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# Your Perfect Beach

South Walton offers something for everyone, all year long.

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PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF WATERCOLOR INN & RESORT

Memphians and Southerners alike won't dispute the appeal of vacationing on Florida's Emerald Coast. During the summer months, seemingly everyone does a disappearing act, leaving the humidity and humdrum of their daily routine on the bluff for the coastal breeze and sandy beaches of South Walton. The allure of the sugar-white sand, fresh seafood, and small-town feel is obvious, but the creative aesthetic and "shoulder season," or non-summer season, hype are often overlooked.

From Memorial Day to Labor Day, cottages stay rented, restaurants stay full, and as the Cottage Rental Agency in Seaside says, "Heads are in beds." In March, the beach in front of the Whale's Tail restaurant stays occupied by spring breakers, and tourism booms from families on summer vacation. But those who think the panhandle is simply a collection of highrises and souvenir shops aren't familiar with South Walton.

South Walton, or SoWal, refers to the 26-mile stretch of beach of Walton County east of the Okaloosa County line and south of Choctawhatchee Bay, which includes the 16 charming communities along Highway 30A, such as Seaside, Water Color, Grayton Beach, and Sandestin.

Although best known for its impressive outlet mall, SoWal is decidedly casual and intentionally different from neighboring tourist destinations on the panhandle. Ideal for young couples and empty-nesters, its laid-back attitude, along with the picturesque scenery of the Gulf, make it a diamond in the rough for budding creatives, young and old, including musicians, painters, photographers, and artists of every medium.

Nurturing this interest, SoWal invites songwriters and musicians from all genres to perform at the annual 30A Songwriter's Festival every January. With over 20 venues set up along 30A, this three-day festival is a hotbed for creativity as songwriters migrate to perform and local artists provide stage backdrops for each location. Signs that read

“please do not save seats” and “quiet please” ensure that each “listening room” is at capacity and provides a refreshing break from artists trying to compete with bar chatter. While 30A Fest definitely brings musicians to the forefront, Kelli Carter, SoWal native and marketing coordinator at South Walton Tourism

Development Council, says, “There’s always somewhere to find live music [around here].” Bands like Dread Clampitt, The Owsley Brothers, and former Elvis bass player Duke Bardwell, can be found jamming at restaurants on a given weeknight and drinking beer with the locals.

But music is just the tip of the creative iceberg. Andy Saczynski, the 2013 30A Artist of the Year, “turns junk into funk” by mixing recycled items with acrylic paint. His folk art is inspired by the architecture, landscape, and wildlife of Florida and whatever music he’s listening to while creating. His work is featured in several restaurants, and various pieces, including “Blues Man,” evoke the soulful Memphis style of Beale Street.

Photographer Tommy Crow is a firm believer in the creative potential of SoWal. Crow traded life at an Atlanta ad agency for Rosemary Beach, where he opened his gallery, and encourages others to do the same. “Instead of the rat race, you have quality time [to create],” Crow says. “You could say ‘South Walton’ and in the same vein think ‘we can go buy art,’ like Santa Fe. You say Santa Fe, you think art, you think jewelry, silver, turquoise. I hope that would be where we end up, so that it enriches this area even more because we have this amazing palette out there [pointing to the beach].”

“There’s some art, but there needs to be more. Without diversity you’re not going to keep growing. There’s so much room for everybody,” Crow says.

For those who would rather enjoy the finished product than do the creating themselves, SoWal offers something for everyone. “You can be as relaxed as you want or as active as you want,” says Laurie Hobbs, director of marketing and public relations at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. Relax, mix, and mingle at events like 30A Fest every January, the Sandestin Gumbo Festival every February, the South Walton Beaches Wine and Food

Festival at Grand Boulevard in April, and the ArtsQuest Fine Arts and Music Festival in May, which features more than 130 international exhibiting artists, live music, artist workshops, and a children’s exhibit.

South Walton also offers a plethora of outdoor activities for the adventure junkies looking to try new experiences on vacation. Over 40 percent of South Walton’s land is preserved by the state of Florida and cannot be developed, providing a lush landscape including 200 miles of trails for hiking and biking, water sports on the Gulf and Bay, horse trails, historic sites, and much more. It is also home to the largest concentration of coastal dune lakes in the world. Coastal dune lakes are a rare eco-system in which freshwater naturally flows over (or through) dunes and blends with salt water.

Aside from being a rarity in nature, dune lakes are the perfect training ground for a favorite local sport — stand-up paddle boarding. While the sport isn’t native to SoWal, it’s found a place to thrive due to the superior weather conditions. “This place is indicative of if you were a snow skier going to Telluride; this is a resort for stand-up paddling,” says Jeff Archer, co-founder of YOLO Board and Beach. “We’ve got the Gulf, we’ve got the Bay, we’ve got some of the best springs within a 30- to 45-minute drive from here. We don’t have surf here on a regular basis. So, we didn’t really have the ability to nurture a surf community in a big way, but with stand-up paddling, because it’s all-inclusive, and water presents itself here every day somewhere and [at every skill level] it’s very palatable.





“If we had tried to do this company anywhere else, many days I don’t think it would have worked,” Archer continues. “The 30A family embraced us before anybody else really knew what the sport was, and we had people taking a chance on us.”

When describing the benefits of paddle boarding to alternatives like kayaking and surfing, Archer credits viewing the ocean from a stand-up perspective as to why he and buddy Tom Losee created the company. “[While paddle boarding for the first time and witnessing dolphins in the pass] my first thought was, ‘I feel like Marlin Perkins.’ My second thought was, ‘Everyone’s going to want to feel like Marlin Perkins.’ This was too easy; I was just on the land over there, and now I’m in one of the most exciting moments of my life. That’s when I knew we had to make them.”

For those wary about giving the sport a chance Archer says, “The greatest thing about this sport is that it’s for everybody. If you can ride a bicycle, you can stand-up paddle board. It’s really about finding the right model that’s for you and the right water, and from there the adventure begins. I see people who get into this and within the first year they’re going to Hawaii to surf waves, and I’m talkin’ about 55-year-old women that you would never imagine [to do this sport]. It really

hooks the inner child and makes you want to be the best that you can be. It really empowers people. It's a vehicle for adventure. The board just gets you out there, then that's where the adventure begins."

Much like YOLO boarding, South Walton offers a new perspective proving that there's more to a perfect beach than what meets the eye. "There are little treasures all over the place here, and we're fortunate enough to be able to live here," says Archer.

Whether you're having grits at Great Southern, listening to Duke Bardwell jam at Stinky's Fish Camp, YOLO boarding on Western Lake, browsing Andy Saczynski's gallery, enjoying fine dining and watching the sunset at Vue, or having a massage at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort's spa there is a little slice of paradise for everyone. So what are you waiting for? Visit South Walton and find your perfect beach.



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**March 1-3**

Seaside School Half Marathon and 5K Run beginning at Alys Beach along Scenic Highway 30A

**March 9-10**

30A Wine Festival in Alys Beach

**April 18-21**

Sandestin Wine Festival at Baytowne Wharf

**April 25-28**

South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival and Destin Charity Wine Auction at Grand Boulevard

**May 10-12**

ArtsQuest Fine Arts and Music Festival at WaterColor

**May 17-19**

Sandestin Beach Bicycle Tour through northwest Florida

**June 7-8**

Digital Graffiti at Alys Beach

**June 19-23**

Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic

**August 24**

27th Annual Sandestin Triathlon

**September 1**

Sandestin Music Festival at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort