain and improve the park through volunteer projects, community events and fundraising. Along with a series of concerts and guided walking tours, the Friends of Camp Helen State Park recently undertook a kayaking program to raise funds for the park.

The default tagline used for the venture is “Paddle Lake Powell.”

“All of our money stays in the park,” Cherry said. “We figured that if we’re on the world’s largest coastal dune lake, let’s get people on the water.”

Kayaks cost \$10 per hour for a one-person kayak, and \$15 hour for a tandem kayak. All of the funds go back into Camp Helen State Park to support maintenance of the facilities and research and interpretive programs. If a local teacher wants to introduce students to archaeology or biology, the funds give Camp Helen State Park staff the opportunity to buy school supplies for those visits, which preserves the educational value of the land.

“As our community grows, it becomes more and more important to protect this



treasure,” Cherry said. “Please consider joining the Friends, volunteering or making a donation.”

The Friends of Camp Helen State Park is a citizen-support organization. Anyone interested in becoming active in the Friends of Camp Helen State Park, can join at FriendsOfCampHelen.org. Kayak reservations can also be made on the website.

The park is open from 8 a.m. until sundown, 365 days a year. Admission is \$4 per vehicle (limit 8 people per vehicle); \$2 for pedestrians, bicyclists and extra passengers. ●

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Diving Panama City Beach

THE NO. 1

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.

Down the Diving Trail

Explore Panama City Beach's stops along the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail

STORY BY JASON DEHART // PHOTOS BY DAVID BENZ

IN THE AQUAMARINE DEPTHS off Panama City Beach, Pensacola, Destin and Port St. Joe, divers will discover 12 nautical ghosts highlighted by the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail. This collection of tugs and warships, sunk over a period of many years, was designated a diving trail by the Florida Department of State in 2012 to create opportunities for ecological and recreational tourism. The trail was developed by the department's Underwater Archaeology Team, in partnership with several waterfront communities.

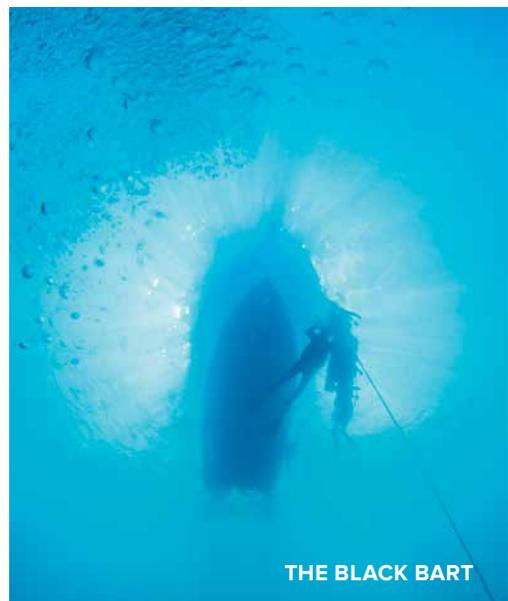
Five of the best dives on the trail are located right off the shores of Panama City Beach. These are the twin FAMI tugs, USS Strength, USS Chippewa, USS Accokeek and the Black Bart. An interactive website features videos of each wreck, and an official shipwreck trail passport is available for divers to log their adventures.

THE FAMI TUGS

The "Twin Tugs," as they're often known, are a pair of tugboats that were sunk by the Florida Aquatic Marine & Institute, Inc., (FAMI) in 2003. The tugs were surplus Navy ships and part of a fleet of four vessels abandoned by a defunct corporation in a Panama City-area bayou. The vessels — 85 and 95 feet long — rest at a depth of about 100 feet, and are 11 miles from the St. Andrew Bay pass. The tugs originally came to rest nose-to-nose but a storm lifted one on top of the other, creating an interesting conjoined wreck that shows the power of nature.

THE BLACK BART

Originally christened as the Vulcano del Golfo in the 1970s, the Black Bart was an offshore oilfield supply ship that was one of the first vessels to be sunk in 1993 as part of the local artificial reef program. It was renamed the Black Bart in honor of Charles "Black Bart" Bartholomew, a Navy salvage captain and sport diver who championed the cause of artificial reefs in Panama City Beach. The ship is 185 feet long and rests upright in



THE BLACK BART





USS ACCOKEEK

times as a training hulk for salvage divers in Panama City Beach. She was sent to the bottom for the last time in 1987 during an explosive test performed by the Navy Diving and Salvage Training Center. She settled on her side in 76 feet of water but was later righted by Hurricane Opal in 1995. Her average depth is 65 feet; time and saltwater worked to separate her bow from the rest of the ship, now allowing divers to easily swim between the two sections. And, like many other artificial reefs that have spent sufficient time underwater, a wide variety of marine life populates both sections.

USS ACCOKEEK

This powerful, 143-foot tug began its service life in 1944 in Orange, Texas, and roamed the planet as a fleet tug hauling damaged ships in for maintenance. She served in the Pacific, crossed the Panama Canal, worked in Lake Michigan and in places as geographically diverse as Newfoundland and the South Atlantic. In 1987, she, too, was given over to the Navy's diving school in Panama City Beach for salvage and ordinance training. After being repeatedly sunk and refloated, the Accokeek was stuffed with explosives and sunk for the last time in 2000 at a depth of 100 feet.

USS CHIPPEWA

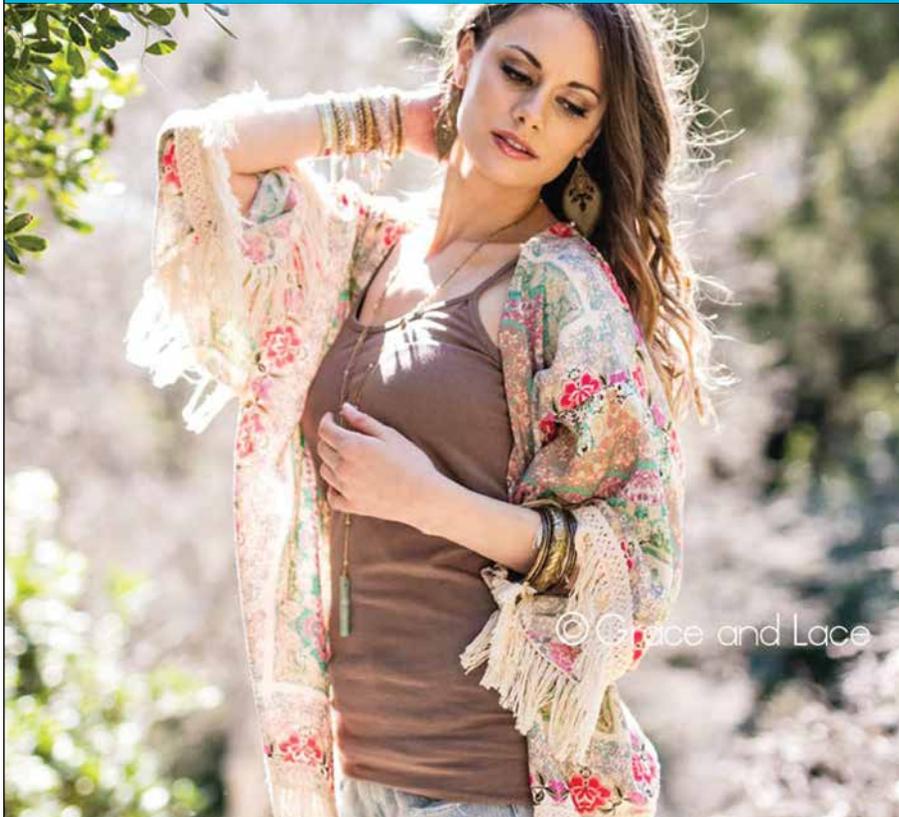
Built in South Carolina and launched in 1942, the 205-foot U.S. Navy tugboat USS Chippewa was once the fastest vessel of its kind. She performed towing and salvage duty from the Caribbean to Newfoundland and laid mooring buoys in Casablanca. She was retired in 1961 and handed off to the Navy's Experimental Dive Unit for explosive tests in 1989. In 1990, the Chippewa was sunk using 37 explosive charges and today sits upright on the bottom in 100 feet of water. ●

about 80 feet of water. The top of the ship rises to a depth of about 45 feet, which makes it a prime location for open water certification of student divers. The biggest highlight for divers on the Black Bart is seeing a goliath grouper, which can grow up to eight feet in length and weigh as much as 800 pounds.

USS STRENGTH

The 184-foot Strength was built in a Seattle shipyard in 1943 and commissioned in 1944. After serving her country well in the Pacific during World War II, she returned home in 1946 and was placed in reserve status. She was decommissioned in the late 1960s but still was useful to the Navy, which sank and refloated her many

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FROM
Market
TO TABLE



Bazaars Offer Healthy Produce and More

BY HANNAH BURKE // PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BOINI

There's a satisfaction that comes with knowing where your food comes from, understanding how it was grown and learning how it got to you. Farmers markets enable anyone to join the farm-to-table movement. A quick stop and you can pick the freshest, healthiest produce in the area, all while supporting the people who grew it. The additional appeal of crafts handmade by local artisans has folks flocking to local farmers markets as soon as they open!

The Grand Lagoon Waterfront Market is just one of the local farmers markets, attracting visitors every weekend year-round. Opened in 2012, this waterfront market is located next to Capt. Anderson's Restaurant by the Grand Lagoon Bridge. It's staffed by volunteers, who work to assist the sellers and support the local agricultural efforts. With unique craft and boutique booths intermingled with food stalls, there's a little something for everybody.



A formidable bear, albeit wooden, stands guard over jars of honey at a Panama City Beach farmers market. The markets attract not just growers and purveyors of sweet things to eat, but artisans as well.



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Markets Galore

Panama City Beach Artist, Musicians and Farmers Market

Friday–Saturday, from 8 a.m.–2 p.m.; 437 Richard Jackson Blvd. at Edgewater Shopping Center, Panama City Beach; (850) 774-5367.

A market that places emphasis on specialty crafts, art and musical entertainment.

Carillon Farmers Market

Every Monday from 8 a.m.–9 p.m.; 100 Carillon Market Street, Panama City Beach; (530) 440-5883.

Live music starts at 7 p.m. as part of the “Groovin’ on the Green Concert Series.”

St. Andrews Waterfront Market

Every Saturday, from 8 a.m.–1 p.m. 1201 Beck Ave., Panama City; (850) 872-7208.

Enjoy a scenic view from the Smith’s Yacht boardwalk.

Seahaven Beach Market

Every Thursday and Sunday, from 9 a.m.–2 p.m.; 15238 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach; (850) 867-0316. Tasty treats by the beach.

Grand Lagoon Waterfront Farmers Market

Saturday–Sunday, from 8 a.m.–2 p.m.; 5551 Thomas Drive, Panama City Beach, (850) 763-7359 or visitwaterfrontmarkets.org for more details.

One of these products is Kriss Harris Bahroun’s Touch of Florida Salt Scrub. “I actually started this by accident,” she says. “I have eczema, which is severely dry skin, so I designed this for myself.” After friends suggested she take her product to the local farmers market, her product sold out within an hour. The salty scrub is now sold in 20 different markets along the coast of Florida. “Everything is hypoallergenic — all natural, so no dyes or anything like that. It’s extremely healthy for people. We use salt from the Dead Sea, which is the only salt in the world that has high amounts of magnesium that helps treat problems like psoriasis, rosacea and dry skin.”

