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Sunny-side up: Beach umbrellas line Dune Allen Beach (left). Tropical-hued cottages characterize the community of Seaside (above).

THE BEACH | By MARGARET LOFTUS

Florida: Gulf Coast Renaissance

ASIDE FROM the brief glare of the spotlight after the 2010 Gulf oil spill, the strip of shoreline known as the Beaches of South Walton has long been off the radar for most Americans. The comparatively little oil damage this neck of the Florida Panhandle sustained is now cleaned up. A new airport receives direct flights from major cities such as Baltimore and Houston. As a result, the communities that straddle Scenic Highway 30A and include 26 miles of broad sugar white sand beach are more appealing than ever.

BEACHFRONT URBANISM

A relative latecomer to tourism, the sleepy stretch from Seascape east to Inlet Beach was still being farmed and logged when much of Florida's coastline was already stacked high with condos. Most of the development here is planned, notably Seaside, the idyllic community of pastel cottages and white picket fences that pioneered the New Urbanism movement and famously served as the backdrop for the 1998 film *The Truman Show*. Renting a home here makes for a self-contained vacation, with shrimp and barbecue peddled out of shacks and Airstream trailers. Once a week, the community projects movies on a big screen in the town center. "You can just park your car and not drive it all week," says Michael Azzano, a New Orleanian who spends long weekends in

and around Seaside each summer with his wife and two kids.

Several other South Walton communities have a more traditional resort feel. In WaterColor, for instance, digs range from the beachfront 60-room WaterColor Inn, with private patios or balconies, to understated low-rise condos overlooking the placid Gulf. Use of bicycles, kayaks, canoes, and fishing gear is free.

FUNKY TOWNS

While much of the new architecture is inspired by old Florida—think front porches and paddle fans—the real thing is still alive in parts of the older towns of Seasgrove Beach and Grayton Beach. Inland, oystershell lanes are lined with classic clapboard charmers on small lots thick with scrub oak. Head closer to the beach for roomier rental lodgings, many of them lavish. For a cozier setup with maid service, book one of the 12 eclectically furnished guest rooms at the Hibiscus Coffee and Guesthouse and wake up to a bowl of homemade granola, a tropical smoothie, and other wholesome breakfast fare.

LAID-BACK PURSUITS

Forget the longboard; the surf is only big enough for boogie boarding. Rent an ocean kayak or stand-up paddleboard (known locally as YOLO) with lessons starting at \$35 an hour. Off the beach, easily explore the towns and several coastal dune lakes on foot or bike via a paved path that stretches the entire length of 30A.

Sunset viewing is something of a sport at Gulf beaches. Here, regulars gather for cocktails at the rooftop bar of Bud & Alley's, a Seaside institution perched above the sand dunes. The patron who can guess when the sun will dip below the horizon—a bell rings to signal the exact moment—wins a free drink.

The dining scene is just as relaxed. Hit the Cowgirl Kitchen in Rosemary Beach for a casual, kid-friendly bite, like meatloaf sandwiches and chicken enchiladas. Sample local pompano and fresh Apalachicola oysters lakeside at Stinky's Fish Camp in Dune Allen Beach. The Red Bar, housed in an old general store in Grayton Beach, hosts live jazz in the evenings, but overall the nightlife here is pretty low-key, says Azzano. "The kids go out at night with a flashlight and hunt little crabs." ■

