

# VISIT PANAMA CITY BEACH

SUMMER 2016 MAGAZINE

## GULF VISTA

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**Timeless  
Charms**

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SUMMER 2016



PEPSI GULF COAST JAM

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HOLLY GARDNER



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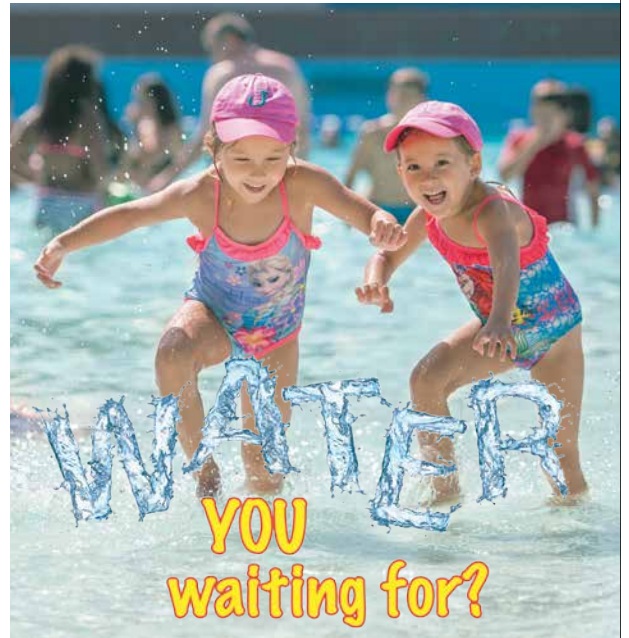
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**AS WE COMMEMORATE** Panama City Beach's 80th anniversary this year, it's been fun to look back at photos from summers gone by, and note in particular how two things have remained constant: summer fun, and our beautiful white sand beaches.

It's true that more and more visitors are discovering the shoulder seasons of fall and late spring, and our winter visitors continue to have as much fun as anyone, but there's no better example of a classic American summer vacation experience than what you'll find here in Panama City Beach.

That's why in this summer issue of Visit Panama City Beach Magazine we were spoiled for choice when it came to topics to explore — we looked at how the beach has changed over the years, sharing memories of favorite places to eat, drink and play, and adding new hot spots to the mix in "Then and Now ... and Still." We look at the continuing history of Shipwreck Island Water Park — a PCB mainstay for 33 years — and talk with Buddy Wilkes, the long-time park manager and the man behind the idea that made the park a reality in "Shipwreck Island: 33 Years of Wet Fun." And of course we highlight fishing, diving, golf and the thrill rides that are simply essential to the fabric of summertime.

We're also showing you the fun you might have missed in Panama City Beach — opportunities to explore the exceptional ecosystem of West Bay, Panama City Beach's starring roles in television and movies ("Scene 1, Take 1"), and even the undiscovered treasures of the historic St. Andrews neighborhood.

As always, there's a lot to explore this summer and a lot of fun waiting for you in Panama City Beach.

Sunny regards,

**Dan Rowe, President and CEO**

*Visit Panama City Beach*



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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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## >> 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

# Exciting Fishing Adventures Await!

**WHETHER YOU'RE** an experienced angler, a family ready for the “next big adventure” while on vacation or a father passing on his love of the sport to his children, fishing in Panama City Beach will not disappoint. From the sandy marshes and tidal flats of St. Andrew Bay to the depths of the Gulf of Mexico, our waters abound with a variety of marine life sure to entice the adventurer in you!

Today, pros and amateurs alike continue to catch an array of species, including amberjack, bluefish, cobia, flounder, grouper, king and Spanish mackerel, mahi mahi, marlin, pompano, redfish (or red drum), red snapper, trout, wahoo, sailfish and yellowfin tuna. Two of our premier locations to fish are the Russell-Fields Pier (or City Pier) and the M.B. Miller Pier (County Pier). An admission fee will include a license to fish from that pier for the whole day.

Summer is the most popular time of the year for fishing trips, though many locals say that spring and fall are their luckiest seasons. Knowledgeable anglers will find great rewards even in the winter.

In the summertime, family fishing rules. Anglers can choose from private charters, joining other anglers on a “party boat” or simply casting a line from shore. Snapper season is a highlight of summer, though red fish, gag grouper and red grouper are popular fish to target as well. Redfish and trout are more likely to bite in the bay during the early mornings or evenings of summer.

Offshore, deepwater fish like wahoo, yellowfin tuna, sailfish and marlin are favorites, while closer to shore red snapper are abundant and in season beginning the first of June.

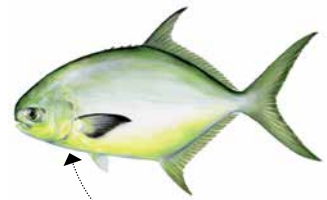
In the fall, cooler temperatures stimulate fish to feed. That’s when redfish and trout most aggressively go after bait near the top of the water. With pompano and others schooling along the beach, fishing near the shore also improves.

As winter arrives, trout and redfish occupy the deep holes in the bay or seek refuge in creeks and rivers. Flounder, pompano and cobia, however, swim toward the shoreline for food. The warmer shores, in fact, lure larger fish throughout the cold weather.

At the onset of spring, Spanish mackerel, bluefish and cobia can be caught off the piers and in the bay, while trout and redfish populate the grass flats to feed.

For trolling and bottom-fishing offshore, deep-sea excursions range from private crew charters on luxury yachts to large group experiences on party boats. Small boat rentals are also available. For pier fishing, public sites include the Russell-Fields Pier, the M.B. Miller Pier and Tiller Pier in St. Andrews State Park.

Information and resources for fishing expeditions are available from the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau website at [visitpanamacitybeach.com](http://visitpanamacitybeach.com) under Ecotourism. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission publishes fishing regulations and license applications online at [myfwc.com](http://myfwc.com), and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council posts federal and state regulations on its website at [gulfcouncil.org](http://gulfcouncil.org). Find additional information on fishing and charters at [visitpanamacitybeach.com/things-to-do/fishing-charters](http://visitpanamacitybeach.com/things-to-do/fishing-charters).



**Pompano**



**Redfish**



**Flounder**



**Mahi Mahi**



**Grouper**



**Sea Trout**



**Cobia**



**Red Snapper**



**King Mackerel**



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# The Best Birding, Naturally

**NATURE ENTHUSIASTS** have much to explore in and around Panama City Beach. Birding is a hobby that is growing in popularity on the Gulf Coast, and with our diverse ecosystems of coastal dunes, salt marshes and freshwater wetlands, a wide variety of birds can be viewed in their natural habitat.

The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail (GFBWT) is a program of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission designed to conserve and enhance Florida's wildlife habitats by promoting birding and wildlife-viewing activities and conservation education. At its core is a network of nearly 500 sites throughout Florida selected for their excellent bird-watching, wildlife-viewing or educational opportunities. Miles of this self-guided trail run right through the Panama City Beach area.

St. Andrews State Park is featured on the GFBWT. Lush nature trails wind through the park, providing an excellent opportunity for birding. Or, take a kayak out and explore the coast for a more unique vantage point. Also, from

St. Andrews State Park you can take a boat tour to Shell Island, a 700-acre island populated with a variety of wild birds, including pelicans, sandpipers, gulls, egrets and snowy plovers.

Camp Helen State Park, another site on the Trail, boasts a wide array of bird-watching opportunities. There is no end to what the attentive bird-watcher will see at Camp Helen since it is bordered by water on three sides: by the Gulf of Mexico to the south and Lake Powell — one of the largest coastal dune lakes in the world — to the east and north.

The Panama City Beach Conservation Park was born from a desire to protect and balance our natural resources while providing outdoor recreational opportunities. Twelve trails, ranging from just over half a mile to 11 miles, provide endless opportunities, so bring your binoculars and camera and enjoy a day in nature!

For more information on birding in the Panama City Beach area please visit: [BayCountyAudubon.org](http://BayCountyAudubon.org) and [FloridaBirdingTrail.com](http://FloridaBirdingTrail.com).



**Bald Eagle**



**Brown Pelican**



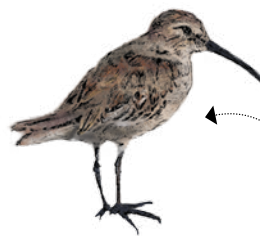
**Osprey**



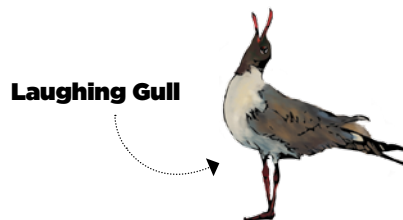
**Red-Shouldered Hawk**



**Sandpiper**



**Dunlin**



**Laughing Gull**



**Great Blue Heron**

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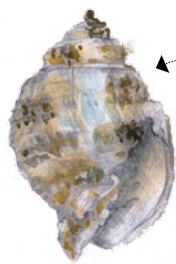
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# Discover Seashells by the Seashore

**DISPLAYED ON WINDOW SILLS,** end tables and bathroom shelves all over the world are samples of nature’s handiwork plucked from the sugar sands of Panama City Beach and the bay bottoms and nearshore waters of Bay County’s Gulf Coast. Anyone who says they will stop for nothing surely hasn’t walked anywhere between St. Andrews State Park and Camp Helen the day after a heavy surf deposits sand dollars and the latest raft of seashells on the

sand. Shells can be found along the entire 27-mile length of Panama City Beach — make sure you pack a mesh bag along with your towels and sunscreen whenever you hit the sand — and especially on the uninhabited and aptly named Shell Island, accessible by shuttle boat from the state park. Serious collectors gather their most spectacular shells while snorkeling or diving. The species below represent a sampling of those that are indigenous to our area.



**Common  
Nutmeg**



**Angel Wing**



**Alphabet Cone**



**True Tulip**



**Lion's Paw**



**Atlantic  
Giant  
Cockle**

**Calico Scallop**



**Lightning  
Whelk**



**Florida  
Fighting  
Conch**





## 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.

# Swing Constructor

Adam Brack shaves strokes

BY PAT MCCANN

**ADAM BRACK HAS BEEN** a professional golf instructor for the better part of two decades. In that time, he has come to realize that when it comes to teaching, it's best to keep it simple.

That is not to say that the training methods at the Adam Brack Golf Academy are primitive, by any means. But it does mean that Brack frequently reminds his students that golf is a game involving a stick and a ball. According to Brack, players who forget this basic truth can get caught up in certain misconceptions about how to play the game. Brack calls these misconceptions the Big Three:

**MISCONCEPTION NO. 1: SWING SLOWLY.** Instead, Brack says that a balanced swing, not necessarily a slow swing, is key.

**MISCONCEPTION NO. 2: MAINTAIN A STRAIGHT LEFT ARM.** Convinced this is a golden rule of golf? Think again. Brack notes that the No. 1 player in the world, Jordan Spieth, bends his left arm at the top of his swing.

**MISCONCEPTION NO. 3: KEEP THE HEAD DOWN.** "Keep an eye on the ball and the head will follow," Brack says. "If the head stays buried down into the body, you won't rotate properly. Allow the head to move a little, especially through impact and to the finish. If you don't, you'll lose all athletic motion. Anika Sorenstam and Dustin Johnson are just a couple of the best that do this."

Brack's advice is employed by golfers who are as young as 5 and as old as 92. During the winter months in Panama City Beach, many students



ADAM BRACK GOLF ACADEMY

visiting the academy, located on the back half of the practice range at Hombre Golf Club, are snowbirds from Canada. What these visitors, usually ages 60–80, gain is a big picture approach to their pursuit of a better score.

It begins with a club assessment to ensure that equipment isn't negatively affecting the golf swing. Simply put, some golfers' clubs aren't a proper fit for their bodies.

Then comes a physical evaluation to discover body limitations and whether some stretches and strengthening in the academy's indoor gym are needed to better influence rotation.





“We don’t give them an entire workout program loaded with exercises,” Brack says. “We just want to find out what they can and can’t do.” Brack stresses that lateral motion and rotation are important and that most people are stationary much of their lives and need to learn how to rotate and loosen their body again.

“(Golfers) need for the ankles and legs to be strong. Energy in the swing comes from the ground,” Brack says. “If there’s no stability in the legs they don’t have the stability to support rotation.” Students

also are shown simple exercise programs they can do at home using their own body weight, but they are also free to use the tools available in the gym. “We have resistance bands, bosu balls and medicine balls to teach stability,” Brack says.

Once the initial phases of a student’s evaluations are complete, the student is videoed with high-speed cameras while putting, chipping and making a full swing.

“We establish a file or folder on (each student),” Brack says. “One of the things we do differently is we’re not about

hour-long lessons as much as putting a plan and a coaching program together.”

The high-tech AboutGolf simulator enables the staff to gather more information. Brack says that it spits out data including club-head speed, ball speed, launch angle and spin rate. There are also force plates that indicate areas of pressure change in a swinging golfer’s feet.

“Golf is a game of balance,” Brack says. “When we work with force plates, it tells us if (a golfer is) balanced and using the ground for power. Most golfers are out on





ADAM BRACK GOLF ACADEMY

ADAM BRACK GOLF ACADEMY



## THE ADAM BRACK GOLF RESUME

- » Teaching professionally since 1999
- » The Adam Brack Golf Academy ranked among top 25 golf schools since 2002
- » Yes! certified Putting Instructor and Custom Fitter
- » Certified Henry Griffitts Master Club Fitter, 2004
- » Director of Adam Brack Experience Better Golf, 2005
- » SNAG Golf Coaching certified, 2006
- » U.S. Kids Golf Instructor, 2005
- » Impact Zone certified instructor, Bobby Clampett Golf, 2007
- » Henry Griffitts Clubs certified instructor
- » Guest instructor at Kadena AFB, Okinawa, Japan, 2006–2010
- » Guest instructor at Missouri Military Academy, Missouri, 2009–current
- » Guest instructor at St. Joseph Island, Ontario, Canada, 2010–2013
- » Titleist Performance Institute Level 1, Body and Swing Connection, 2015
- » Titleist Performance Institute Level 2, Junior Coach, 2015
- » Certified Seemore Custom Fitting Center, 2015

their toes, which shows that there is lack of rotation and power.”

Video self-analysis is another important tool for teaching golfers how to correct their stance and swing. Brack explains that a high percentage of his students are visual learners, and it helps them to be able to see themselves in action. It also validates what they’re being taught. “It gets them on board much faster.”

Of the many golfers who visit the academy, Brack says that most either request to be taught how to gain more distance or how to become more consistent.

“We want to get it down to lower scores, and the coaching program is where the numbers are,” Brack offers. “Our evaluation gives them an assessment on their game and how to practice and what to work on.”

Brack is quick to say that his staff doesn’t get enough requests about working on the

short game, which is the most effective way to improve scoring. He says that amateurs will work about 80 percent of the time on their full swing and 20 percent on their short game, while professional golfers split their practice time into thirds for putting, chipping and developing the full swing.

In addition to working with players on an individual basis, the academy offers corporate and group outings that can range from one hour to a half-day or full day. Clinics are also available for groups and companies and include group instruction and range use.

According to Brack, group instruction emphasizes the social and competitive aspects of the game. But group instruction does not mean a lack of one-on-one attention. “We have a maximum ratio of 6-to-1,” Brack says. “We’re about quality, not quantity. We just don’t herd students through.”





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The Meadows Course  
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baypointgolf.com

**Hombre Golf Club**

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hombregolfclub.com

**Holiday Golf Club**

(850) 234-1800  
holidaygolfclub.com

**Signal Hill Golf Course**

(850) 234-3218  
signalhillgolfcourse.com

Brack and his staff are First Tee certified, and they teach summer camps and an after-school group for youth that has been extremely successful. Brack's junior programs now include more than 100 golfers. He also instructs many of the local high school golf teams and offers a coaching summit for all high school coaches in August. This summit is designed to provide coaches with the tools they need to work with their teams.

The Adam Brack Golf Academy stays busy year-round. "Our winter guests roll us right into the Masters (in April), which usually is a trigger to get out and play," Brack says. "Hunting is over. Football is over. The holidays are over and weather

warms up, and that runs into the summer junior program and private lessons."

Brack says that Panama City Beach is a good golf destination, and he estimates that 50 percent of his business is from out of the state. Some of his students even fly in for a day or two of golf and then fly home.