Another display showcases four different Woods in the Round children’s books, all of which are written by local author Sandy Meyer. “They’re about adventure, friendship and courage,” Meyer says, sitting beneath a “Meet the Author” booth. “I write my stories so adults and children can enjoy them together. Adults can explain the things that occur in the adventures so their children learn values and character.”

The whole family will also enjoy the fun and wholesome ambience of the market, where live musical guests sometime take to a stage set up in the center of the lot. Seasonal events are hosted as well, along with specially themed days. On most weekends, you’ll find a shaved-ice vendor, a kettle corn stall and a lemonade stand offering treats to enjoy as you stroll around the market. Be warned though: If you visit on an empty stomach, you won’t be able to resist the aroma of freshly baked goods and hot food stands.

Of course, the main attraction to farmers markets is the selection of fresh fruits and vegetables grown by local farmers. The Grand Lagoon Waterfront Market offers a handful

of fruit and vegetable vendors from which to choose. One of the larger displays features goods from Artzi Organic Vegetables, a family farm in Thomasville, Georgia, whose natural produce makes it way down to Panama City each weekend. “Every vegetable is organic so no chemicals, pesticides or GMOs,” says Megan Cogbill, who assists farmers Yoche and Israel Artzi. Connected to the long line of Artzi veggies is Pita Queen, the family’s other specialty. “They make pita bread, hummus and falafels at home. Falafels are chickpeas fried in pita bread with hummus and salad. The salad is made from everything you see on the table.”

Across the market you can meet Megan’s mother, Lynda Cogbill, operating a shrimp-boil booth.

“My husband and I have a boat and we catch them right out here ourselves,” Cogbill says. “We usually go out on Thursday night and bring them in Friday mornings so they’re always fresh for the market. They’re never frozen.” The Cogbills dish out free samples of their succulent shrimp next to a homemade cocktail sauce. “We’ve been at the Grand Lagoon market for seven years. A lot of people come around and they don’t know how to cook shrimp, but boiling is really easy and brings out all the flavors without having to do a whole lot.”

Meat eaters will also delight in a grass-fed beef booth offering high-quality cuts of steak, or to satisfy immediate cravings, you might stop by a tamale and empañada stand serving up hot Mexican food favorites.

An excursion to the Grand Lagoon Waterfront Market uncovers one-of-a-kind treasures and an experience that will have you coming back each weekend for more of the most scrumptious produce you’ve ever tasted. ●

I N T O

T H E

B L U E

BOARD SHOP HELPS CHILDREN WITH
AUTISM GET ON THEIR FEET

BY STEVE BORNHOFT // PHOTOS BY CHASE YAKABOSKI

Visitors to the Into the Blue surf shop on Thomas Drive in Panama City Beach are likely to be greeted first by Dharma, one of the most precocious surfers that the business's owner, Tony Banks, has ever encountered.

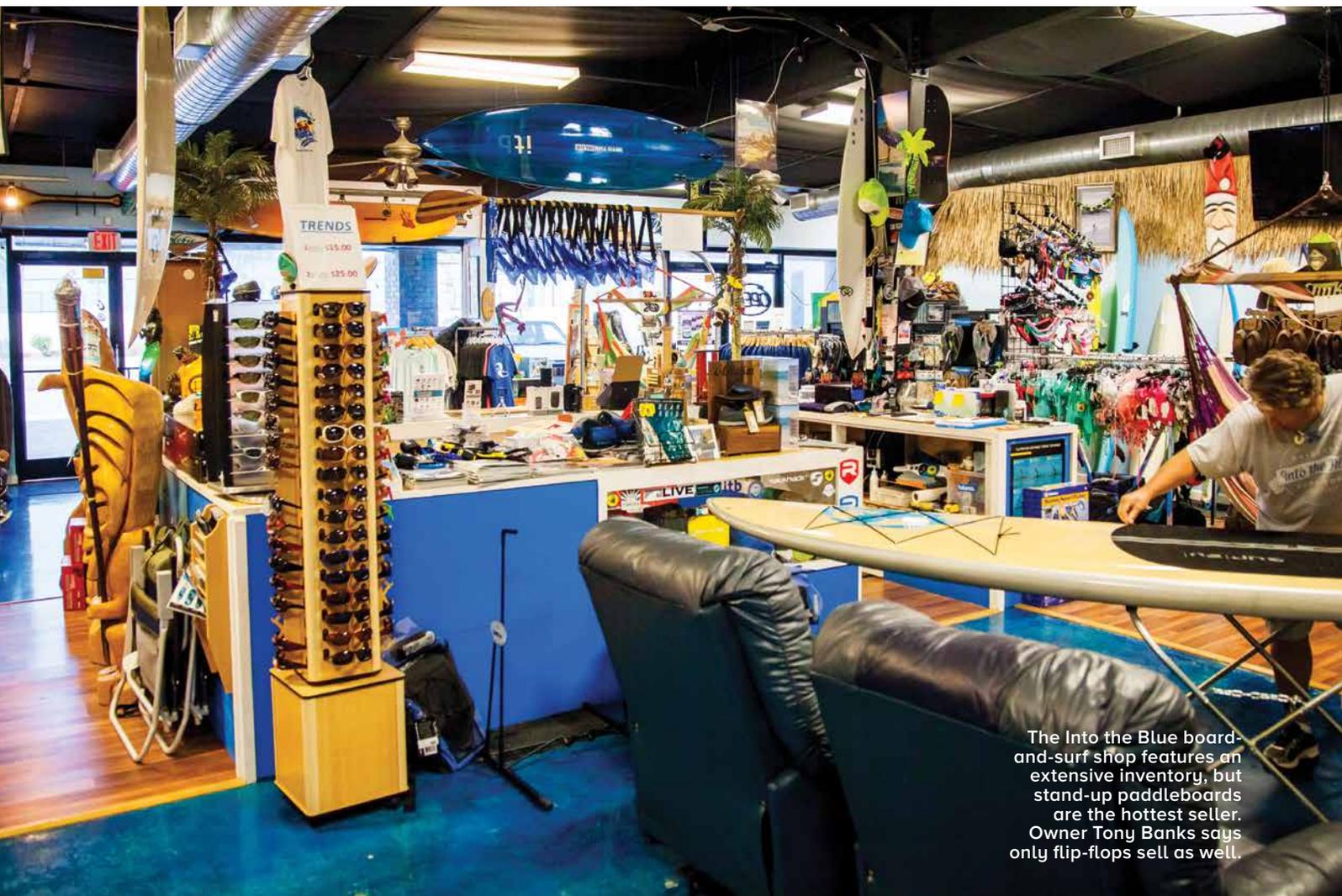
Banks, in the four years since Into the Blue joined the eclectic mix of businesses in the Aloha Village, has introduced a lot of newcomers to surfing and stand-up paddleboarding, but Dharma has some distinct, inherent advantages over others.

Prior to her adoption by Banks, she grew up on the shores of Lake Lanier in Georgia. Too, she has a very low center of gravity, about six inches off the ground. And her stability is further enhanced by the fact that she has four feet.





Tony Banks hams it up on the paddleboard he shares each morning with his dog, Dharma, who doesn't fetch or roll over, but took to the board like a black lab to water.



The Into the Blue board-and-surf shop features an extensive inventory, but stand-up paddleboards are the hottest seller. Owner Tony Banks says only flip-flops sell as well.

But Dharma, who weighs maybe eight pounds soaking wet, has limitations. While she can dog paddle with the best of them, she cannot paddle a board. For that, she relies on Master Tony.

“Dharma doesn’t fetch or roll over, but one day she just hopped on my board and, ever since, we try to go paddling every morning,” says Banks, who calculates that he traveled around the world “two-and-a-half times” as a hardhat Navy diver and instructor before retiring 12 years ago. He then worked in London as a contractor for the U.S. Air Force. “Sometimes it’s just the two of us, and at other times, I start my day by leading a tour or teaching a class.”

There is more to stand-up paddling than the uninitiated might think. There are different types of boards with a variety of fin arrangements. Paddles are far from uniform. The complete paddler will

need to master five basic strokes and variations thereof.

Banks quizzes first-time board buyers about their goals and tries to assess their skill levels.

“They may opt for a heavy barge of a board that requires a lot of torque to move it through the water or they may have a desire to get into racing with a lighter board,” Banks says. “A lot of people graduate from a touring board to a more sleek racing board as their confidence grows.”

In classes, Banks teaches his customers about paddling techniques, board characteristics and how fin arrangements affect board performance. Grand Lagoon is a favorite starting point for tours that range from two to 14 miles in length and last from one to four hours. Some cross the pass to St. Andrew Bay and visit Shell Island.

“What do people most want to see when they come to Panama City

Beach?” Banks asks, then answers his own question. “Dolphins. And we reliably find dolphins in Grand Lagoon in the morning before they fan out into the bay. Plus, there are always trout, redfish and mullet in the lagoon. We pass over rays and I point out the osprey nests.”

Banks and Dharma also lead tours along the Econfina Creek in north Bay County. There, paddlers will discover crystal clear springs and beautiful scenery as they enjoy a 7.5-mile guided tour along a Florida Designated Paddling Trail.

Banks grew up in Griffin, Georgia. His family had a vacation place on Panama City Beach when the westernmost structure of consequence on the beach was the Fontainebleau Terrace. In the course of his Navy career, he served two stints as an instructor at the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center’s dive school in Panama City Beach. From the



“Most people, when they get up on a board, they’re focused on their feet and trying to keep their balance. Our autism kids are focused on where they are going. Many of them have a real affinity for board sports once they get started. Before long, some don’t want to be helped. They turn to you and say, ‘I am a surfer.’” — **TONY BANKS, BUSINESS OWNER**

experience, he decided Panama City Beach would be a good place for him to settle down when he ceased globetrotting.

While Banks sells skateboards, skimboards and surfboards, paddleboards are his biggest seller. “I sell more paddleboards than T-shirts,” he says. “Olukai sandals are the only thing that might outsell paddleboards for me. Paddling is still relatively new here.”

As a businessman, Banks is committed both to providing customers with products and services at a competitive price, and to giving back to the community. In Autism Surfs-Panama City, he found a tailor-made opportunity for doing the latter.

Julie Clark founded the nonprofit with her husband, Warren, in March 2012 after noticing that autistic children at the day care center she owns responded surprisingly well to water activities. She visited Into the Blue and asked Banks to get involved. He didn’t hesitate.

Banks recruited volunteers including Navy divers, lifeguards and medical professionals and began conducting events that give children on the autism spectrum an opportunity to experience board sports and, in many cases, enter the water for the first time. These days, about 80 kids participate in the monthly get-togethers.

“Most people, when they get up on a board, they’re focused on their feet and trying to keep their balance,” Banks has observed. “Our autism kids are focused on where they are going. Many of them have a real affinity for board sports once they get started.



Before long, some don’t want to be helped. They turn to you and say, ‘I am a surfer.’”

Surfing helps autistic kids overcome their resistance to socializing, Clark has found. She describes a boy, Gage, whose only interaction for years was with his service dog. But surfing has so brought him out that he now helps teach other kids to get on their feet ... on boards.

“There is another benefit,” Clark begins. “As part of Autism Surfs, the kids become part of the surfing community. Surfers who are not part of the program get to know them, learn to accept them and actually look after them in school. That acceptance enables them to get over their fear of being judged.”

