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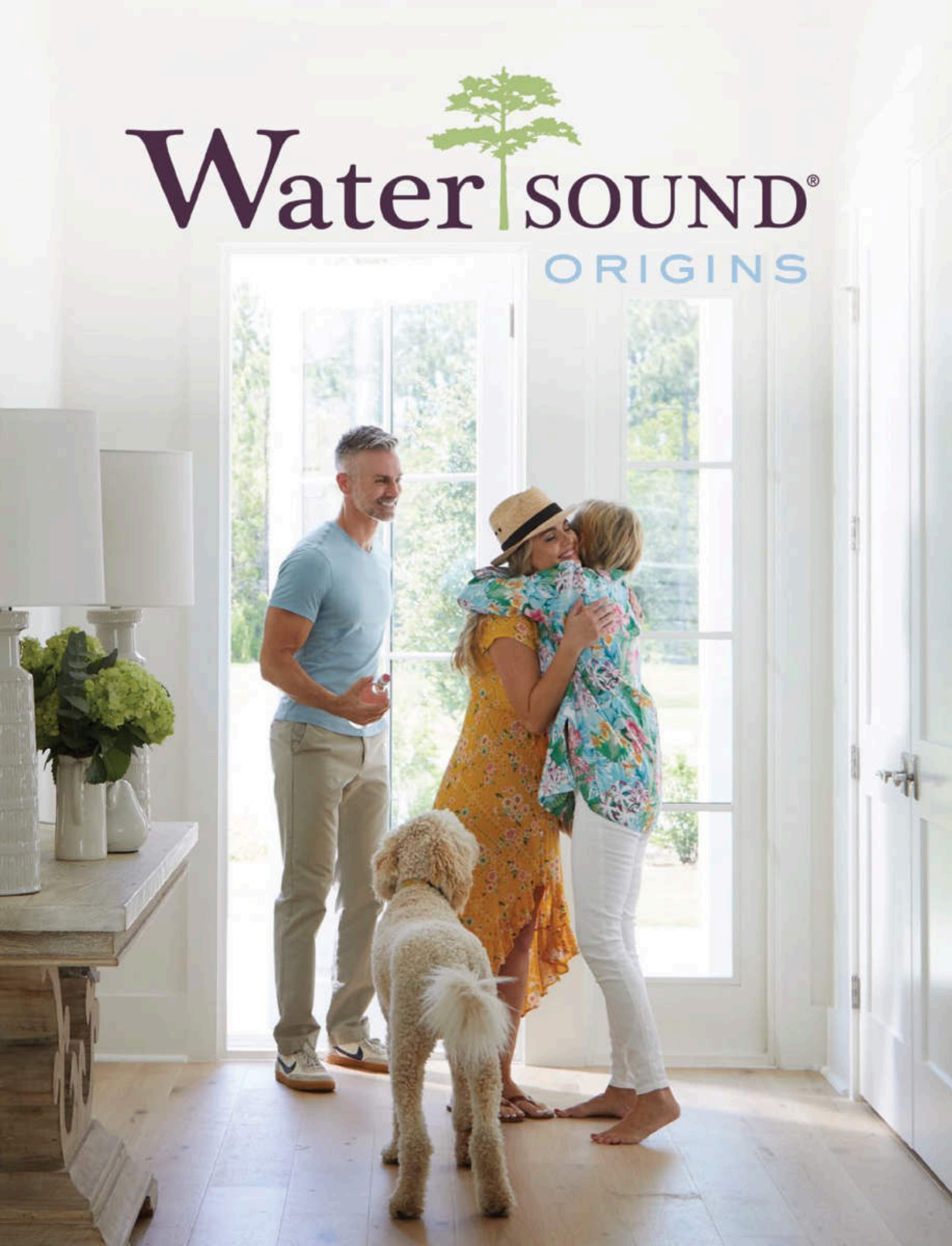
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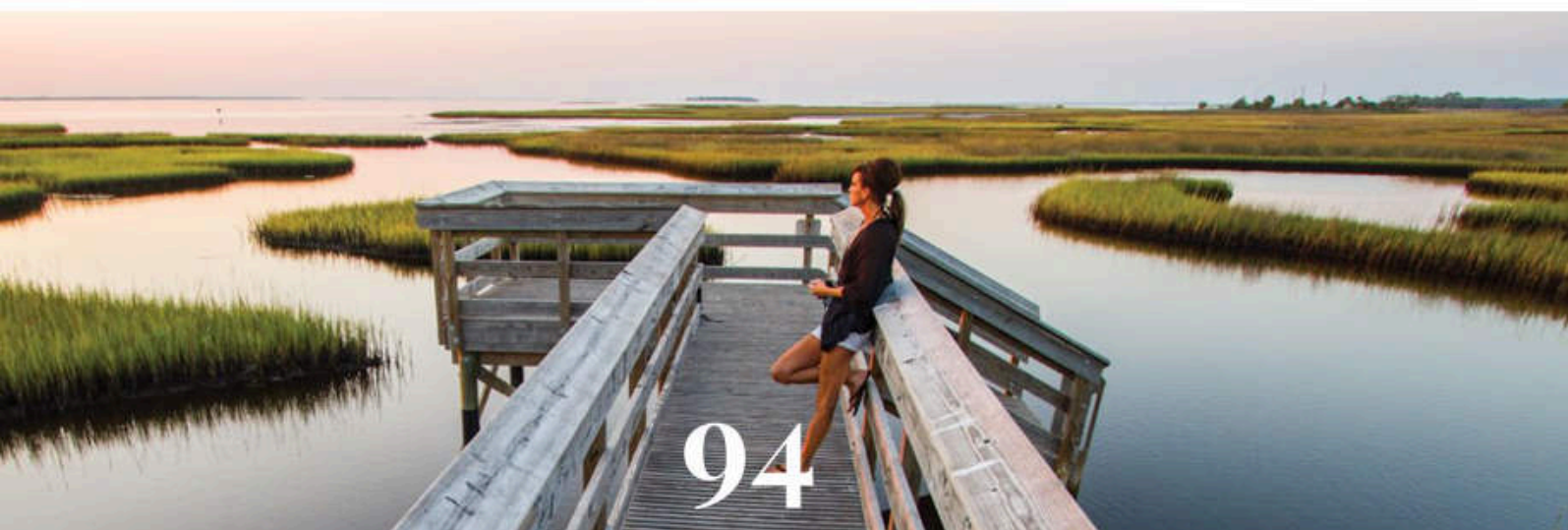


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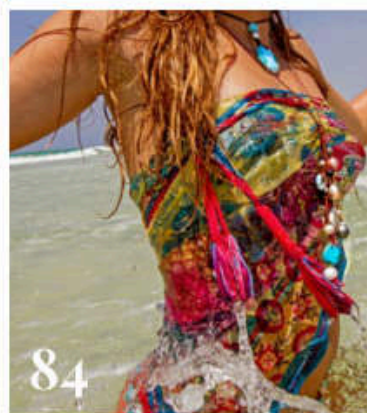
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We live in divisive times.

We pick teams. We pick sides. We pick our political party. We pick our so-called “news” channel. And due to a psychological concept known as cognitive dissonance, we rarely waver from those choices. To do so would force us to admit that we were wrong... and no one wants to do that. “We’re number one!” we scream, even as our beloved team limps its way through yet another losing season.

Of course, that’s fine when we’re talking about college football. It shows character to faithfully stand by a team that gets mercilessly pummeled season after season. But it gets a lot more complicated when it comes to politics and social issues, where blindly “standing by your team” doesn’t show character – it shows weakness.

In this issue, we look at people, places, and organizations that simply refuse to pick a side. They embrace multiple mindsets to create new opportunities. You can be both pro-business and pro-environment, as a new hotel in Gulf Shores, Alabama, demonstrates. The “Gulf to Table” movement shows us how to savor the delicious fruits of our seas, while making sure we don’t deplete them forever. The Ocean Cleanup works to remove plastic from our waters, but also to prevent garbage from ever reaching our oceans in the first place. In another story, you’ll learn that the town of Defuniak Springs, Florida, has a deep, rich history as a transportation hub, but it’s her vision for the future that now defines her. You’ll learn about a charity called Trees on the Coast that not only protects our precious oaks, pines and palms, but they’re also planting seeds for the future, both in the ground and in our schools. And, you’ll meet a Beach Cowboy who has mastered the art of mingling old with new, effortlessly shifting gears between the Atlantic Coast and the Gulf Coast, as easily as he melds country twangs with hip-hop rhythms to create something new.

There’s nothing wrong with picking a team. And there’s nothing wrong with picking a side, as long as you’re making educated decisions. But don’t assume that you have to pick a side. Sometimes keeping an open mind can open doors you didn’t even know were there.

Beach Happy, my friends!

Mike Ragsdale

Mike Ragsdale
Founder, The 30A Company

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BEACH HAPPY



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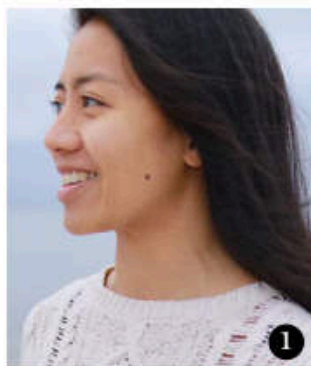
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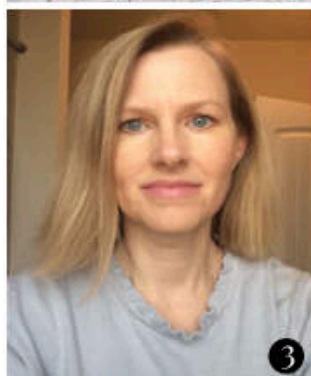
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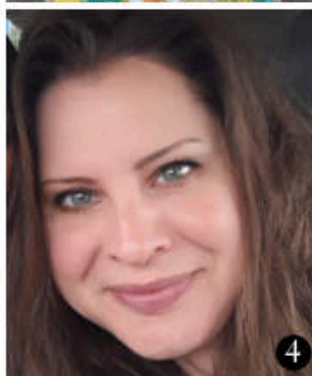
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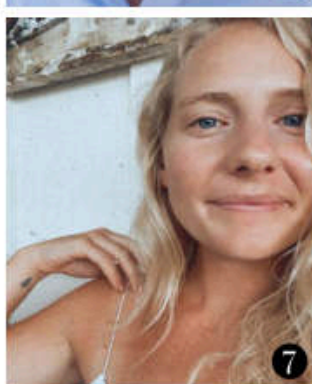
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5 QUESTIONS WITH



KAYLEIGH
NICOLE
GRANT

By Abigail Abesamis Demarest



The co-founder of a Hawaii-based ocean safari company talks about her favorite diving spot and what to do when you encounter marine life.



Kayleigh Nicole Grant's love for the ocean and its inhabitants runs deep, and she's dedicated her life to helping others find that connection to the sea in the hopes of inspiring them to adopt more eco-friendly habits in their daily lives. She's the co-founder, captain, and lead safety diver of Kaimana Ocean Safari, a tour company she started with her husband, Cam. Their other company, Faraway Seas, takes the same concept beyond their home base in Hawaii.

"We created these organizations to introduce people to the beauty of the ocean and show them how to interact with wildlife properly," Grant said. "It's said that if you love something, you'll protect it. With every guest we take out on an ocean adventure, we hope they will fall in love and begin to make more eco-conscious choices in their daily lives."



“
IT'S SAID THAT
IF YOU LOVE
SOMETHING,
YOU'LL PROTECT IT.
”



To learn more about Kayleigh Nicole Grant, follow her on Instagram (@mermaid.kayleigh) and check out her website kaimanaoceansafari.com and farawayseas.com.

BEACH HAPPY: WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT THE OCEAN?

KAYLEIGH NICOLE GRANT: My favorite thing about the sea is its vastness and mystery. It's such a powerful force that can't be tamed or controlled. Being in the ocean can make anyone feel humbled and in awe. My favorite part of being out on the sea is the search. Anything can happen at any moment. You never know what amazing things you might see when you're exploring the oceans.

BH: WHAT ARE SOME SIMPLE WAYS FOR PEOPLE TO BE MORE ECO-FRIENDLY AT THE BEACH?

GRANT: When you're enjoying the beach and the ocean, it's essential to use products that are not harmful to the environment. Reef-safe sunscreen is vital as chemicals can cause coral bleaching. The ONLY active ingredients that should be in your sunscreen are non-nano zinc or titanium. You can also pick up trash. It's a great practice to leave any natural area cleaner than you found it. That includes picking up others' trash. Also, switch to reusables versus single-use. Single-use plastics such as water bottles, bags, straws, utensils, and more are littering our oceans. Be sure to make these swaps a part of your daily practice.

BH: WHAT IS YOUR TOP TIP FOR PEOPLE WHO ENCOUNTER WILDLIFE AT THE BEACH OR IN THE OCEAN?

GRANT: Observe, don't disturb. Frequently, people can get so excited when they come across dolphins, turtles, and sharks that they chase these animals. They may not realize that by chasing an animal, they appear as threatening as a predator would. It's best to let animals approach you on their terms. When an animal feels comfortable around you and trusts you, the interactions are amazing.

BH: WHAT ARE YOUR TOP MUST-HAVE ITEMS TO TAKE WITH YOU TO THE BEACH?