Lessons include one-, three-, five- and 10-hour packages, but can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual students. Three-day golf schools are a big hit for the golfer that is really dedicated to making a change in his or her game.

"We have a price break for people committing their time and a discount as they purchase more time," Brack says. "Packages can be spread out, or in one

case, I have a girl I just worked with who flies down from Kansas City and does five hours in one day."

The academy's distinguished alumni include professional golfer Jordan Massey as well as several young women who currently play college golf. But it is the student who gets more enjoyment from the game by playing it the proper way — while also lowering his or her score — that is the backbone of the business.

More information on the Adam Brack Golf Academy can be obtained by calling (850) 236-8374 or visiting [adambrack.com](http://adambrack.com). ●



# Shop for Summer

**BOOK BAGS HAVE BEEN** packed away, vacations have been planned and are eagerly awaited and sweaters have given way to swimsuits. Days of brilliant sunshine are upon us with the arrival of summer. While nothing can replace riding waves in the Gulf of Mexico or soaking up the sun while in repose on baking-powder sand, a little local shopping can add to the Panama City Beach experience. With a variety of specialty shops, locally owned vendors and open-air markets you are sure to find unique treasures, handmade gifts and beach souvenirs that will evoke memories long after the dog days of summer have past.



## BUNGALOW 360 OCTOPUS TOTE BAG

Made with all-natural canvas and water-based inks, this uber cute tote and matching wallet from Bungalow 360 is not just stylishly whimsical, it's also Earth friendly and conscientiously created. Located in the heart of Pier Park, Magnolia June offers a full line of Bungalow 360, as well as many other unique lines that will appeal to women of all ages.

**Magnolia June**

701 Pier Park Drive, Ste. 117  
(850) 230-3600



## FRESH AND HEALTHY PRODUCE

Happy Homestead offers specialty produce, mushrooms, flowers and microgreens for simple farm-to-table nutrition at Grand Lagoon Waterfront Farmers Market, with a focus on unusual, nutrient-dense and delicious foods that are certified "naturally grown." This small farm also grows wedding flowers to order.

**Happy Homestead Really.Happy.Food.**

Thomas Drive at Capt. Anderson's  
(850) 481-6848



## NECKWARE EXTRAORDINAIRE

This statement necklace will dramatically accessorize any outfit. It's among the hard-to-find and one-of-a-kind items at this eclectic gallery located in the picturesque west end of Panama City Beach. Here, you will find the area's largest collection of wood carvings along with Native American silver jewelry, ceremonial drums and flutes and other intriguing art pieces.

**Sun Bear Gallery**

101 Casa Place  
(850) 234-7701  
sunbeargallery.blogspot.com



## WINGS

The Shadow Box is a collection of whimsical décor for eccentric lifestyles, quaint homes and those writing their life story. The owner, Terrah Waynick, wanted to offer more than just a shop with pretty things. She wanted to create an inspiring, stimulating and happy place to shop. The Shadow Box offers eclectic one-of-a-kind items, coastal décor, handmade jewelry, things repurposed and much more. At the Shadow Box we hope to inspire and encourage its patrons to continue creating.

**The Shadow Box**

1711 Thomas Drive  
(850) 249-1388



## PELICAN SIGN POST

Give this striking fellow with a bill of yellow a place to roost, and he will provide a beachy welcome to all of your guests.

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# A (Delightful) Fishing Conundrum

Bay County leaves anglers to choose what they will catch today

BY STEVE BORNHOFT

## 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.

**A PERSISTENT BELIEF AMONG** deer hunters held that bucks in the rut, distracted by other desires, don't eat. While baseless, that myth no doubt survives to this day in some circles.

Likewise, anglers — pursuers of cobia, mostly — who encountered tarpon hanging off Panama City Beach were convinced for many years that the silver kings were involved in a breeding season migration and consequently not interested in food.

They'd toss a jig or an eel or a plug otherwise intended for a crab cruncher at a breathtaking tarpon and the fish would spurn the offering and take off. Every time. It frustrated the heck out of fishermen, including Capt. Justin Leake, who has been a sight-fishing fanatic since childhood.

"Our pass from St. Andrew Bay to the Gulf is deep and narrow and there's a lot of current in it," Leake notes. "That prevents tarpon from entering the bay and keeps them running along the beach. For years, I would see them not far off the sand while chasing cobia, but I could never catch one."

Finally, a friend's uncle let Leake know what he was doing wrong.

"When you're cobia fishing, you never shut the motor down," says Leake, who has been a full-time guide since 2009. "What I learned is that while engine noise makes cobia curious, it spooks tarpon."

Young and dumb fast-growing cobia will approach running boats, but "tarpon are very long-lived, slow-growing, intelligent fish," Leake points out. "The tarpon we catch may be 20 years old. You've got to turn everything off — even a trolling motor — anchor up and let the fish come to you."

With silence on his side, Leake and clients consistently catch tarpon on flies and other artificial lures, never resorting to bait. Don't tell anyone, though. Leake doesn't intend for the activity to become too popular.



CHASIN' THE SUN FISHING SHOW

A relative few present-day fisherman are aware that tarpon fishing in Bay County was once highly popular. The area's sportfishing industry was built in the first place on the broad shoulders of tarpon. In the 1930s and '40s, the Bay Head Inn at the mouth of Bear Creek attracted well-heeled anglers from Birmingham, Atlanta and throughout the Southeast. The lodge had nothing to do with bass fishing. It was situated where tarpon tended to congregate, especially in the winter months when they were drawn to the relatively warm water exiting the creek.

Construction of today's pass, the resulting silting in of the old pass that used to reliably separate Shell Island from Tyndall Air Force Base, and the construction of the Deer Point Dam brought an end to Bay County's inshore tarpon fishing. The nascent recreational fishing industry had to evolve to survive and began to target species like red snapper that had been the exclusive province of the commercial industry.

"It's always been true about fishing," Leake stresses, "that you have to adapt. From day to day, season to season and trend to trend."

These days, Leake is especially grateful for redfish, a species whose numbers grew dramatically



Redfish are a staple for inshore guides and skinny water fishing enthusiasts and can be caught year-round.







**“When you’re cobia fishing, you never shut the motor down. What I learned is that while engine noise makes cobia curious, it spooks tarpon.”** — Justin Leake

through recent decades in which it has enjoyed gamefish-only status and has benefitted by low bag limits. He finds that the redfish is doing for saltwater fishing in Northwest Florida what the largemouth bass has done for freshwater fishing from coast to coast.

There are redfish guides and redfish tournaments and you can catch a redfish any day of the year in Bay County waters in a variety of ways: topwater lures, jigs with plastic tails, plugs, spoons, live shrimp, cut bait, the list goes on.

“Our speckled trout numbers have fallen off due to fishing pressure and the fact that trout always has been a catch-and-keep fishery,” Leake opines. “Think about it: Our bay system is a pond, relatively speaking, in comparison to the Gulf, and you can’t create new grass-flat trout habitat like you can artificial reefs offshore.”

Leake especially loves fishing during the warm-weather months

of the year — May is his favorite — because of the tempting variety of angling possibilities they present: pompano, cobia, mackerel, tarpon, redfish and reef fish of all sorts.

“In the summer, I begin by scouting the weather and then offering to my clients the best options that a particular day presents,” Leake explains. “I run two boats: a flats boat for skinny water fishing and a center-console that gets me offshore on a pretty day.”

A favorite activity for Leake: chumming up red snapper from nearshore reefs and wrecks and catching them on a fly rod. Sometimes, he reports, it’s possible to catch both a redfish and a red snapper from the same spot. Then, it might be time to head for the beach, stay still and wait for a tarpon to show.

A tarpon, redfish and red snapper in a single day? There’s a Bay County slam that would thrill any angler, from novice to know-it-all. ●

Capt. Justin Leake, Bay County born and raised, co-hosts the Chasin’ the Sun fishing show, which is filmed in Panama City Beach and airs nationwide on Sportsman Channel.

## Gulf Coast Regional Medical Center



### CHOOSE QUALITY AND SAFETY

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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# Then and Now ... and Still

Fond memories and new favorites blend in Panama City Beach

**BY CHRIS CHAMBERLAIN**

## Instant Attractions

FOR THOSE LOOKING FOR ATTRactions GALORE, PANAMA CITY BEACH IS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

**“FUN IN THE SUN”** may be one of Panama City Beach’s unofficial mantras, but this booming beach town has a lot more to offer than simply world-class natural amenities. Sure, the 27 miles of pristine coastline are what draw people in. But once visitors arrive in this vacationers’ wonderland, there are a million reasons to stay.

Sightseers in need of a reprieve from the sunshine will have an array of adventures to choose from in Panama City Beach.

On the agenda? Well, for starters how about partaking in a round of mini-golf, getting into a laser tag shootout with loved ones or making friends with a stingray? As a true, All-American seaside retreat, this beach is chock-full of fun attractions.

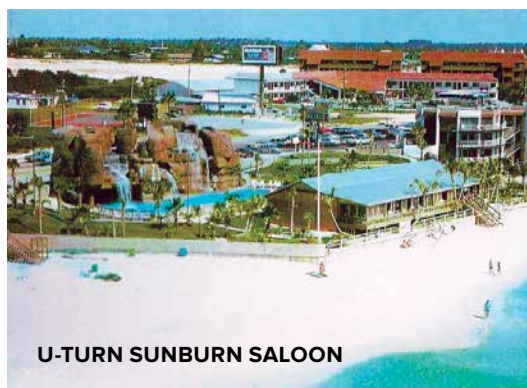
**AS A LIFELONG RESIDENT OF NASHVILLE,** Panama City Beach has been my family’s choice for vacations for more than 40 years. In fact, if you want to stir up a ruckus among a group of Nashvillians of a certain age, just ask them the best way to drive from Music City to the Emerald Coast. “331?! You’re crazy! 231 shaves off a good half hour, and you don’t have to worry about the speed trap in Opp!”

Fortunately, with the addition of multiple daily Southwest flights between Nashville and the coast, this argument has been rendered primarily moot. But with time bringing easier access, the years have also ushered in the demise of some of the favorite haunts of frequent visitors to PCB. While new restaurants and bars have emerged to replace these attractions, the old reliables live on in our memories, and some stalwarts are still hanging on to preserve the past. Here’s a lineup of some of our gone but not forgotten faves as well as new arrivals and longtimers:

### BEACH BAR

#### **THEN:** U-Turn Sunburn Saloon

You can still see part of the large man-made rock that housed a series of massive waterfalls streaming into a party pool at this beloved watering hole on the west end of Front Beach Road. Once, the U-Turn was a quintessential beach bar filled with bikini and board shorts-wearing patrons enjoying frozen drinks and pumping music on the pool deck or under the covered patio with a beach view. Unfortunately, that proximity to the Gulf led to the Saloon’s demise under the waves of Hurricane Opal in 1995.



**U-TURN SUNBURN SALOON**

#### **NOW:** Runaway Island

Locals and visitors alike can find something to love about this beachfront restaurant and grill. Conceived and owned by locals, Runaway Island opened in 2015 and offers nightly food and drink specials. There is inside and outside seating, and all are welcome to feast on fresh seafood on either of the two stories of this enormous 12,000-square-foot dining area that faces the waterfront. If that’s not enough Gulf view for you, a gigantic outdoor deck extends all the way to the beach so that the salt air can contribute some extra flavor to your crab cakes appetizer. [14521 Front Beach Road](http://14521FrontBeachRoad.com), (850) 634-4884, [RunAwayIslandPCB.com](http://RunAwayIslandPCB.com)

#### **STILL:** Schooners

Tucked away near the end of a spit of land that contains the pass where St. Andrews Bay splits the State Park, Schooners can be hard to find if you don’t know where you’re headed. A little local knowledge goes a long way at what is fondly referred to as “The Last Local Beach Club.” Thanks to a westward exposure, Schooners is especially known for their glorious sunsets, and since 1985 crowds have gathered to count down the seconds when the disappearance of the sun is marked with a cannon blast. After the day has ended and the night has officially begun, Schooners’ patrons return to the dance floor to enjoy daily live music while others retreat to the bar for cold beers, powerful tropical drinks and delicious seafood dishes. [5121 Gulf Drive](http://5121GulfDrive.com), (850) 235-3555, [Schooners.com](http://Schooners.com)





## NIGHT CLUB

### **THEN:** The Breakers

For forty-two years, The Breakers on Front Beach Road set the standard for live entertainment in Panama City Beach. Established in 1971 as an old-fashioned supper club, The Breakers featured live music and a full-service menu. Over the years, many thousands of party people danced to the music of Clutch, the house band for more than a quarter century. A major fire and two hurricanes basically destroyed the building three times, but owner Jack Bishop kept rebuilding his flagship property until eventually selling in 2004. Somewhat unexpectedly, Bishop continued running the restaurant for the new owners until 2013, when he was able to reacquire the property and reopen after a massive renovation made it part of Harpoon Harry's. With food and fun still the key to success, the spirit of The Breakers lives on, even if this generation of visitors might not remember the name. [12627 Front Beach Road, \(850\) 234-6060, HarponHarry.com](http://12627FrontBeachRoad.com)

### **NOW:** Pineapple Willy's Pier Bar

Compared to The Breakers, Pineapple Willy's is a relative newcomer, having

served their first signature rum punch in 1985. But a reputation for the best ribs on the beach and a creative menu of Po' Boy sandwiches, seafood specialties and powerful drinks have made this a go-to destination for eating, drinking and partying. Located at the head of Thomas Drive where Front Beach Road turns (sadly) inland, Pineapple Willy's Pier Bar offers one of the best opportunities to enjoy live music and a beautiful view of the Gulf of Mexico. [9875 S. Thomas Drive, \(850\) 235-0928, PineAppleWillys.com](http://9875SThomasDrive.com)

### **STILL:** Spinnaker

With more than 300 feet of beachfront access, by day Spinnaker attracts fun loving youngsters for rousing games of beach volleyball and rounds of cold drinks at their beach bar. Spring Break parties in March are legendary at Spinnaker, but the restaurant and waterfront seating are a draw for visitors all year-round. At night, multiple stages host a variety of live music, and the lounges at Spinnaker fill with beautiful people looking for fun in all the right places. For more than four decades, Spinnaker has truly been one of the iconic nightclubs in the

country and undoubtedly has the best view. [8795 Thomas Drive, \(850\) 234-7892, SpinnakerBeachClub.com](http://8795ThomasDrive.com)

## STEAK HOUSE

### **THEN:** Sir Loin Family Restaurant

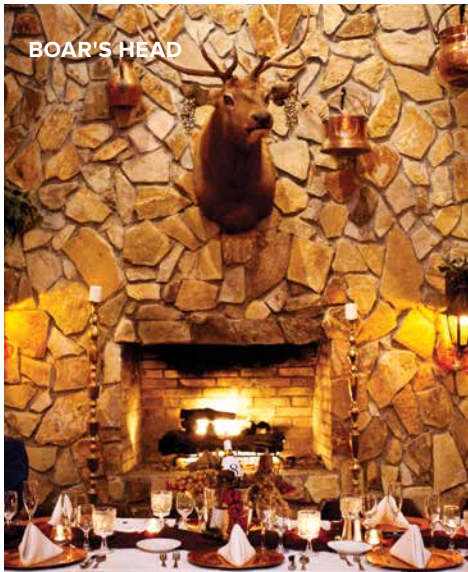
Today, 10015 Front Beach Road houses T-shirt shops and swimwear boutiques, but once it was the proud home of a mighty defender of the intersection of Front Beach Road and Thomas Drive. Sir Loin was a 46-foot tall concrete statue of a knight who drew crowds into the eponymous Sir Loin Steak House. Originally opened in 1971, this old English steak emporium featured a "knightly buffet" after it morphed into Sir Loin's Family Restaurant in the mid-'80's. Eventually the restaurant became the Shell Island Gift Shop, and the proud knight was converted to King Neptune by the addition of a new crown, a trident and a coral pink paint job.

### **NOW:** Firefly

Firefly evokes a trip to the Mediterranean with its menu of upscale steak and seafood dishes served in a comfortable and casual ambiance. Warm wood furnishings reflect the heat from a fireplace in the clubby Library Lounge, and a collection



TREASURE SHIP



BOAR'S HEAD



SALTWATER GRILL

of guitars from famous guests adorns the wall of the Sushi Bar. The real drama is reserved for the main dining room where an illuminated oak tree dominates the center of the space and faux terra cotta walls create the feeling of dining al fresco in Italy. Watch the tree closely for the occasional flicker of a virtual LED firefly. [535 Richard Jackson Blvd., \(850\) 249-3359, FireFlyPCB.com](#)

#### **STILL: Angelo's Steak Pit**

Since 1970, Big Gus, the giant fiberglass steer has been drawing diners off of Highway 98 into the parking lot at Angelo's Steak Pit. The restaurant was opened twelve years prior by Angelo Butchikas and carried on by his son George. A dinner at Angelo's is still a decidedly delightfull old-school experience offering a variety of steaks broiled over an open pit hickory fire and served with a choice of Angelo's famous salad or soup (seriously, get the salad ... it's famous) plus a side order of veggies. There are also plenty of a la carte options ranging from seafood to chicken to ribs. [9527 Front Beach Road, \(850\) 234-2531, Angelos-SteakPit.com](#)

#### **SEAFOOD**

##### **THEN: Treasure Ship**

In 1978, a challenger emerged to Capt. Anderson's decades of seafood restaurant dominance over the Grand Lagoon. The Treasure Ship Restaurant was a full-scale, 200-foot replica of The Golden Hind, the ship that Sir Francis

Drake used to circumnavigate the globe. The Treasure Ship was landlocked, but its tables overflowed with the fruits of the ocean as diners feasted on fresh seafood while enjoying panoramic views of the Grand Lagoon. Tragically, the restaurant was destroyed in a huge fire in 2010 and was not rebuilt.

##### **NOW: Saltwater Grill**

What do you do with a wide open space left when the Panama City Brewery shut down? If you're the Saltwater Grill, you take out the tanks that previously held beer and replace them with a 25,000-gallon fish tank filled with exotic and colorful aquatic animals. The hypnotic parade of fish swimming by offers a pleasant distraction while you wait for a table in this popular seafood restaurant, but one of their excellent martinis will also help pass the time. The tinkling tunes of the beach's only piano bar provides the soundtrack to a dining experience that revolves around the Saltwater Grill's signature grilled fish dishes and lobsters flown in fresh from Maine. [11040 Hutchison Blvd., \(850\) 230-2739, SaltWaterGrillPCB.com](#)

##### **STILL: Boar's Head**

Although the restaurant is primarily known by locals for their prime rib and steaks, the Boar's Head has been serving fresh Gulf seafood on Front Beach Road since 1978. Their secret weapon is a delicious fried lobster dish that is available as either an appetizer or entree, and the kitchen is particularly adept at cooking yellowfin tuna. A popular pan-fried grouper plate is served topped with lump crabmeat and a rich Béarnaise sauce just in case it wasn't already decadent enough for you. The Boar's Head also offers daily Early Bird specials that coincide nicely with their happy hour drink deals. That's quite thoughtful of them. [17290 Front Beach Road, \(850\) 234-6628, BoarsHeadRestaurant.com](#)

Chris is a food and travel writer based in Nashville. He is a regular contributor to the Nashville Scene, Nashville Lifestyles, Local Palate, Edible, FoodRepublic.com and Conde Nast Traveler. He likes beer, bourbon and bacon but isn't fanatical about any of them.



# Making Summer Memories



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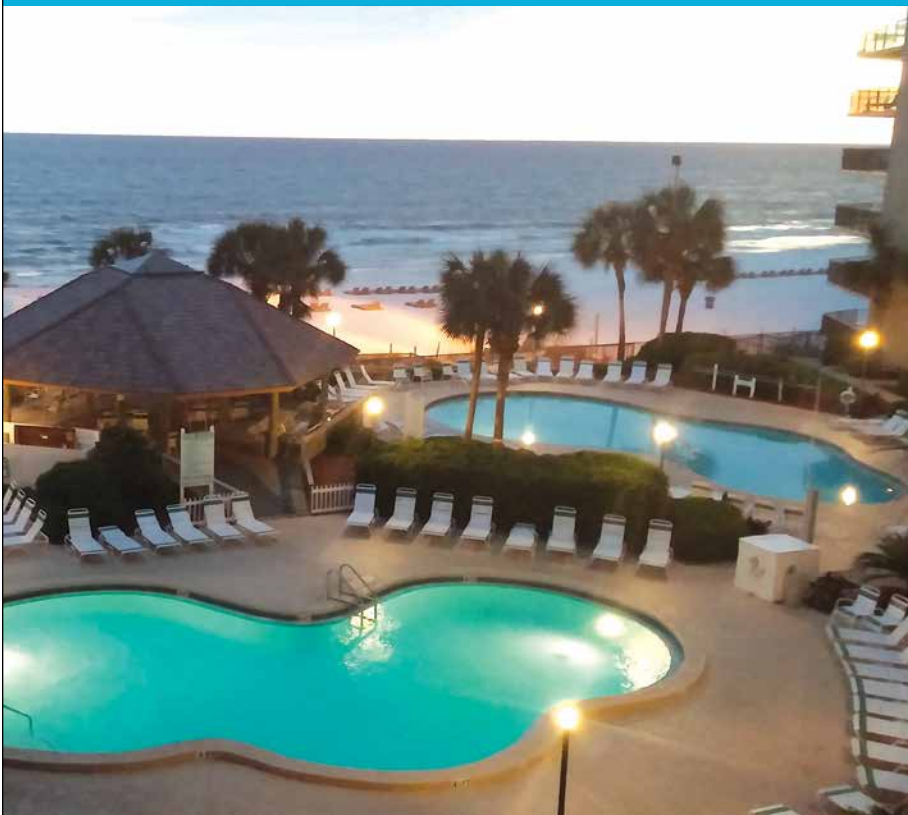
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# Endless Summer

For 'Mr. Surf,' The Beach Has Always Been a Rush

BY JEFF NEIDERMAN

PHOTOS BY ANDREW WARDLOW PHOTOGRAPHY

**NOTHING IS QUITE AS RELAXING** as watching the emerald crests of the Gulf Coast break into eruptions of sea foam in the distance — the white noise of crashing waves filling the breeze as it drifts inland.

The sight and sound has beckoned locals and visitors alike for generations. Some answered the call more actively than others. While many people are content with basking in the sun, others hunt seashells, build sandcastles or dive for treasures below the waves. But an increasingly diverse audience is gaining a new appreciation for gliding across the surface of the water.

That is something Tony Johnson, owner of Mr. Surf's Surf Shop, fell in love with

about 42 years ago, and he has since built his life around riding waves.

"When you get up and ride a wave, it's an adrenalin rush," Johnson says. "Once you feel that glide, it's a high that eventually becomes a lifestyle. It's that 'Endless Summer' allure."

As owner of a landmark location of Panama City Beach's surfing scene, Johnson has watched the ebb and flow of trends in individual water sports for the past few decades. Since then, many well-loved activities have taken a dive in popularity while one form of riding what some locals affectionately refer to as "Gulf Coast Ripples" has surged in appeal: paddleboarding.

History seems to be repeating itself with the recent rise of longer, wider, more stable boards; but the novelty of modern day paddleboarding lies in accessibility.

"People can get paddleboards, take them home and paddle in the lakes and rivers where they live," Johnson said. "It's something mom can do, dad can do, all of the kids can do at the same time, just about anywhere the water is calm."

Johnson said he's one of the like-minded people who have merged surfing and paddleboarding into "paddle surfing," or catching waves while stand up paddleboarding. He likens the experience of the big, stable paddleboards to "riding on an aircraft carrier."





## Fun on the Water

WHAT'S YOUR WATER SPORT PLEASURE?

### IS IT A CRUISE

at sunset, a chance to observe dolphins or a fishing trip? Are you enticed by SCUBA diving and snorkeling adventures? How about the fast-paced thrills of jet skiing, parasailing and skimboarding? Maybe you'd like the challenge of surfing and kiteboarding, or would be happiest with a peaceful paddle along the coast.

In Panama City Beach, water sports are a way of life, and you'll find the equipment, guides and lessons here to experience them to the fullest.

And the fun doesn't stop at the beautiful white sand beaches. The area is loaded with bays, lakes, rivers, bayous, swamps, creeks and lagoons — all waiting for you to explore and enjoy.

However, for those in search of something more physically demanding, surfing has not lost any excitement since its inception.

The origins of surfing in Florida date back to as early as the 1930s and have been preserved in photographs coming from Daytona Beach. Boards of the era were sometimes upward of 15-feet long. Eventually, popular culture spread the allure of the sport to the Gulf Coast, which is still regarded by some as Florida's best kept surf secret, a prime example of which is tucked away near the jetties of St. Andrews State Park. By the '80s, surfing gained enough momentum to spark business interest in PCB. That's when Mr. Surf's opened, catering to those demands.

A corkboard inside the business greets visitors with pictures from that bygone era. In some of the pictures, soon-to-be prominent locals can be spotted as youngsters, literally buying into the surf culture. Some of those locals grew up to be doctors, attorneys or politicians but still enjoy the sport; and their kids and grandkids can relive the memory of them buying their first board every time they visit Mr. Surf's — those old photos often get a good laugh.

Meanwhile, Johnson was a 14-year-old who'd started out surfing in 1974 off the coast of southern California in an attempt "to get chicks," he says.

After being wounded in combat, he relocated to Panama City Beach and took over operation of Mr. Surf's in 1998. Skimboarding held sway

then — Panama City Beach was home of a world championship skimboarding competition — but it has since faded in popularity in comparison to surfing's continued meteoric rise. For Johnson, the shift from Pacific swells to the Gulf Coast's less reliable surf was substantial, but the usually placid water could at other times produce enough excitement to feed Johnson's wave addiction.

"PCB is not known as a surf destination," he says, "but we do get surf here. Wherever there's wind and a large body of water, there's surf."

With the ease of accessing information via the Internet or smartphones, Panama City Beach's underground appeal as a surf destination could be moving closer to the light. Accurate surf reports and analysis are now readily available several days before waves arrive on shore. And that could lead to more people structuring visits around surf conditions.

In the meantime, though, several surf shops — from the large chains to the small mom and pop shops — offer paddleboard and surfboard rentals, which usually cost about \$50 for an entire day. Many shops also offer surfing lessons.

One of the main focuses of the lessons is pairing the right equipment with the right conditions. If one of those factors is off, the session can be unnecessarily difficult or, possibly, dangerous.

"We can't teach you to surf in one day," Johnson said. "We can get you on top of the water and get you to feel what we feel."



For most beginners, the longer the board, the better. And although it depends on the rider — their natural agility and height — adults are usually best paired with an 11-foot-long board. Lighter and shorter riders don't need as long a board. Fortunately, many surf instructors will bring a variety of boards in order to find the right match.

In some instances, it can be dangerous for an inexperienced rider to paddle out. It's legal to go out on a board during double red flag days but not recommended. In dangerous marine life conditions, when purple flags are flying, some local surfers advise against going out, and others have tricks — such as keeping window cleaner on ice nearby or wearing protective coverings — to reduce the effects of a jellyfish sting.

An unwritten code of surf ethics exists for interactions with swimmers and other surfers. In most areas, swimmers have the right-of-way. At the surf hotspots of the St. Andrew jetties and around either of the piers, senior surfers advise those just getting started to allow for ample space.

In his 42 years of riding the waves, Johnson's focus has turned from using the sport to get the attention of females into using it as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment.

"It's an incredible sport," Johnson says. "It's a spiritual feeling, being there with nature — sometimes you see dolphins — but what we have over anywhere else is that emerald, blue-green water. You don't get that in Cali or Hawaii, especially with that white sand. There's nothing like it." ●

### There are also a few safety tips from Johnson to ensure you have fun on the water:

- » Never surf alone, many people take the Gulf's power for granted.
- » If there is lightning, don't surf.
- » Pay attention to surf conditions. There is a lot of difference between "Victory at Sea" and fun surf conditions.
- » Pay attention to jellyfish conditions.
- » Always surf with a leash so the board doesn't get away from you. That also plays a roll in the next tip:
- » Respect other people in the water. In the summer months, many other people are enjoying the Gulf of Mexico for a variety of activities. A careless mistake can ruin a nice day on the water.
- » Most importantly, the goal of surfing is to have fun.

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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, eco-tourists 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.



ST. ANDREWS STATE PARK



# Pick a Park and Go!

Camp Helen and St. Andrews connect visitors to the real Florida

**NINA RODRÍGUEZ-MARTY**



**FLORIDA'S AWARD-WINNING** state parks offer ample opportunities for wildlife expeditions and seaside escapes. With two outstanding state parks in Panama City Beach, visitors may find it difficult to choose which park to visit first.

## **ST. ANDREWS STATE PARK**

Lather on the sunscreen when you head to St. Andrews State Park; this former military reservation is a beachfront paradise.

Established in 1947 and opened in 1951, St. Andrews sits on a peninsula and boasts over 1.5 miles of white sand beach on the Gulf of Mexico, curving around the pass between the mainland and shell island, and wrapping along the Grand Lagoon. Vestiges of the area's unique history survive and are open to the public, including a historic turpentine mill and a gazebo built on what was originally a huge World War II gun mount protecting the entrance to St. Andrew Bay.

St. Andrews is the quintessential weekend destination for beach bums and pleasure seekers alike. In between excursions to Shell Island and fishing sessions off the piers, beach or jetties, you can hang out, hang ten, paddleboard or even SCUBA dive along the bright, sugar-sand coast. Bikes, canoes, snorkeling gear and kayaks are all available for rent, or you can explore shaded paths as you take a stroll through the pine flatwoods of Heron Pond Trail or Gator Lake Trail. There, you're sure to discover a variety of wildlife from deer to flocks of birds. You might even spot an alligator, if you're lucky.

## **CAMP HELEN STATE PARK**

When it comes to Camp Helen State Park, the old adage rings true: Good things do come in small packages.

Nestled peacefully on 180 acres between Lake Powell and the Gulf of Mexico, this historic state park contains



prehistoric middens and mounds that prove human activity on the site as far back as 4,000 years!

The park's modern origin story is no less fascinating: Purchased by Robert E. Hicks in 1928 with a partner, the property fell to his wife after Hicks' untimely death. She built the Rainbow Cottages and a general store as a way to generate income from vacation renters as she raised her daughter on the property. Avondale Textile Mills of Alabama then purchased the estate in 1945 and used it as a vacation resort for their employees until 1987. A grass-roots community effort saved the park from private development and led to the state acquiring the land in 1994. It was opened to the public in 1996. Remnants of this interlaced history, including a historic lodge, water tower and the brightly-painted cottages earn Camp Helen a well-deserved spot on the National Register of Historic Places.

Though often overlooked, Camp Helen offers a spectacular cache of wildlife and ecological wonder. Lake Powell, one of the world's largest coastal dune lakes, is a maritime rarity present in only five regions of the world. Birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts are drawn to the wide range of migratory and coastal species that make their home here. Canoes, kayaks and even paddleboards can be rented to explore the lake, or visitors can take a 0.5 mile walk down to the beach to discover "Hidden Pier," the remains of an old fishing pier and the site of country music superstar Luke Bryan's music video "Roller Coaster."

A peaceful refuge a little off the beaten path, this Gulf Coast state park is the ideal spot for beachcombers willing to walk a little farther in order to guarantee a little extra elbow room.

Now, which park will you visit first? ●



PARKS	SIZE	BEACH	CAMPING	HIKING	PICNICKING	SWIMMING	FISHING	BOATING	BICYCLING	CANOING/ KAYAKING	HISTORIC SITE
St. Andrews State Park	1,200 acres	✓	✓	2 Trails	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Camp Helen State Park	185 acres	✓	—	1 Trail	✓	✓	✓	—	—	✓	✓

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# History at 76 Feet

The USS Strength saw action in World War II before coming to rest as an artificial reef

BY JASON DEHART



Nurse shark with an attached Remora resting on the bottom among the wreckage of the USS Strength off the coast of Panama City Beach.





## 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.

DATE OF SINKING	DEPTH	LENGTH	BEAM	LOCATION
May 19, 1987	80 ft.	184.5 ft.	33 ft.	30° 01.936' N 085° 42.413' W

### HISTORY LIES HIDDEN BENEATH

the corrosion and marine organisms that color artificial reefs off the sandy shores of Panama City Beach. The 184-foot-long minesweeper USS Strength, for instance, has a history that is as interesting as the experience of diving the wreck itself.