Banks annually holds a sanctioned Gnarly Charley surfing competition for boys and girls ages 15 and under.

It features a division reserved for children with autism or who have participated in the Special Olympics.

While Banks is in business by himself, he enjoys assistance from interns — students of Florida State University-Panama City, where Banks earned a business degree — and volunteers including a lanky, heavily tattooed dude who enters the shop and slips in behind a display counter.

“This is Greg,” Banks says. “He’s a 40-year-old kid.”

The kid, Banks explains, is being trained to take over the board rental aspect of the business and hopes to sell a few boards, as well. On this day, he had joined Banks and Dharma for an early morning paddle on the lagoon.

Given their shared affinity for board sports, it’s not too surprising that Dharma and Greg get along just fine. ●

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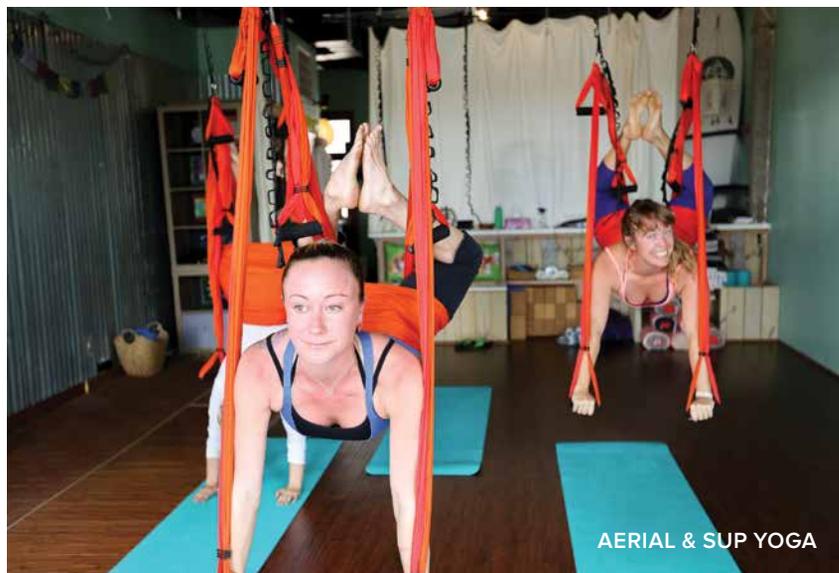
GET UP OFF OF THAT LOUNGE CHAIR ... FOR A BIT

BY KRISTIN LUNA

While many trips center upon leisure, what about the fit traveler? Not everyone wants total R&R on their vacation — or to come home 10 pounds heavier, for that matter. Luckily, Panama City Beach is the perfect spot to have your cake (the sun, the beach, the bars) and eat it, too (i.e. burn off those calories as fast as you consume them). Here are a few of our favorite active pursuits that are every bit as fun as they are good for you.

» AERIAL & SUP YOGA

Aerial Yoga is just as it sounds: anti-gravity yoga performed in the air (with the assist of a soft hammock anchored to the ceiling). The class flows through many familiar asanas, while the hammock enables students to reach a deeper stretch, find more length in the spine and learn safe alignment. (Plus, you get to spend 90 minutes suspended in the air — and who hasn't dreamt of channeling a Cirque du Soleil acrobat?) Situated along Carillon Beach's Market Street, Yoga Elements is the only studio in the area with aerial yoga; all levels are welcome, and the instructor starts from the basics, so first-timers shouldn't be afraid to jump right in. Space is limited to just nine students per class; book online in advance to secure your spot. Yoga Elements also has stand-up paddleboard yoga classes held on



the lake behind the studio, as well as Vinyasa, Hatha and Ashtanga classes.

YOGA ELEMENTS

108 Carillon Market St.
(850) 866-2199
YogaElements108.com

» MOUNTAIN BIKING

Bay County newbies may be surprised to find that the Gulf Coast is rich in greenery and dense foliage, but the area's ecosystem is diverse, particularly within the confines of the Panama City Beach Conservation Park. Boasting 12 looping trails ranging from 0.6 to 11 miles, it's a cyclist's dream. Those without their own equipment can rent

a cruiser, mountain bike, hybrids, fat tire or kids' bikes from Barley's Bike Rental just outside the park. The 3,000-acre conservation area is also prime for walking and bird-watching. Looking for even more of a sweat? Gayle's Trails — a network of greenways and trails that soon will extend across the entire island of Panama City Beach — connects the Conservation Park to Frank Brown Park, which has athletic fields, a world-class aquatic center, a fenced dog park, a gym and more.

CONSERVATION PARK

100 Conservation Drive
(850) 233-5045



Pedestrian and bicycle-friendly bridges span cypress swamps at the Conservation Park in Panama City Beach. The trails system known as Gayle's Trails — named after former mayor Gayle Oberst — links the Conservation Park with Frank Brown Park and its newly remodeled athletic facilities.



STAND-UP PADDLEBOARDING

» STAND-UP PADDLEBOARDING

In recent years, the stand-up paddleboard (SUP) craze has swept the nation, and more than a few outfitters in Panama City Beach now offer rentals and private classes. But Walkin' On Water goes one step further with the additional option of three tours: a Gulf/lake paddle that launches from Camp Helen State Park, an exploration of natural springs via Holmes Creek and a sunset tour with Lake Powell as the backdrop.

WALKIN' ON WATER

108 Carillon Market St., Suite 1
(850) 588-6230
WowPaddleboards.com

» SNORKELING

Captain Lorraine Frasier, owner of Dolphin and Snorkel Tours, guides three-hour ecotours that promise dolphin sightings galore, as well as offer the opportunity to snorkel a small shipwreck, swim in the shallow waters of Shell Island and hike around the sandy, 7-mile-long undeveloped barrier island. The company provides fins, masks and snorkels, but you'll want to bring your camera: In addition to dolphins, you're likely to spy puffers, starfish, sea urchins and myriad other marine life.

DOLPHIN AND SNORKEL TOURS

Bay Point Marina
3824 Hatteras Lane
(850) 866-8815
DolphinAndSnorkelTours.com



SNORKELING

» KAYAKING

A former military reservation with Gulf access, St. Andrews State Park occupies a protected area and 1 1/2 miles of prime beachfront real estate. Along with kitesurfing, boating, fishing and standup paddleboarding, kayaking is a favorite park pastime thanks to a sheltered cove and placid waters that lead out into the bay. Equipment rentals are available on site from a shop at the park.

ST. ANDREWS STATE PARK

4607 State Park Lane
(850) 233-5140
FloridaStateParks.org/Park/St-Andrews

» GOLF

Adam Brack's operation is no run-of-the-mill golf school. The pro, who has been teaching for the better part of two decades, tailors every experience to the individual's needs. From refresher lessons to short-game specialty courses, Brack's team offers a little bit of everything. There's even a Titlelist Performance Institute expert, Ken Loewen, on staff who will perform a swing assessment and health screening to pinpoint deficiencies and come up with a prescribed fitness program, personalized for the golfer.

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(850) 236-8374
AdamBrack.com

» INFLATABLE GYM

The ultimate mix of fitness and fun, Paradise Adventures combines a scenic catamaran cruise with a trip out to a veritable floating gym! Anchored just off of Shell Island, the company's inflatable slide, pair of trampolines and see-saw make for one heckuva exciting day at sea. The three-hour Adventure Tour also includes access to snorkel equipment, kayaks, paddleboards, banana boat rides and an onboard slide.

PARADISE ADVENTURES

3901 Thomas Drive
(850) 769-3866
ParadiseAdventuresPCB.com

» BEACH HIKING

If you're staying along the beach, you can walk along the sand to and from one of the many waterfront restaurants (or the bars) — or use one of the nearly 100



GOLF



KAYAKING

public beach accesses to hop on (or off) the beach anywhere you like. Think of it as your own personal, soft sand treadmill — only, there's no gym involved and you might even spot wildlife as you wander aimlessly (while getting one killer calf workout while you're at it). Camp Helen has a 0.6 mile hike that winds through sand dunes and across a small bridge on its way to the beach, while the other end of the beach near St. Andrews State Park has immediate beach access but looping trails through the forested center of the park.

CAMP HELEN STATE PARK

23937 Panama City Beach Parkway
(850) 233-5059
FloridaStateParks.org/Park/Camp-Helen

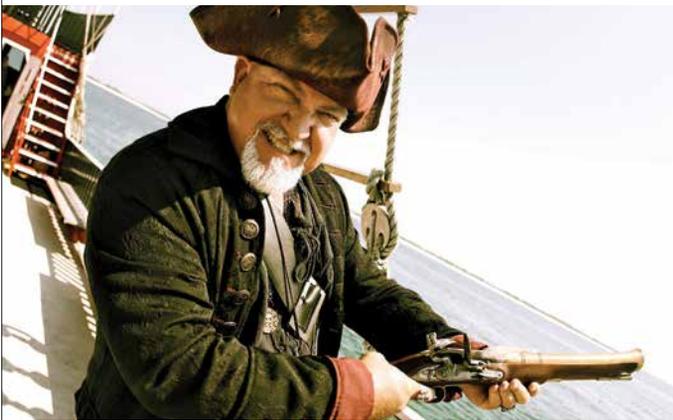
» DANCING

For those who hate the gym but love to groove, Studio by the Sea is the solution. This high-energy fitness studio has a weekly schedule packed with fun offerings such as adult ballet, beach bootcamp, plyometrics, barre, Zumba and even the "Marilyn Makeover," a targeted strength training class that aims to "define your abs, booty, arms and legs." And for \$10 a class, you can't beat the price either.

