



FORAGING FLORIDA'S FORGOTTEN COAST

A Trip to the Florida Panhandle Gets Visitors Closer to Nature Without Sacrificing Luxury

BY LISSA POIROT

IT WAS THE PERFECT DAY. Scratch that. It was the perfect weekend, for every day was perfect. Sunrise on the beach, a shower with a view of the ocean, getting my feet wet and catching a few crabs for dinner, paddling a canoe through a quiet pine-lined bay, biking an even quieter tree-lined path, tonging for oysters and eating them fresh from the water, sunset dinner back on the beach, gigging for flounder at midnight in absolute hypnotizing silence under a million bright stars. My friends laughed when this “girlie girl” said she was embarking on a foraging trip to Florida’s forgotten coast. But I was the one laughing — gaily each and every day.

This wasn’t my first trip to the Florida Panhandle and its emerald-green waters and sugar-white sand beaches. I’ve stayed in a luxury high-rise condo right on the beach in Destin, and even better, enjoyed one of Seaside’s charming cottage rentals. I’ve come to discover the Beaches of South Walton’s 30-A, which is not just a road laced with wind-blown sand, but a lifestyle that no one could ever truly understand until they arrive here and kick off their shoes. Here is the one place where I could truly relax, enjoying the beaches, swinging in a hammock with a juicy novel and sampling the area’s wonderful restaurants and shopping.

So when I learned about a new opportunity to explore the area, organized by the St. Joe Company, which owns much of the land and seaside communities that have popped up between Destin and beyond Panama City, I thought it would be just another way to experience an area I enjoyed. Little did I know my days would be spent in and on the water working side by side with fisherman who have grown up along this coast, enjoying the company of a group of people who felt like family by trip’s end, and being utterly pampered with luxurious accommodations and gourmet cuisine. I joked it was the fisherman’s version of “City Slickers” with king-sized beds, but just like Billy Crystal’s character, I learned so much more about the environment and my place in it, as well as discovering my newfound courage to let a rugged side emerge.

Painting the Perfect Picture

Stepping off the plane in Fort Walton, I could feel the warm, humid air wash over me and instantly began to smile. A brief drive past Destin’s bustling streets filled with T-shirt shacks and mini-golf amusement began to ease into the more refined and quiet setting of the Beaches of South Walton, with rising dunes and palm trees beckoning. I was here to join the Foraging Florida’s Forgotten Coast tour package, where 10 of us would meet some of St. Joe’s friendliest staff and be guided on a culinary-focused trip by a most wonderful host, Chris Hastings, a renowned chef from Birmingham who owns Hot and Hot Fish and who has hired and trained the chefs of St. Joe’s community restaurants, including WaterSound and WaterColor.

The package began with a two-night stay at WaterColor Inn in Santa Rosa Beach. The three-story hotel (the area’s development laws prevent buildings from going any higher, a welcome break from Destin) features 60 rooms that all open to the ocean with private balconies and large sliding glass doors. A down-covered -



View of the Dunes from the steps.



Top of Page: Fresh seafood is served beachside .

Above: The end of another good day as the sun sets over the beach.

king-sized bed, armoire, and sitting area were comfortably arranged and stylishly decorated, but my jaw dropped when I noticed my shower featured windows that afforded views to the emerald green ocean. Having a couple of hours to relax and unwind before the evening's special dinner at the Inn's Fish Out of Water Restaurant, I strolled the WaterColor community, which was idyllic as families pedaled by on bicycles, then found myself walking the soft sandy shores.

As day turned into night, our trip organizers gathered our intimate group for a six-course dinner in Fish Out of Water's private dining room overlooking the water and backed by a glass wall connecting to the wine cellar. This first introduction into the area's local foods included tuna steak sushi drizzled lightly with citrus, crab fritters in a pepper sauce that added a little kick, scallion-laced flounder, a salty yet delicious pork jowl, blue cheese in a sweet beet sauce, and a fresh strawberry sorbet dessert to finish the night on a sweet note. Each course was complemented by a different white or red wine, and as we savored the dishes set before us, Chef Phil Krajeck and Hastings explained the fresh foods came daily from local, organic farmers and fishermen. The goal, Hastings said, wasn't just to provide the freshest foods to the visitors of the Inn — for why should anyone staying on the Gulf eat lobster flown in from Maine — but to also support the community and ensure the environment stays as fresh and pristine as it is today. Briefly explaining the damage that overfishing the Gulf does to both the community and the culinary world, it was only the beginning of our connective discovery into the Forgotten Coast.