GRANT: My Cressi dive gear, reef-safe sunscreen, a reusable water bottle, a swimsuit made from recycled ocean plastics (like One Ocean Bikini), a towel (Pokoloko brand), and a hat.

BH: WHERE IS YOUR FAVORITE PLACE TO DIVE AND WHY?

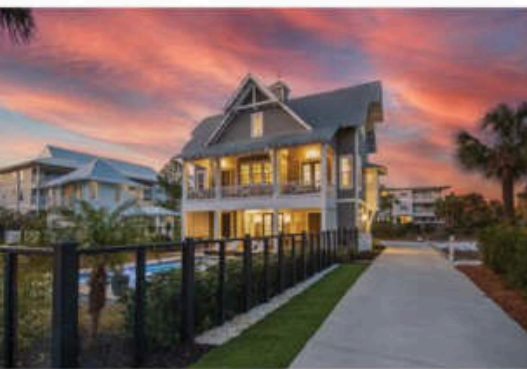
GRANT: French Polynesia because it is a shark sanctuary and still has an abundance of life. The humpback whales migrate here every year to mate and birth their calves. Cam and I run trips to this location every year. If you ever visit, check out Moorea Moana Tours.




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BRIAN KELLEY

Florida Georgia Line's

BRIAN KELLEY

*Eases Into a Sunshine
State of Mind*

By Mike Ragsdale
Photos: Ben Christensen

"I was baptized in the ocean," said Brian Kelley, the 'Florida half' of the country music super-duo known as Florida Georgia Line. "It's forever part of me."

The pandemic impacted everyone. Millions of people lost their lives, and millions more lost their livelihoods. Yet, despite unfathomable losses and hardships, many people are emerging from the global lockdown with a new sense of purpose.

"The pandemic opened up a ton of time, a ton of creativity," said Kelley. "At first, I was just looking forward to hanging out at the beach, writing in my journal, working out a little, and trying to get my arm back in shape. I was actually planning to take time away from music. I just started writing for me."

He had no idea he was writing his first solo album.



“The beach seemed so huge to me as a kid.”



Of course, Kelley is no stranger to the creative process. He and his FGL partner, Tyler Hubbard, are among the best-selling Country duos in history, racking up eighteen #1 hits so far. But this time around, Kelley found himself locked down in a one horse beach town.

With surreal times subsiding, Kelley launched his solo project, *Sunshine State Of Mind*, featuring 17 sandy tracks with titles such as, “Boat Names,” “Party On The Beach,” “Made By The Water,” “Fish All Day,” “Florida Boy Forever” and “Beach Cowboy.”

Beach vibes come naturally to Kelley, having been born and raised on the Atlantic Coast in Ormond Beach, Florida. “The beach seemed so huge to me as a kid,” said Kelley, who recalls boogie boarding, skimboarding, and

fishing, with a bit of surfing thrown in for good measure. “It seemed like we had to walk a mile across that red sand just to get to the water.”

Despite his comfort with all things water, Kelley still has a healthy respect for the seas, especially when it comes to sharks. That shouldn’t come as a huge surprise, as Ormond Beach is located in Volusia County, Florida, where there have been more documented shark attacks than just about every other place in the world.

“I never had an incident or anything,” he laughed. “When I’m stand-up paddleboarding, I never even give sharks a second thought, but when I’m surfing, sometimes I get in my head. Honestly, I think I’ve been ruined by watching too many *Shark Weeks*.”



“Following my gut is what keeps me on my compass.”

Even though he grew up in a proper beach town, every summer, Kelley looked forward to coming to Florida's panhandle, where white sand reigns over red.

"We all loaded up and drove over to Panama City Beach every single summer," he recalled. "My dad had a Hawaiian Tropic account, and the panhandle was part of his territory. He would make sales calls while we played on the beach."

After high school, Kelley attended Florida State University on a baseball scholarship. He was good, but ultimately not good enough to go pro.

"Baseball was always a dream of mine, but the universe didn't open that door for me," said Kelley, who firmly believes that everything

happens for a divine reason. "God put Tyler (Hubbard) and me together. I honestly don't know where I'd be if I hadn't walked through that open door. I just followed my heart. Following my gut is what keeps me on my compass."

Last year, with COVID-19 forcing long lockdowns, and longer introspections, doors closed. Others opened. With concerts and crowds grinding to a sudden halt, Brian and his wife Brittney needed a place to hunker down. They officially decided to make their home along Scenic Highway 30A in Walton County, Florida.

"To be honest, a lot of it feels the same as growing up in Daytona," he said. "Taking a bike ride, listening to music under a shade tree. Fishing



under a beach umbrella. The Florida mindset is all about doing something outside."

Kelley said a significant factor in their decision was the thousands of acres that Walton County has preserved in its state parks and forests. "I love biking and driving through all the trails," he said. "There's just a calm here. Every single time you cross that bridge coming home, you feel a weight taken off instantly. I love to travel, but I love having my anchor in Florida."

But despite that relaxed vibe, Kelley also seems to feed off the Gulf's dynamic range.

"This is actually a moody place," he said. "The threat of hurricanes. Clear, sunny days turn to sudden afternoon thunderstorms. There's an incredible energy here. You really feel inspired to work and write."

Kelley recently invited a few buddies down to the beach for a writing camp. "One morning, we got some coffee and drove out on the beach," said Kelley. 'Sunday Service In The Sand' was the result. "It's really more of a prayer, a song of gratitude."

Kelley said faith and family are the two most essential things in his life, fueled by his father's faith and devotion. Kelley led worship services in high school, and he even met Tyler Hubbard (of FGL) at a campus worship group in college.

"You can have church anywhere," said Kelley. "I like walking out to the beach, sitting down, and just taking time to thank the Lord for another day, another breath. My dad always wanted me to write more spiritual

songs, and I promised him that day would eventually come. 'Sunday Service' is my soul song."

Kelley's life seems to embrace both old and new simultaneously. East Coast or Gulf Coast? Horse or YOLO Electric Bike? Country or Rap? Who says you can't have both? Florida Georgia Line's unique style of music famously blends old country twangs with progressive hip-hop beats. What else would you expect from someone whose playlists growing up included talents ranging from Garth Brooks and Lil Wayne to Alabama and Eminem? Now, Kelley's shuffling some flamenco guitars and flamingo dreams into his mix.

"It's hard for me to coin what my sound is," said Kelley, who insists such lifestyle mash-ups are not intentional. "I'm not in competition with anyone else. I'm in my own lane, and I'm chasing my own sound. I dunno, maybe you'd call it beach-country?"

Kelley sounds like another famous tropical troubadour. Listen to Kelley's catchy "Party On The Beach" track, and it might soon become one of those songs you know by heart. So, has BK's sandy path been influenced by Jimmy Buffett?

"Absolutely. It's not only Jimmy's music but how he's run his branding," said Kelley, who recalls his parents taking him to Buffett concerts. "It's just a massive party, with everyone getting lit in the parking lot. He's a genius. It all comes from authenticity and creativity. People are drawn to authenticity."

While many of today's pop and hip hop hits glorify mega yachts, sporty

**"I love to travel,
but I love having my anchor in Florida."**





cars, and luxury brands, country music often embraces a complete lack of such material possessions. Kelley wrote his new track “Don’t Take Much” after living in relatively cramped quarters during the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s awesome touring. You get VIP treatment, and sometimes you even get to take private jets or whatever,” said Kelley. “But when everything gets stripped away, as it was from so many people last year, you begin to appreciate what really matters. I have Brittney. We have a roof over our heads. We have food on the table. We have our dogs. We’re happy. Last year was such a curveball, but I don’t think I’ve ever gotten away from how I was raised. I’ve never gotten away from being that kid catching crayfish in Ormond.”

After such stressful times, Kelley thinks people have reevaluated what’s most important to them. He believes post-pandemics will begin seeking fresh sources of happiness and inspiration. For him and many others, some of that happiness will come from the beach.

“When you’ve been busting your butt all week, there’s just something about a beach day,” he said. “Living by the water, even if you’re having a tough day at work, you can still steal a 30-minute lunch break on the beach. That’s everything. That right there is some cheap therapy.”

So what song puts the yippee-ki-yay in this Beach Cowboy’s giddy-up?

“A couple of years ago, I picked up an album by Freddie McGregor at Central Square Records in Seaside,” said Kelley. “I had never heard of him, but now I listen to his song, ‘Big Ship,’ every morning when I make coffee. It instantly makes me happy and puts me in a beachy frame of mind.”

So does Kelley’s solo ride mean the end of a wildly successful Florida Georgia Line run? Not at all. Remember, Kelley excels at fusing together old and new.

“Every pivotal moment in my life, I’ve felt like a door opened,” said Kelley. “It was just time to pivot. Now is my time to make a solo record and follow my heart. I feel more alive than ever. Our creative pause really adds to what Tyler and I are doing with Florida Georgia Line.”

Of course, one can’t successfully meld everything together. Sometimes, you simply have to pick a side. For example, what’s the proper footwear for a Beach Cowboy — boots or flip-flops?

“I’ve actually written a song about that,” laughed Kelley. “I might need to dust it off.” He grew quiet, pausing long and hard to contemplate his answer as if making the wrong choice now could carry career-long consequences.

“Definitely flip-flops.”



“Flip-flops,” said the Beach Cowboy, with a serious certainty. “Definitely flip-flops.”

To learn more about Brian Kelley and his debut solo album, [Sunshine State Of Mind](#), follow him on all social media and music channels, and visit [officialbriankelley.com](#). @

SHUNK GULLEY

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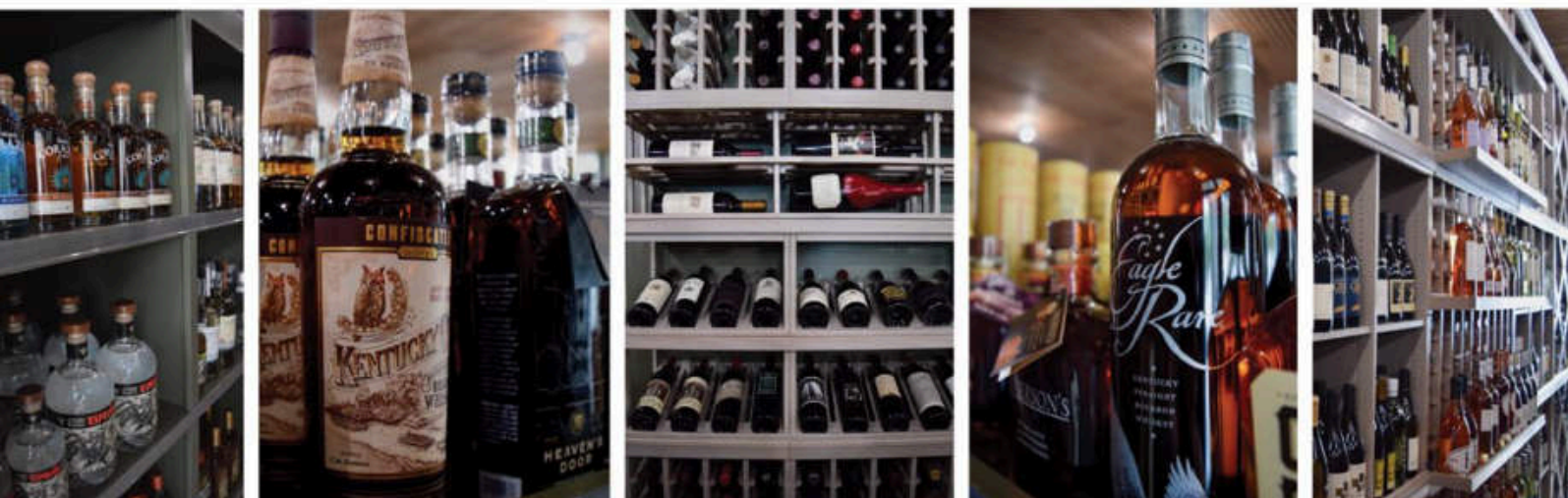


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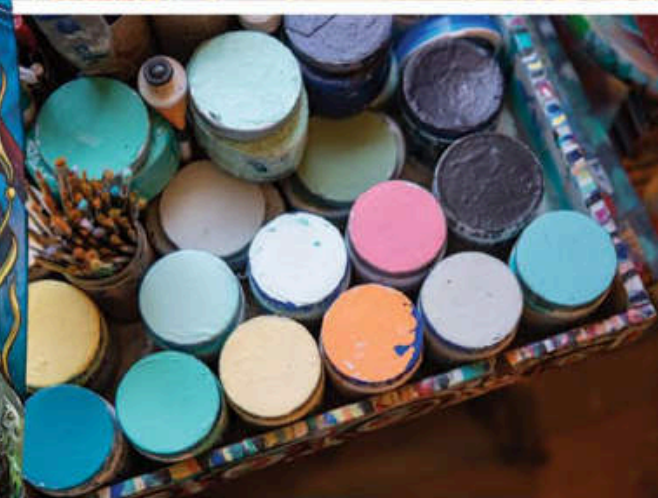
The Art of Surf

By Susan Gunn

*Man's connection to
water is a
tale as old as time.*

From the first centuries-old body surfers and reed riders to modern-day maverick chasers, humans have had a soulful union with the sea.