STUDIO BY THE SEA

7328 Thomas Drive, Suite G
(850) 867-7209
PCBStudioByTheSea.com

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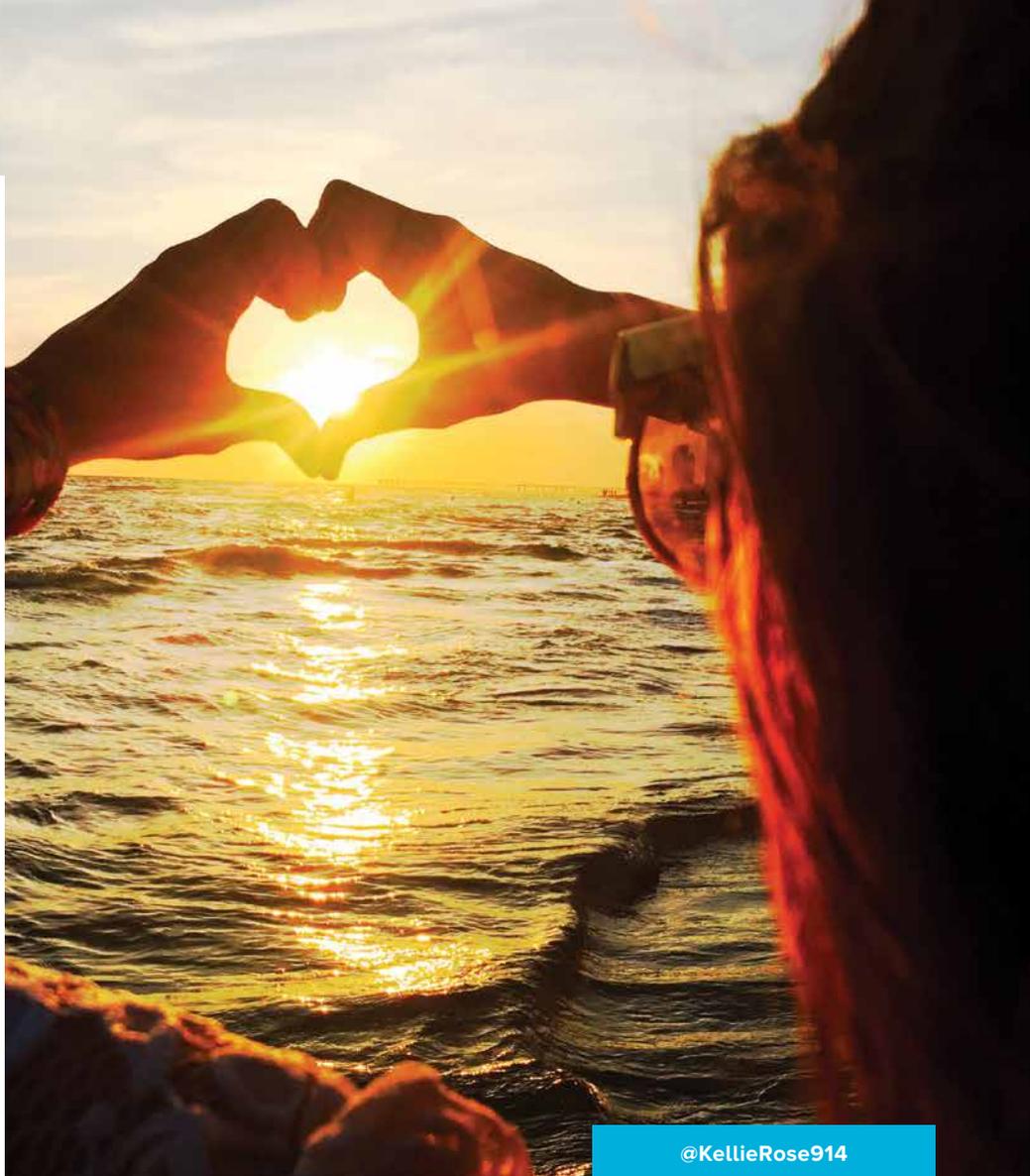
We're located on Grand Lagoon at the Lighthouse Marina. Open March through October!

SAND & SURF

PANAMA CITY BEACH

sets the stage for great memories and spectacular photos as well. Visitors often share their breathtaking “you had to be there”-types of photos with us on social media, so we thought we might pick a few and show them off here in the non-digital space of our magazine. I think you’ll agree, they look great in any format!

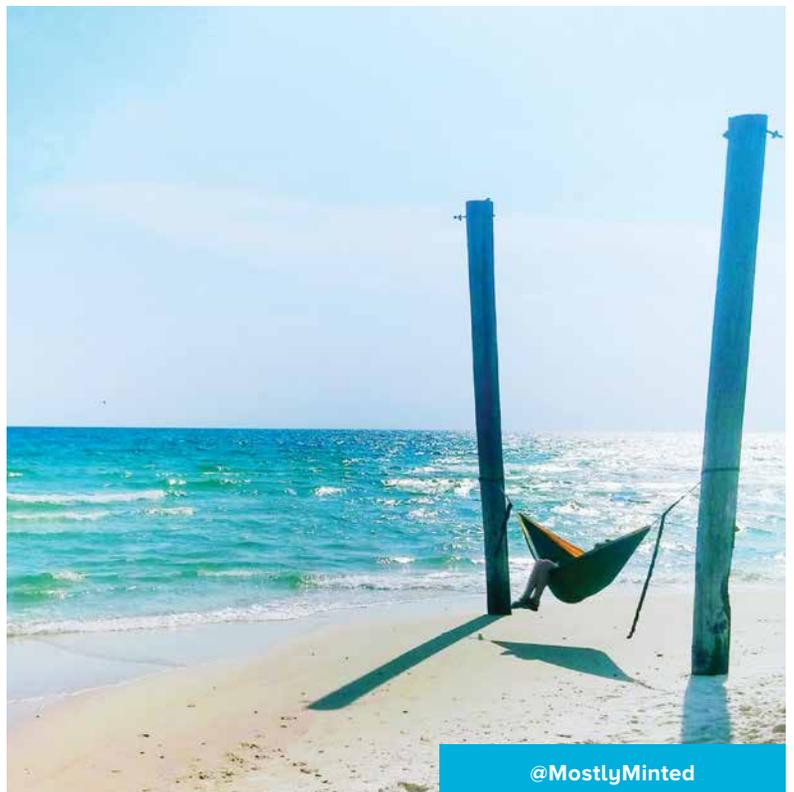
Post your Panama City Beach photos on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook with the hashtag #RealFunBeach, and they might just end up featured here in the next issue! (We’ll contact you to ask permission first, of course!)



@KellieRose914



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Panama City Beach
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Panama City Beach





DON'T STOP CHASIN' THE SUN

MUSIC FESTIVAL EXTENDS
SUMMER SEASON

BY REBECCA PADGETT
PHOTOS BY SCOTT PITTMAN

By some standards, summer is endless in the Sunshine State, but fall breezes do usher in a seasonal change by bringing an end to the dog days — and making the Chasin' the Sun Music Festival that much more enjoyable.

The festival was created to celebrate artists whose recordings you likely listen to while relaxing beneath the sun on a beach towel. Aaron Bessant Park, the festival site, has played host to familiar names including Alan Jackson, Chris Stapleton, Maddie & Tae and members of Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefer band. The 2015 lineup performed to a sold-out crowd of 7,500. The 2016 edition of the festival promises to be another unforgettable experience.

Charlie Brown's Tribute to the Coasters, Charlie Thomas' Drifters, The Tams, The Temptations Review featuring Dennis Edwards and the Panama City POPS Orchestra performing Windborne's Music of Journey will take to the Aaron Bessant stage on Sept. 23–24. And, as a further enticement, this year's festival will be free, with "VIP Experience" upgrades available.

Organizers seek to offer festival-goers a sampling of music that is popular among beach lovers by dipping into styles such as jazz, country, oldies and classic rock.



“It is our hope that visitors will experience the diversity of music and events that Panama City Beach provides throughout the year,” says Richard Sanders, vice president of sports and events for the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau. “We intend that they enjoy a weekend away and choose to come back often after enjoying entertainment provided by award-winning legends of music.”

In 2014, the festival included Jan & Dean’s Beach Party featuring original Beach Boys Al Jardine and David Marks. Also featured were leading Trop-Rock performers The Boat Drunks, Conch Republic, Jerry Diaz & Hanna’s Reef, Jim Morris & The Big Bamboo Band, and the Caribbean Chillers. A year later, the festival added country stars.

“Chasin’ the Sun invites visitors both new and returning to come to Panama City Beach to enjoy a laid-back, easy listening, beach music type of event,” says Sanders. “With kids in school in September, we

wanted to provide a weekend getaway for both parents and families.”

As a shoulder season month, September has much to offer music-loving visitors to Panama City Beach. The popular Gulf Coast Jam kicks things off on Labor Day weekend, but great live music can also be found during Schooner’s Lobster Festival & Tournament (Sept. 12–18), at the Bloody Mary & Music Festival (Oct. 1), at the Pirates of the High Seas Fest (Oct. 7–9) and during the Emerald Coast Cruizin’ events (Nov. 7–12). And that’s just to name a few!

Any time is the right time to head for the world’s most beautiful beach, but quality music can add to the experience — and visitors will find more dancing room than during the height of the summer vacation season.

So, as summer begins to recede, there is no need to put away the beach chairs and blankets. Bring them back to Panama City Beach, follow the music, chase the sun and see where the weekend leads you. ●

“IT IS OUR HOPE THAT VISITORS WILL EXPERIENCE THE DIVERSITY OF MUSIC AND EVENTS THAT PANAMA CITY BEACH PROVIDES THROUGHOUT THE YEAR. WE INTEND THAT THEY ENJOY A WEEKEND AWAY AND CHOOSE TO COME BACK OFTEN AFTER ENJOYING ENTERTAINMENT PROVIDED BY AWARD-WINNING LEGENDS OF MUSIC.”

— RICHARD SANDERS, VICE PRESIDENT OF SPORTS AND EVENTS FOR VISIT PANAMA CITY BEACH



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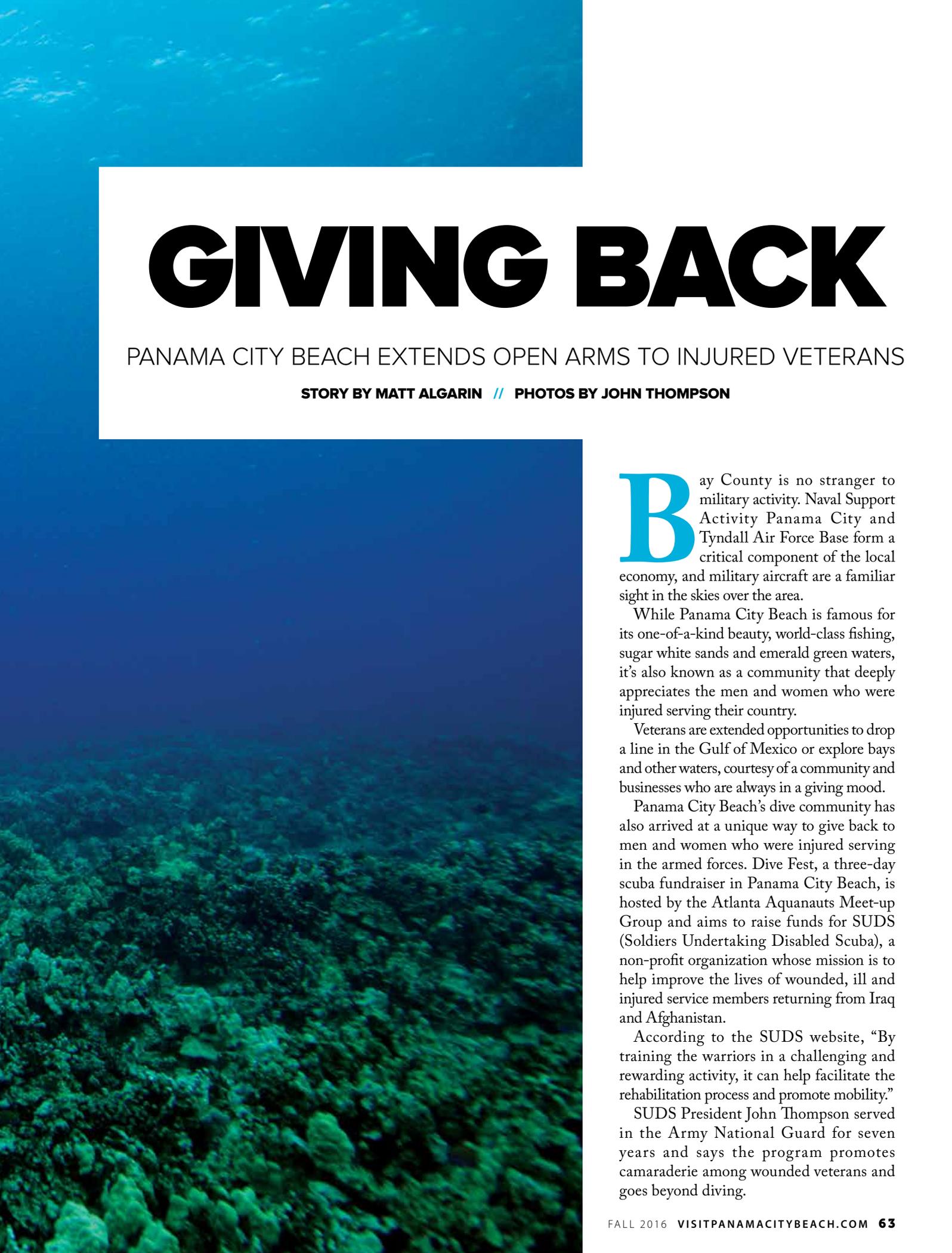
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An underwater photograph of a coral reef, showing various types of coral and the surrounding water. The image is split into two horizontal sections: the top section is a clear, bright blue water, and the bottom section is a darker, more detailed view of the coral reef.

