

This coastal stretch of road on Florida's Panhandle is a natural wonder. Your eyes, ears, and taste buds will thank you for coming.

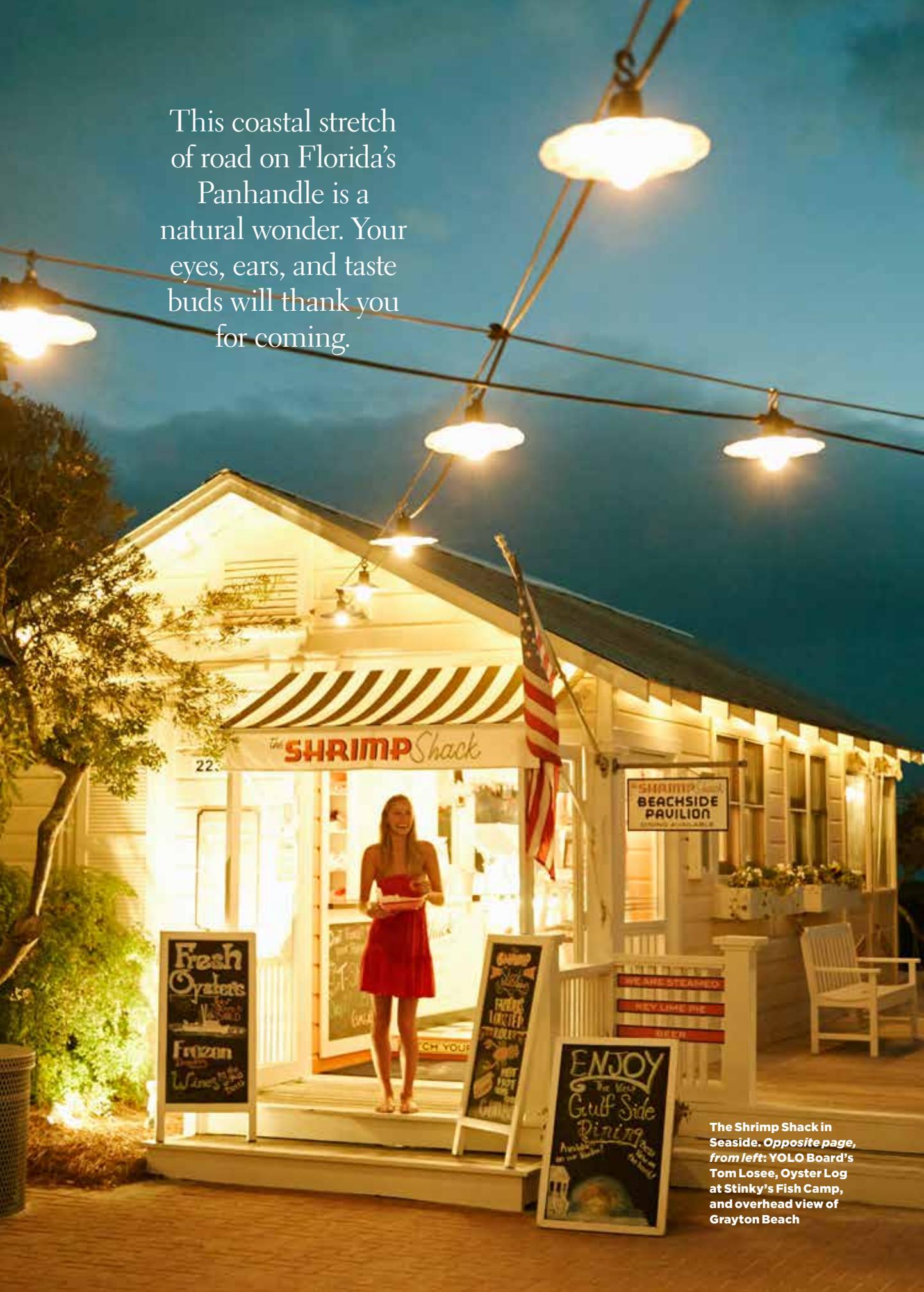


SMILE!