The Strength was built in a Seattle shipyard in 1943 and commissioned in 1944. After shakedown and training cruises, the Strength was sent to Hawaii where she joined Mine Division 36 at Lahaina Roads in Maui. Here she trained for the upcoming invasion of Iwo Jima. She performed screening duties for LST Flotilla One before rejoining other minesweepers and arrived at Iwo Jima on Feb. 16, 1945, three days ahead of the invasion. Here, she participated in clearing the way for the assault task force and later conducted antisubmarine patrols.

At the end of the month, her division was ordered to Saipan and soon arrived at Ulithi — an atoll in the Caroline Islands that was notable for being the site of the biggest and most secretive U.S. Navy base of World War II. It was located 850 miles east of the Philippines and 1,300 miles

south of Toyko. The reef provided the only suitable anchorage for hundreds of miles and was a strategic jumping off point for assaults on the Japanese home islands.

On March 25, the Strength and other minesweepers worked an area off the Kerama Islands in preparation for an assault that would put U.S. forces 20 miles closer to Okinawa. The next day, four torpedoes were fired at her from a Japanese “midget” submarine. Fortunately, all four missed their mark. Later, during the American assault on Okinawa, Japanese suicide planes attacked the fleet. One of the kamikaze pilots set his sights on the Strength, but American gunners aboard the ship lit up the attacker and splashed it hundreds of yards astern.

The Strength continued on her mission around Okinawa before heading back to Ulithi for repairs. She then conducted antisubmarine patrols around the atoll until the end of the war. She returned to the States in 1946 and was listed as “out of commission in reserve” status for several years before finally she was taken off the Navy list in April 1967.

MICHAEL WOOD

Despite being decommissioned, she still played a vital training role. The Navy sank and refloated her many times as a training hulk for salvage divers. According to Divespot.com, she was sunk for the last time in 1987 off Tyndall Air Force Base as part of an explosive test performed by the Navy Diving and Salvage Training Center in Panama City.

She settled on her side in 76 feet of water but incredibly, was later righted by Hurricane Opal in 1995. Time and saltwater have taken their toll on the Strength, and at some point her bow broke off from the rest of the ship, allowing divers and marine life to easily swim between the two sections. What was once a home for sailors, then a training tool for divers, has now become a permanent structure serving as habitat for a wide variety of marine life and a fixture on the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail.

The Strength earned three battle stars for her service in World War II. Today's scuba divers can plunge below the surface and look for a plaque affixed to the ship commemorating her history. ●



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# SCENE 1, TAKE 1

## Panama City Beach

SURF AND SAND MAKE A BIG SPLASH  
ON THE SILVER SCREEN

BY TONY BRIDGES

If you've ever gotten the feeling that Panama City Beach looks like something out of the movies, you're right.

Filmmakers have been coming here for years to shoot everything from critically acclaimed dramas with Oscar-winning actors to B horror movies. And it's not just the big-screen. Television shows film here regularly, and so do commercials and music videos.

Panama City Beach is perfect for film crews because there's such a variety of settings in one place, says Bay County film commissioner Julie Gordon.

You've got the beach, with iconic Gulf waters, near-perpetual sunshine and happy crowds for morning programs and travel shows. Then there are the seaside homes



COURTESY JULIE GORDON, BAY COUNTY FILM COMMISSIONER

Bay County Film Commissioner Julie Gordon touts Panama City Beach's production values to a varied host of producers.





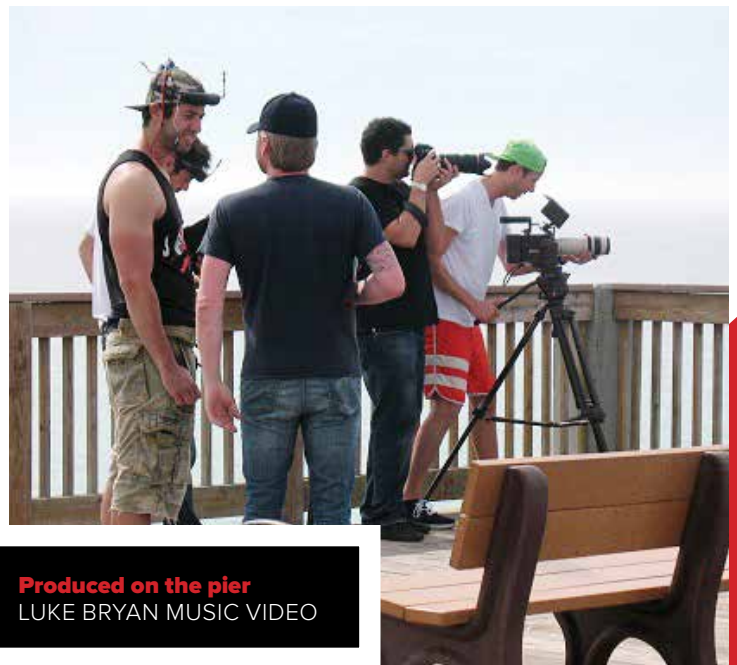
COURTESY JULIE GORDON, BAY COUNTY FILM COMMISSIONER

and high-rise condos for the home decorating shows. And finally, the shorelines and marshlands and small-town neighborhoods — doubling for locales as exotic as North Africa and as ordinary as rural Mississippi — for filmmakers.

“They can just get more production value when they shoot here,” Gordon says. Plus, locals and visitors “are so receptive to people coming in and filming here.”

The movies filmed in and around Panama City Beach get the most attention, of course. You’ve probably seen, or at least heard of “Ruby in Paradise,” starring Ashley Judd, or “Secondhand Lions,” starring Michael Caine.

But Gordon says most of the filming done here is for television shows. “Good Morning America,” HGTV and the Weather Channel film in Panama City Beach, as do reality programs including “Last Call Food Brawl” and “Rock of Love.” CMT also frequently shoots Top 20 countdowns and other specials in PCB, she says, and country music artists — Luke Bryan is one — often use the area as the backdrop for their videos.



COURTESY JULIE GORDON, BAY COUNTY FILM COMMISSIONER



RYAN ACEVEDO

**Footage in a condo foyer**  
DANCIN' IT'S ON (2015)



COURTESY JULIE GORDON, BAY COUNTY FILM COMMISSIONER

**Taking to the surf**  
PCB PROMOTIONAL VIDEO

Commercials are also big in Panama City Beach, which is a natural fit for recreational watercraft companies like Polaris and Jet Ski to film their ads. Pier Park, the shopping and lifestyle center, also serves as the site of commercials for many others, including Pottery Barn and Men's Wearhouse.

What this means for visitors is that there's a good chance you might stumble upon a movie, commercial or TV show being filmed while you're in Panama City Beach.

Usually, production teams try to keep a low profile while filming here to avoid drawing crowds to the sets. "Sometimes they come in and out without leaving much of a trace," Gordon says. That's the way it was when the movie, "Heartbreakers," filmed some scenes at Long Beach Resort in Panama City Beach.

Certain TV shows — "Good Morning America," Jay Leno and Weather Channel

programs, for example — also don't like to announce themselves because "we don't want people coming up and waving in the background," Gordon says.

But sometimes crowds are welcome, even encouraged, and it's possible you might end up on camera.

Gordon says productions sometimes need extras, which was the case when the movie "East Side Story" (now known as "Dancin' It's On") was filming here. When





COURTESY SEASIDE, FL AND PARAMOUNT PICTURES

**A scene from Seaside**  
THE TRUMAN SHOW (1998)

that happens, she'll put out a press release and a Facebook post to get as many people as possible.

Other times, crews will just include people in their shots as they pass by.

If that happens, "just keep smiling and having fun," Gordon says. "Ninety-nine percent of what we're shooting is all fun."

Most production crews don't mind if visitors stand quietly and watch filming. Taking pictures is a little trickier.

Photos are a big no-no with reality shows and some movies — they don't want any spoilers getting out — but isn't a problem with others. Gordon says it's best just to ask a production assistant, especially if you want a picture with a celebrity who's shooting.

In fact, Gordon suggests always finding a production assistant when you come across a production set. The production assistant (look for a person with a radio/earpiece) can answer any questions you might have, or direct you to Gordon, who's usually also on the set.

Other than that, all you have to do is remember: Never look straight into the camera. ●

## MOVIES FILMED IN AND AROUND PANAMA CITY BEACH

**SECONDHAND LIONS** (2003). A boy is sent to live with his two crazy uncles on their Texas farm for the summer and hears tall tales about their exploits as younger men. Starring Michael Caine, Robert Duvall and Haley Joel Osment. A scene of a horse race and sword fight on the Mediterranean shore was filmed on Shell Island.

**DANCIN' IT'S ON** (2015). A girl (Witney Carson) spending Spring Break at her father's hotel in PCB meets a boy, falls in love and teams up with him for a state-wide dance competition. Originally called "East Side Story," the movie is directed by David Winters and stars former contestants/winners of "So You Think You Can Dance" and "Dancing with the Stars."

**HEARTBREAKERS** (2001). Two beautiful grifters (Sigourney Weaver and Jennifer Love Hewitt) target a wealthy Palm Beach County tobacco magnate played by Gene Hackman. Some scenes were filmed at Long Beach Resort.

**RUBY IN PARADISE** (1993). Ashley Judd is a young woman from Tennessee who moves to Panama City Beach to find herself and to find love. Written and directed by Victor Nunez, a filmmaker from North Florida who also directed "Ulee's Gold" and "Coastlines."

**THE TRUMAN SHOW** (1998). Jim Carrey is a man who discovers that his whole life has been faked for a TV show. Scenes were filmed in Panama City and north of town at Deer Point Dam, and in the planned community of Seaside.

**FROGS** (1972). An aging millionaire invites his family to his island mansion

for a birthday party, and they're attacked by thousands of angry frogs, snakes and other reptiles. Starring Sam Elliot and Joan Van Ark. Some scenes were filmed in PCB, the rest mainly filmed at Eden Gardens State Park about 30 minutes west.

**CONDOMINIUM** (1980). A shoddily built condo on a Florida beach stands in the way of a hurricane in this TV disaster movie. Stars Barbara Eden and Dan Haggerty (Grizzly Adams). Filmed at Pinnacle Port Condominiums in PCB.

**LITTLE SWEETHEART** (1989). A couple on the run ends up in a Florida beach town, where they meet a cute 9-year-old girl who's actually a budding psychopath. The film stars John Hurt and Karen Young, and is based on the novel "The Naughty Girls," by Arthur Wise. Filmed in Panama City Beach and Eastpoint, in Franklin County.

**BORN & RAISED** (2012). A young man looks to his grandfather, a local hell-raiser, for lessons on living. Indie film set and shot in the St. Andrews neighborhood. Written by and starring Nick Loritsch, who went to high school in Panama City.

**THEY BITE** (1996). An adult film crew stumbles into an invasion of monster fish/creatures in this little-seen horror-comedy spoof. Filmed in PCB and New Hampshire.

**A FREE BIRD** (2014). A down-on-his-luck man decides to help his friends pull a meat heist at the steakhouse where he was just fired. Indie comedy filmed in the PCB area and in Atlanta.

Source: [IMDB.com](http://IMDB.com) and the [Bay County Film Commission](http://Bay County Film Commission)





# SHIPWRECK ISLAND

33 YEARS OF WET FUN





COURTESY BUDDY WILKES, SHIPWRECK ISLAND



COURTESY BUDDY WILKES, SHIPWRECK ISLAND

‘SHIPWRECK’ THRILLS VISITORS, GROOMS YOUTHS FOR WORLD OF WORK

BY STEVE BORNHOFT

James I. Lark Sr. was incredulous. A pioneering Panama City Beach businessman who had built the magnificent Starliner roller coaster (Florida’s first roller coaster!) at Miracle Strip Amusement Park when it was surrounded by nothing but sand, turned to an otherwise trusted employee, Buddy Wilkes, and declared, “You have lost your mind.”



COURTESY BUDDY WILKES, SHIPWRECK ISLAND



COURTESY BUDDY WILKES, SHIPWRECK ISLAND



SCOTT HOLSTEIN

Unbeknownst to Lark, Wilkes and one of Lark's sons, Alan, had been researching an emerging concept, the water park. Only a handful existed in the country, including three in Florida. The pair had studied the River Country attraction at Disney World, an inner-tube ride that emptied into a lake. They had visited the Wet 'n' Wild water park in Orlando and Adventure Island at Busch Gardens in Tampa.

"We took pictures and gathered information and crunched numbers and we were satisfied that we were ready to have a conversation with Mr. Lark," Wilkes recalls. Ready, that is, to propose that vacant land owned by Lark across Alf Coleman Road from Miracle Strip Amusement Park become the site of the first-ever small-market water park.

Wilkes had left a job with WJHG-TV in the mid-1970s to go to work for Lark at Miracle Strip. Now five years later, he intercepted Lark as the boss arrived for work. Wilkes had been elected spokesman for the water park idea. Alan Lark was behind him.

Lark was unlocking his office door when Wilkes summoned the temerity to ask him, "Would you mind if we talked to you about a water park?"

The pair was invited in.

Wilkes didn't get far before Lark bottom-lined the conversation.

"How much does something like that cost?" he asked.

"I knew I should have avoided answering that question," Wilkes says. "But foolishly, I told him that we thought it would be about \$5 million."

"Do you know how much money that is?" Lark blustered in response.

Silence fell upon the office, and Wilkes then heard the office door close. He turned around. Alan was gone.

Still, Wilkes persisted.

"We talked about the idea and he yelled a little bit, which I expected, and I

down the street. And you're gonna charge people money?! You have lost your mind."

Wilkes, of course, eventually would prevail in part by reminding Lark of all that doubters had told him as he was building the Starliner on the dunes.

"Mr. Lark told his detractors that the more attractions we had on the beach, the more people we would attract, and I reminded him of that," Wilkes says.

Financing for this groundbreaking venture wouldn't be easy to come by. Bubber Nelson at the Commercial Bank in Panama City wanted to know, "If we do the deal and the business doesn't work out, reckon I could put the equipment in my backyard for my grand young'uns to use?"

Wilkes patiently explained that the wave pool alone held a half-million gallons.

Financing, finally, was obtained. Shipwreck Island Water Park was built in 1982 and opened a year later. Mr. Lark, who had

a background in construction, was closely involved in the build-out. He personally drew up the plans for the Speed Slide, an attraction that was built to withstand the end of time.

"Builders have told me through the years that if Panama City is ever visited by a Category 5 hurricane, you're going to want to be under the Speed Slide," Wilkes notes.