From the ancient cultures of Peru to Polynesians as far back as the 12th century, humans have been fashioning watercraft to take to the waves. Ask any surfer and they will most likely be happy to tell you about the first time they stood on their beloved board and caught the crest of that perfect wave. It's a heady thing and true partnership, for without the surfboard, most people would lack that awe-inspiring ride high on the water. Herein lies the heart of the inspiration for a select few surfers who have been compelled to express that deep connection by making stunning works of art out of their surfboards.





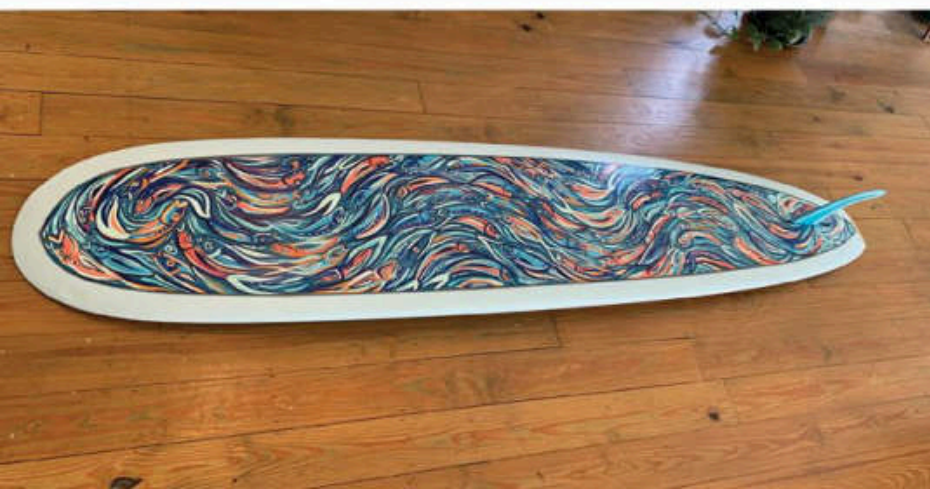
Andy Saczynski

Long-time surfer and Florida native Andy Saczynski has literally carved out a name for himself in Grayton Beach, opening his gallery in 2012. Surfing since he was thirteen, Andy began his art career early. "I was always finding old materials to build things," said Andy. It wasn't long before he began using his old surfboards as canvases. Andy's gallery also houses his eclectic work space. Among the painted surfboards on display are works of fantastical art—unique pieces constructed of recycled, found, and collected functional objects. You don't have to look closely to notice the giant angler fish, but you might be surprised to see the old piano leg used for the main structure, the eye that is a functioning music speaker, and the dangling lure glowing with real light. "There is so much sentimental value in the hours on the water and the amazing experiences each board has given me, so much joy and happiness," he said. "If I can put that feeling onto a board in the form of art and pass it on to a collector, well, that's just a cool thing." (www.andysaczynski.com / Instagram: @andysaczynski)

Photos: Lauren Athalia



Photo: Alex Lewis



Jason Alders

Jason Alders grew up in central New Jersey about 14 miles from the shore. He has also spent time in North Florida, and learned to surf at seventeen. He began drawing surfers and waves in high school. "As soon as I had a driver's license, I was at the beach surfing or skim boarding almost every day." Working with oils, acrylics, sprays, and airbrushes, Jason creates award-winning works known for bold lines, colors, curves and geometrics. Brazil's popular *Alma Surf* magazine named him Surf Artist of the Decade, and he has done five album covers among other commissions and freelance work for big bands and brands. "My favorite, though, is just bringing my own visions to life." Jay might be most well-known for his philanthropic work, donating art to help hurricane victims and spearheading campaigns to raise money for important causes. He says it's an honor to be an ambassador for SurfAid and to donate a portion of his income to charities he believes in. "I am very much moved by those moments in life that make you look twice," he said. "People, shapes, light, and colors that replay in my mind might end up becoming a painting. I let my brush guide me most often. That's what feels best." He currently lives not far from his childhood home with his wife and four children, about a mile from the ocean. He still surfs as much as he can. (www.jayalders.com / Instagram: @jayalders)





Haylee Fieldes

Haylee Fieldes grew up in the South Pacific and now resides in Perth, Western Australia. It was here that she discovered her love of surfing. Fieldey, as she is better known, is a classically trained graphic artist. "I bought and painted my first surfboard in 2011 and I got hooked," said Haylee. Her surfboard creations are big, bold, and packed with color in a style based on mixed realism and old-school tattoo design. Fieldey is a well-known artist and blogger with a popular YouTube channel. In addition to her surfboard art, she currently specializes in large murals and street art, and is recognized for her commissions on skateboards and canvases. "The craziest thing I've ever painted was a 2.4 meter remote-controlled jet boat," said Fieldey. "Right now I'm expecting a baby in October, so I'm not currently surfing." (www.fieldey.com / Instagram: @fieldey / YouTube: [youtube.com/c/fieldeytv](https://www.youtube.com/c/fieldeytv))



Gareth Smith



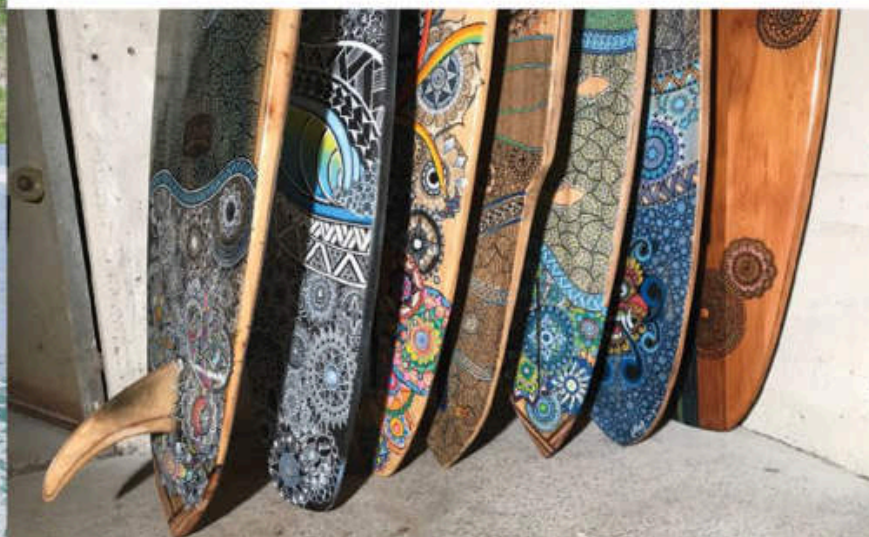
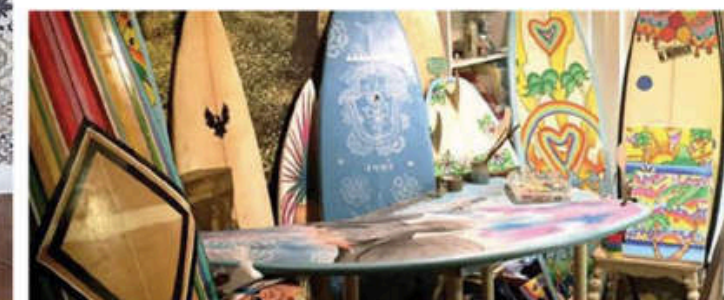
Gareth Smith has had a long love affair with surfing and art. He was born in New Zealand, and moved to Australia at fourteen, where he honed his passion for surfing. As a teenager, Gareth, like many surfers, began to draw and sketch pictures of waves, and says he drew on his first surfboard when he was 18. What began for him as a creative outlet grew into a lifelong craft and skill. Gareth's process has been authentically organic, and he is completely self-taught. Using the hollow wooden board method, he designs, shapes and constructs his own boards from start to finish. "It's a long procedure, but I find myself getting lost in the process, and I love it," said Gareth. His beautiful works feature repeating patterns, indigenous art, and symbols of shapes. He takes inspiration mostly from the ocean, and his time spent riding the waves, but says he is influenced by the work of Jason Alders and Drew Brophy. Today, Gareth resides in Wollongong on the coast of New South Wales and has custom boards residing with collectors all over the world. He is proud to be a contributor to the charity Surfers Healing, donating his boards to help their cause, and he still surfs almost every day. (gwswoodensurfboards.com / Instagram: @gareth_w_smith)



Natalie Thompson



Natalie Thompson resides in San Diego but she calls home, "more of a feeling, and ultimately where my paint brushes are." Natalie's world travels and studies have given her a broad knowledge of art in general, and she says her favorite way to create is with oil. Natalie is not a surfer herself, but painted her first surfboard at the age of sixteen for a friend. Her boards reflect her love of brilliant, bold color and floral patterns. "I find inspiration everywhere," she said, "from a rainbow of light on a building, to the way a palm tree branch sways, to the way a person moves their face in a nightclub. It starts with a theme I've thought about, a scene of my friends posing for me or taking a photo of a landscape. Then straight to the canvas or surfboard—no sketching, no planning." Natalie graduated with a degree in Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute, and studied techniques abroad such as marble carving, ceramics, and classical painting. Using acrylic paint and acrylic paint pens, Natalie is happy she has "found a way to paint the boards and have the art last when surfers bring the art into the ocean." (Instagram: @sol.surf / Email: 96natalie@gmail.com)



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"In addition to SPF, be sure to use a topical antioxidant like Vitamin C for even more protection from harmful UV rays. Vitamin C comes in many forms and concentrations. Your aesthetician can help you pick the right one for your skin!"

☀️ -Stacie Senn
Aesthetician & Aesthetician Trainer

"Generously apply a broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen with a SPF of 30 or higher to all exposed skin. Reapply approximately every 2 hours, even on cloudy days and after swimming or sweating."

☀️ -Jon Ward, MD
Board-Certified Dermatologist & Mohs Surgeon

"Use extra caution near water because it reflects and intensifies the damaging rays of the sun, which can increase your chances of sunburn."

☀️ -Michael Stickler, MD
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"It is important to avoid sunlight or other sources of UV light in order to minimize the risk of hyper-pigmentation of scars."

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HOW 5 Fisherman CHANGED Destin Forever

By Susan Vallee

If you are ever feeling insignificant, like you are too small to have an impact on this world, take a moment and stare at Destin's East Pass. Watch the fishing fleet return from the Gulf, admire all the yachts going back and forth, and then repeat after me: "Five guys and some oars."



Yep. That's what did it.

Five guys and some oars (and a big dash of determination) are responsible for that big, wide entryway into the Gulf of Mexico from Choctawhatchee Bay.

It has long been local lore that families whose properties were quickly sinking underneath rising Choctawhatchee Bay waters had grabbed a few shovels and dug a trench in a desperate attempt to relieve the Bay's swelling. It turns out, that's pretty close to what actually happened.

With the help of Destin historian H.C. "Hank" Klein, we were able to unearth the facts lost in lore.

In 1929, unprecedented rain in Alabama led to a surge of water that reached the Bay via Choctawhatchee River. The original pass (Yes! The East Pass was not the first) was narrow and crooked, not only making it tricky for boats to navigate, but it also made it difficult for the Bay's excess water to escape into the oncoming Gulf waves. This old original pass, Klein explained, was located at the east end of Destin Harbor, between what is now Sandpiper Cove and Pelican Beach Resort.

In an attempt to help relieve the flooding, five determined men – O.T. Melvin, his son O.T. Melvin Jr., Capt. Dewey Destin Sr., Adolph Weekly, and Ian Strickland – climbed into a small skiff and hacked a trench into the sand with the tips of their oars.



"Within an hour, there was a gully more than 100 feet wide; and by the next morning, it was more than 100 yards across, and a new East Pass that was 1,300 feet across was formed," Klein wrote in his History Mystery column for *The Destin Log*.

In the 1930s, the U.S. Corp of Engineers began dredging the new pass, as hurricanes and storms had caused the original pass to close. [Fun fact: Crab Island was created by the sand dredged from the pass!]

With the new East Pass' depth still unstable, officials devised a plan to ship giant boulders from Kentucky on barges to create jetties. These jetties were completed in 1969 and are now a treasured snorkeling spot.

Today, fishing boats, locals, and tourists are thankful for the East Pass' location and for the quick access it provides to the Gulf. Destin's famous "Luckiest Fishing Village" slogan is partly due to the location of what's called the 100-fathom curve in the Gulf. This curve is closer to Destin than any other spot in Florida, meaning anglers only need to travel 10 miles before the water depth drops a dramatic 600 feet, where a wide variety of fish can be caught.

If the Bay hadn't flooded, and if those men hadn't been so determined, Destin's Harbor might look a lot different than it is today.

For additional Destin history, check out Hank Klein's new books, *Destin Pioneer Settlers* and *Destin's Founding Father*. 📖

The Other East Pass



Did you know, Panama City Beach has its own East Pass? Or rather, had.

Dubbed "The Old Pass" by many, the East Pass was located between Tyndall Air Force Base and Shell Island. It closed naturally in 1999 and was reopened by Bay County in 2001, before closing itself again in 2003.

Concerns regarding the health of St. Andrews Bay have prompted support for reopening the East Pass. Bay County received \$1 million through the RESTORE Act grant to study the impact to the Bay if the East Pass is opened. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is also requiring a feasibility study. These studies could take 35 months or more to complete.



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MOON CRUSH *(ing It)*

The story of a music festival that was conceptualized, planned, and executed in the midst of a global pandemic.