You're on

HIGHWAY 30A

The bright blue circles appear on cars hundreds of miles from their source. They read "30A," the zero in yellow, drawn like a sun. A mystery to many, the stickers trigger fond memories for those familiar with one of America's most rewarding coastal drives: Highway 30A in the Florida Panhandle. For them, "30A" means good times on the Gulf Coast.



The Shrimp Shack in Seaside. Opposite page, from left: YOLO Board's Tom Losee, Oyster Log at Stinky's Fish Camp, and overhead view of Grayton Beach



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barefoot from one end of the county’s beaches to the other.” Dunes fringed in sea oats separate the dazzling strand from something found in only a few places on earth: coastal dune lakes. South Walton has 15 of them, each framed in tall pines, live oaks, magnolias, and palmettos.

The lakes are popular with kayakers and stand-up paddleboarders. I went for a spin on West Lake with Tom Losee, cofounder of local manufacturer YOLO Board (for “you only live once”). The board’s stability makes this blend of canoeing and surfing easy to learn. “You can get the hang of it on sheltered water like this, then go out on the Gulf,” Losee says. “It’s not uncommon to see three generations of family stand-up paddleboarding together here.”

Forty percent of South Walton is preserved in four state parks and 15,000-acre Point Washington State Forest, where you can hike or ride horses, and see cypress swamps and the longleaf pine forest that once covered much of the South. At their most



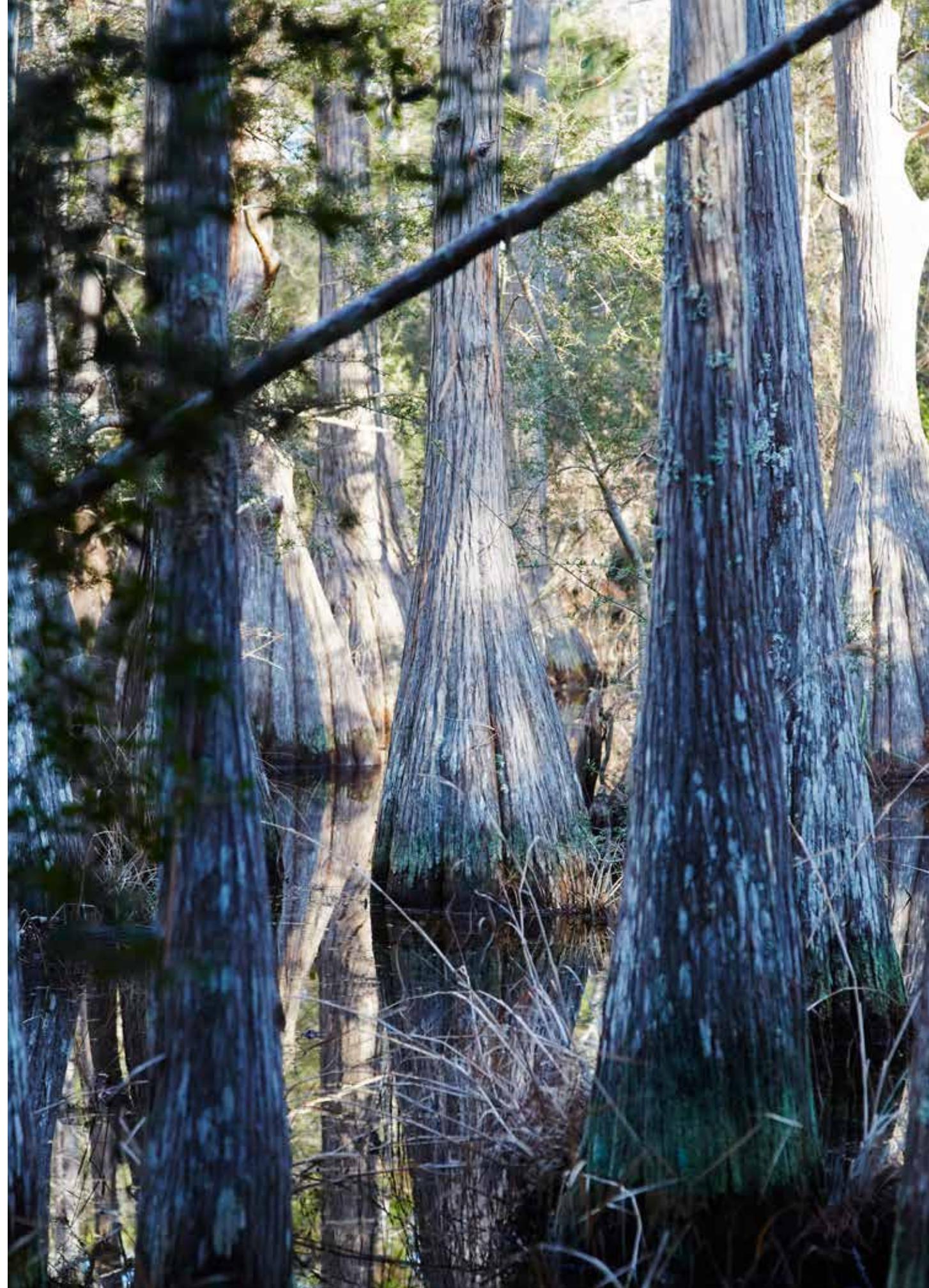
★ Years ago, the stretch of coast from Mobile Bay to Panama City was affectionately dubbed the “Redneck Riviera” — a breezy haven of seafood dives, roadside attractions, modest motels, condo towers, and spring-break antics at places like the Flora-Bama, the fabled beach bar that claims to straddle the Florida-Alabama line. Later it was branded the Emerald Coast for its vivid blue-green water (and perhaps its pricey