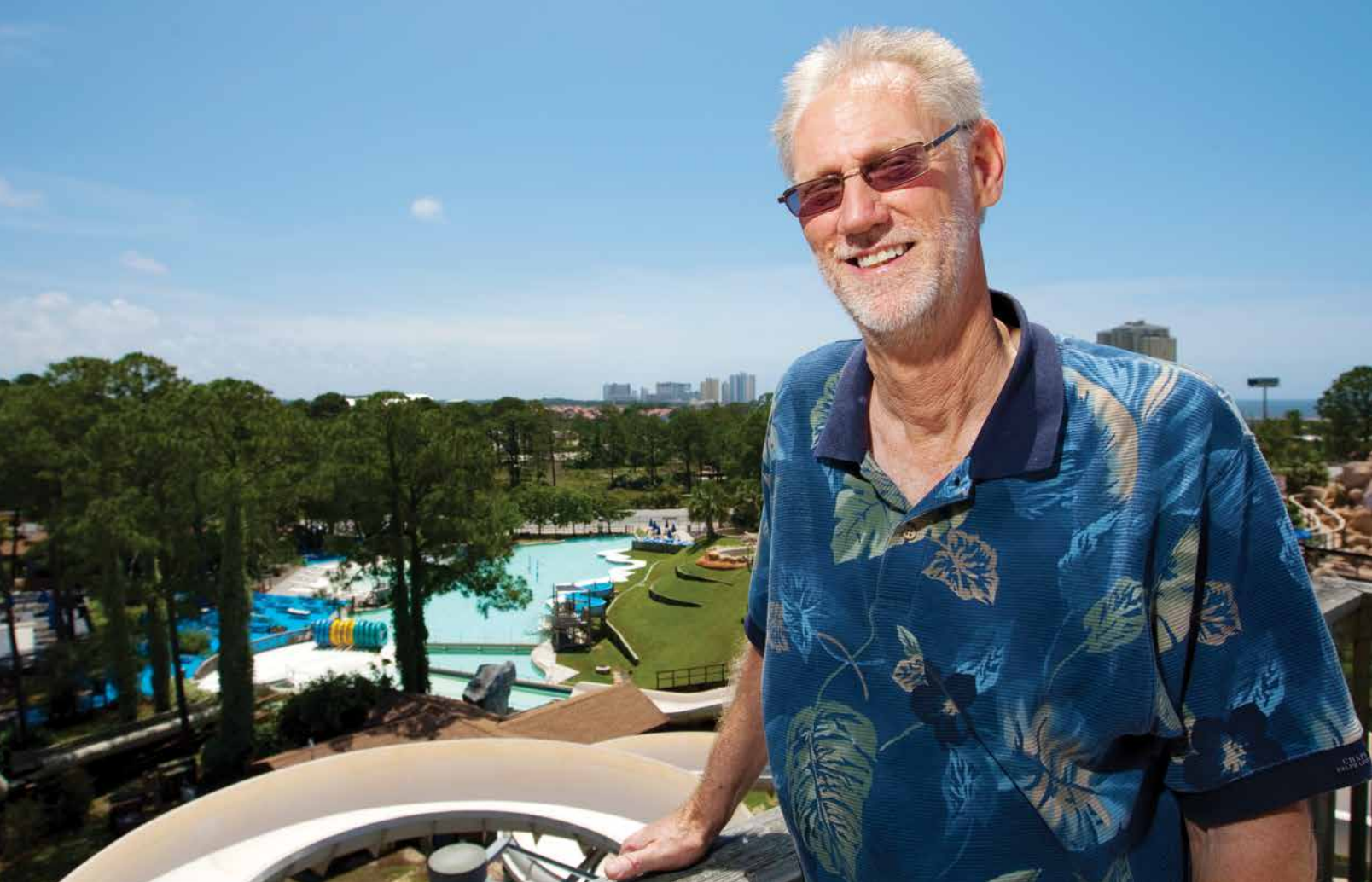
"Builders have told me through the years that if Panama City is ever visited by a Category 5 hurricane, you're going to want to be under the Speed Slide." — Buddy Wilkes

yelled back at him because that's what he expected and eventually he said we'd take a look at it," Wilkes remembers.

When next the two men got together, Wilkes detailed his plans for a wave pool.

"Let me make sure I've got this straight," Lark responded. "You want to build a pool that makes a three-foot wave just like the waves we have in the Gulf of Mexico right





In developing the Rapid River Ride, Lark and his workers experimented with a series of temporary weirs built on chicken-wire frames until they got it right. (Meanwhile, efforts by a park developer in Branson, Missouri, to arrive at a similar ride failed despite hundreds of thousands of dollars paid to PhD hydrologists.)

While Wilkes is properly proud of the countless good times that the water park has provided visitors in its 32 years, he is equally proud of the formative role the park has played in the lives of thousands of young people for whom Shipwreck Island provided their first jobs.

"I've always thought of the park as a big family," Wilkes says. "I treat the employees as if they were my kids. My wife, Nancy, can hardly stand to go to the mall or out to eat in this town. We're constantly approached by people who used to work at the park. We employ about 300 kids each season and 125 to 150 of them will be first-year employees. Most kids hire on at 15 and stay with us three or four years."

(One employee, now a school teacher, tried to come back for an eighth year and,

says Wilkes, "We had to tell him no. It was time to move on. It just was.")

Shipwreck Island, then, is a lot like Neil Young's "Sugar Mountain."

*With the barkers and the colored balloons/  
You can't be 20 on Sugar Mountain/  
though you're thinking that you're leaving  
there too soon.*

Only Buddy gets to stay seemingly forever, although at 66, even he concedes that the "light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter."

Shipwreck alums include doctors, lawyers, a Navy Seal and the Mosley High School swimming coach. And a man named Eric, who almost washed out at the park.

"He didn't have a poor work ethic when he started with us," Wilkes says. "He had zero work ethic. Here was a kid that wouldn't think about so much as cleaning his room."

Not long ago, Eric reached out to Wilkes via email. He is a high school teacher and band director in Alabama these days and holds a doctorate in music earned at Jacksonville State University. And, Wilkes smiles, "He credits the park

with teaching him the responsibility he needed to succeed."

Buddy's memory of his former employees seems almost photographic, so I test him.

"My stepsister worked for you for a time about 20 years ago," I tell him. "Carolyn Weiben."

"Carolyn Weiben, oh I could tell you a story about her," Buddy replies. I cringe in expectation as Buddy proceeds.

No need. The story is a positive one. Turns out that Carolyn was the first girl ever to work the wave pool or the rapids as a lifeguard. To bring that advance about, Buddy overruled an aquatics manager who insisted that the duty was appropriate only to boys.

"Carolyn was the first, and before long I scheduled shifts with nothing but girls on the rapids," Buddy recalls. "The boys took a Muscle Beach approach to the customers, tossing tubes around. The girls completely changed that experience by taking an interest in the customers, asking them if they were having a good time.

"Carolyn Weiben, what is she doing these days, if you don't mind my asking?" ●







# *Bachelorette*

## *Fun in PCB*

PLEASURES OF  
PANAMA CITY  
BEACH PROVIDE  
FOR PERFECT GAL  
PAL GETAWAY

**BY KRISTIN LUNA**

**PHOTOS BY KRISTIN LUNA  
AND FRIENDS**



**A**s a Tennessee native, I've been traveling down to the Panhandle annually for the last 30 years: friend vacations, spring breaks, family reunions, work trips — you name the occasion, and I've probably done it. One thing I hadn't checked off my Panama City Beach list, however was a bachelorette weekend with a whole gaggle of gals in tow — until last summer, that is. And I discovered that while PCB is a great destination for families and college kids, it's also the perfect place for a girlfriend getaway.



**Top:** Braving the waves on the Gulf side of Shell Island.  
**Bottom:** Geared up for a ride with Panhandle Helicopter.

**VENTURE OUT** With 27 miles of coastline, PCB's beaches are incomparable with their powdery sand and sparkling emerald water. Venture away from bustle of the Strip and you'll find one of Panama City Beach's most cherished stretches of real estate, St. Andrews State Park: 1,260 acres brimming with nature trails for hiking, lagoons for swimming, and more than a mile and a half of beachfront just made for sunbathing. Looking for an active afternoon? SUPConscious offers standup paddleboard

excursions through the park, while Mermaid Heather leads SUP yoga classes and surf lessons nearby. On the western end of Panama City Beach sits Camp Helen State Park, a wooded, marshy display of the region's biodiversity — flanked by the Gulf of Mexico and a coastal dune lake — that leads out to a magnificent and oft-empty beach.

**DIVE IN** For the more adventurous groups, exploring the Gulf's marine terrain is a must. After all, PCB bears the distinction of being the

“Wreck Diving Capital of the South.” As you float through bridge spans and ships' skeletons, you'll mingle with schools of amberjacks and angelfish and marvel at Goliath groupers, who earned their name for a reason. Not certified? Not a problem. Consider a Discover Scuba outing through a local dive shop — it's an exploratory dive giving beginners a chance to get their fins wet.

**LOUNGE AROUND** If underwater adventures don't light your fire and you prefer the more R&R route, what better time to indulge in a day of pampering than when armed with your pals? While PCB boasts more than a dozen top-notch day spas and salons, Salon Baliage & Spa at the Carillon Beach Resort is a fun spot to get your mani and pedi on and offers customized spa parties, as well as a number of seasonal specials like a Pumpkin Spice Pedicure, Coconut Sweet Lime Sugar Scrub or the three-hour Wrap Yourself in Chocolate package. On the other end of the beach, Serenity Spa at

Bay Point is the ideal luxury accommodation option for a girls' getaway. With its well-appointed suites and stunning pool, many will want to choose a treatment from the spa menu, then spend the day lounging and hanging out, soaking up the upscale vibe of this luxury spa.

**HIT THE WATER** Not far from the mainland, Shell Island is a glorious undeveloped seven-mile spit of land surrounded by crystal clear bathwater. Charter a pontoon with Shell Island Snorkeling & Dolphin Tours and make a day of it by packing a cooler with drinks and lunch, and loading up with sunscreen and beach chairs to spend a carefree day beneath the warm Florida sun. Or cap off a great day with a sunset cruise aboard Paradise Adventures' 52-foot catamaran, which has mood music and a full bar on hand.

**DINE ABOUT TOWN** With its growing culinary scene, Panama City Beach is rife in restaurants like the upscale Firefly restaurant or Saltwater Grill, where you'll find decadent deserts, delicious martinis, fresh sushi, seafood and prime cuts of meat. For a more toes-in-the-sand, boat-drinks-in-hand kind of afternoon (or night), nab a table at Schooners or Runaway Island Beach Bar & Grill right on the beach. If you plan to have a drink (or several) and don't have a designated driver on hand, consider hiring a driver through Bay Limousine, whose fleet comprises a number of trolleys, party buses, Hummers and stretch limos, including one very hot pink Lexus. ●





**Top:** The sun sets over the Grand Lagoon. **Bottom:** Playing and relaxing on the bay side of Shell Island.

# Thrill Seekers' Delights

ARE YOU GAME ENOUGH TO COMPLETE OUR TOP 10 LIST?

BY HANNAH BURKE

For those looking for something a little more exciting than a lazy day at the beach, Panama City Beach has attractions to get your adrenaline pumping.

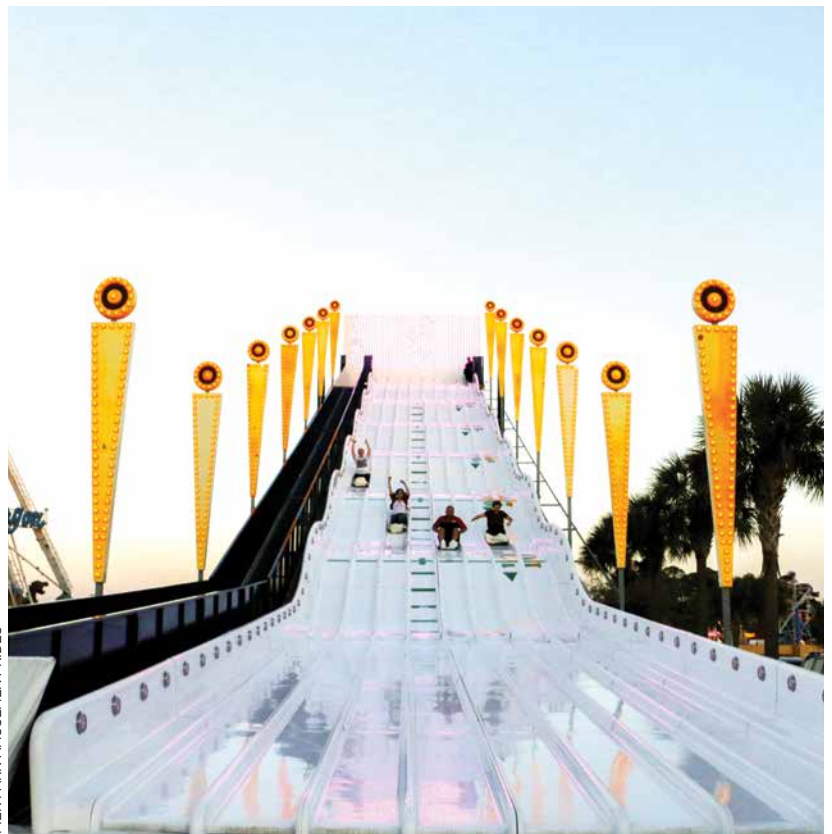
Lovers of speed, spins, drops and dives will get their kicks from rides built for children of all ages to enjoy.

With both the daredevil and the slightly less adventuresome rider in mind, we offer you our Top 10 list of amusements.

## 10 THE GIANT EURO SLIDE

**Pier Park Amusements** Nestled in the heart of Pier Park is a year-round collection of amusement rides. There's a wide variety, but perhaps most eye-catching is the Euro Slide. This multi-lane attraction extends 50 feet into the air, offering an expansive view of the park. Grab your riding mats and line up with your friends and family at the top for a race to the bottom!

PIER PARK AMUSEMENT RIDES



After the sun goes down, the slide is illuminated with neon lights, perfect for a funky race beneath the stars.

## 9 HURRICANE ROLLER COASTER

**Race City Amusement Park** Coaster enthusiasts need look no farther than Race City Amusement Park on Front Beach Road. Opened in 2015, the Hurricane is among the newer thrill rides along the beach. It's a steel coaster that lives up to its name, employing

multiple winding turns at 35 miles per hour and over 1,400 feet of track. Dizzy yet? This ride will have you coming back for more — once you catch your breath.

## 8 WONDER COASTER

**WonderWorks** Afraid of heights? Not to worry, WonderWorks hosts the Wonder Coaster, an indoor, virtual coaster that provides all the excitement of the real thing. Guests are strapped



With its speed slides, an upside-down attraction and a rollicking sky coaster, Panama City Beach offers all the excitement you could want.







into a capsule in front of a screen and then pick a cyber-ride to fit their thrill level. Though you remain on the ground, the capsule is anything but stationary. As you watch the track ahead of you plummet and loop on the screen, you'll dip and spin, too, as the container follows every twist and turn.

## 7 BANANA BOAT RIDES

**Various locations** As an exhilarating way to beat the heat, banana boat rides offer a unique experience on the water. These banana-shaped rafts seat multiple people and are pulled through the waves by a Jet Ski. Children especially love this bouncy ride, provided by various services along the beach. What better way to experience Panama City Beach's crystal clear water than to get out in it yourself? Strap on your lifejacket and hold on tight for a wet and wild glide ride!

## 6 TREETOP DROP

### Shipwreck Island Waterpark

Craving more wet fun? Shipwreck Island Waterpark is home to slides, rapids, a lazy river and even a wave pool, but the Treetop Drop alone is enough to make the entire visit worthwhile. These two slides are the tallest in the park, standing 65 feet high. One is enclosed from top to bottom and coils in circles in a speedy descent. The second slide is partially enclosed the opens up for a plummeting, jaw-dropping finish. Either way you choose, you're guaranteed to be climbing to the top of the tower again for more.

## 5 SPACE FURY 360

**WonderWorks** There's a new ride at WonderWorks that's taking Panama City Beach by cosmic storm. Board your fully controlled orbiter and make it spin, twist, roll and move as you bump along with other participants. The fun doesn't stop there. In this one-of-a-kind attraction, riders are equipped with their very own laser gun. As they navigate through this galactic game, riders take aim at targets on other players' vehicles.

## 4 RACETRACK

**Hidden Lagoon** If your idea of a thrill involves good old-fashioned go-karting,





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Chasin' the Sun explores the diverse fisheries found in the emerald waters off the coast of Panama City Beach. Hosts Justin Leake (professional guide) and Aleese Maples (dive master) provide an in-depth look at Panama City Beach's irresistible coastal lifestyle, highlighting the region's rich culture and revealing why its popularity as a fishing and diving hot spot and family vacation destination has exploded in recent years.

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**SLINGSHOT PCB** The Slingshot at Panama City Beach’s “Indy Speedway” propels riders vertically 300 feet at 100 miles per hour. That translates to 60 feet per second, but maybe it’s best not to think about that.

you should know that Hidden Lagoon Racetrack offers the longest track available in the area — not to mention the fastest. Zip around a nearly mile long course, featuring plenty of curves and high-speed straightaways. While Hidden Lagoon is family friendly, it is important to note that drivers are required to be at least 56 inches tall to operate a go-kart unassisted. Children under this height must ride with an adult to ensure a swift — and safe — adventure.

### 3 ZIP LINE

**Beachfront Adventures** Enjoy an adrenaline rush with a view at Beachfront Adventures, where guests can choose between two zip line courses. Climbing up the 60-foot tall towers, you’ll take in the emerald green expanse of the Gulf of Mexico before propelling yourself from

a platform. Soar through the summer sky, gaining a breathtaking view of the rope courses, mini-golf course and dune buggies the park also has to offer.