By Abigail Abesamis Demarest
Photos: Will Byington



In late April, during the Super Pink Moon, around 2,000 people attended a five-day music festival. It's a feat that, in light of a global pandemic, would have seemed impossible a year ago, and marked a return to some semblance of normalcy. For those who attended, it was pure, socially-distanced awesomeness.

Moon Crush is "a connected music vacation" created by Topeka, a company that connects artists and fans through virtual and in-person experiences. The idea for Moon Crush came to Andy Levine, founder and CEO of Topeka, last year. Levine and his family were renting a house in Destin, and as he was

riding his bike along Scenic Highway 98 he noticed Seascape Golf Course.

"We've had some success doing concerts on golf courses before, and I noticed all of these people vacationing—staying in whatever home they wanted, and spending time at the beach with their friends and family," Levine said. "I wondered if we could do something similar; have people rent a home, enjoy the beach during the day, and then walk or take a golf cart over to Seascape to listen to some musical performances."

This idea for a boutique music vacation festival became a reality less than a year later—conceptualized, planned, and executed in the midst of a pandemic.

Planning an event of this magnitude, particularly during a global pandemic, came with its challenges, but it was well within Levine's wheelhouse.



"I started out playing in bands," he said. "I wasn't very good, but I booked all the shows, and then I started managing bands." One of the bands he managed, Sister Hazel, had a dedicated fan following and Levine and the band wanted to do something special for them. In 2001, Levine invited the members of Sister Hazel and their fans on a cruise, and the concept grew from there. Levine explained that his team took care of all the logistics for these music festivals at sea.

"We would rent the cruise ship, book the band, build the website, sell all of the tickets, hire people to bring stage, light, and sound equipment on, and create this music festival," he said. What started out as a single cruise with Sister Hazel grew to 15 cruises a year with 20 different bands and 2,500 guests on each 4-day trip. Levine sold this company to Norwegian Cruise Line in 2012 and ran it until 2017, before founding Topeka in 2019.

Topeka was created as a platform for artists to connect with their fans without having to be away from their families. Levine explained that for many artists, the majority of their income comes from touring, which can take away from time spent with family. The solution? Creating virtual ways for artists to connect with fans (via serenades, one-on-one conversations, and more) from home and offering vacations for fans to see their favorite artists live, where the artists are also invited to bring their families along—making new memories with their families while earning a living. The Moon Crush

festival fit right into Topeka's vision. Moon Crush distinguishes itself from other music festivals by having just a handful of artists and bands perform each day, on one stage, with plenty of downtime in between to go to the beach, explore the local area, and spend time with family and friends that you've brought with you on vacation. The first-ever Moon Crush festival included performances by Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit, St. Paul & The Broken Bones, Sheryl

Levine noted that for the first event, the team was able to deliver ordered items to the appropriate COVEs in less than three minutes.

"What we heard from guests is that the things we had to put in place due to COVID are the things they love the most," Levine said. "People loved the COVEs, they loved having a designated area where they could move. They didn't have to elbow their way back to their friends after



Crow, and The Revivalists, among many others.

Many elements of the April 2021 Moon Crush festival that were implemented because of COVID were well-received by guests, and the team plans to build upon them for future events. Most notably, attendees watched the performances in their assigned COVEs (Contained Outdoor Viewing Environment), which were built in multiple sizes to accommodate different sized groups. The roped-off areas were spaced six feet apart, and the Moon Crush team provided contactless food and beverage service ordered via an app.

they went to the bathroom, and they really liked being able to order food and drinks so they didn't have to wait in line and miss music and time with friends."

Tickets for the next Moon Crush festival (October 20-23, 2021) are on sale now, with confirmed performances by Brandi Carlile, Maren Morris, Ben Harper, and Keb' Mo'. You'll want to get your group together and book a COVE, stat.

For more information on Moon Crush, visit mooncrush.live. For more information on Topeka, visit topeka.live.



THE OCEAN CLEANUP Project

By Shannon Serpette
Photos: The Ocean Cleanup

Using Technology to Tackle One of the World's Biggest Challenges

The oceans provide us with beauty, food, livelihoods, entertainment, and so much more. Unfortunately, we're not always so fast to return the favor. Thanks to humankind's neglect, our oceans are constantly being polluted with more

and more trash. In fact, experts estimate there are currently more than 5 trillion pieces of plastic garbage in our oceans.

The Ocean Cleanup (theoceancleanup.com) wants to change that.





Founded in 2013 by Dutch inventor Boyan Slat when he was just 18 years old, The Ocean Cleanup team includes brilliant scientists, researchers, engineers, and computational modelers, who are all dedicated to designing and implementing the first feasible method to rid the world's oceans of plastic.

The Problem Is Not Going Away On Its Own

The Ocean Cleanup knows two things need to happen. First, the many ways in which plastic enters our oceans need to be eliminated. Second, we need to remove the plastic that has already made its way into the sea.

Currently, much of the plastic garbage is sizable, as it hasn't yet broken down into "microplastics." Microplastics are tiny pieces of plastic debris that measure less than five millimeters. Microplastics come from waste and consumer items, and they aren't suitable for anyone to digest, especially marine life.

Nonetheless, microplastics are frequently consumed by ocean life. Some animals intentionally eat microplastics instead of their usual prey, which ultimately leads to their starvation and death. Consuming microplastics is also known to hinder reproduction in some species, such as oysters. And of course, when we humans eat

seafood (or any food, for that matter), we are also ingesting the same microplastics they ate.

Where Is All This Plastic Trash?

You may think of garbage dumps as only existing on land... but you'd be wrong. Much of our trash ends up in five giant floating garbage patches. The largest of these garbage patches is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which can be found drifting between Hawaii and California.

When the ocean currents inevitably push plastic into these growing garbage patches, it will stay there for hundreds of years, unless there is a human effort to remove it. Plastic removal can be difficult though, as these patches span millions of square miles. According to The Ocean Cleanup, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch covers an estimated surface area of 1.6 million square kilometers, an area twice the size of Texas or three times the size of France.

If an effort were made to clean up these garbage patches using traditional nets and ships, it would cost billions of dollars and take hundreds of years. A quicker and cheaper solution is needed, both for the environment and the global economy.

That's where The Ocean Cleanup comes in.



THE GREAT PACIFIC GARBAGE PATCH IN NUMBERS

CONCENTRATION

100 KM²
The GPP holds ocean plastic concentrations ranging from 10x to 100x kg per km²



MEASURES

1.6
MILLION
KM²

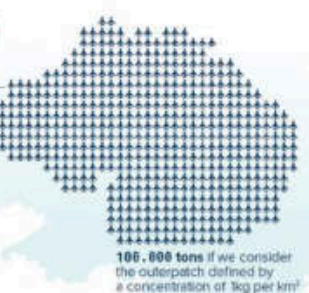
2x
THE SIZE OF TEXAS

3x
THE SIZE OF FRANCE

MASS & COUNT

1.8
TRILLION
PIECES
EQUIVALENT TO 250 PIECES OF DEBRIS FOR EVERY HUMAN IN THE WORLD

80,000
TONS OF
PLASTIC
FLOAT IN THE GPP EQUIVALENT TO 500 JUMBO JETS



MASS
8%
LARGER THAN TON

COUNTS
94%
LARGER THAN TON

MASS DISTRIBUTION



THE TOTAL MASS OF PLASTIC IS
4X TO 16X
HIGHER
THAN PREVIOUS STUDIES HAVE SHOWN

1977

PRODUCTION DATE OF THIS PLASTIC CRATE FOUND FLOATING IN THE GPP BY THE OCEAN CLEANUP RESEARCHERS

99%
OF EVERYTHING
IS PLASTIC

46%
OF THE TOTAL
MASS IS MADE
OF DISCARDED
FISHING GEAR

REFERENCE
Laufer et al. (2018), Evidence that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is rapidly accumulating plastic. Scientific Reports.

Find out more on
www.theoceancleanup.com/great-pacific-garbage-patch

THE OCEAN CLEANUP

“

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch covers an estimated surface area of 1.6 million square kilometers,

-an area twice the size of Texas-

or three times the size of France.

”

How The Ocean Cleanup Works

The Ocean Cleanup team has engineered new technologies designed to remove plastic from our oceans much faster and in a much more cost-effective manner.

First, a hard-walled pipe and screen – known as a “floaters” – catches and contains drifting plastic garbage. The U-shaped floaters are solar-powered, buoyant and measure one-to-two kilometers in length. They’re engineered to be flexible and resilient enough to ride the ocean’s waves and currents.

These massive floating net systems collect plastic debris as small as one centimeter in diameter. For the health of marine life, it’s critical to capture these larger pieces of plastic before they can break down into more easily digested microplastics.

The Ocean Cleanup removed its first round of polluting plastics from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in 2019. That process led to design improvements, with a new system scheduled to deploy this year. As more money is raised for the project, more and more floaters will be added.

But That's Only Half The Battle

Comprising 71 percent of the Earth’s surface, the oceans span such a large area that the Pacific Ocean alone

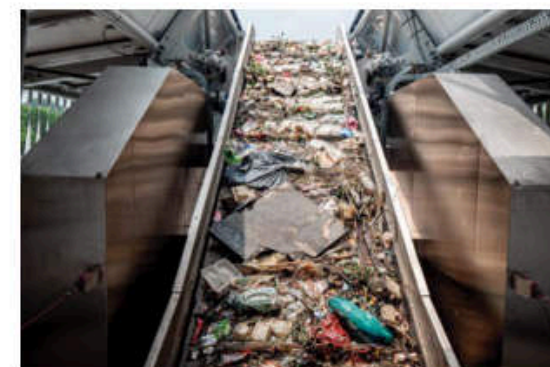
is roughly the size of all land put together. Plus, organizations trying to clean trash from the ocean aren’t just working with the surface – they have to collect underwater, too. Given that the Pacific Ocean’s average depth is 13,213 feet, there are plenty of places for garbage to hide.

While The Ocean Cleanup continues to remove plastics from the oceans, they also want to intercept plastic before it reaches the sea. Their goal is to remove 80 percent of plastics from 1,000 rivers across the planet before those pollutants can even reach the oceans.

To help with this goal, The Ocean Cleanup has built a machine called The Interceptor, which uses a river’s natural current to collect debris and is 100 percent solar-powered. A single Interceptor is capable of removing 110,231 pounds of plastic every day.

Right now, three Interceptors are in operation, with prototypes operating in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Dominican Republic. The Ocean Cleanup is working with governments to place Interceptors in additional locations, intending to reach 1,000 rivers in five years.

If a full-scale, fully-funded effort was made using The Ocean Cleanup’s technologies, it is estimated that 50



percent of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch could be removed from the ocean within five years. But The Ocean Cleanup isn’t waiting for that day. After all, the trash isn’t waiting. It’s growing. As is the need to support The Ocean Cleanup and organizations like them.

To learn more or to support The Ocean Cleanup, please visit www.theoceancleanup.com.

THE
OCEAN
CLEANUP
Project

THE GLOWING SEAS

By Shannon Serpette

The northern sky may stake claim to the awe-inspiring Aurora Borealis, but the sea can put on an impressive glow-show too, powered by a natural phenomenon known as bioluminescence.

Bioluminescence is the emission of light produced by living organisms. Children often first encounter this extraordinary spectacle in the form of “fireflies” or “lighting bugs,” but bioluminescence can also be commonly found in bacteria, algae, jellyfish, worms, crustaceans, sea stars, fish, and sharks, just to name a few. There are some 1,500 known fish species that can create luminescence. In fact, our oceans are so vast and so dark that bioluminescence may very well be the most common form of communication on the planet. In addition to communication, bioluminescence can serve other purposes too, including camouflage, mate attraction, and warding off predators. Some species of fish even dangle an illuminated “lure” in front of their mouths to attract unsuspecting prey.

In addition to sea creatures, the sea itself can also glow. Well, not really. But that’s how it appears to us.

Although surreal glowing surf might look like something straight out of the 1989 sci-fi movie, *The Abyss*, bioluminescent seas actually have nothing to do with UFOs or alien species. The U.S. Navy began researching bioluminescence after a German submarine was sunk in World War I while leaving a glowing trail that was easily spotted by surface ships. Later, Apollo 13 astronaut Jim Lovell used bioluminescence to find his way back to an aircraft carrier when his navigation systems failed. By turning off his cabin lights, he was able to see glowing wake of the U.S.S. Shangri-La and safely land.



So why does the water sometimes glow?

Tiny, surface-clinging dinoflagellates are to thank for this beautiful, mystical effect. Often described as marine plankton, these single-celled organisms have characteristics of both animals and plants. They’re a valued food source for crustaceans and fish, and they produce oxygen when they use carbon dioxide and water to make their own food. When disturbed though, dinoflagellates emit light. This glow can be caused by nearby predators, waves crashing against them, the bow of a boat striking them, or even a kayak paddle slicing through the water.

Curious observers have been known to travel great distances to witness these lights, and there are some world-famous bioluminescent bays, including Vietnam’s Halong Bay, Jamaica’s Luminous Lagoon, and Mosquito Bay, Laguna Grande and La Parguera in Puerto Rico. That said, you don’t have to travel outside the U.S. to find this other-worldly occurrence. In Florida, there are places where it’s possible to observe bioluminescence, including Navarre Beach, St. Joe Bay and even along Florida’s Scenic Highway 30A. Unfortunately, in most places, bioluminescence is not predictable enough to say precisely when and where it will occur.