real estate). On this coast adorned with beautiful beaches and backwaters, the crown jewel must be southern Walton County (west of Panama City Beach), home of Highway 30A.

On the map, South Walton is a de facto island: 56,000 acres bounded by the Gulf, Choctawhatchee Bay, and the Intracoastal Waterway. Its shore is 26 miles of sugar-white sand. As an early-morning beachcomber tells me, “You can walk



Clockwise from top: biking around Seaside; cypresses on the Cassie Trail; chefs (from left) Todd Misener, Jim Richard, and Brannon Janca at Stinky’s Fish Camp; grouper with succotash at Fish Out of Water; Seaside Obelisk





pristine, these habitats conjure a vision of primeval nature, where you could glimpse a rare Florida panther through the palmettos. At Topsail Hill Preserve State Park, named for a soaring dune that ships once used as a beacon, most people head for the inviting, three-mile-long beach. That leaves dune-framed Campbell Lake largely deserted. “This looks like it did a thousand years ago,” Topsail’s park services specialist Jeff Talbert observes. “We have a lot of herons and ducks and birds that spend the winter here, like Northern tourists.”

The amount of public land offers ample territory for what staffers at the visitor center on U.S. Highway 98 call “ecosploring.” Of course, you don’t have to visit a park to jog or stroll on the beach. Or to bike along the paved path that runs the length of 30A. Even if your idea of outdoor activity is hoisting a beer at Bud & Alley’s rooftop bar, where they ring an antique ship’s bell when the sun slips into the sea, the area’s natural beauty captivates. It inspires local artists such as Allison Wickey, who shows worthy work (including her own) at her eponymous gallery in Seacrest Beach. “This is kind of a mystical place,” she muses. “Our sand is made of quartz, which is a healing stone. I like to imagine and paint it the way it looked before people came, before manmade structures were here.”

For design-savvy visitors, manmade structures are a big part of South Walton’s appeal. The area is



As a morning beach-comber tells me, “You can walk barefoot from one end of the county’s beaches to the other.”

known as a hotbed of New Urbanism, the movement to create walkable, mixed-use communities with high-density housing and green common spaces. Begun in 1981 on 80 acres flanking 30A, Seaside was the first town to embody New Urbanist principles. Early houses were based on traditional Florida cottages, but as it grew, Seaside embraced other styles, including its whimsical beach pavilions.

Seaside proved New Urbanism’s livability and desirability (a house that sold for under \$100,000 in the early years can now fetch seven figures). It spawned like-minded communities across the country, among them several on 30A, each with a different style. Mixing European and West Indian design elements, Rosemary Beach suggests a posh port on an imaginary island. Alys Beach’s style blends Bermuda’s whitewashed

walls and stepped roofs with a fanciful North African influence. Regarding adjacent Seaside as their historic district, the creators of WaterColor gave it park-like squares and houses with broad verandas that echo Charleston. With their eye-catching architecture, pedestrian-friendly planning, and one-of-a-kind shops and restaurants, these distinctive enclaves are a pleasure to explore.

Sandestin, in west South Walton, is also a master-planned community, though more on the order of Hilton Head — 2,400 acres of golf courses, tennis courts, a marina, and housing. But its most recent addition is more New Urbanist with a dash of theme park: the Village of Baytowne Wharfe, a walkable blend of shops, restaurants, and condos cast as a charming fishing port (albeit one with a zipline, carousel, arcade, and other diversions).

Because it developed later and more gradually than much of the Florida coast, the few high-rises in South Walton were all built before a four-story limit took effect. More common are clusters of one-off houses (vintage beach shacks, wooden cottages, and Mediterranean-style villas) that provide a note of coastal quirkiness to the planned communities. Homes across South Walton are available for vacation rental, and many

GETTING THERE

US Airways offers direct flights to Ft. Walton Beach and Pensacola from Charlotte.



Clockwise from top left: WaterColor Inn, beach view from WaterColor Inn, shopping in Sandestin, and artist Allison Wickey in her studio



local produce, which flourishes in the long growing season. Diners here prize fresh-from-the-Gulf seafood. Longtime favorite Café Thirty-A satisfies that craving with a fried oyster spinach salad, roasted grouper with baby Gulf shrimp, and red pepper risotto. Adding a Latin lilt, intimate Café Tango serves smoked piquillo peppers stuffed with crab and shrimp and an entrée of fish Basque-style, topped with Gulf shrimp and a sauce of white beans and Spanish sausage. Overlooking a coastal dune lake, Stinky's Fish Camp ("With a name like Stinky's, it better be good!") stays true to its Southern roots (chef Jim Richard trained at Commander's Palace in New Orleans), serving fresh Apalachicola oysters "all day, all ways," along with standards old (crawfish pie) and new (papaya slaw).

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— Tom Losee, cofounder of YOLO Board



To learn more about Highway 30A lodging, vacation rentals, dining, and shopping, set your browser to visitsouthwalton.com and 30a.com.

families from the South and beyond have a tradition of doing just that for a week or more each year.

To stand out on Santa Rosa Beach, a hotel has to show a flair for design. The WaterColor Inn, a playful take on grand old seaside hotels, features beachfront rooms, a host of recreational options, and the top-rated

Fish Out of Water restaurant. The Pearl in Rosemary Beach, a new boutique hotel, boasts a rooftop pool with party-ready cabanas and Havana Beach restaurant, which evokes the Cuban capital with waiters in *guayaberas* and a bar modeled on El Floridita, a favorite drinking hole of Hemingway.

South Walton chefs pride themselves on using

People come to South Walton to relax and to splurge — witness the number of boutiques, galleries, farmers' markets, and festivals. Balancing the upscale shops and outposts of smart design, there will always be places like the Red Bar in Santa Rosa Beach. Lined with faded film posters and other cultural detritus, festooned with chandeliers and disco balls, it's the kind of rollicking joint where the house band, Dread Clampitt, turns "Your Cheatin' Heart" into a sing-along. There's always a line waiting to get in for the music, the cold beer, the killer crab cakes, and the funky-cool beach vibe.

And sooner or later, the beach is where you'll want to hang out. Mark Twain said, "Buy land, they're not making it anymore." But starting this year, the Army Corps of Engineers will be making more beach along 30A, bringing in sand from offshore reserves. That means more of the sparkling granules that make this coast shine and keeps people coming back for more good times. Even in peak season, there's more than enough to go around. ✦

Jeff Book is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His work has appeared in many national publications. He writes from Birmingham, Alabama.

From top: paddleboarding class; cocktails at Fish Out of Water