### 2 SLINGSHOT PCB

**Indy Speedway** The name says it all. Buckle up with a friend and prepare to be launched 300 feet straight up into the clouds at a heart-pumping 100 miles per hour. This, by no means, is for the faint of heart. The Slingshot beckons the bravest among us. Those who have the courage — or who yield to highly persuasive friends — will experience a brief, gorgeous view of Panama City Beach at the top of their trajectory (that is, if they manage to keep their eyes open), before falling back toward earth. Children must be 44 inches tall to participate.

**And the No. 1 gonzo, hold-on-to-your-heart amusement on Panama City Beach is ...**

### 1 SKY COASTER

#### Race City Amusement Park

It’s a bird. It’s a plane. No, it’s you! Race City offers the thrill ride of your life — it’s the rise and fall of a rollercoaster experience sans cart and track. Up to three people share a hang gliding harness and are hauled up 130 feet in the air. When people on the ground below you start to look like ants, your tether is released and you’ll drop into a giant swinging arc. Get as close to flying as you’ll ever get as you cut through the air. Smaller family members need be only 42 inches tall to experience an unforgettable thrill! ●

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# SAIL AWAY ON **ST. ANDREW BAY**

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EXERCISE YOUR  
SENSE OF  
ADVENTURE AND  
SHARPEN YOUR  
SEAMANSHIP

BY WENDY O. DIXON







**T**here's something captivating about feeling the wind in your face, gazing at an impossibly emerald sea and breathing in fresh salty air. A jaunt at sea, especially in the waters off Panama City and Panama City Beach, can immediately turn a humdrum landlubber into a smiling sailor. Few places in the world have such an ideal climate for sailing. Sliding through the calm waters of the bay or charting a course on the wide open Gulf of Mexico, a sailing enthusiast can master all kinds of water conditions without traveling too far from the white sand shores of Panama City Beach.

Bill Lloyd likes to say a sailboat changed his life. After two major life blows — weathering a divorce and being laid off from a corporate job after 32 years — Lloyd bought a 31-foot sailboat and moved to Panama City, where he lived on his boat for eight years. He got a job at West Marine and eventually

It is likely because of the ideal sailing conditions that two young local sailors have become world champions. Sailing duo Matthew Whitehead, age 22, and Taylor Reiss, 20, have competed in Ireland, Italy, Germany, England, France, Spain, Croatia and Brazil. The men are already four-time Youth



COURTESY GEORGE REISS

**“This is the best sailing bay. Anyone who sails here will tell you this place has good winds, beautiful water, few obstructions and great access to the Gulf. You can sail from one end to the other and never have to tack.” — Bill Lloyd**

World Champions, finishing the highest among youth teams at the F18 World Championships each year since 2012. Teams from Germany, Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Australia, Argentina, Finland and Ireland were among those competing.

While Reiss is now busy sailing around the world, his mother, Christine Reiss, recognizes that his sailing success is likely due to growing up in Panama City, where he sailed every chance he got on St. Andrew Bay.

Taylor Reiss was born in Panama City, and had his first sail at the age of three weeks. “He’s always been on sailboats,” says Christine Reiss. “He just fell in love with it.” Taylor was sailing his

became the marina director for the city of Panama City. “Those eight years gave me time to recoup my finances and get my life back in order,” Lloyd says. He’s since retired but now spends his days at the marina simply for the joy of it. His wife, boat Capt. Kathy Lloyd, shares his love for the water.

Lloyd says that what makes St. Andrew Bay so great for sailing is its optimal conditions.

“This is the best sailing bay,” he says. “Anyone who sails here will tell you this place has good winds, beautiful water, few obstructions and great access to the Gulf. You can sail from one end to the other and never have to tack.”

own boat by age 5, and entered his first competition at age 11 when he was invited by fellow sailor Evan Miller to join him in the U.S. youth championship in California, where they finished one point out of first place. He then partnered with sailor Matthew Whitehead, and in 2012 they became U.S. Youth Multihull Champions.

“They were a perfect match,” Christine adds. “During their first North American championship, Taylor weighed only 65 pounds, and Matthew weighed 205. We didn’t know he was really too small for the boat. And he had so much fun he didn’t mind.”





Champion sailors Matthew Whitehead and Taylor Reiss have competed extensively in Europe and South America. The Pyxis, below, is a member of the fleet at the Reef Runner Sailing School in Panama City.



COURTESY GEORGE REISS

REEF RUNNER SAILING SCHOOL

Reiss and Whitehead have raced at sailing venues throughout the world, and that extensive travel has given them an even greater appreciation for conditions in Panama City.

“The conditions here are perfect,” Christine Reiss notes, “with the huge protected bay and calm flat water, you’re not likely to damage your boat, whereas in other water you can damage your boat just getting it out.”

It’s the variety of conditions that makes St. Andrew Bay ideal for sailing.

“You can be out into flat water and train in just a few minutes,” Reiss says. “If you want to simulate conditions of bigger waves, you can be in the open Gulf and train there within 10 minutes. This is a tremendous place for all low impact boating, kayaking and rowing.”

If you have a sense of adventure, whether you are new to sailing or desire to sharpen your skills, you can sign up for a charter or sailing course with a local sailing captain. Reef Runner Sailing School docks at the St. Andrews Marina complex. Stem to Stern Sailing in Downtown Panama City also offers charter sailing excursions and courses.

Reef Runner Capt. Pete Wodraska has been teaching sailing courses for 16 years. At the age of 12, Capt. Pete stepped onto his first sailboat, a borrowed Sunfish, and sailed in his first race on a lake in upper New Jersey. Since then he has never been without some form of watercraft — he’s spent time cruising the Bahamas and the Caribbean and now teaches others about the joy of sailing in the waters around Panama City Beach.

He says St. Andrew Bay is one of the best venues on the east coast, due to the large protected area. “The bay is large and deep enough, very important for sailors,” he says. “St. Andrew Bay gives us a wonderful large area and even if the wind is blowing, it’s not going to be miserable on the boat. Also, we have a routine amount of heavy boat traffic from fishing boats, U.S. Navy boats and boats that enter and exit the shipyard, which gives people the opportunity to learn to sail around big boats.”

Deciding which course to take depends on your sailing experience and goals. Both Reef Runner and Stem to Stern offer courses that include teaching the basics, as well as mastering advanced sailing. Options range from a short sunset sail lasting two hours to a weeklong advanced class for those who want to get certification.

As American Sailing Association (ASA) certified schools, both Reef Runner and Stem to Stern offer Basic Keelboat Sailing (ASA 101) and the more advanced ASA 103 and 104 courses.

“We teach at the beginner’s level for those who have never seen the Gulf or the ocean,” Capt. Pete says. “Self-taught sailors, while skilled, may lack fundamental knowledge gained from a formal sailing course. Certification may make it easier and less expensive for them to charter a boat since they will have proof of their sailing experience.”

Both charter companies recommend that their students bring a rain jacket, hat, suntan lotion, sunglasses and deck shoes or white-soled sneakers, as well as snacks and drinks. ●

# PEPSI GULF COAST JAM

BY GAYLE THOMPSON

PHOTOS BY PEPSI GULF COAST JAM

ERIC CHURCH,  
BRAD PAISLEY  
AND JAKE OWEN  
TO HEADLINE  
THREE-DAY  
EVENT

**P**anama City Beach has had a long and enduring love affair with country music, and now the relationship is being taken to a new level.

The fourth annual Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam will take place Sept. 2 to 4 at the Frank Brown Park festival grounds, headlined by superstars Eric Church, Brad Paisley and Jake Owen, with performances by Brett Eldredge and the Band Perry, among others.

Last year's Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam drew a three-day crowd of more than 57,000 people, both locals and tourists, who gathered to hear artists like Lady Antebellum, Dwight Yoakam, Miranda Lambert, Hunter Hayes, Gary Allan and Keith Urban perform over Labor Day weekend. That was followed by the first-ever Pepsi SpringJam, which boasted an all-star lineup of singers





Keith Urban enthralled fans at the third annual Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam, held at Frank Brown Park. This year's headlines include (inset photos on opposite page) Eric Church, top, and Brad Paisley.





including Chris Young, Thomas Rhett, Cam, Kelsea Ballerini, Old Dominion and Rascal Flatts.

Now, as the Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam readies what will be their biggest event to date, perhaps no one is more excited than 2016 Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam performer, Jake Owen.

"I'm excited to be a part of this year's Gulf Coast Jam. I can't think of a better way to close out the summer than with one last big beach party," Owen says. "And, to be back in my home state of Florida makes it even better. Let's do this!"

Rendy Lovelady, Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam Executive Producer, promises this year's event will be the best one yet, thanks in part to the artists gracing the stage this year.

"The first thing is, the talent budget's literally about three times what it was our first year," Lovelady says. "Jake Owen is really familiar with Florida. He has a lot of pull in the Florida area. That's home. That's the biggest thing. The other thing is, every year, based on the success of the festival, we add more events. More side areas. More things for people to do other than just music. We've added different levels of entertainment."

Fans who attended last year's Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam will have even more to entice them to return this year, including a huge video wall so every seat, from anywhere in the park, is a good seat, as well as the ever-popular Happy Hour, with even bigger artists and more drink specials.

But most importantly, Lovelady hopes fans come to not only hear the country music, but enjoy all that Panama City Beach has to offer.

"We're trying to really push the local community," he says. "You don't have to be with us until 2:30, so make sure you go eat at a great breakfast place, and you go shopping and you go play golf or you go fishing. We wanted to really impress to the people how great the restaurants and the shopping areas and the fishing and golf areas around Panama City Beach are. It's more than just going to the beach."

Lovelady was inspired to host the festivals in Panama City Beach after scouring dozens of other locations



and realizing that a large population of country music fans were already gathered in the Florida Panhandle or frequently vacationing in the area.

"We wanted to try and find something like the New Orleans Jazz Fest, where you have a destination location, and they have a reason to come to the city," Lovelady notes. "You have a sufficient airport to handle the city, but then you can also find the land that we wanted to have 35,000 people. We looked everywhere, and Panama City Beach was the best fit."

The mutual love affair between country music and Panama City Beach is a long one. Kenny Chesney got his feet wet playing at the famed Spinnaker's, before his career exploded, and he was replaced by then-newcomer Luke Bryan, launching Bryan's successful seven-year run headlining his annual Spring Break shows in 2009. Justin Moore met his wife of nine years, Kate Moore, during a senior class trip on the famous white sands, and Kip Moore hosted two Spring Break Bash appearances at Panama City Beach's Walmart in 2012, performing a couple



## JAKE OWEN

### Golfer Turned Singer

As a teen-ager, Jake Owen began pursuing a career as a professional golfer, winning his first tournament at 15. While a student at Florida State University, he fell victim to a wakeboarding accident that required reconstructive surgery and left him unable to continue to play golf. While recovering from his injuries, he borrowed a neighbor's guitar and began to teach himself how to play. After playing gigs in bars, he moved to Nashville and made contacts that launched his career.





More than 57,000 country music fans attended the 2015 Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam, drawn to Frank Brown Park by Hunter Hayes and other top-flight performers.

shows in honor of the release of his debut *Up All Night* album.

But the relationship actually goes even deeper. Hank Williams, Jr. opened a club, *Hank's Beach Club* in the 1980s, where Pier Park now resides, and George Jones and Alan Jackson are just a few of the stars who have owned homes along the white sandy beaches in the city limits. Perhaps more importantly, Music City's world-famous *Tootsie's Orchid Lounge* opened a second location in Panama City Beach in 2008 to accommodate all of the country music fans in the area.

Regardless of the roots, one thing is certain: Panama City Beach and country music belong together, and there's no better way to celebrate the connection than at the fourth annual Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam.

Tickets are on sale now at [GulfCoastJam.com](http://GulfCoastJam.com). ●

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2016 Events

# Music, Food and Fun for Everyone

**There's Music in the Air in Panama City Beach Summer** Throughout the summer, visitors and locals gather for the free summer concert series at Aaron Bessant Park amphitheater, where live performances in the open-air amphitheater set the tone. The PCB Summer Concert Series takes place every Thursday night, and Groovin' on the Green offers a scaled down version of the open-air concert series on Monday nights at the Carillon Beach neighborhood.

**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.

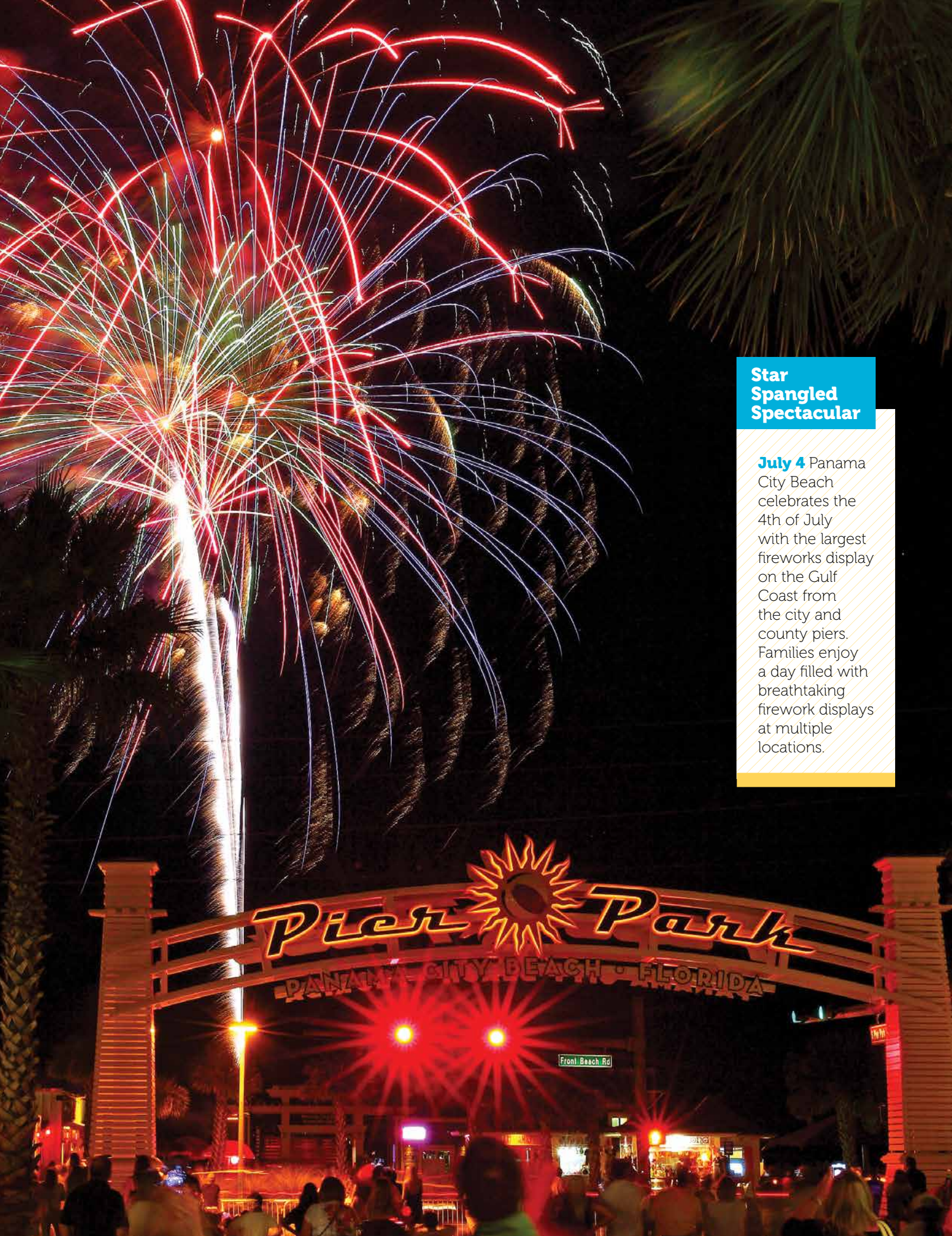
**Lobster Festival and Tournament Sept. 12-18** Schooners sets the stage for the largest lobster festival in Florida, as the 27th Annual Lobster Festival & Tournament gives divers a chance to compete and attendees a chance to eat amazing lobster dishes. Tournament participants compete in a variety of 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

## 3rd Annual Chasin' the Sun Music Festival

**Sept. 23-24** Enjoy a few bonus days of summer at a festival created to celebrate artists who wrote and continue to play classic beach songs.