Crabby Days are Here Again

Located in the Central Time Zone, I awoke bright and early and decided to hit the ground running, literally. The air was crisp, the waves lapped and I fit in some exercise while enjoying a sunrise in paradise. Our group would

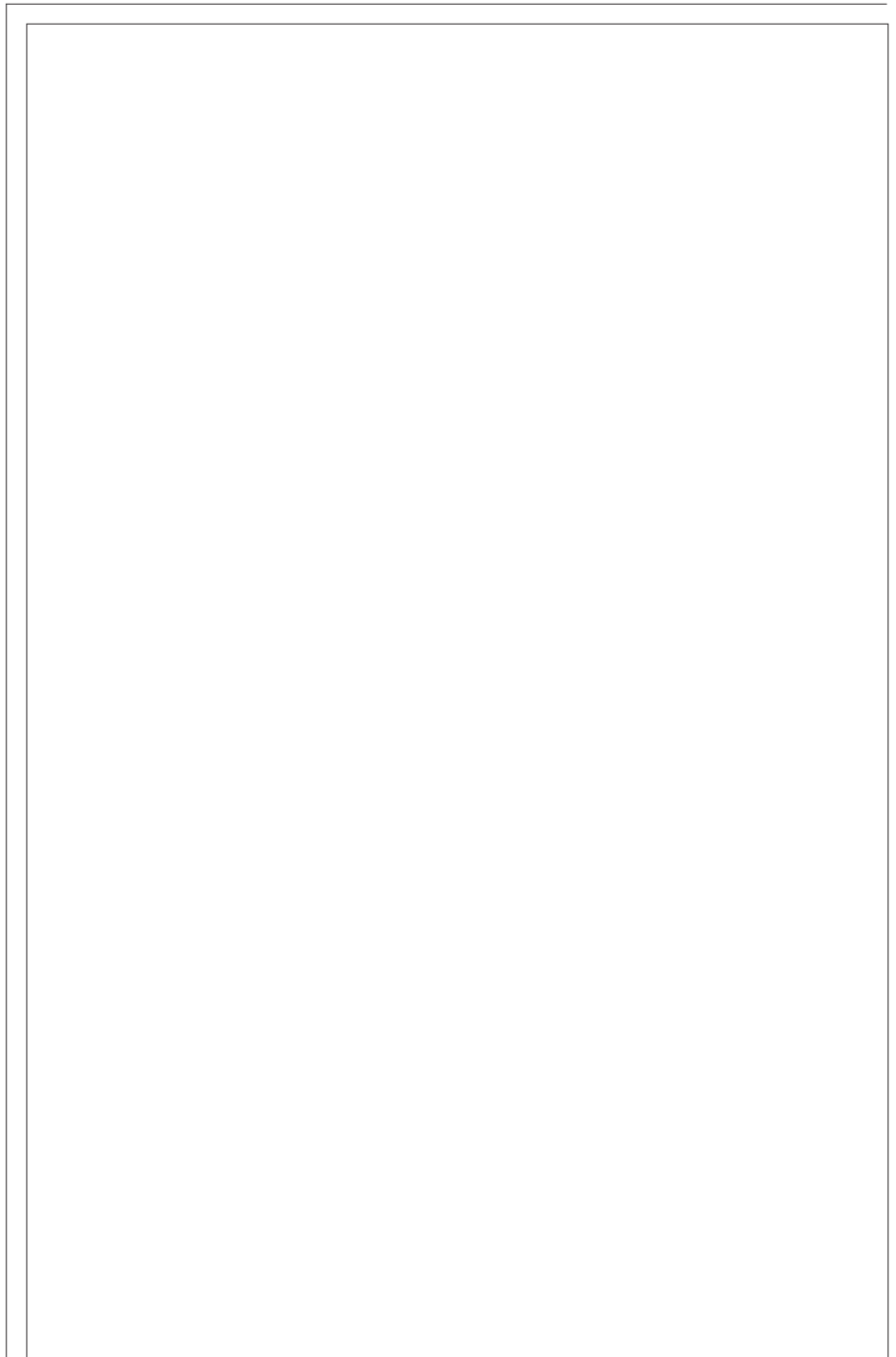
also be leaving early for a crab hunt in the tidal rivers of St. Joe's newest community, WaterSound, just a few miles up the road. A former Bostonian who has spent countless summers on The Cape, North Shore and Vineyard, I immediately felt at home at WaterSound's New England-inspired community, nestled near towering, protected dunes. Of course, living on the coast has also afforded me many opportunities to go crabbing, "fishing" for the crabs with raw chicken and a net. (I know, I know, it doesn't sound the least bit romantic, but when you get to eat a freshly caught crab at the end of the day, it's well worth the effort.) Our group was on the hunt for blue crabs, and during our forage, I learned how to identify female from male crabs by looking at their underbelly and the orange-tipped claws of the female. We struck gold on our three-hour hunt and Hastings promised we'd see those crabs again that evening when we dined on the nearby beach. But hunters build up quite an appetite and we were moving on to lunch at Larder on 30-A's Seagrove Beach.

Larder was a surprising stop for lunch. Looking more like a small wine shop, the high-end deli/wine bar was closed for our group as Chef Adam Caperton presented, again, course after course of delicious food — toasted baguettes with grilled shrimp and thinly sliced beef with light and tasty sauces, for example. Even more surprising was learning that Caperton was a former chef at Atlanta's own Bacchanalia. Caperton and his wife Stephanie fell in love with the beachside community four years ago and gave up the harried life of Atlanta's bustling city to create culinary masterpieces for a bunch of tourists like us.

Before evening, we had an afternoon free back at WaterColor. The inn provides free rentals of bicycles, kayaks and canoes, and during my stay BMW was providing a special promotion, loaning out four of their newest cars. The convertible Z4 sports car just happened to be available and I signed a piece of paper and was given the keys to one sweet ride, perfect for cruising the beaches.

(Next time I visit, I'm ditching my SUV and renting a convertible.) After a couple of hours of the wind blowing through my hair, I decided to slow things down for a moment

and borrowed one of the inn's bicycles, meandering in and out of WaterColor's neighborhood. The further back into the community I pedaled, the larger the homes





The club house and pool at the WaterColor.

and the quieter the streets. Approaching a bay and the Inn's Boat House, I realized there was an hour left of sun and this would be my only chance to use one of WaterColor's kayaks or canoes. Meeting up with another member of the tour, we decided to slip into the calm, still waters of the bay in a canoe. No one else was on the water and we paddled without talking, both happy to soak up the silence and the beauty surrounding us.

As if the day wasn't already ending in perfect relaxation, our group was whisked back to WaterSound's beach for a bonfire and candlelit dinner under the stars. Hastings was fully prepared to show off his skills — he's been written up in magazines such as *Food and Wine* and *Cooking Light* — as he and Chef Wayne Alcaide, St. Joe's chef for Northwest Florida, cooked up a large selection of freshly caught seafood: shrimp, flounder, mussels, clams and our morning's catch. We enjoyed a family-style meal, passing along seafood with buttery hands and laughing well into the evening.

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The "Foraging the Forgotten Coast" trip will be Oct. 18–21. Pricing for the package is \$1,750 per person and is all inclusive of activities, lodging, planned meals and gratuity. Transportation will not be provided. For more information, visit www.watercolorinn.com or www.joe.com.

It Gets Into the Blood

Our short stay at WaterColor had to end on the third day of our tour so we could experience Florida's true forgotten coast in Apalachicola, a sleepy community located between Panama City and Tallahassee. It would be quite a drive, but before reaching our destination, we had one important stop to make on our culinary adventure: Buddy Ward's 13 Mile Oyster Company to feast on oysters! The area still rests on the water, but is separated from the Gulf by a bay that catches fresh water from the Apalachicola River, providing the perfect breeding ground for oysters. Towering pines flanked the roads before we turned onto a sand and shell road leading to Buddy Ward's, where piles and piles of oyster half shells create a hauntingly beautiful graveyard of the delicacies.