GIVING BACK

PANAMA CITY BEACH EXTENDS OPEN ARMS TO INJURED VETERANS

STORY BY MATT ALGARIN // PHOTOS BY JOHN THOMPSON

Bay County is no stranger to military activity. Naval Support Activity Panama City and Tyndall Air Force Base form a critical component of the local economy, and military aircraft are a familiar sight in the skies over the area.

While Panama City Beach is famous for its one-of-a-kind beauty, world-class fishing, sugar white sands and emerald green waters, it's also known as a community that deeply appreciates the men and women who were injured serving their country.

Veterans are extended opportunities to drop a line in the Gulf of Mexico or explore bays and other waters, courtesy of a community and businesses who are always in a giving mood.

Panama City Beach's dive community has also arrived at a unique way to give back to men and women who were injured serving in the armed forces. Dive Fest, a three-day scuba fundraiser in Panama City Beach, is hosted by the Atlanta Aquanauts Meet-up Group and aims to raise funds for SUDS (Soldiers Undertaking Disabled Scuba), a non-profit organization whose mission is to help improve the lives of wounded, ill and injured service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to the SUDS website, "By training the warriors in a challenging and rewarding activity, it can help facilitate the rehabilitation process and promote mobility."

SUDS President John Thompson served in the Army National Guard for seven years and says the program promotes camaraderie among wounded veterans and goes beyond diving.

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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.

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gcmc-pc.com



“My wife Connie and I could hardly believe what was happening. Everywhere we went, from the time we landed in Panama City Beach and while in Bay County and Panama City, the people, young and old, welcomed us with arms wide open. There were so many thank you’s and welcome home’s that we lost count.”

— Tim Lee, a Wounded Warrior from Texas

“It can be a catalyst or a springboard to other things,” he said. “It can open a lot of doors for these men and women.”

Patrick Green is the owner of Panama City Diving and a native to Panama City Beach. Green, who has been diving since the 90s and has completed thousands of dives, has been a supporter of Dive Fest and the SUDS program since 2009. Green donates his time and his boat to support the program.

“It’s been a success,” he said. “I just love sharing the underwater world with other people. To me, it’s a place where you feel free. It’s as close as you can get to flying.”

As for the wounded warriors who go on these trips, they typically have injuries that affect their mobility — many are missing limbs — and diving can be a liberating experience.

Too, coming together as SUDS participants gives veterans the chance to meet others battling circumstances similar to their own.

Back home, “they may be the only guy they know with their types of injuries,” Green said. “Here, they can make friends with people with whom they have a lot in common and make a new support group.”

As for the support extended wounded warriors and veterans in Panama City Beach and nearby communities, Green said he is proud of his fellow business owners and neighbors.

“Communities are always stronger when people in the community give back,” he said. “My family always taught that as a simple ethic growing up.”

Bay Limo’s T.J. Gastone says he couldn’t find an easier thing to say yes to than giving back to the military community. Bay Limo uses vehicles from its fleet to transport wounded warriors and family members visiting Panama City Beach as part of the Warrior Beach Retreat.

“We took them out for their relax-and-spa day, which allowed them to take their minds off of the normal day-to-day stresses,” Gastone said. “We respect and honor our military veterans and that’s the way we are as a family-owned business. This was our way of paying respect to those who have served, worked hard and given their lives and limbs.”

The Warrior Beach Retreat is a nonprofit organization founded by Linda Cope. The retreat offers an opportunity for wounded veterans to visit Panama City Beach for a week-long relaxing vacation. While soaking up some Florida sun, these men and women and their families are pampered and treated to a variety of local activities such as fishing, dinner and spa visits.

As a wounded warrior himself, Tim Lee was astonished by the way the Panama City Beach community showed support for the men and women taking part in various activities provided by the Warrior Beach Retreat. Lee, who operates Tim Lee Ministries in Garland, Texas, was a featured speaker during a recent retreat.

“My wife Connie and I could hardly believe what was happening,” he said. “Everywhere we went, from the time we landed in Panama City Beach and while in Bay County and Panama City, the people,

young and old, welcomed us with arms wide open. There were so many ‘thank you’s and ‘welcome home’s that we lost count.”

Lee lost both of his legs to a land mine while serving in Vietnam. He established his ministry in the early 1970s.

Lee was especially moved during a parade through Panama City Beach. Onlookers had tears running down their faces as they waved American flags and saluted those taking part in the parade.

“I got out of my vehicle to go say thank you to a bunch of them and tears just began flowing down my face,” Lee recalled. “The words wouldn’t come out as I had a lump in my throat the size of a baseball. I was just speechless, and that’s from a Marine that makes a living by speaking.”

Lee will not soon forget his Warrior Beach Retreat experience.

“Panama City and Panama City Beach will forever have a very special place in my heart,” he said. “On a scale of one to 10, it was clearly a 20.”

To learn more about the Warrior Beach Retreat, as well as the local business who support its mission, see WarriorBeachRetreat.org.

Events including Dive Fest, which will be held Sept. 23-25, help support the SUDS mission. To learn more about SUDS, visit SudsDiving.org. For information about Dive Fest, visit AaDiveFest.com. ●

2016 Events

Music, Food and Fun for Everyone

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

Sept. 12-18 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.

Beach Home for the Holidays

Nov. 25-26 Thanks giving weekend brings the lighting of a 100-foot Christmas tree and holiday music from the Panama City POPS Orchestra to the beach to kick off the holiday season.



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.





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.




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Panama City Beach Marathon

Dec. 3 A 5K, half marathon and full marathon all run along the beautiful Gulf of Mexico and the world's most beautiful beaches.

New Year's Eve 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.

2017 EVENTS

Winter Resident Senior Prom Feb. 7

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 2017 theme is Mardi Gras.

Panama City Beach Mardi Gras & Music Festival Feb. 24–25

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.

UNwineD April 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.

Seabreeze Jazz Festival April 19–23

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 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.

Thunder Beach Motorcycle Rally

May 3–7 & Oct. 25–29 Known as "The Most Biker Friendly FREE Rally in the United States," 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.

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Times That Bind

Vacations unite families **BY JEREMY HINES**

WHEN YOU HAVE A LARGE FAMILY, like I do, vacations are something you only dream about.

With our five children, my wife and I are always too busy with sports, school and work to find time to take a family trip. This year, we decided, was going to be different. My oldest daughter is a senior in high school, and our time together is quickly passing as she prepares to leave for college. For the sake of making fun family memories, this year we made a vow to take a trip together.

So we sat down and started looking for the perfect place for a family trip. My oldest children (17-year-old daughter, twin 16-year-old sons) all wanted to be able to walk on the beach without mom and dad. They wanted adventure, excitement and a chance to do things not available in Indiana.

My wife wanted a romantic location. Somewhere with beautiful beaches, breathtaking sunsets and restaurants offering amazing views and authentic food.

Then there were my two youngest daughters. Their vacation wish lists were

pretty simple: They wanted to find sea shells; they wanted to build sandcastles and see the ocean and a dolphin or two.

I wanted to fish.

After talking to friends and doing tons of research we decided on Panama City Beach for our first family vacation since 2005, the year before my youngest daughter was born.

We have always heard a lot of good about Panama City Beach, and our research showed that the weather in PCB in October is typically outstanding. We saw pictures of

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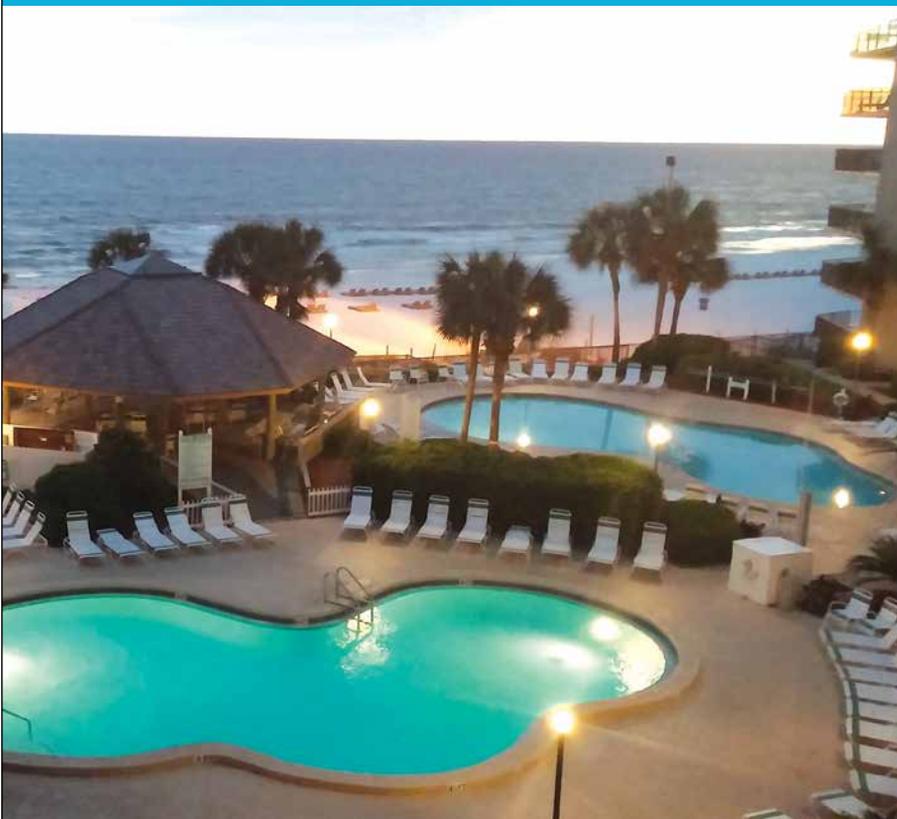
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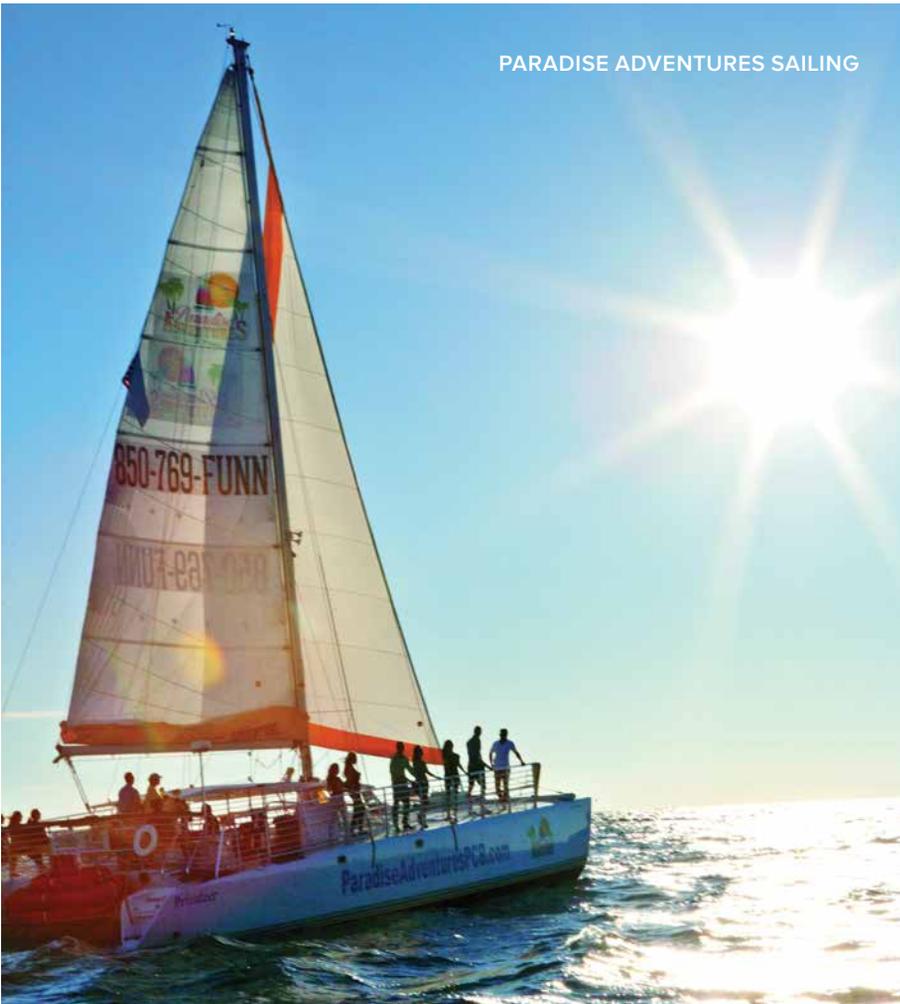
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For a family seeking a romantic getaway, room to roam, sea shells and more, Panama City Beach proved to be the perfect vacation destination.