“*Bioluminescence may very well be the most common form of communication on the planet.*”

Researchers say you have the best chance of seeing bioluminescent waters during Florida’s summer months, from June to September. That’s because dinoflagellates reproduce when the weather starts getting hot, and those higher numbers make for spectacular viewing. Of course, one’s chances also increase when the moon isn’t illuminating the evening sky, so if bioluminescence is the light you seek, plan your trip when there isn’t a full moon. ☾



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Smiles FOR MILES

WaterColor Welcomes 30A's Beach Happy Café

"It's pretty cool to be able to ride my bike to work," smiled Chris Kramolis. "When your commute starts by crossing Western Lake, it immediately puts you in a happy and grateful frame of mind."

In June, Chris and his wife Shannon opened the very first Beach Happy® Café, in partnership with The 30A® Company. The new casual dining and retail concept is located at the main intersection in WaterColor, Florida, directly on the south side of Scenic Highway 30A. Almost every local and visitor routinely passes through this 4-way stop, and thousands of people walk by the café on their way to, and from, the beach every day.

"You can hear the waves, the seagulls, the wind blowing through the palm trees, the bells of passing bicycles," said Shannon. "We really couldn't have asked for a better place to create the first Beach Happy Café experience."



Photos: Lauren Athalia



The experience is everything, because the Kramolis' vision doesn't end by the sea. It starts there. Like a message in a bottle, they hope to one day bring a little beach happiness to cities, towns, and communities all across the U.S.

"We really want to capture the authentic 30A experience," said Chris, who once developed a network of thirty Tropical Smoothie Cafes in Arkansas. "It's not only about serving exceptional food and coffee, it's also about creating a relaxed, coastal vibe. We want to fine-tune all of those things here at the source before we test the waters in other markets."

To help pull off such a lofty vision, Chris recruited the help of his longtime friend and business partner, Eric Jenrich, another Walton County local. In the late 1990s, Jenrich founded the Tropical Smoothie Cafe empire, which now boasts over 900 locations nationwide.

"We're both locals and we live and breathe the 30A lifestyle," said Chris, who called WaterColor home for years and now resides in Grayton Beach, just a short e-bike ride away. "Our mission is to make people happy, and it all starts right here on Scenic 30A."

Beach Happy Café serves healthy wraps and sandwiches, fresh pastries by Blue Mountain Bakery, plant-based options by NaturBaker, locally roasted 30A Coffee by Amavida, 30A Craft Beer by Grayton Beer, premium 30A Wine curated from Oregon by industry legend Chan Cox of Wine World, and a new line of 30A Gelato, hand-crafted by G.S. Gelato in Fort Walton.



Beach Happy Café also offers 30A apparel made from recycled plastic bottles and other 30A-brand products, including hats, drinkware, and more.

"We've really pulled together a Who's Who of authentic Gulf Coast originals to bring the 30A experience to life," said Shannon, who said that music will also play an important role in literally setting the tone for Beach Happy Café. "I don't want to give it away, but if you love the beach and you also love music, I think you'll really appreciate what we've come up with."

So while this may be 30A's very first Beach Happy Café, if all goes as planned, it might not be long before you see one in your neighborhood.

"It's a huge responsibility to one day bring the beach to people who can't always be here like we are, so it's really important to us that we get it right," said Shannon. "But every journey starts with a single step. Our first step just happens to be in the sand."

To learn more about 30A and Beach Happy Café, visit beachhappycafe.com.





SANDY SERVES



SPECTRUM*Classic*

SPECTRUM*Classic*

SPECTRUM

BEACH VOLLEYBALL SERVES UP FUN IN THE SUN

By Kristy Gustafson
Photos: Sean Murphy



Sports fans – and volleyball fans in particular – will never forget the historic reign of Olympians Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor. The nail-biting intensity, the digs, the dives. The whole nation was glued to the television to witness this unstoppable duo's rise to the top, where they would remain for years. Their passion and dominance helped inspire an entire new generation of players.



In many ways, the sport of volleyball can be likened to a dance. Teams appear to share the same mind as they move in sync to a single, understood rhythm: bump... set... spike. Drama can take a while to unfold in other sports but in volleyball, action unfolds moment to moment whether in a leisurely pickup game with friends, old and new, or an awe-inspiring display of fast-paced, intoxicating finesse.

Either way, take it to the beach, and now you've got a whole other ball game. Sand spraying, sun beaming, beads of sweat dripping down. Volleyball is the quintessential beach sport.

While an iteration of indoor volleyball was founded in 1895, beach volleyball would be popularized in the early 1920s, along the shores of Santa Monica, California. The sport's Summer Olympics debut wasn't until 1996 in Atlanta where it has grown ever since.

If you're lucky enough to find yourself on sandier shores, a beach volleyball league is most likely within close reach. For example, Florida's panhandle is well-regarded for being one of the best regions for the sport, bringing together regulars, locals and visitors alike for weekly matches in Destin, Panama City Beach, Santa Rosa Beach, Fort Walton, Navarre, and Pensacola.

Local love for this seaside sport can be partially attributed to the Emerald Coast Volleyball tournament known as "Fuds," which takes place twice a year on Okaloosa Island, between Destin and Ft. Walton. Players and fans religiously attend from all over – Hawaii, California, Utah, Texas – many migrating to the tournaments for a decade or more. The local tradition has even attracted big names from the Association of Volleyball Professionals (AVP), such as Taylor and Trevor Crabb, Nick Lucena and Ed Ratledge, and many more. But this sport isn't reserved for the pros. Like the beach, it can also be laid-back.

"The panhandle is a really special place full of open, friendly, and loving people," said Kristy Lake, founding member of the popular Grayton Beach Volleyball group. "A lot of us are naturally nervous to introduce ourselves to a group of



complete strangers. But anywhere you go to play in this area, you'll be welcomed with a smile, a "What's your name? Where are you from?" and an invitation to hop in the next pickup game."

In addition to a strong sense of community, beach volleyball is accessible to players of all skill levels, from total amateurs to die-hard professionals. Average Joes often come back to the sport after years of being physically dormant, risking injuries and blistering temperatures just to feel the rush and belonging of a sport they once loved with all their being.

"It's special to play competitive sports all your life and have something like this to keep that drive alive," said Lake.

Perhaps it's the added challenge – or forgiveness – of the sand beneath, the ocean breeze serving as temporary sedation, or the promise of an after-game dip to cool off. But whatever the draw, more and more people are bitten by the beach volleyball bug each year. With a little research and a little courage, you can no doubt find a beach volleyball community that serves up fun, laughter, and a healthy outdoor lifestyle.

To learn about Emerald Coast Volleyball Week, visit emeraldcoastvolleyball.com. To join the Grayton Beach volleyball community, head over to the "Grayton Beach Volleyball" group on Facebook or follow them on Instagram @graytonvolleyball.



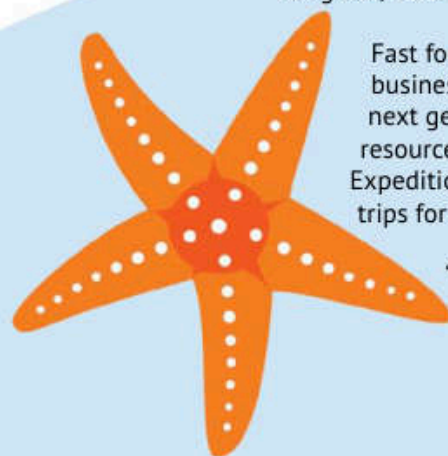
"This area is one of the most unique environments in the world."



HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Inspiring the Next Generation To Protect Our Oceans

By Abigail Abesamis Demarest



At the 30A Sea Life Discovery Center in Grayton Beach, Florida, kids snorkel with sea turtles, kayak across serene coastal dune lakes, and participate in evening scavenger hunts to learn about species that only come out at night. The center was established in 2017 by Joe Moore, a marine biologist with a doctorate in fishery biology.

"I started the center to inspire kids and help them develop their passions, but also to teach them how to protect our natural marine resources," said Moore. "With our coastal dune lakes and all of the different habitats here, this area is one of the most unique environments in the world."

At nine years old, Moore already knew he wanted to be a marine biologist. He lived on South Padre Island, Texas, and would often visit a lab where professors from the University of Texas studied lobsters, crabs, and other sea creatures.

"It wasn't for kids, but they let me go into the lab and hang out," said Moore.

Fast forward to today, and Moore now runs two businesses with a similar focus: educating the next generation about protecting our natural resources. The first business is Appleseed Expeditions, a company that organizes educational trips for students to destinations worldwide.

"We do everything," said Moore. "We plan the trip, sell the trip, arrange the airlines, coordinate the hotels, and then provide our own Appleseed Guides, who meet the kids in each country and teach them all about marine science."

A big part of their Costa Rica itinerary, for example, is planting trees and helping local scientists with conservation programs such as protecting frogs and planting endemic species.

While Appleseed Expeditions is a for-profit company that Moore runs as CEO, the 30A Sea Life Discovery Center is a nonprofit venture open to everyone, including students, adults, and families. Sea Life Center programs are led by Moore and interns that are recent graduates in environmental or marine science. They stress the importance of protecting our beautiful beaches and wildlife, and teach simple but useful practices such as "plus one" – gathering all your things "plus one" piece of plastic whenever you leave the beach. Through interactive programs like snorkeling with sea turtles, seeing creatures up close via net pulls, and even dissecting squid, the 30A Sea Life Discovery Center team hopes to instill a love and appreciation for sea life that lasts a lifetime.

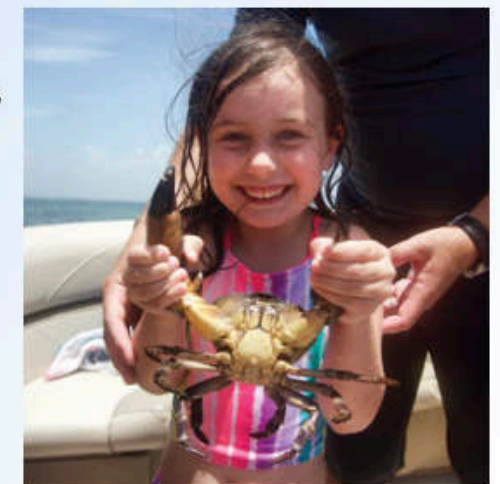
"We're trying to spark that desire to protect our marine creatures, so we talk about plastics in the ocean, marine debris like fishing line,

and what we can do to limit these things," Moore said. "When they see how unique these animals are, that connection lasts forever. You can teach young people about these animals in class, but it's not until they have that one experience where they swam next to a sea turtle that they think to themselves, 'I want to help protect these animals and our oceans.'"

Moore's work and impact goes way beyond a classroom. Through his research, for example, Moore learned about a green sea turtle nursery near St. Andrews Bay. As many as 40 juvenile sea turtles inhabit the cove, and it's one of the only known turtle nurseries in the Gulf of Mexico. Moore is now working to educate people about the importance of such habitats.

"We obviously want to protect the nesting sea turtles," said Moore, "but we should also be trying to protect fragile places that are so unique to our area."

To learn more about the 30A Sea Life Discovery Center, visit www.30asealife.org. To learn more about Appleseed Expeditions, check out www.appleseedexpeditions.com.



How T-Shirts Are Made From Recycled Plastic Bottles

Your clothing choices impact the planet.

By Abigail Abesamis Demarest
Photos: GuilleBeau Photo



Every year, Americans throw away more than 35 billion plastic bottles. These discarded plastic bottles eventually end up in our landfills, rivers, and oceans, where they take hundreds of years to decompose.

As a consumer, your choices matter. In addition to using less single-use plastics, you can lead a more eco-friendly life by wearing clothes made from sustainable, plant-based, and

recycled fibers such as organic cotton, linen, and hemp.

30A-brand apparel is made using a 50-50 blend of Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) cotton and REPVE recycled polyester. In addition to being eco-friendly, 30A shirts are incredibly soft, long-lasting, and usually feature fun, beachy designs. Since launching their recycled apparel line in 2016, 30A has recycled more than 6 million plastic bottles.



Here's how the process works.

1. Plastic Bottles Are Spun Into Recycled Fiber.

Plastic bottles diverted from U.S. landfills are sorted, washed, and chopped into flakes at Unifi's REPVE Recycling Center. The clean flakes are then blended, melted, and turned into recycled chips. The chips are loaded into silos, each holding the equivalent of 27 million plastic bottles, before being sent through an extrusion and texturing process where they're turned into fibers with performance properties like wicking and odor control. Through this process, REPVE has recycled more than 25 billion plastic bottles so far.

2. Recycled Fiber Is Blended With Cotton to Make Fabric.

The REPVE recycled fiber is sent to a knitting mill in Guatemala, where it's blended with cotton to make a new super-soft fabric. 30A's Megan Lyons visited Guatemala in 2019 to see the knitting mill and sewing facility in person. She was impressed by their open-door policy. "It's rare in the apparel industry to be able to go to a facility and get a full tour," Lyons said. "They're genuinely transparent there, and they treat all of their employees really well."

3. The Fabric Is Inspected, Then Sewn Into Shirts.

The knit fabric is sent to a nearby facility where it is inspected before being dyed, cut, and sewn into t-shirts, tank tops, joggers, hoodies, and more. During her visit, Lyons was particularly impressed by the quality control at the sewing facility. "They have people there with lights checking every single inch of fabric, and if there's a mistake, they fix it immediately," she said. "The quality control at the facility is intense and intentional."