Now owned and operated by Tommy Ward, the Ward family personally welcomed us with an oyster roast featuring his entire – and very extended – family. Rows and rows of picnic tables were filled with friendly folk shucking oysters taken from the bay just that morning. I selected to go out on the water to meet up with Tommy's brother George and try my hand at tonging for oysters. Standing on a flat boat, holding large wooden tongs with a metal rake at each end, I scooped and scooped to pull oysters from the water. George does this, alone, eight hours a day, but my arms, shoulders and back were feeling fatigued after 10 minutes, while blisters were forming on my hands. I'll never eat another oyster without appreciating the work that goes into collecting one. And after returning back to shore to enjoy my catch, I'm not sure I'll ever eat an oyster that hasn't been caught that day; the fresh salty meat never tasting so good.

After lunch, we continued our drive to Apalachicola and checked into one of the small town's historic bed-and-breakfasts, the Coombs House Inn. The Victorian Home, built in 1905, features 10 antique-decorated rooms, each with bathrooms and original fireplaces. Here, in this remote part of the world, we were greeted by the Italian accent of Ana Wilson, who left the beauty of Tuscany to live in bliss with her husband Chris. The town consists of just a few blocks, and our group decided to explore its antique shops. As we walked down the street, we received greetings from each and every passerby, including a group of teenage boys carrying skateboards, who also yielded the sidewalk to us. (Imagine that occurring in Atlanta!) Seeing a handwritten sign posted outside one



George Ward of Buddy Ward's Oyster Company tongs for fresh oysters.

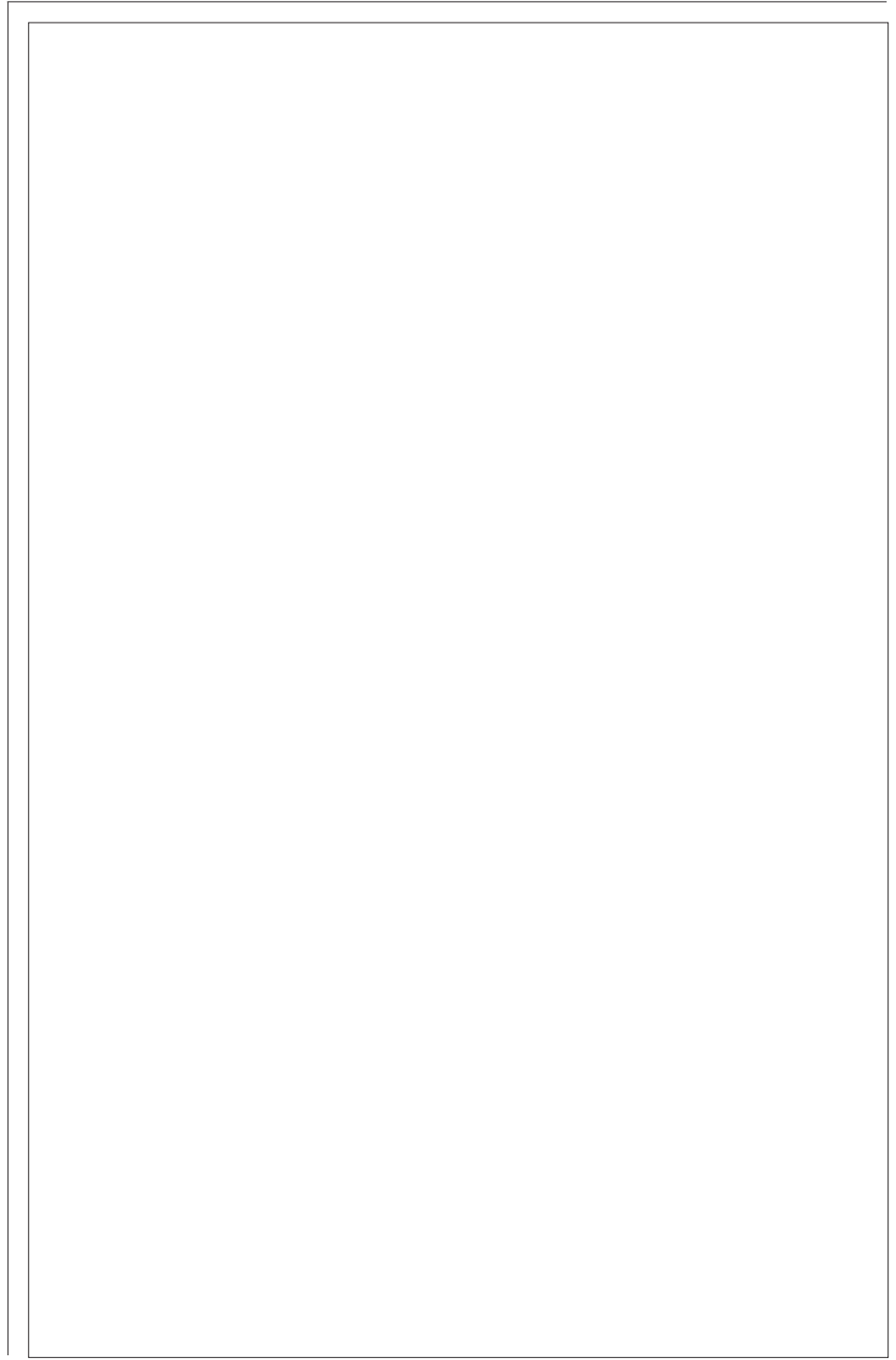
antique shop that in a humorous and misspelled manner explained what would happen to shoplifters, I walked in and encountered the owner, one of the town's eccentric residents. Although not originally from Apalachicola, he expressed his love for this remote community by reciting a saying that truly describes why the area touches people, "They say when you come to Florida, you get sand in your shoes. But when you come to Apalachicola, you will find the sand is much, much finer and it will get into your blood and into your heart."

Gathering for appetizers of soft-shell crab and clams at Avenue Sea restaurant in the Gibson Inn, our group was given the choice to enjoy the town's nightlife or bundle up for a four-hour flounder-gigging excursion. Feeling adventurous after the tonging, I elected to fish – the only woman to do so. In my naïveté, I didn't realize we would be on tiny motorboats holding just two members of the group and our guide, an area fisherman. Climbing into the boat in a crystal clear night spackled with bright stars, I felt like a kid again, embarking on a new adventure. Finding a remote and isolated area in the bay along St. George Island, our guide Captain Dwayne Allen told us we may see alligators, deer and wild boars on the shore or dolphins swimming beside us as we glided through the still waters. Given a gigger, basically a long pitchfork, we were told to stand at the front of the boat while Allen stood on the bow, guiding us quietly through the water with only a dim light illuminating a few feet of shallow waters to look for flounder camouflaged in the sand. Looking into the quiet and darkened waters in silence, I felt entranced, breaking the spell every now and again to look up into the brilliant sky. (I don't think I've seen the Milky Way that clearly since childhood.)

As we glided along, Allen explained how the waters are affected by the river, which when crossing the Georgia border is our own beloved Chattahoochee. Apparently, Atlanta controls a great deal of the river to help support our growing city, damming water for our own needs. But when Florida's

bay receives less fresh water, they lose the wildlife that thrives in it, such as the oysters. Allen explained that he gives flounder-gigging tours to support himself as oystering

and shrimping become more difficult. While I let it sink in how my hometown has affected the area, he discovered a flounder, stopping the boat near the fish and giving



me the opportunity to catch it. I'll admit proudly that my aim was true and swift and I gipped my first fish — first ever, as I've never caught a thing using a rod and reel (granted, I never really tried!). I was so energized after we docked that even though it was late, I couldn't sleep for hours. I just wanted to get back onto the boat.

Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow

The next morning was the end of our tour, but not without one last chance to forage the area with a trip to Apalachicola Research Reserve to learn about the harvesting of Tupelo honey, the “champagne” of honey. Now I really was a child again, sitting in a classroom setting as George Watkins explained the very extensive process of bee keeping and honey making – who knew so much labor went into making something so sweet and delicious? Sadly, I discovered our Chattahoochee plays a big role on the area's honey making as well, as the bees need the springtime blossoms of Tupelo trees that grow along the river. This type of honey has a distinctive flavor and non-granulation that make it the best table honey, but the white tupelo tree is very particular on what it needs to thrive. As we munched on sweet samplings and honey mead (quite a strong kick for the early morning), I hoped Apalachicola wouldn't lose its Tupelo trees. While our tour was a chance to forage and indulge in the riches of the sea, it was uplifting to learn that St. Joe, while a development company, was fighting to preserve the region's environment, preserving more than 35,000 acres of the land. As we left the sweet town, our arms loaded with bear-shaped bottles of honey, our tour came to an end. We began saying our near-tearful goodbyes driving off into the sun and knowing we were introduced into a quiet, pure and forgotten way of life I will always remember. ✨

Photos courtes of Lissa Poirot.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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