the sugary white sand and crystal clear water. We knew we had made the right choice.

Arriving at sunrise, my youngest daughter got to see the ocean for the very first time on what happened to be her ninth birthday. She was awestruck. We spent the next several days enjoying the many wonders of PCB. There truly is something for everyone.

At the city pier we caught a plethora of fish, including a large remora that had other fishermen on the pier all focused on our catch. The local anglers were more than helpful, and very knowledgeable.

The next day we visited GulfWorld Marine Park, which is amazing. The sea lion show is entertaining and educational, and exploring the property we saw everything from sea turtles to flamingos before making our way to the arena for the bottlenose dolphin show.

The dolphin show was, without a doubt, the best we have ever seen. The trainers even get in the water and perform acrobatic maneuvers with the dolphins.

That night we shopped at Pier Park and went back out on to the city pier to see the sunset. The scenery was absolutely gorgeous.

The next day we took a trip with Paradise Adventures Sailing called the Adventure Tour. We rode a catamaran to Shell Island, and then spent a few hours snorkeling, riding the banana boat, kayaking and much more. At the end of the trip Captain Joe took us to see dolphins playing around Shell Island. He was friendly, knowledgeable and genuinely wanted us to experience all that the waters around PCB have to offer.

The next day was one we were looking forward to the most. We rented a pontoon boat from Adventures at Sea. The staff there was fantastic, explaining in minutes how to drive the boat and where the best places to go were.

We snorkeled at several locations and found starfish, sand dollars and more shells than we could fit in the bucket. The dolphins were particularly active, and on more than one occasion they swam right up to us and circled our boat.

We drove down the bay side of Shell Island and walked across a narrow section to the Gulf side, where we found the most beautiful beach any of us had ever seen.

On the final day of our trip we visited St. Andrews State Park where we spotted a white tailed deer with its young fawn right away. At Alligator Lake, sure enough, there was an alligator bathing in the sun by the water's edge.

At the kiddie pool (a beach protected by jetties where the water is perfect for children) my daughters spent hours snorkeling and enjoying the water. They found more shells there than they did anywhere else on the trip.

While exploring Panama City Beach we ate at several excellent restaurants, including Captain Jack's and Spinnakers. We had a blast putt-putting and going through the maze at Coconut Creek Family Fun Park. We enjoyed playing tennis and swimming at Gulf Highlands, where we stayed.

I didn't think we could find one location that would satisfy my large family, but I was wrong. PCB was perfect – it had exactly what we were looking for and much, much more. We left PCB with memories we will cherish forever, but we've already booked our return trip.

When you find that much fun in one place, you just have to go back. ●

The author is a former award-winning editor and sports writer now freelancing for Indiana-area newspapers. He wrote about his family's first visit to Panama City Beach in fall of 2015.



MICHAEL BOONIN

WINNING EDGE

Frank Brown Park facelift is enjoying rave reviews

BY REEVES TRIVETTE



IN NEW YORK CITY, visitors celebrate the visionaries responsible for Central Park. In Panama City Beach, the persons responsible for the creation and enhancement of Frank Brown Park are deserving of plaudits of their own.

The park, comprising 200 acres of tennis courts, softball, baseball and soccer fields, an indoor gym and a world-class aquatic center, is not just an expansive recreational facility. It also is a significant economic driver for Panama City Beach.

The baseball and softball fields alone generate approximately 60,000 room nights and \$50 million in direct economic impact annually. That volume of traffic also means that the park's assets need to be refreshed periodically, as they were in recent months.

"The nine ball fields have basically had a complete face lift," says Richard Sanders, vice president of sports marketing and special events for the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors

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“The renovations have made a tremendous difference. Aesthetically, the brick and concrete they used helps the park stand out. It’s a lot more team friendly, a lot more space. It ended up being wonderful.”

— Larry Thompson

Bureau. “All new fencing, new dugouts, new score boards, it’s totally been redone.

“Visiting teams and local residents have given the improvements rave reviews. It’s just a whole new atmosphere.”

The \$4 million renovation/enhancement project began in November 2015, and the refurbished fields have been in use since the first weekend of March. A new concession building is scheduled to come on line this November.

Ninety-five out-of-town teams visited the park during the Memorial Day weekend, and an astounding 2,200 teams were welcomed over the course of the entire summer.

Larry Thompson of Grand Slam Baseball, which promotes and organizes tournaments, is especially impressed with the south end of the complex, where a large awning replaces the old concession stand.

“The renovations have made a tremendous difference. Aesthetically, the brick and concrete they used helps the park stand out,” Thompson said. “It’s a lot more team friendly, a lot more space. It ended up being wonderful.”

Thompson feels certain that the newly redesigned park is sure to help ensure that first-time visitors come back in future years.

“People who have been there in the past are overwhelmed with how good the fields now look,” Thompson says. “And it’s going to help bring more teams in.” ●

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Downtown Panama City

Charm, history, local cuisine and a bright future

BY MATT ALGARIN

PHOTOS BY CITY OF PANAMA CITY BEACH

IF YOU'VE TAKEN A STROLL along Harrison Avenue in downtown Panama City or explored Old St. Andrews, you're familiar with the area's historic charm. Whether you are hankering for street-front dining, a unique locally owned boutique or a slice of the cultural arts, Panama City is a hub of activity with much to offer.

For those who have yet to explore the downtown corridor and historic St. Andrews, prepare yourselves for an experience you won't soon forget. And given plans for downtown Panama City currently in the works, there is a lot to be excited about even for those who have long been acquainted with the area.

Downtown is just a short hop from the beach, so brush the sand off your feet and get to ready exercise your sense of adventure.

"Panama City offers two very distinct neighborhoods that are ideal for exploring, and both are pedestrian friendly," says Jennifer Vigil, president and CEO of Destination Panama City. "Downtown Panama City offers a variety of local shops, restaurants and live entertainment venues. Old St. Andrews — Downtown's

eclectic counterpart — is lined with art galleries, coffee shops and eateries. Best of all, they're minutes apart, so it's quite convenient to fully explore both during a day trip."

Destination Panama City is the official marketing organization for Panama City and is a division of the Panama City Community Development Council, a not-for-profit corporation on a mission to "inspire people to visit our great destination and provide a positive experience for all guests."

If history and culture are your passion, the Martin Theater has to be one of your first stops. Located along Harrison Avenue at East 4th Street, the Martin Theater dates back to 1936 when it was known as "The Ritz." Notable stars including Clark Gable, Constance Bennett, Michael O'Shea, William Boyd and Bill Elliot all paid visits to this historic location over the years. Imagine if those walls could talk!



The theater was purchased by the Martin family in the early 1950s and operated until 1978. After falling on hard times, the deteriorating building was purchased by the Panama City Downtown Improvement Board and restored to the elegant and retro experience that visitors to the downtown theater enjoy today. The Martin Theater has been continually operated since reopening in 1990.

For foodies, Panama City has plenty of culinary options to tantalize the taste buds. Trying to indulge in all of the unique eats can be a daunting task for your day trip, so let A Taste of Panama City Food Tours help you out. They will introduce you to



some of the best places to grab a bite in Panama City while strolling the city streets and sharing historical knowledge.

For a complete list of Panama City sights, sounds and exploration opportunities, see DestinationPanamaCity.com.

Although Panama City already buzzes with adventure, history and culture, Panama City Mayor Greg Brudnicki has big plans for the city he's called home since he was 9 years old.

There are currently about 3 million people who visit Panama City Beach annually, and Brudnicki's goal is to lead a significant percentage of those visitors to spend time in Panama City, too.

"We want to establish our own identity, though," he said. "We offer some things on this side of the bridge that are more cultural, like the Civic Center, and we have some things that the beach doesn't have."

Plans are in place to completely revitalize downtown Panama City. Sidewalks will be widened to promote pedestrian activity, Harrison Avenue will get a facelift and streetscapes will be improved.

"It will definitely refresh our existing streetscape and will provide for a nice aesthetic and a threshold to our future renovated marina," said John Carbullido, executive director of the Downtown Improvement Board. "With some

"We want to establish our own identity, though. We offer some things on this side of the bridge that are more cultural, like the Civic Center, and we have some things that the beach doesn't have."

— Greg Brudnicki,
Panama City Mayor

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Concept sketches depict the possible future look of downtown Panama City. Plans will encompass mixed uses.

patience and careful planning, our downtown district will be positioned for a distinct revitalization of our area, and we are giving ourselves the best chance for positive growth in attracting new businesses and retaining the existing businesses currently serving us.”

A big piece of the puzzle for Panama City’s future is the roughly 23-acre marina property, which the city acquired from the state of Florida for the per-acre value of the property as it was established in the 1950s. When the state owned the marina property, all activities there had to serve a public purpose, so from a development standpoint the city was limited.

“We found out the property was really Panama City’s,” Brudnicki said while overlooking the marina from his office at City Hall. “It was a game changer. Once we established that ownership, it gave us the ability to sit back and figure out what we wanted to do with this property.”

California-based Sonnenblick Development has been hired to head up the marina redevelopment project. Brudnicki said timelines are being developed calling for a combination of retail, motel and hotel projects.