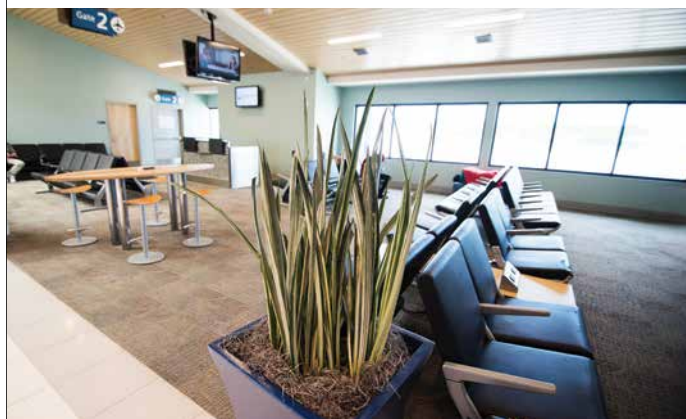


## Star Spangled Spectacular

**July 4** Panama City Beach celebrates the 4th of July with the largest fireworks display on the Gulf Coast from the city and county piers. Families enjoy a day filled with breathtaking firework displays at multiple locations.



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now in its 17th year and takes place on the beach behind Schooners.

**UNwined Oct. 14–15** 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.

**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.

**Emerald Coast Cruizin' Nov. 7–12** The annual event at Aaron Bessant Park is perfect for families and attracts thousands of classic cars, hot rods, custom cars and trucks. Live music will also be featured at the event.

**Beach Home for the Holidays Nov. 25–26** The lighting of a 100-foot Christmas tree and holiday music from the Panama City POPS Orchestra kick off the holiday season.

**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.

**Ninth Annual 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 2016 theme was "Old Hollywood."

**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.

**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 the 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–May 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.

**Jeep Beach Jam May** Jeep enthusiasts from throughout the United States travel to Aaron Bessant Park & Amphitheater for this five-day event dedicated to all things Jeep. Industry leading companies will be present with information, seminars and merchandise. This family-friendly event includes bounce houses, obstacle courses, live music, bonfires, a parade and much more!

Visit [VisitPanamaCityBeach.com](http://VisitPanamaCityBeach.com) for more details.

## 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.



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# (SEA) BIRDS OF A FEATHER

For a family reunion, nothing beats the beach

BY NINA RODRÍGUEZ-MARTY



BARB KOEHLMOOS



BARB KOEHLMOOS

**ITCHING TO ROUND UP** the flock for her 25th wedding anniversary, Barb Koehlmoos was faced with a serious dilemma: Go on a cruise or head down to Mexico?

The perfect solution turned out to be neither, actually.

“We were talking about it,” Koehlmoos laughed, “and my husband goes, ‘Yikes. Why in the world would we want to do any of that when we can go to Panama City Beach?’”

A Nebraska native and current Midwesterner, Koehlmoos first fell for the beauty of Panama City Beach in 1975. For five years she called the World’s Most Beautiful Beaches home, but then migrated back north.

Koehlmoos has since refused to be a stranger. Despite residing over a thousand miles away, she treks south at least once a year to vacation in her former home, visit her son

— now a Panama City Beach resident — and soak in the splendor of her favorite seaside city.

Simply put, “Nothing compares.”

This June, Koehlmoos is heading to her favorite beach once more — and the gang’s all invited.

“My husband and I just wanted to do something special to celebrate our anniversary with our family,” she says. “We decided Panama City Beach would be the perfect place.”

With a large, blended family scattered across the U.S., the Koehlmoos understand how tough it can be to gather the clan, and how difficult it can be to ensure that everybody is sufficiently entertained. In fact, when “everybody” includes a total of five adult children, their spouses and 12 grandchildren, meeting everyone’s needs just might be Mission Impossible.

Koehlmoos isn’t too worried, though.

“I can’t think of anything that Panama City Beach doesn’t offer that somebody would want,” she says. She’s right, of course. The unique shops of Front Beach Road make for the perfect knickknack hunting grounds; golf enthusiasts can take a swing at one of the many courses along the coast; and a day on the water or visiting Gulf World by Dolphin Discovery or Shipwreck Island Water Park are sure to satiate thrill seekers young and old.

Plus, there’s always the beach.

“Everybody, everybody, has heard so much about the beauty of Panama City Beach and how great the beaches are,” says Koehlmoos. “I’m just anxious to show everybody that it really is just that beautiful.”

**Barb Koehlmoos decided to celebrate her 25th wedding anniversary at her favorite vacation destination — and to include her extended family.**

Guaranteeing plenty of leisure time between waterslide plunges and dolphin encounters, Koehlmoos is housing her family in the Grand Lagoon area: She reserved five condos on Thomas Drive close to St. Andrews State Park.

“We want everybody to have a chance to relax and be together when they want to be together, and for everyone to have their own space to go back to when they want some down time,” she explains.

Boating trips and shopping excursions aside, Koehlmoos is most excited about spending time with her family.

“We’re blessed with a wonderful family,” she says, “and all of us being together is just so important to everybody.” ●

# History, Charm and Local Cuisine

Revived St. Andrews has much to offer

BY WENDY O. DIXON // PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BOONIN

**IF YOU'RE LOOKING** for off-the-beaten-path charm, Historic St. Andrews in Panama City is a great place to start. The friendly neighborhood has a recently renovated marina, a walkable shopping and restaurant district, beautiful historic homes and plenty for Florida history buffs to explore.

It's St. Andrews' history that makes the community so charming. First settled by American Indians and visited by the Spanish, French and English, this area's modern era began in the 1820s when a retired Georgia governor and his wife built a home along what's now known as Beach Drive.

In the early days, most of the residents made their living through fishing and salt harvesting. In fact, during the Civil War, St. Andrews was a key producer of salt for the Confederate Army. As a result, the area was often raided by Union troops.

Over the years the population of the town of St. Andrews grew, the St. Andrews Bay Railroad, Land, and Mining Co. began advertising small parcels of land for sale in what they called Florida's "brightest jewel" for \$1.25 each, and finally St. Andrews was first incorporated as a city in 1908.

In the 1970s, as Americans moved away from downtown shopping areas and toward modern shopping malls, St. Andrews suffered a decline in popularity. The stage was set to reverse that trend in 1989, however, when St. Andrews was established as a Community



Redevelopment Area, paving the way for the eventual rebirth of the once vibrant neighborhood.

"A group of people known as the Friends of St. Andrews wanted to preserve the area's history and make it something they could be proud of again," says Ryan Ledford, museum coordinator for the Panama City Publishing Company Museum and Visitor Center. "They did everything from pulling up weeds in their neighbors' yards to painting buildings. They really turned things around."

The most recently completed project, a revamping and beautification of the St. Andrews Marina, includes new landscaping and restrooms, as well as

To enjoy an educational walk-through of Historic St. Andrews, take a free tour on Wednesdays and Fridays at 2 p.m.

additional parking spaces for both the public and marina tenants.

To enjoy an educational walk-through of Historic St. Andrews, take a free tour on Wednesdays and Fridays at 2 p.m. The tour is about a mile long and takes you through the quaint community, beginning and ending at the Panama City Publishing Company Museum and Visitor Center.

"We have a couple of older ladies who have lived here all their lives," Ledford says.





The St. Andrews Marina has figured prominently in the resurgence of the historic neighborhood. It hosts both private boats and vessels for hire.





“They’ll sometimes walk along with the tour and give you the town gossip.”

A self-guided audio tour with downloadable files is also available at [historicstan-drews.com/historic-walking-tour](http://historicstan-drews.com/historic-walking-tour).

**The St. Andrews community offers an eclectic mix of shops, restaurants and attractions including a museum.**

On the tour, you’ll see St. Andrews’ pride and joy: Built in 1877, the Governor Stone is designated as a National Historic Landmark as the oldest known surviving Gulf Coast schooner. The vessel was vital to trade and coastal community life. Now the restored boat is devoted to educational programming and historic and cultural tourism. The Governor Stone embodies maritime heritage as a moving museum and a reminder of the slower-paced past and the labor-intensive traditions of the Gulf Coast. Visitors learn about maritime construction as well as the history of the vessel, the schooner fleet and the people the fleet supported.

The St. Andrews shopping district is made up of locally owned stores that have retained their quaint charm over the decades. Antique lovers and history buffs will enjoy visiting the boutiques and shops in St. Andrews, including Clara Jean’s Antiques on Beck Avenue. The shop has antique furniture, vintage clothing and jewelry, even some old roller skates and cameras. One of Clara Jean’s biggest eye catchers is a melodeon, a type of pump organ dating back more than 160 years.

If you love a challenge, or are in the market for the weird, funky and bizarre, head over to Design Salvage on 12th Street. Unique



Vintiques & Collectibles on 15th Street has vintage oil cans, car parts, Coca-Cola memorabilia, tin signs and even an old barber chair.

Cassandra Johnston, owner of Four Winds Grille and Spirits, has been in the restaurant business for 15 years, opening Four Winds in its current location in 2014. Serving breakfast and lunch (closed Mondays and Tuesdays and for special events), the restaurant is a nighttime hot spot for music and comedy lovers.

On Thursday nights, the place is elbow to elbow as the Ukés of St. Andrews, a ukulele orchestra made of 25 musicians, strums favorite tunes. “You owe it to your soul to see this,” says Johnston. “It’s one of the best things you have ever seen. Everyone sings and drinks and has a great time. It’s hard to describe, but you’ll have one of the best



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nights of your life.” Four Winds also hosts a comedy improv show on Friday nights.

The Ukes of St. Andrews also perform every Wednesday at the St. Andrews Episcopal Church, or you can catch them on the second Sunday of every month at the Little Village, a waterfront shopping and entertainment venue in St. Andrews. The outdoor market features handmade items from around the world. Much of its inventory comes from fair trade companies that help improve living conditions in impoverished communities.

Of course, there are seafood restaurants aplenty in St. Andrews. Hunt’s Oyster Bar, The Shrimp Boat, Uncle Ernie’s Bayfront Grill and the Captain’s Table Fish House Restaurant and Oyster Bar are all seafood lovers’ delights. Thai Basil offers Asian fare, Enzo’s Pizza and Grill adds an Italian touch, and you can find south of the border flavors served up at Los Antojitos Mexican restaurant, which reopens this summer in a new location along Beck Avenue.

Take a trip to St. Andrews, and you’ll discover a vibrant community where the area’s history is on display and the locals will welcome you with a smile. Spend a day exploring the streets and the marina; stroll through Under the Oaks park; browse shops offering collectibles, rare finds and vintage items; take a break for lunch or dinner at one of the locally owned restaurants.

It’s a great day in St. Andrews. ●



# Panama City Beach Raises the Bar for Sporting Events

Frank Brown Park sparkles after \$4 million renovation

BY PAT MCCANN

**SUMMER IS THE TIME WHEN** school is out and parents and families have more flexibility to travel. Tens of thousands of vacationers, including many youth sports teams, make Panama City Beach their destination.

“In an eight-week period in June and July, we will be visited by close to 1,000 youth teams that average 46 people per team, staying an average of seven nights and utilizing nine sleeping units per team,” says Richard Sanders, Vice President of Sports Marketing for the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Do the math and you arrive at more than 60,000 Panama City Beach room nights, all part of a successful lodging program that represents a home run for Panama City Beach’s economy.

Sanders says he has seen a dramatic increase in visitation since he became involved in the program in 1999.

“The estimated impact over that two-month period is more than \$30 million,” Sanders says.

## THIRTY MILLION DOLLARS

It’s an attention-grabbing sum of money that equates to the direct economic impact of the summer sports season at Frank Brown Park on Panama City Beach and surrounding communities. But perhaps a better gauge of the program’s success is provided by viewing those numbers through the prism of the past.

In 1999, the north-end complex at Frank Brown Park had recently been completed, and Sanders says that summer sports attracted about 4,000 room nights, which increased to 10,000 in the year 2000. The economic impact grew from \$3 million to \$6 million. But Panama City Beach still was in its embryonic stage as a summer sports attraction.



“Frank Brown Park is now one of the most recognized championship sports facilities in the United States,” Sanders says.

The United States Fastpitch Association holds its “World Series 1” and “World Series 2” softball events at Frank Brown Park during consecutive weeks in July. That brings in 500 teams, 97 percent of which are from out of state, and results in 30,000 room nights. With an average of 46 people included in the entourage for each team, that is a total of 23,000 people traveling to Panama City Beach, just for those softball events.

Included in the overall softball championship experience are expansive pre-tournament parades in which participating teams walk the main street





## Venue Made New

### Investment extends park's competitiveness

Richard Sanders, Vice President of Sports Marketing for the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, termed the recent improvements at Frank Brown Park a “much-needed project,” given the volume of championship-caliber events that it hosts.

A \$4 million renovation to the complex that is expected to host 30 amateur youth and adult tournaments this year, as well as a major high school softball invitational, was unveiled in February. It included improvements to five fields in the northern pinwheel of the park that were completed in mid-February, and work on four fields in the southern portion finished in March.

The construction addressed amenities and renovations. The spectator experience was an important consideration.

“In the sports industry a facility is considered old after 10 years or so,” says Sanders. “Frank Brown Park, with the expansion in 1999, was reaching 16 years. ... The south complex was built in 1978. The renovations and redesign of the south complex take us to another level compared to our competition.”

Larger dugouts, new fencing, new backstops, scorers’ boxes and shaded canopies over the bleachers are additions that players and spectators are sure to take note of.

Vinyl-coated black fences, new foul poles, and masonry walls at the backstops now enclose the renovated fields. Two fields in the southern quadrant were moved about 20 feet to enhance spectator mobility. Shaded pavilions have also been added.

of Pier Park, a 900,000-square-foot lifestyle center and entertainment hub located near the park.

“The larger events, such as girls’ fastpitch, start at Aaron Bessant Park and work their way through Pier Park,” Sanders says. “At times, close to 8,000 kids are parading through streets lined with family and supporters.”

While about 20 percent of the tournaments — such as those involving military teams — are strictly for adults, the emphasis remains on bringing families to Panama City Beach’s sugar-white sands. With that in mind, a master plan has been developed for a new sports park designed to strengthen Panama City Beach as a year-round destination.

The first phase is expected to cost \$30 million to \$35 million dollars and will include fields for lacrosse, soccer, softball and baseball. It will also offer playgrounds, trails for biking and walking and more. As many as 18 new fields could be built; initially, nine are projected, all featuring synthetic turf.

Sanders says that meanwhile many improvements at Frank Brown Park have been made.

“They include the addition of Gayle’s Trails, the festival site, new tennis courts, the dog park, the Aquatic Center and the Miracle Field for the handicapped,” Sanders notes.

“Our success is built on providing experiences. Our new complex will have a





major focus on the family experience, whereas other groups may just be building fields. The new complex will cater to rectangular sports, such as soccer, lacrosse, football, rugby and ultimate Frisbee, to name a few — most of which are spring, fall and winter sports, complementing our summer success.”

Sanders foresees the new facilities also attracting spring training for

college and high school baseball, soccer and lacrosse, and filling the need for overflow baseball and softball fields during the summer.

“With the \$4 million renovation at Frank Brown Park bringing us to above-industry standards and the new facility in the works, we are in a very good place,” Sanders says.