4. 30A Shirts Are Printed Using Water-Based Inks.

The blank garments are then sent to Bowling Green, Kentucky, where they're printed with various designs using water-based inks, a far more environmentally friendly choice than traditional screen printing. "Traditional screen printing uses plastisol inks, which are oil-based," said JoAnn Ribaudo, 30A's Chief Revenue Officer. Ribaudo has nearly 40 years of apparel industry experience. "We chose water-based inks because they're eco-friendly and don't pollute the water."

In addition to using water-based inks, 30A uses direct-to-garment (DTG) printing, which results in a softer feel. "It's different from traditional screen printing, where you can usually feel that ink sitting on top of the t-shirt," said Lyons. "DTG is direct to the actual apparel, so it feels just like the t-shirt. We are a beach brand, so we wanted something you would feel comfortable wearing all day long."



To learn more about 30A recycled apparel, visit 30Agear.com.

BEACHES ABROAD

PEBBLE BEACH NICE, FRANCE

By Han Vance

WHY GO?

Since the well-chronicled days of novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald's newlywed highbrow adventures shortly after World War I, French Riviera dreams have occasionally flooded our American consciousness. This place remains a playground of the international elite, with the word 'riviera' itself resonating European charm mixed with coastal Mediterranean romance. In short, Nice is nice.

HOW DO I GET THERE?

There are many daily flights directly to Europe from Atlanta, and other major U.S. hubs. It's usually not a direct hop across the pond though, so you may have to change flights more than once to get to Nice. Recovering from jetlag at a posh beach resort doesn't sound so bad though, right?

WHERE SHOULD I STAY?

For over a hundred years, Hotel Le Negresco [built in 1912] has stood as a symbol of French opulence. Le Negresco is home to a Michelin-star restaurant, Le Chantecler, which has cellars holding over 15,000 bottles of wine. The marble floor rotunda astounds, while the pink with aqua trim façade towers above passersby on Promenade des Anglais. If a modern and recognizable hotel brand appeals to you more, there's Hotel Hyatt Regency in nearby Nice City Centre.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Roundtrip flights from Atlanta run about \$1,200, while a night stay at Le Negresco in peak summer season can be around \$600, before the delicious fine wining and dining commences and accrues. Earlier in the spring and later into fall, prices drop down to approximately \$365 per night.

A popular summer retreat of the 18th century elite, the city of Nice is the second-most visited destination in France today, after world epicenter Paris. This French Riviera jewel features Belle Epoque and Baroque architecture built alongside the tan-colored pebbled shoreline of Baie des Anges – named after the wings of an angel. A perfect combination of beach relaxation and cultural good times awaits you in this cosmopolitan hotspot on the Mediterranean coast. In the book *Matisse in Nice*, the work and life periods of famous painter Henri Matisse living in Nice are explored, a lush layer-after-layer brocade of texture, color and coastal culture revealed, as Nice comes alive. Matisse most loved the place for its frequent golden light and azure sea. You will, too.



the Panhandle

By Sean Dietrich



My truck is parked on the bay. I am watching a Florida Panhandle sunset while sharing a gas-station burrito with my dog who has not mastered sharing.

I've been out of town for a few days. I was on my way home when I pulled over here.

Home. One of my favorite words. If there's anything more thrilling than coming home it's probably frowned upon by Sunday school teachers.

Music plays through my open windows. Classical music. In my truck I only play classical. Usually, I select classic masterpieces from the repertoires of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, or Spade Cooley.

Such music goes well with Floridian sunsets.

You'd be surprised how few people are familiar with the finer points of the Panhandle region. A lot of Americans get confused about our area and assume we're similar to mainstream Florida. These assumptions are wrong.

We're nothing like Tampa. Nothing like Orlando. My front door is located closer to Houston than Miami. We don't dress like Jimmy Buffett, and I don't own mouse ears.

West Florida is its own thing. Our region was settled long before the rest of our tourist-centric state, and it's considerably more historic than big cities with theme parks.

In fact, for years this area never had much in the way of tourist amusement unless you counted the Miracle Strip Amusement Park in Bay County, where I once took Anna Lee Wilson on a date.

Anna Lee puked all over me while riding the Loop-O-Plane ride. She had eaten nachos that night. I lost interest in nachos after that.

Our county is mostly rural. Here we have rich people and poor folks alike.

In the affluent zones, you have Land Rovers, Teslas, and hopped-up golf carts that cost more than Cadillacs. But on my street, most homes have double axles, high mileage, and foam-deer targets in front yards.

We are not fancy. We are painfully downhome. I have a 20-year-old truck which is the nicest thing in our neighborhood.

And in the longstanding tradition of my people, my vehicle is covered in a fine blend of saltwater rust, red dirt, and old duct tape residue. My tires are mismatched. My broken side mirror dangles from the door like a hanging chad.

The Panhandle.

But don't misjudge us by our appearance. We will surprise you. We are the salt of the earth, not dumb hicks. Several of us can even do long division. I received my education within this Panhandle, beginning with my local library.

The Defuniak Springs library resides in a little clapboard house that was built in 1886, back when Buffalo Bill Cody was still on tour and Helen Keller was just a kid.

It is the oldest continuously run library in the state,

containing about 25,000 volumes, and growing. And I have late fees that predate the Punic Wars.

And there's also my alma mater—if you can call it that. My little school began as a junior college in 1963 over in Valparaiso. Officially, it was called Okaloosa-Walton Junior College, but it underwent several name changes.

Although the unofficial nickname for it used to be "Doublewide School Beneath the Pines."

Something the school never changed over the years was the teachers. They all knew your first name, and asked about your mama. Without these educators in my life, you would not be reading this.

Food-wise, we have the usual beach tourist traps that serve fruity drinks festooned with live parrots. But if you want authentic, go to Nick's on Highway 20, not far from where I'm parked now.

Walk inside Nick's Seafood Restaurant and you'll understand the Panhandle.

The waitresses are younger than you, but still call you "sweetie." There are chickens wandering the parking lot, roosting on truck hoods. Reba is on the radio. And Nick's still serves fried mullet.

I bet they don't eat much fried mullet in Buckhead.

When you're done eating, you can go for a drive and see our trademarked pine trees. Free entertainment.

Florida longleafs don't interest tourists, but that's because visitors aren't looking hard enough.

Most modern Americans see trees the same way real estate developers see trees. They see unprocessed lumber; organic inconveniences standing in the way of someone's in-ground swimming pool.

The longleaf has been treated like the American bison: killed for sport, and practically obliterated.

At one time there were 90 million acres of longleafs in the US. Today, we have a fragmented 12,000 acres remaining. That's less than half the size of Disney World's property.

Still, the longleaf is one of nature's strongest, most ferocious trees. It has adapted to survive wildfires, hurricanes, beetles, and the hell that is commercial progress.

And when you sit beside this bay at dusk you feel their strength. These pines are my example of steadfastness.

At sunset, orange beams poke through their trunks like light through the slats of an old barn. The trees run for miles along this sandy shoreline, until the sand finally meets the Choctawhatchee Bay.

Florida's handle is one of the great pieces of God's art. The mirrored bay water reminds me that although it's been a long year, we're still here. And that counts for something.

I wish I had something more eloquent to say about our area, but I don't do eloquence so good.

So when I finish writing this column, I will shut my laptop, admire the final pie-slice of sunset, let my dog finish her burrito, and make my way back home.

One of my favorite words. ☺

Sean Dietrich, nicknamed Sean of the South, chronicles life in the American South. Find him online at seandietrich.com.

DeFuniak Springs



Small Town, Big Vision

DeFuniak Springs' evolution
as a transportation hub

By Susan Vallee

Thirty miles due north of Santa Rosa Beach, Florida, DeFuniak Springs is a small town with a big story to tell. It is a community shaped by transportation: the railroad, the Old Spanish Trail, I-10, and now a TESLA supercharger hub.



But we can't rush to the future without first looking to the past. In 1874, two men, Lewis Miller (who would later become Thomas Edison's father-in-law) and John Vincent, a Methodist minister, created a lecture series to educate Sunday school teachers in Chautauqua, New York. The series became so popular that others began to develop "Chautauquas" of their own.

In 1885, a group called The Florida Chautauqua began its lecture series in DeFuniak Springs and welcomed author Harriet Beecher Stow, Vice President Thomas Marshall, and other notable writers and thinkers. Classrooms, lecture halls, and hotels began to populate the grounds around Lake DeFuniak as the popularity of the Florida Chautauqua movement grew. At its height, more than 4,000 visitors were arriving by train to DeFuniak Springs each day.

As the popularity of Chautauqua began to fade in the 1920s, the automobile replaced the once busy passenger rail. An impressive highway system to connect cities and towns from Florida to California's coast began construction. Named the Old Spanish Trail, this highway is identified on most maps nowadays as US Hwy 80 and US Hwy 90.

Instead of rail passengers, DeFuniak Springs now welcomed travelers who preferred to travel by car. Today, City Council Member Anthony Vallee said the city has plans to improve US Hwy 90, while paying homage to the Old Spanish Trail's history.

"DeFuniak Springs is a beautiful place," said Vallee. "One of the big problems we have is that I-10 cut us off, so people don't see the historic district and all the town has to offer. We have a lot of cyclists who stop in town while biking the Old Spanish Trail."

That's one reason he's glad TESLA chose to locate a Supercharger station at the edge of DeFuniak's historic district.

"I knew the charging station was a great addition to our downtown, but I didn't realize how busy the superchargers would be," said Vallee. "All five spots are taken, or cars are waiting, on the weekends. I constantly see people stretching their legs and following the sidewalk downtown."

Superchargers can give drivers an additional 200-mile range in about 15 minutes. TESLA has added a network of these charging stations along major highways, often choosing to locate them closer to local business hubs to help local economies. According to TESLA, drivers typically spend between 20-45 minutes charging their cars. That's plenty of time to grab a bite to eat or do a bit of shopping before hitting the road again.

"To be honest, seeing the TESLA Supercharger station here was one reason I decided to move my office from Blue Mountain



Beach," said Vallee. The balcony of his architectural office, McWhorter Vallee Design, now has a bird's eye view of the TESLA superchargers from across the street.

"TESLA invests a lot of money in each of these stations," he said. "I saw the beauty of these historic buildings and the potential of our location, and knew the city was going to continue to grow."

Chelsea Blaich, executive director of the not-for-profit organization Main Street DeFuniak Springs, said three new businesses have opened in the historic district within the last few months, and three more are preparing to open their downtown doors soon. Main Street DeFuniak Springs helps drive interest in the downtown area, and one way the organization has done that is by hosting ongoing events.

"We have a Farmers Market every Saturday, rain or shine," said Blaich. "Main Street just concluded a successful Music on Main program, and we're about to host Bounce on Baldwin, a free end-of-school bash that features eight bounce houses."

Programs like these helped secure the organization an official accreditation honor as a 2021 Main Street America™ Accredited program.

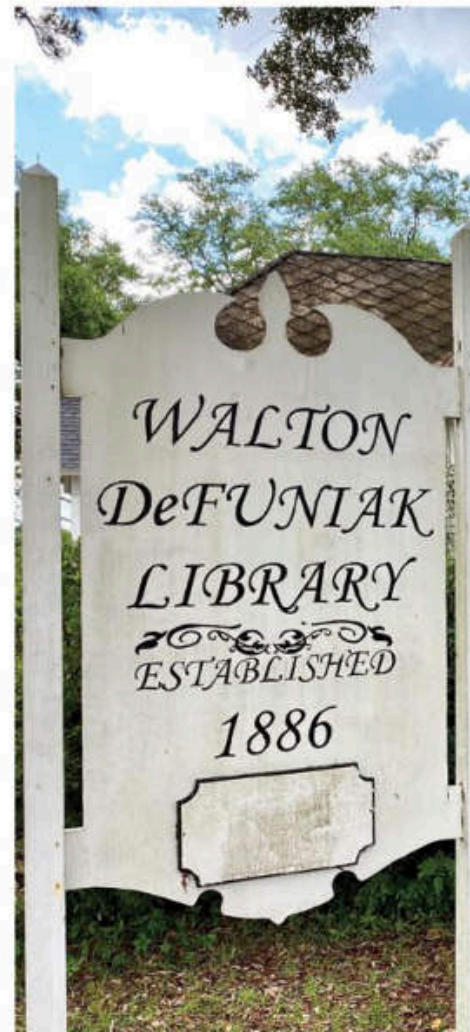
"We've been able to make Main Street DeFuniak Springs more than just a place for commerce – it's a community," she said.

Vallee said another project he's working on would connect the community to the vibrant downtown, no car keys required.

"We are working to create a landscaped area and multimodal path that follows the railroad tracks and connects historic downtown to the elementary school, the Walton County golf course, the public pool, and the airport," said Vallee.

Vallee said that creating such connections will bring the community closer. Families could safely walk or bike downtown for events, get a haircut, grab a bite to eat, visit the pharmacy, or go to the library, without ever getting in a car.

"This is such an amazing place," said Vallee. "People walk their kids to school. The middle school and the library are both here in the heart of the historic district. I hope more people continue to discover DeFuniak Springs and see the value of living here."