“It’s going to be a public-private partnership, where the city’s contribution is making this property available (via lease),” he says. “We really could not be as bold until we got ownership.”



With big plans on the horizon for Panama City, there’s a new energy emanating from the mayor’s office and City Hall. Brudnicki says local residents and business owners have enthusiastically bought into the revitalization efforts.

For now though, the key is exercising patience while the planning process plays out. Brudnicki recognizes that there’s no such thing as a quick fix en route to diversifying the city’s economy and making downtown a destination.

“It’s probably going to take us five to seven years,” he said, “but we’ve got a great opportunity.” ●

Firefly

Aglow with gifts from the earth and sea

BY LIESEL SCHMIDT // PHOTOS BY CHASE YAKABOSKI

THERE'S A SENSE OF MAGIC, a unique, spellbinding feel to the restaurant that Dave Trepanier created when he opened Firefly in 2007. Much like the glowing hallmark of summer for which it was named, Firefly is something unexpected, a bright flash of creativity that seems a foretaste of wonderful things to come.

It's a sensory experience of the best kind, a whimsical escape to another world where tables topped with white tablecloth are sheltered by an indoor oak tree illuminated with sparkling white lights. And while the cracked and weathered facades that encircle a small courtyard of a private dining area may evoke the feel of Old-World European charm, the al fresco feel of the main dining room is yet another bit of illusionary magic that makes Firefly truly incandescent.

Equally luminous is the fare, a feast both for the eyes and the taste buds that leaves no doubt of the skilled hands at work

in the kitchen. Each plate is reverential of the ingredients, highlighting the naturally crisp colors and bright flavors. Inspired in part by Mediterranean cuisine, Firefly's menu also reflects French, Asian and Southern-comfort food influences, delicately balancing bold flavors to light up the palate.

Every component is executed with precision, handcrafted by a chef whose appreciation for his ingredients is evident in the way that he allows them to shine.

"Our menu is fresh and seasonally based and extremely unique because of the direction that seasonality drives us," says executive chef Derek Langford, who joined the Firefly team in 2015. "Really, that's our overall goal here, to offer something exciting and different that celebrates what the earth gave us in the ways that we use it. These are my tools for creating the best flavors, and as a chef, they also provide me with my biggest inspiration."





For Firefly chef Derek Langford, his restaurant's cuisine is a celebration of all that the earth provides. His menu is frequently refreshed to include seasonal dishes.



Firefly's pepper-crusting stuffed filet mignon features cream cheese, feta, spinach and bacon over roasted potato and red pepper hash with red wine reduction.



From freshly caught seafood to hand-cut steaks and bread baked from scratch each day, every element of the menu is a reflection of the quality and attention to detail that Chef Derek demands from his team. Every sauce, every spice and herb plays its role in producing a culinary light show, with every element connecting on the plate to create that perfect meal.

With its wide array of seafood and terrestrial fare, Firefly caters to diners of all predilections. Dishes such as the Crispy Potato Crusted Salmon are a playful marriage of Southern charm and French rusticity, offering a meaty

salmon steak encrusted with the crunch of pan-fried potatoes, accompanied by creamy grits and sautéed spinach, and served with the rich, oniony sweetness of vermouth-scented soubise sauce.

Providing a decadent, velvety taste of the sea, Firefly's signature She Crab Soup features succulent morsels of jumbo lump crab topped with tender, flaky puff pastry and finished with cream sherry. Meat lovers will delight in the Espresso & Tomato Braised Free-Range Texas Boar Shank, a fork-tender pork shank rubbed in espresso and slow-braised in hearty tomato sauce, perfectly paired with a wild mushroom risotto cake and

topped with oven roasted tomatoes and the sweet kick of a honey-chipotle sauce.

To more fully understand the restaurant, one must first understand the owner, a longtime music industry insider whose 15 years as a band manager hardly prepared him for the daily demands of the restaurant world. But much like the musicians that he managed, Trepanier knows a hit when he has one on his hands. When he put his vision for Firefly into motion, he felt confident that the restaurant would provide something so new and different that people would be enchanted.

Nine years later, that spark of ingenuity has truly caught fire. "I wanted to provide

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the guests here with a fine dining experience that wasn't boring by any stretch of the imagination," Trepanier explains. "I also didn't want to be the kind of restaurant you might typically find in a beach community. We have a need for something different here, something that offers a different type of atmosphere and stays on the cutting edge with its cuisine."

For Trepanier, staying on the cutting edge also meant being a mix master, bringing an eclectic variety of cultural cuisines together and creating the types of environments that would do them justice, from the fully stocked cocktail bar to the private dining rooms with full HD/AV capabilities ideal for hosting events. Trepanier aimed to exceed expectations on all levels, and he achieved that goal by tapping into his own imagination.

Catering to those in search of an escape to a studied atmosphere, the 535 Library Lounge offers a intermingling of old and new, an homage to cigar rooms of days long gone with walls lined in aging books. Supple leather seating offers a comfortable welcome to the evening's guests — it's the perfect place to end an evening, to indulge in a quiet bit of romance or watch the last minutes of a game, the ideal spot to let the tension slip away.

Playing to the more energized crowd, the musical décor of Firefly's sushi bar gets things on a roll with its guitar-lined

"We have a need for something different here, something that offers a different type of atmosphere and stays on the cutting edge with its cuisine." — Dave Trepanier, Owner of Firefly



PAN SEARED RED SNAPPER

Served with a Cajun-style Corn and Tomato Maque Choux

Pan Seared Red Snapper

Ingredients

4 filets red snapper, skin on
2 tbsp. olive oil
Salt and pepper

Directions Heat oil in a sauté pan on high heat, until oil begins to smoke. Reduce heat to medium high and add snapper to the pan, skin side down and lightly press skin into the oil, cooking 2-3 minutes. Flip onto the other side once a golden crust has begun to form on the edges of the skin, then continue cooking 2-3 minutes over medium heat. Remove fish from the pan, placing skin side up on a plate and top with Corn and Tomato Maque Choux.

Adapted from a recipe provided by Firefly.

Corn and Tomato Maque Choux

Ingredients

1/2 lb. Tasso ham
1 small onion, chopped
1 red pepper, diced
4 ears corn
1/2 pt. grape tomatoes, halved
1 cup heavy cream
1 egg yolk
1 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper

Directions Heat olive oil on medium in a sauce pan. Once oil is hot, add Tasso ham and onions. Caramelize onions until tender. Shave corn from the cob and add to the pan, along with red peppers and tomatoes. Heat mixture for five minutes, then add heavy cream and continue cooking for 10 minutes on medium heat while the sauce begins to thicken. Add egg yolk to thickened sauce and stir, then season with salt and pepper to taste.

walls, a playful space where gifted hands create harmony on a plate. Among their most popular items is the Devil's Advocate roll, a truly fiery flash-fried roll comprised of spicy tuna, sliced jalapeno and cream cheese, topped off with spicy crab and fresh seaweed salad,

drizzled in a duo of bright chipotle lime aioli and sweet eel sauce. By far the most creative of them all, however, would be the Slammin' Salmon, an explosion of colors, flavors and textures — of salmon, krab, cream cheese, jalapeno, bacon, chili paste and chipotle lime aioli topped with thin slices of apple, fresh strawberries, diced red onion and lump crab meat, drizzled with the

salty finish of miso sauce.

Wherever one might find themselves at Firefly, one thing is guaranteed to be true: It's a bit of magic to savor and share. It's the perfect play on the senses, from the sights to the sounds and the smells. Firefly is a place to let life light up, even if only for a moment. ●

Firefly is located at 535 Richard Jackson Boulevard. Open daily at 5:00 p.m. For more information on their menu and dining spaces or to make inquiries about their full catering services, call (850) 249-3359 or visit FireflyPCB.com.



Permanent residents at St. Andrews State Park include alligators like this one, nearly invisible among the duckweed. Visitors are advised not to approach or feed the reptiles.



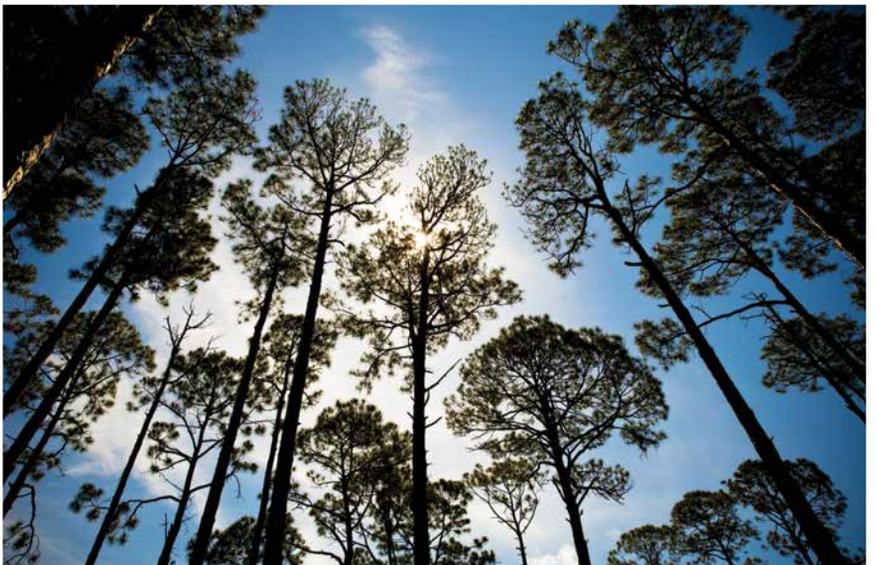
The Trails Less Taken

St. Andrews State Park
Offers Hikes Off the Beaten Path

BY HANNAH BURKE // PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BOINI

AT THE ENTRANCE TO ST. ANDREWS STATE PARK, you're greeted by a sign welcoming you to the real Florida. For some, that's the 1 1/2 miles of beach the park has to offer and the accompanying water activities. Others find the real Florida in its roots, among the endless pine forests and wetlands.

While Panama City Beach is home to several parks, including the Panama City Beach Conservation Park, Aaron Bessant Park, the often overlooked Camp Helen State Park and the popular Frank Brown Park, St. Andrews State Park is both easily accessible and contains the unspoiled landscape that first welcomed visitors in 1951. (Before that, St. Andrews was a part of a World War II military reservation.) Ensnconced within the



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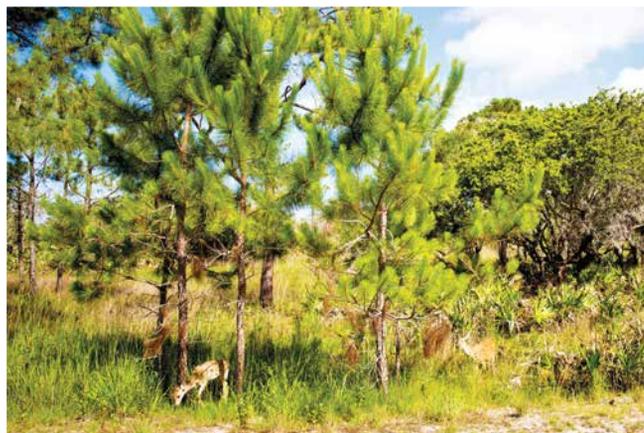
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The pier at St. Andrews State Park is known to attract anglers and fish, including bottom-hugging flounder and speedy mackerel. Inland, the park is home to whitetail deer.