A very good place that many will be anxious to visit. ●



## FRANK BROWN PARK 2016 TOURNAMENT SCHEDULE

### March 5–6

Arnold High School, Florida vs. USA High School Fastpitch Classic

### March 11–12

Nations Baseball Travel Ball Select TNC Qualifier

### March 19–20

Grand Slam Sports Baseball Beach Bash

### April 2–3

Grand Slam Sports Spring Breakin' @ the Beach Baseball Bash

### April 9–10

ISSA Senior Softball Gulf Coast Championships

### April 16–17

Grand Slam Sports Fun in the Sun Baseball Bash

### April 23–24

USSSA Military Softball NIT

### May 7–8

Travel Ball USA Mother's Day Baseball Splash II

### May 13–15

Global Sports Baseball Super NIT

### May 21–22

ASA Girls Fastpitch at the Beach

### May 28–29

Grand Slam Sports Memorial Day Baseball Beach Bash

### June 4–5

USFA Girls Fastpitch in Paradise

### June 10–12

USSSA Girls Fastpitch Extravaganza

### June 10–12

Minor League Paintball

### June 17–19

Grand Slam Sports Baseball Beach Blast

### June 21–26

Grand Slam World Series of Baseball Session 1

### June 27–July 3

Grand Slam World Series of Baseball Session 2

### July 5–9

Grand Slam World Series of Baseball Session 3

### July 11–16

USFA Fastpitch World Series 1

### July 18–23

USFA Fastpitch World Series 2

### July 25–30

Grand Slam World Series of Baseball Session 4

### Aug. 10–13

Air National Guard National Tournament

### Aug. 20

Travel Ball USA Summer Classic

### Aug. 20

Okaloosa Rugby 7's Tournament

### Aug. 24–28

Next Generation Sports National Tournament

### Sept. 8–11

WSL North American Championships 1

### Sept. 15–18

WSL North American Championships 2

### Oct. 7–9

Endless Summer Soccer Classic

### Nov. 16–20

National Homeschool Football Championships

### Nov. 19–20

NSA Fall World Series

### Nov. 24–26

Snapper Bowl (youth) Football Classic



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# Cooking Up Traditions

At J. Michael's, consistency is a hallmark

BY HANNAH BURKE // PHOTOS BY HOLLY GARDNER

**J. MICHAEL'S IS A NAME** that has been synonymous with Panama City Beach for decades. The vintage, beach-themed restaurant has been serving up seafood favorites married with Cajun dishes since 1976.

J. Michael Stewart, a lifetime local who has seen Panama City Beach transform from a relative backwater to the vacation hotspot it is today, believes in consistency and a traditional approach when it comes to food.

"I was a beach boy, a lifeguard," Stewart says. "We were starving to death eight months out of the year. There was just nothing on the beach during the off season. We opened an oyster bar — there were a lot of mom-and-pop oyster bars, and we thought we'd try the same thing. Then somebody suggested that we offer other foods. I just thought I'd make some red beans and rice; nobody else was selling that dish, and it took off."

Forty years later, red beans and rice remains a specialty of the house, prepared with the same tried-and-true recipe.

"We don't even change the sauce," Stewart points out. "Our Original Shrimp J. Mike is about 39 years old. The Seafood Gumbo is our original. We buy from the same people. We like to keep it the same. When you come back, we want you to have the same quality. We live by that. If you don't like something here, we don't expect you to eat it."

Though the menu has remained consistent, the restaurant's location has not.

"Me and my wife started the restaurant, along with some friends. We all got together, built it. It was an old building, an old bar. We fixed it right up," Stewart says of his first beachside location. Three moves

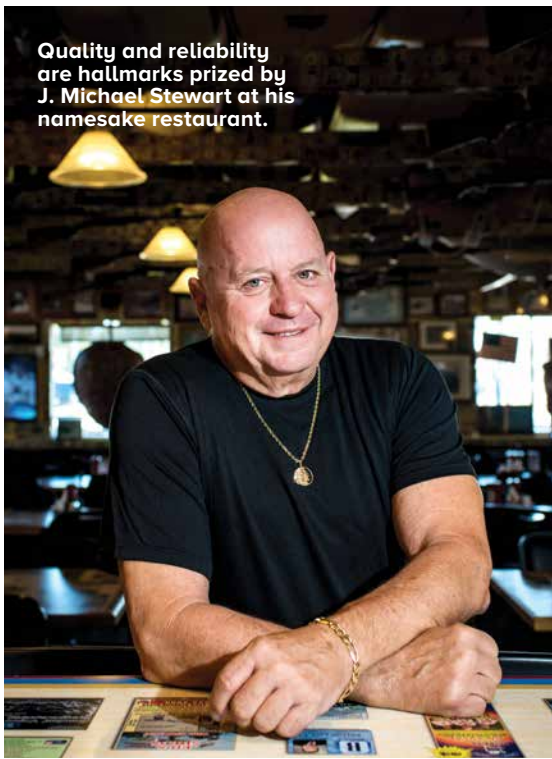








Quality and reliability are hallmarks prized by J. Michael Stewart at his namesake restaurant.



later, J. Michael's has found a home by the water on Thomas Drive.

"Every location has been better than the last," Stewart smiles. "Every one we've had has been my favorite, but when we moved here, it got better."

Today's restaurant, which resembles a seafood shack (in a good way) gives guests the option of patio seating or tables within a uniquely decorated interior. Dollar bills personalized by diners are tacked to the rafters, which are loaded down with surfboards, while the walls are decorated with rifles, tortoise shells, antique signs, license plates and a giant sting ray that you just can't miss. Much of the décor is decades old, all gifted to Stewart by his patrons over the years.

"It keeps growing," Stewart says of the assortment of displayed objects. "My customers keep bringing them to me."

There's a World War I helmet and dog tags displayed above the bar; they belonged to a customer's great-grandfather. Hanging there, too, are the customer's dog tags from Vietnam, and his uncle's from World War II.

"When they bring me this stuff, I'm glad they brought it to me," Stewart says. "I'm glad they thought about me while they were here."

It's easy to see what bonds customers to J. Michael's. Diners are made to feel like they're getting a genuine, home-cooked meal from a friend. Customers flock

to the restaurant for scrumptious daily specials — Jambalaya Thursdays or Shrimp Burger Saturdays. Among the favorite appetizers are freshly shucked oysters from Apalachicola Bay that serve as a reminder of the restaurant's earliest days.

Visitors also have the option of sitting at the bar and quaffing a draft beer or sipping a glass of wine. There are plenty of TVs about, so fans can monitor the game while enjoying a meal.

J. Michael's encourages guests to bring the whole family. Children love studying all the unique decorations while enjoying selections from the kid's menu. Among the employees are Stewart's own children, making for a true family atmosphere.

"We've been here in the South for seven generations," Michael says of his family history. "My mother's side is from Louisiana and Mississippi. My daddy's side is over up through the Carolinas, Alabama."

Growing up, Michael's father owned a restaurant.

"My mother, the whole family, loved to cook," Stewart notes. "We're really good at it. Some of the recipes I got through them, and I've upgraded them with better ingredients to improve the quality."

Quality and reliability, Stewart believes, are what set his establishment apart from the rest.

"We're not here to sell you a T-shirt," Stewart says. "We're here to feed you. You're welcome to come and eat with us." ●

## THE PERFECT BOILED SHRIMP

**J. MICHAEL STEWART** prefers to boil his shrimp with heads on. He recommends using a combination of Zatarain's and Old Bay seasonings and says people should feel free to add bay leaves, lemon, lime or even juice from an orange into the boil.

"The main thing, the most important thing, is when the shrimp comes off that stove, you need to have a bucket of ice ready. You need to dump loads of ice in there," Stewart advises. "If you want to drain off a little bit of the water, do it quick, then pour the ice in there, stir it and chill it down like that. What that does is pull in the seasonings, the flavor, right into the shrimp. It makes it taste really good."

Many recipes say that once the boil is complete, the water should be strained off and the shrimp refrigerated. That's bad advice, according to Stewart.

"We were making shrimp and it kept overcooking and overcooking," he recalls. "We put the ice in there to keep it from cooking and to allow the seasoning to soak right in. If you take the shrimp right out of the boil, it's hot — it's still cooking. Some people may argue with you, but we're here doing it every day."



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# Happy 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday



In 1936, Thomas Gideon officially opened Panama City Beach for business after building an oyster shell road to connect Highway 98 to the beach. (The road has changed quite a bit over the years but still bears the name Thomas Drive) At the time, many detractors ridiculed the businessman for buying up acres of white sand that they predicted would never grow crops. Thomas countered that, "I'm not interested in growing crops, I'm interested in growing people!" Time has proven him right, as millions now flock to these world-famous

beaches annually, and the property that Thomas' detractors spurned is now some of the most highly valued beachfront in the world!

From Long Beach Resort (the first tourism hot spot in what would become Panama City Beach) to the historic Grand Lagoon or the new attractions at Pier Park, a lot has changed in 80 years, but one thing that hasn't changed is the fun and the incredible beauty of those world-famous white sandy beaches.

This year we're celebrating Panama City Beach's 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday — 80 years of fun!



# BARNEYS BEACH

*Est. May 2, 1936*

# Head North to West Bay

Bay County's answer to the Everglades

BY TONY BRIDGES

**WANT TO DO SOMETHING** a little different during your trip to Panama City Beach?

Head up Highway 79. There, just a few minutes from the beach, you'll find yourself in what feels like another world, where time slows down, the winds brush the tops of the tall grass and eagles float overhead.

You've discovered the slow-moving saltwater marsh ecosystem known as West Bay, one of the most beautiful secrets of Panama City Beach.

"It is a completely different environment than what you will see on the beach," says Rick Ackerman, owner of Airboat Adventures in West Bay. "And you won't believe that you're only five minutes from the beach. It's like being able to go somewhere completely different while you're on vacation."

You might say West Bay is PCB's own little piece of the Everglades.

And since it's so close to the beach, visitors have an opportunity to experience the best of both worlds: Spend the morning sipping orange juice at a luxurious beachfront condo, then pop over for an afternoon of airboat rides and alligator watching.

Getting there is easy.

Take either Front or Back Beach Road about a half-mile west from Pier Park, then

turn north on Highway 79, as if you're headed to the airport. Drive a little less than six miles and stop before the bridge. That puts you right on the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and right in the middle of the West Bay community.

What's there to do?

"It's absolutely one of the best places in North Florida for ecotourism," says Ackerman.

West Bay is where the salt water of the Gulf of Mexico meets the sweet water flowing in from small creeks and streams north of Panama City Beach. The area is mostly marshy flats cut by intertwining waterways. The wildlife is a mix of birds and small animals that have adapted to the brackish environment.

Ackerman says it's common to see osprey, eagles, herons, egrets, alligators, wild pigs, dolphins and the occasional deer.

Airboat rides are probably the biggest draw for West Bay, with companies like Airboat Adventures and Wild Thang Airboat Tours offering eco-tours of the area. Both companies are located



CHASIN' THE SUN FISHING SHOW

The backwaters of West Bay are often still and ideal for kayakers, but occasionally are disturbed by a Wild Thang airboat.

near the Intracoastal Waterway, just off Highway 79.

Ackerman said his scheduled tours begin with a live alligator show, then move on to the airboats for a ride through the bay, creeks and marshes. The water gets very shallow — just four inches deep in some spots — so airboats are perfect for making the rounds, he says.

"We can get around in literally just inches of water," Ackerman says. "We can get places with the airboats that no other boats can go."





MICHAEL BOGINI

The whole tour, alligator show included, takes about two hours. Night tours to look for gators run about 90 minutes, and private tours also are available, Ackerman says.

Ackerman's best advice for visitors planning an airboat adventure: Bring sunscreen and bug spray, dress comfortably — and come with a good attitude and a clean change of underwear because it's going to be a wild ride!

But don't fret if you aren't up for an airboat ride. There are more sedate tours of West Bay offered by outfitters like Into the Blue Surf Shop, which provides stand-up paddleboard rentals and guided tours of West Bay, Econfina and other popular spots near Panama City Beach.

Visitors can also try their hand at fishing in West Bay.

The shallow water is home to redfish and speckled seatrout, both good-sized, tasty sport fish that can



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be caught all year long. They thrive in the grass flats found all around West Bay, where shrimp, mollusks and other small marine life keep them fed.

“West Bay is pristine and it holds a lot of fish,” says Todd Jones, a fishing guide with Panama City Inshore. “Those grass flats just provide a plethora of food out there.”

If you want to do some fishing, you can cast a line from the pier over the Intracoastal at the county’s B.V. Buchanan Park Boat Ramp, or for a better chance at catching your limit, hire a fishing guide and head out into the bay.

Jones says his service offers guided fishing trips into West Bay to fly fish and sight fish for redfish as well as trout, Spanish mackerel and flounder. Guides put in at Sun Harbor Marina (at the eastern foot of the Hathaway Bridge) and use poling skiffs to glide over the grass flats and look for fish.

Trips are from four hours to eight hours and all tackle, equipment and ice are provided. The guides also take care of fishing licenses.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re an amateur or a professional fisherman, we can cater to whatever needs you have and whatever skill level you have,” Jones says.

From December to January, Jones also offers guided hunts in West Bay, where redhead ducks in full plumage stop to feed on the grass flats. Jones says the hunts include a half-day of duck hunting and a half-day of fishing for redfish.

Whether you’re riding airboats, paddleboarding or fishing, all that fun is bound to leave you hungry. And when it comes to food, you’re in luck because West Bay is home to two excellent restaurants with family atmospheres.

Boon Docks is a PCB institution picked as a Top 25 seafood restaurant by Coastal Living magazine. The restaurant, situated on the intracoastal, serves fried and grilled seafood uniquely seasoned, along with Southern favorites like fried pickles and hushpuppies. The restaurant has a great view of the water and a dock where visitors can relax after dinner.

Right across the street is another waterfront restaurant called BFE (Best Food Ever), owned by Richard Dotson.

BFE is a slow-smoked barbecue joint with a menu that includes pastrami, brisket, pulled pork and the occasional prime rib or chicken breast, says manager Michelle Schultz. All the meat is cooked using locally sourced pecan wood, and the restaurant also has another specialty that’s a customer favorite: smoked, candied pecans.

Wild Thang airboat rides leave from the restaurant’s dock, and there are even pet ducks around for the kids to play with, Schultz says.

Like Boon Docks, Best Food Ever is a family restaurant — and that’s what makes West Bay a place worth visiting, Schultz says.

“West Bay is a really good place for families that want to beat the large crowds and enjoy a relaxing atmosphere,” she says. ●



CHASIN' THE SUN FISHING SHOW



MICHAEL BOONI

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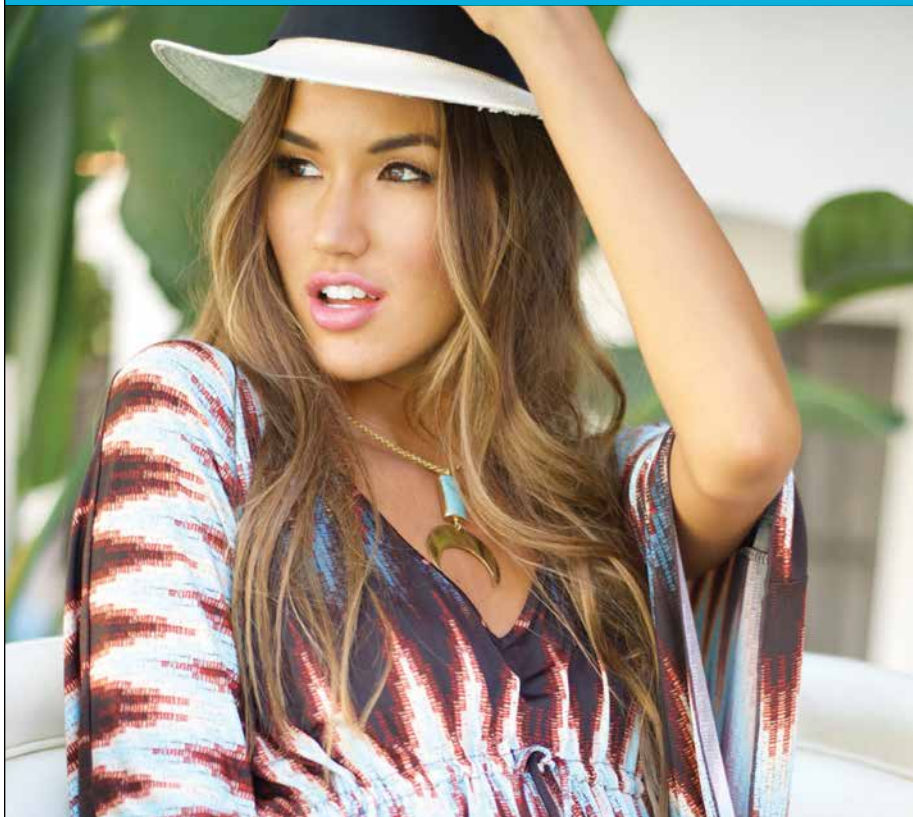
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# Safety First

**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](http://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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