Beach Gear



By Shannon Serpette

There's nothing better than a relaxing day on a pristine beach. To help ensure future generations will be able to enjoy that same opportunity, it's important to choose eco-responsible gear that won't harm the wildlife and the water that we all enjoy so much. Here are some fun, stylish, and socially responsible products to grab before your next day in the sun.

Hydro Flask Water Bottle

You need to stay hydrated when you're out in the sun, but your beach bag should never include a disposable water bottle. You should have a bottle that you can use repeatedly and won't someday end up harming marine animals. Hydro Flask bottles come in a variety of colors, sizes, and designs, such as a standard or wide-mouth bottle. The fun colors the bottles come in will entice kids to want their own water bottle as well.

[HYDROFLASK.COM](https://hydroflask.com)
(\$29)



Rainbow Sandals Hemp Flip-Flops

If you're literally trying to reduce your plastic footprint, these hemp flip-flops are a great option. They're comfy and non-slip, so you won't wipe out when walking around the pool. Unlike those cheap, plastic flip-flops many people buy for a single summer, these Rainbow Sandals can last numerous trips around the sun.

[RAINBOWSANDALS.COM](https://rainbowsandals.com)
(\$44)



Vissla Eco Seas Wetsuit

Wetsuits are a crucial component of in-water gear. But you don't always feel good about what they're made from. You can feel better about your choice if you're sporting the Vissla Eco Seas wetsuit. They're made from natural and renewable rubber trees, not neoprene, and they use water-based glues instead of solvent-based stuff. Vissla also uses recycled plastic bottles, with about 45 bottles used for every wetsuit.

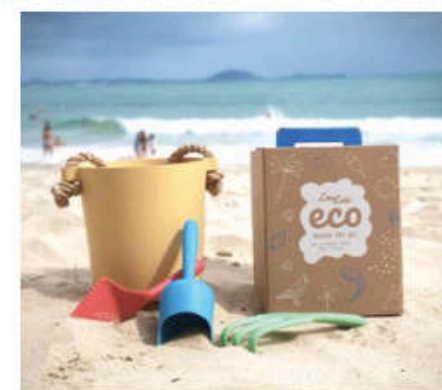
[VISSLA.COM](https://vissla.com)
(\$550)



Outerknown's Bembien Bags

Leave it to a surfer to find a way to help protect the waters. Kelly Slater, one of the greatest surfers of all time, is a sustainability advocate who has developed his own clothing line called Outerknown. To carry your beach gear in style while pursuing a sustainable lifestyle, it's hard to beat Outerknown's Bembien bags. Made from recycled plastic that was collected off of Bali's beaches, this bag has plenty of room for all your essentials. It's also long-lasting and waterproof.

[OUTERKNOWN.COM](https://outerknown.com)
(\$210)



LoveLotte Biodegradable Beach Toys

To kids, the beach is one giant playground sandbox! The problem is, excitable young ones aren't always the best at keeping track of their stuff. LoveLotte's biodegradable toy sets include everything you need to build a sandcastle or dig for hours. If these toys are lost, they'll break down, and you won't beat yourself up for contributing to the ocean's massive plastic problem. This is also a great opportunity to help educate young minds about our habitats.

[LOVELOTTE.COM](https://lovelotte.com)
(\$35)



30A Sun Care Products by Shine On Living

Any eco-loving beachgoer should keep a bottle of 30A SPF 30 sunscreen in their beach bag. All of the products in the 30A line won't hurt the delicate marine ecosystems you're trying to protect by responsibly choosing your gear. These products don't contain oxybenzone or octinoxate, which are chemicals known to do damage to coral reefs and other at-risk ecosystems. Instead, they use a safer alternative, zinc oxide, to keep you safe from the sun's rays.

[30AGEAR.COM](https://30agear.com) (\$18)



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Treasures from the Sea

Growing up in rural Vermont, the coast was another world. I still remember my first trip to Virginia Beach as a young farm girl of seven. The sound of the ocean waves lapping the shore, and the sensation of soft, cream-colored sand pushing up between my toes were feelings I wanted to take back home with me. On the boardwalk, we found a jewelry artist making shell necklaces. My father secretly bought me one, and gave it to me when we returned to Vermont so I could hang on to those memories of being by the sea. I still have it 40 years later.

That yearning to hold on to the experience of coming to the coast is present here in the community of Panhandle visitors. And, like that boardwalk artist of my youth, there are unique jewelry designers in our midst creating pieces you can take home, wear, and remember those blazing Gulf Coast sunsets, sugar sand, and serene aqua-colored water. These artists are not only inspired by their environment, but they honor it as well with eco-friendly packaging, and sustainably sourced materials.

By Carrie Honaker
Photos: Dawn Chapman Whitty
Holly Vaughn
Savannah Young Photography
Merry Beth Myrick Designs
Fletcher Isacks



Reshelled Jewelry



Jessie Taylor is a beach girl from way back. Her love affair with the coast started with visiting her grandmother on Fripp Island, South Carolina, and continued as she spent her adolescent summers in Grayton Beach, Florida. But, jewelry design came later. Taylor was on vacation collecting shells along the shore when inspiration struck.

"I went to the hardware store, figured out what I would need to drill through these shells, and I made a couple of pairs of earrings," she recalled. "I posted them on my Instagram, and everyone freaked out wanting to buy them."

Taylor said one of her favorite things about creating Reshelled Jewelry has been the local female support.

"I've made many connections and seen my friends come together to support me and other local female creatives," said Taylor. "For example, Tori Von Hoene of Ophelia Swimwear let me raid her store for the shoot and then sell the earrings in her store. It's much easier to start a venture when your friends and surrounding women build you up."

Taylor is inspired by the beauty of the ocean, but she is also cognizant of running a business with an eco-friendly outlook.

"I do my best to be as sustainable as possible," she said. "I know that buying anything new is not the sustainable way to do things. But when I package anything, it's all reusable, or reused packaging. I never buy packaging to ship in the mail because I think that's such a huge source of waste in the world."

Many of Taylor's creations are made from shells she collected while visiting her grandmother on Fripp Island, but she's always on the search for new material too, recruiting help whenever possible. "Shell collecting is a family event," she said. "We all get in the boat, go to this specific spot, and pick up shells together."

reshelledjewelry.com
IG @reshelledjewelry

Holly Vaughn Jewelry

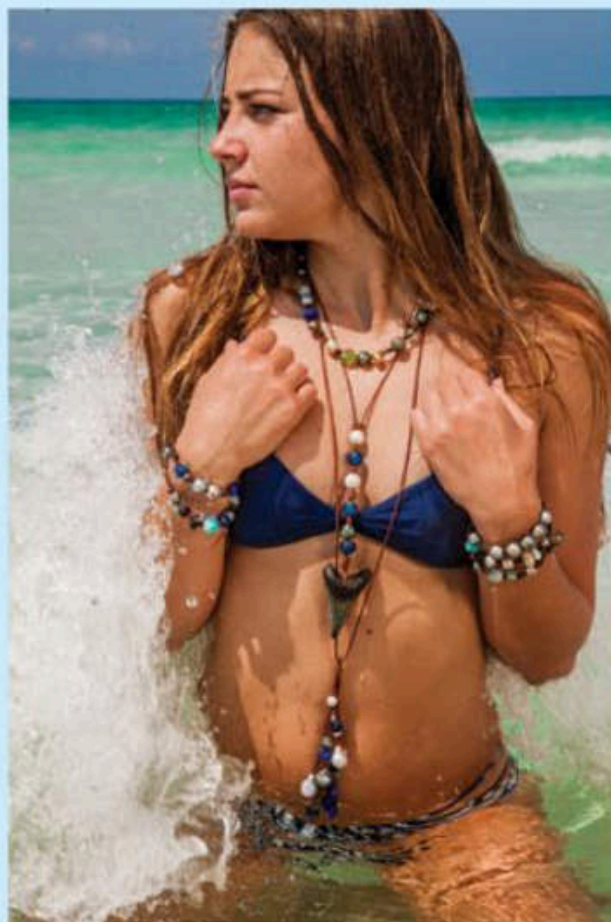
In Pensacola, Florida, Holly Vaughn finds inspiration in her coastal surroundings, translating it into unique jewelry. Vaughn, a teacher at Pensacola State College, has worn many hats, including graphic designer. Now she spends her free time making jewelry she sells at The Blue Morning Gallery in Pensacola, on Etsy and Instagram, and at local art shows across Florida's Panhandle.

"It's so pretty here. You go to the beach, you sit there, especially if it's the low tide and the sun is setting, and you just look out at the colors," she said. "They're amazing—the white sand that turns tan where the waves are lapping up on the shore, and then the light aqua color of the water with a tinge of emerald that gets a little darker. The colors are just amazing."

Vaughn works with shells, beach pebbles, precious stones, and petrified wood, but her work with local Pensacola beach sand stands out. She compresses it under a crystal and bezel sets it in the traditional jewelry making style. For Vaughn, it is about always innovating. "I like pushing designs. I like experimenting, always, always thinking 'What if I did this? What if I incorporate this?' I don't want to be doing the same thing over and over."

Etsy shop: www.etsy.com/shop/hollybrennanvaughn
IG @hollyvaughn





La Vie Est Belle

Like her iconic pearl jewelry, Wendy Mignot has traveled the world. But when Mignot and her family landed in Seaside, Florida, by chance on their way back to Central America in 2004, she knew this was her new home.

"We stopped in Seaside and fell in love," she said. "It's very much like an island, and I saw how the arts were so accepted here. It was a different place, a very art-driven community. And, I actually fit in, which is hard for an artist sometimes."

Mignot has since established herself as an iconic Gulf Coast artisan. Her offerings include precious stones such as turquoise, unique pieces of sea glass, and recovered treasures like shipwreck coins, always paired with her signature pearls and leather.

"The ocean is my heartbeat," said Mignot. "Growing up in Connecticut, my father would take us to the beach every weekend. I feel so connected to the ocean because she is always a constant, yet ever changing. Evolving and creating beauty. The moon tides, the waves, the stillness, the raging. I have so much respect for her, and it shows in every one of my pieces."

The coins are sourced from shipwreck diver, and well-known coin specialist and dealer, Danny Edwards. One of the coin collections comes from the 1641 Wreck Concepcion, a Spanish Galleon run ashore after devastating hurricane damage on the reefs north of Hispanola, the present day Dominican Republic. The "Silver Shoals" treasure trove was discovered in 1978, and now pieces of it adorn Wendy Mignot's pearl and leather jewelry.

La Vie Est Belle
Seaside, Florida
850.231.4692
www.laviestbellegallery.com



Merry Beth Myrick Designs

Merry Beth Myrick has been playing with jewelry her whole life — from a little girl breaking up her grandmother's old necklaces to make something new, to designing her prom jewelry in high school, to making custom pieces for icons like Martina McBride (who incidentally nudged Myrick into the jewelry business when she was a wardrobe stylist in Nashville). Most days now you can find her at her studio in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida, torching and hammering at her latest piece.

Myrick is not a classically trained artisan — she actually learned the craft of silversmithing at a senior citizen center, of all places. "They were the only people who offered a silversmithing class in Nashville at the time," Myrick said. "It was really cool because my grandparents died when I was young, and through this class I got to hang out with these older people, and learn how to be a silversmith."

Myrick's signature Stingray Collection was a happy accident. Making a small tube, she left it in too long and the metal blistered, giving the finished product that stippled effect that looks very similar to stingray skin. Like many artists, Myrick wears her mistakes. The surprise came when she started receiving compliments and inquiries about these "mistake" pieces. This sparked an idea for Myrick.

"I had this stingray skin I found from probably 15 years ago," she recalled. "I was going to make cuffs with it, but then I thought, oh my goodness, that might give the same bubbly effect as my mistake piece. So I tried it, and it worked. Now I use that mold for all the pieces in the Stingray Line. I love stingrays because they are so sweet, and playful. But if you mess with them, they're gonna sting you. I love that attitude. They stand up for themselves."

www.wearmerry.com
IG @merrybethmyrickdesigns





Jubilee! Jubilee!

Nature's Free-for-All Fish Fiesta

By Martin Liptrot
Photos: Jon Hauge

"Jubilee! Jubilee!" they cried.

Bells rang, tin pots clanged, and gangs of locals grabbed buckets and bowls, spears and nets, and ran, bleary eyed, through the faint dawn light to the water's edge.

Here in Mobile Bay, Alabama, one of the strangest – and most rewarding – natural phenomena is in full swing.

Here, and only here, regularly but never predictably, one of the largest free harvests of seafood presents itself.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of flounder, eel and other fish race from the deep water of the bay to the shallow northeast shores between



Fairhope and Daphne where they can be easily speared – or 'gigged' in South Alabama parlance – and scooped up by hand.

Fish gigged, crabs grabbed, shrimp scooped. A successful jubilee can see local families return home with drums and containers overflowing with fresh seafood.

"At a good jubilee you can quickly fill a washtub with shrimp," wrote naturalist and author Archie Carr in his book *A Celebration of Eden*.

"You can gig a hundred flounders and fill the back of your pick-up truck a foot deep in crabs."

This event occurs each summer, between June and September, but nobody can predict exactly where or when... hence the alarm calls and hollering between the cottages and homes along this shoreline.

According to the experts at Auburn University's Marine Extension and Research Center, jubilees occur only when certain

conditions are met. Typically, they happen in the warm summer months, and usually just before sunrise. They follow a cloudy day with a gentle breeze and a calm, smooth bay with a rising tide.