Though the forest is home to squirrels, deer and an array of other wildlife, birds steal the show on Heron Pond Trail. Bird-watching enthusiasts and casual observers alike will enjoy spotting local and migratory species that grace the coast. While some fly high to scout their next meal, others prefer to get their feet wet. Marshes are particularly appealing to egrets, herons, and ibis — birds that wade through the water on their long legs as they wait for their opportunity to snatch fish and crustaceans.

Once the sand dunes end and the marshland begins, a wooden walkway will take you over the water for a closer peek at the unique environment. As you cut through the tall grass and rushes, you'll begin to see the Grand Lagoon in the distance. An optional side trail connects Heron Pond Trail to Sandy Point. This beautiful strip of beach is nestled between St. Andrew Bay and the Grand Lagoon, a prime fishing spot to those who know about the hidden gem.

After that, your next stop on the hiking circuit should be Gator Lake Trail. Though shorter than Heron Pond, the trail takes on a slightly more challenging terrain as it carries you over hills and then dips to a winding, waterside path. At its head is an observation deck for Gator Lake, which of course is named after the famous Florida reptiles that inhabit it. Hikers will have the chance to watch for gators catching rays as they bask in their natural habitat. A sign will remind you to not feed the gators — a necessary rule as there is nothing between you and the reptiles on your trek, and park

1,200 acres of St. Andrews are two trails that allow hikers to venture through a breathtaking natural landscape.

The longer of the two is Heron Pond Trail, an approximate one-hour walk that starts at a historic Turpentine Distillery. Visitors may be a little confused about the massive structure, but turpentine production played an enormous role in the early days of Florida. The area's copious amount of pine trees provided the sap that was extracted to produce turpentine. Turpentine, in turn, was essential to maintain wooden ships, providing a protective coating to shield ships against the elements. Guests are

encouraged to enter the distillery, where helpful illustrations hang above each piece of equipment and describe its specific function.

The trail then leads you into the shade of longleaf pine trees toward freshwater and saltwater marshes. This tranquil stroll is perfect for families (yes, you can bring Fido, too!), as markers guide the way and provide interesting facts about the flora and fauna. One post points out the saw palmettos sprouting around the sandy path, a low-lying palm whose berries and roots were used by the Native Americans for food and leather processing.

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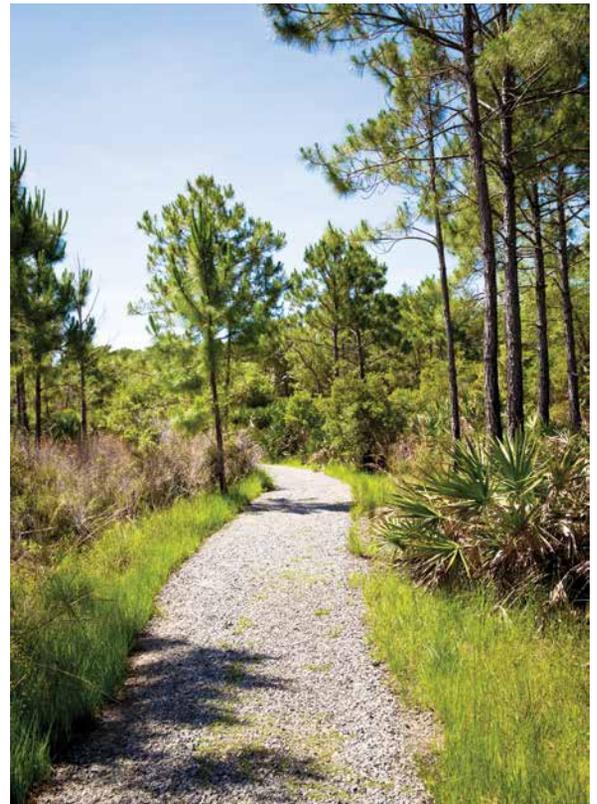
rangers don't want the animals to learn to associate humans with food. Unlike a zoo, Gator Lake Trail lets you get acquainted with the majestic creatures inside their own playground, without the glass walls and artificially constructed surroundings.

As you follow Gator Lake Trail you'll first travel along an incline into a pine forest to begin the 0.36-mile loop. Tracing the water's edge, you'll notice a spiky green plant that takes up residence there. Sawgrass — though it's actually a part of the sedge family — thrives in wet, tropical areas like Gator Lake. Even though its blades stretch high, the view of the water remains unobstructed. Several benches are strategically placed in optimal lookout points. Some of the more daring hikers can take a rest on a bench located just feet away from a popular gator-gathering spot, but take caution, and heed the alligator warning sign! There are also

elevated seating areas that provide a great perspective for more distant observation.

For additional viewing of the Florida wildlife, Button Bush Marsh Overlook is just across the road. A small walkway leads to the edge of a freshwater marsh, a beloved spot for wading birds looking for a snack. It's wise to pack your binoculars and cameras to capture some unforgettable sights of these magnificent creatures in their element. Button Bush Marsh offers a great place to rest your legs after a day's hike, allowing visitors to connect with nature in the most intimate of settings.

Though St. Andrews State Park is wildly popular with anglers, campers and water recreationists, its trails are often lost among all the other fun. So hikers, gear up, pack a lunch and spend the day with these two trails for an opportunity to escape the crowds and meet Florida at its most natural state! ●



St. Andrews State Park is located at 4607 State Park Lane, at the southeast edge of Panama City Beach. (850) 233-5140

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RECREATIONAL FISHING

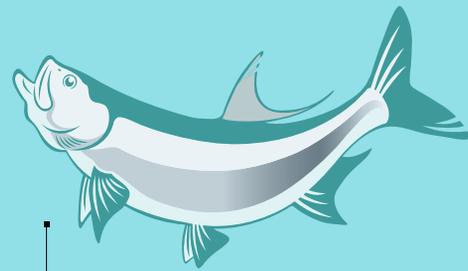
AT A GLANCE

MANY OF THE SALTWATER FISH pursued by anglers fishing out of Panama City Beach occur in both state and federal waters. Separate sets of fishing regulations govern fishing in state waters — those that reach nine miles out from the coastline — and federal waters, which lie beyond the nine-mile mark.

Find state regulations at myfwc.com/fishing/salt-water/recreational.

Find federal regulations at gulfcouncil.org/fishing_regulations/index.php.

Anglers should also be aware that regulations governing species such as red snapper and grouper change frequently. Be sure you consult the regulations including size limits, bag limits and season dates that are currently in effect.



TARPON

Habitat Inshore, shallow estuaries

Best fishing June, October

Good fishing July, August, September

State record 243 pounds

Food value Poor



KING MACKEREL

Habitat Nearshore and offshore, often around piers

Best fishing April, October

Good fishing May, June, July, August, September

State record 90 pounds

Food value Fair

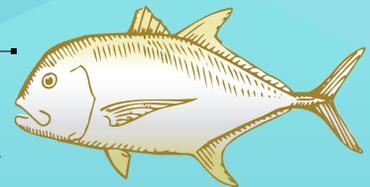
CREVALLE JACK

Habitat Inshore waters and open sea

Good fishing May, June, July, August, September

State record 57 pounds

Food value Poor



BARRACUDA

Habitat Open water and around reefs

Best fishing May, October

Good fishing June, July, August, September

State record 67 pounds

Food value Poor



SPECKLED SEATROUT

Habitat Inshore and nearshore, particularly seagrass meadows

Good fishing Year-round

State record 17 pounds, 7 ounces

Food value Excellent

SHEEPSHEAD

Habitat Nearshore waters, often around bridge pilings and other structures

Best fishing January, February, March, December

Good fishing April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November

State record 15 pounds, 2 ounces

Food value Good



RED SNAPPER

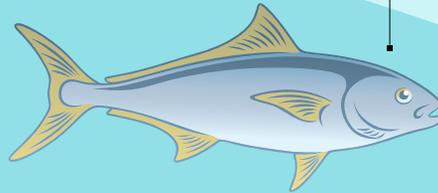
Habitat Brackish water river mouths, bays, and estuaries and tidal creeks; especially near oyster bars, buoys, channel markers, piers and bridge piles where food is plentiful.

Good fishing Year-round
State record 15 pounds, 2 ounces
Food value Excellent



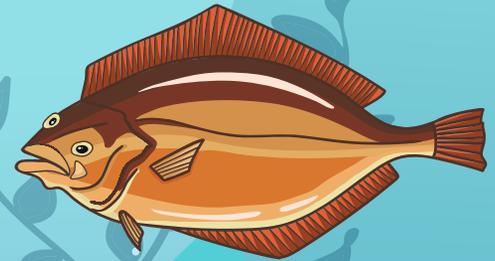
AMBERJACK

Habitat Inshore, offshore
Best fishing May, June, July
Good fishing April, August
State record 142 pounds
Food value Excellent



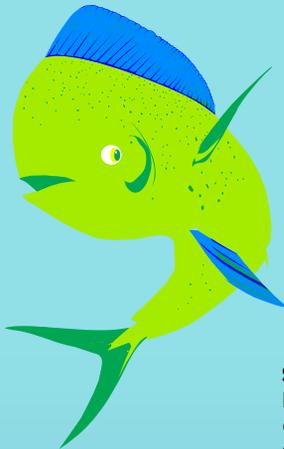
FLOUNDER

Habitat Bays, estuaries, beaches, nearshore waters
Best fishing January, February, September
Good fishing October, November, December
State record 20 pounds, 9 ounces
Food value Excellent



REDFISH (RED DRUM)

Habitat Creeks, bays, inshore waters
Best fishing January, February, March, December
Good fishing April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November
State record 52 pounds, 5 ounces
Food value Excellent

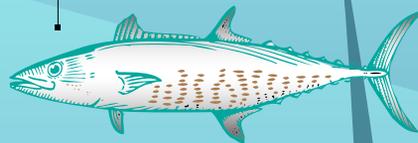


DOLPHIN (MAHI MAHI)

Habitat Open ocean
Best fishing May, October
Good fishing June, July, August, September
State record 81 pounds
Food value Excellent

SPANISH MACKEREL

Habitat Inshore, offshore and nearshore
Good fishing March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October
State record 12 pounds
Food value Fair

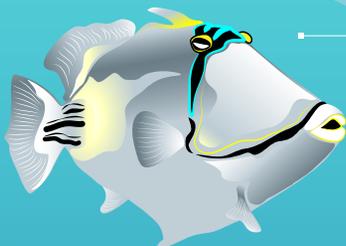


GROUPE

Habitat Offshore rocky bottoms and reefs
Best fishing May, June, July, August, September, October
Good fishing January, February, March, April, November, December
State record 113 pounds, 6 ounces
Food value: Excellent

POMPANO

Habitat Inshore and nearshore, especially along sandy beaches
Best fishing February, October
Good fishing March, April, May, June, July, August, September
State record 8 pounds, 4 ounces
Food value Excellent



TRIGGERFISH

Habitat Offshore, hard bottom and artificial reefs
Good fishing Year-round
State record 12 pounds, 7 ounces
Food value Excellent



COBIA

Habitat Nearshore and inshore waters; migrates along beach
Best fishing March, July, August
Good fishing April, May, June, July, September, October
State record 130 pounds, 1 ounce
Food value Excellent



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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

Leave Only Footprints

Together, we can keep our beaches pristine

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.



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