In simple terms, jubilees are caused when the water in the deeper parts of Mobile Bay rapidly de-oxygenates. With warm waters and large volumes of decomposing vegetation, there is an explosion of microorganisms, which strip the oxygen from the water. Unable to breathe or swim properly, the fish and shellfish head for the oxygen-rich shallows – and the awaiting fisherfolk.

Although a similar occurrence is recorded in Tokyo Bay, Japan, this small strip of shoreline in southern Alabama is the only place where the occurrence happens with any regularity.

The phenomenon has gripped the local area. Nearby Daphne has adopted the nickname 'Jubilee City' and, Fairhope, Alabama, has a boutique hotel called The Jubilee Suites. Even the seven-mile twin span bridge that connects Mobile and Spanish Fort is named Jubilee Parkway in honor of the fish-sensation, and the local phone listings will reveal Jubilee dentists, locksmiths, vets, churches, and even a cinema complex. Even though the earliest recorded instance of this event is from 1860, it was in the *Mobile Daily Register* newspaper on July 29, 1912, that the term 'Jubilee' was first used.

The newspaper told its readers:

"A fisherman of experience in explaining the unusual occurrence stated that it was a 'jubilee'.... People who saw the wild scramble of fish and crabs on the sandy beach say they won't soon forget the sight."

But the jubilee only rewards those who are quick, and in the know.

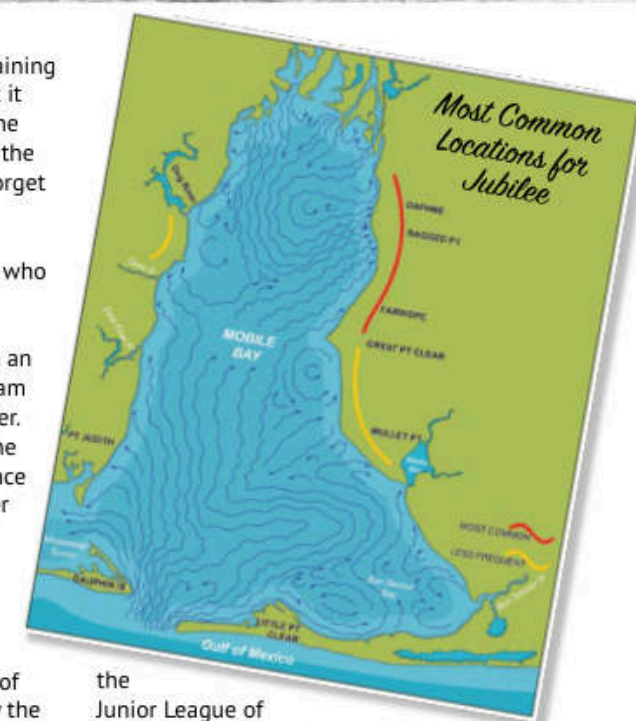
The whole event can last less than an hour and by the time the mainstream news and radio are alerted, it is over. While the fish and crabs rush for the shallow waters in vast numbers, once the tide turns and the deeper water is re-oxygenated, they are gone – back to the depths.

Tourists and city folk who turn up hours after the event is over, responding to local media reports of the event, are comically greeted by the locals who have already cleaned up all the available seafood.

But if you did make the trip only to miss out on the event, you may still enjoy the bounty by ordering some of the catch at any of a number of local restaurants, cafés, or community cook-outs.

Locals who partake in this annual event have their own jubilee recipes. Some of these are closely guarded secrets, nervously protected by those who wish to preserve the continued good luck and bounty that Mobile Bay provides.

But many locals have shared their favorite ways to cook their haul in the *Jubilee Recipes* cookbook produced by



the Junior League of Mobile. Here, they share nuggets of Gulf Coast culinary heritage; that crabs are best saved for gumbo, while the plentiful flounder should only be grilled with a little salt and pepper to prevent its delicate flesh from breaking or being overcooked.

The jubilee is a truly remarkable event. That it happens deep in South Coastal Alabama and has become so ingrained in the fabric of the local community only adds to its magic and romantic allure.

Who knows, you may be lucky enough to be passing through one warm early summer morning and hear the cry go up – "Jubilee!" If you do, come running... with your pots and buckets, of course. 🐟





WATERWAYS



CREATING A HEALTHY GULF

By Christian Wagley



In the deep blue waters that drop off from the white sand beaches of the Florida panhandle, one of the world's rarest animals struggles for survival. At over 40 feet long and 60,000 pounds, the critically endangered Rice's whale has taken refuge here from the chaos of the modern Gulf of Mexico. For many of us who want to share our planet with its magnificent wild creatures, the whale offers an opportunity to make a difference.

For me, that drive to make a difference comes in part from a loss in my childhood. As a young boy growing up near the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, in late winter, every year, my grandfather took me fishing for the yellow perch that made their annual spawning run up a winding tidal creek a few miles from my home. In a leafless forest of brown and gray, under a dark winter sky, the perch's light yellow body with contrasting vertical bands of olive green brought a vibrant splash of warmth and color.

But in just a few short years, the run of perch was no more—done in by polluted runoff from development and acid rain from fossil fuel power plants. In that experience, I shifted from being a student of nature, studying, examining, and exploring, to an advocate for its protection. I was too young to do anything about the yellow perch, but I can do something about the Rice's whale.

Today I have the honor of carrying out that advocacy work for Healthy Gulf (www.healthygulf.org). This small but mighty nonprofit organization works to protect the Gulf of Mexico and the waterways and communities along its shores. Our founding came over 25 years ago in a weekend retreat of conservationists who gathered in Florida's historic Four Mile Village near Destin to discuss the problems facing the Gulf and what to do about it. From that was born a new organization that would work to educate, advocate and protect beaches, waterways, marine life, and ultimately, the people of the Gulf coast.

My colleagues and I work to cover it all, from the Florida Everglades to the emerald green waters of northwest Florida, west to the fertile Mississippi River delta, and on to the arid south Texas coast. We do what I like to call "science-based advocacy," in that science helps us identify the issues and solutions. From there, we engage with communities, providing help with the research, communication, and organizing tools needed.

The fewer than 50 remaining Rice's whales are threatened by drilling for oil and gas, with its constant noise and pollution in the central and western Gulf, driving the whales to seek refuge in the quietest and cleanest area of the Gulf. To give these whales a chance to survive, we must accelerate the





transition to a cleaner and healthier future of renewable energy from the sun and wind that will bring an eventual end to offshore drilling in the Gulf. We are also seeking limits on the speed and operation of ships crossing the whale's habitat, helping them avoid accidentally striking the whales.

To do these things will take support from the people of the Gulf coast—people who care about an animal they will almost certainly never see with their own eyes.



And there is a larger vision in that linkage between nature and people. Because if we can save the Rice's whale, then we can save the Gulf of Mexico. And if we can save the Gulf, we have a chance to protect the people and cultures of the Gulf region fully.

With a staff of 15 headquartered in New Orleans, Healthy Gulf works across all five U.S. Gulf states. Its vision is that of a healthy Gulf of Mexico returned to its former splendor that supports a thriving ecosystem that includes the Gulf's natural resources and, just as importantly, the people, communities, and cultures that depend on those resources. To learn more, visit www.healthygulf.org.



FACTS ABOUT RICE'S WHALES

- The Rice's whale lives in the Gulf of Mexico and nowhere else in the world, mainly off the west coast of Florida in waters between 300' and 1,200' in depth. The Desoto Canyon, 60 miles south of Pensacola, is believed to be a favored area for these endangered whales.
- Threats to the survival of the whale include vessel strikes, ocean noise, oil and gas exploration, development and production, oil spills and responses, entanglement in fishing gear, ocean debris, etc.
- The whales spend most of their time within 50' of the surface of the Gulf. They feed by diving hundreds of feet deep, and it is believed they consume schooling fish and crustaceans.
- The Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010 is believed to have killed 22% of the Rice's whale population.



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Cape San Blas



The Road To *Recovery*

**Three years after
Hurricane Michael,
Cape San Blas is anything
but forgotten.**

By Carrie Honaker
Photos: Gulf County Tourist Development Council



“
It's hard to reconcile
the quiet perfection
of this scene with
the damage wrought
by Hurricane Michael.
”

Driving the curving road into T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, there are still remnants of the devastation that Hurricane Michael left on Cape San Blas. Trees are severed in half, construction crews busily work to restore the buildings and access road, and fledgling patches of sea grass are pushing up out of the dunes. I am here to walk with the Turtle Patrol, looking for nests to protect until the babies hatch and make their run for the Gulf. Walking the pristine white sand with the fiery orange sun rising out of the sea, it is hard to reconcile the quiet perfection of this scene with the damage wrought by Hurricane Michael.

Michael's powerful storm surge completely separated the state park from the rest of the peninsula, pouring in water that connected St. Joseph Bay with the Gulf of Mexico. T.H. Stone Memorial St. Joseph Peninsula State Park's camping area was destroyed, and the nature trails suffered significant damage. Despite the damage, Cape San Blas' laid-back, low-rise, untouched Old Florida charm was only strengthened by Hurricane Michael. Community members rallied around the restoration efforts.

"Our community is extremely resilient, and all of the businesses reopened quickly after the storm," said Adrienne Glass of Visit Gulf County. "We even have several newly opened businesses. Although the park is closed for camping, Cape San Blas has a wide array of single family vacation homes available."



“
But, as with life,
restoration
is a
process.”

“Thanks to the incredible efforts of park staff and volunteers, a portion of the park reopened in January 2019 – just three months after Michael made impact,” added Alexandra Kuchta of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. “Meanwhile, sand has naturally started to fill in the breach created by the storm, beach and bay access is available, roads have reopened and the park’s concessions have resumed operation.”

Cape San Blas partnered with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation on a restoration project to reconstruct the coastal dunes, and protect them from future damage. Along with all the fresh sand, new sea oats were planted, as well as native dune vegetation.

“The natural communities on the peninsula, such as coastal scrub, have evolved over millions of years and countless storms,” said Kuchta. “The resilient coastal ecosystems in the park are some of the best suited to rebounding after hurricanes.”

As of May 2021, the southern end of the park is open from 8 a.m. until sunset, and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection is working feverishly to restore camping accommodations, an access road, and additional amenities. The diverse wildlife, shell-rich beaches, and slower pace of Cape San Blas is still very much alive. There are still horseback rides on the beach, hikes on Maritime Hammock Trail, and miles of bike lanes to enjoy. But, as with life, restoration is a process.



“
It is secluded here,
kind of untouched,
and not commercialized.”
”

“We always welcome volunteers, and anyone wishing to get involved should visit Florida State Parks' volunteer portal or consider joining the Friends of St. Joseph State Parks, a citizen support organization,” said Kuchta. “The group assists with many park-related projects.”

Hurricane Michael ripped through the Gulf Coast as a Category 5 behemoth, leaving devastation in its wake. Cape San Blas was not spared, but three years later, visitors like Megan O'Toole from Atlanta are still venturing to the sleepy Forgotten Coast town. “I like that it is secluded here, kind of untouched, and not commercialized,” said O'Toole. “My son and I go to the state park, explore the bay, and go to the beach. It feels safe, and there is so much marine life to see – from whelks to horseshoe crabs.”

“The beaches are still so beautiful,” said Alex Neville of the Sand Dollar Café in nearby Port St. Joe. “The sun is still setting and rising.”



Cape San Blas

Experiences Not to be Missed:

Happy Ours Kayak and Bike Outpost

Cape San Blas is a beautiful place for ecotourism and nature lovers. Happy Ours rents kayaks, paddle boards, bicycles, and offers guided snorkel tours to explore the underwater ecosystem.

happyourskayak.com

Going Coastal Cabanas & More

Dreaming of a bonfire on the beach, toasting marshmallows, enjoying the sound of evening waves? Going Coastal is a concierge service that sets up beach equipment, cabanas, bonfires, and more for visitors. They also take care of all the cleanup in accordance with Gulf County's Leave No Trace Ordinance.

270-839-4699

Forgotten Coast Sea Turtle Center

Relocated to Port St. Joe, the facility is the epicenter for habitat clean-up, nest monitoring, and restoration projects. Volunteers spend long hours patrolling approximately six miles of Cape San Blas peninsula for nesting loggerhead turtles during turtle nesting season, May 1 through October 31. Visitors and residents are welcome to sign up for a Walkalong Turtle Patrol. It starts at sunrise, and is an unforgettable "voluntourism" experience.

floridacc.org

Horseback Riding on the Beach

There are three horseback riding outfitters available for bookings. Broke-a-toe Horseback Riding, Rockin' M Ranch and Two-Bit Stable are all open and offering memorable rides along the coast. The horseback riding is scheduled, and by appointment only but they host quite a few rides each day including sunset and sunrise rides. Rides last about an hour and include photos and a slow leisurely canter along the Gulf of Mexico. Rides depart from Salinas Park Gulfside.

brokeatoe.com

therockinmranch.com

twobitstable.com





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HARBOR DOCKS



gulf to **TABLE**

**Harbor Dock's mission to
keep seafood fresh and local**

By Carrie Honaker
Photos: Eddie Morgan

The story started over 40 years ago when Charles Morgan opened Harbor Docks as a spot for selling fresh oysters and cold beer. Two years later, in 1981, Morgan opened the fish market to ensure that his restaurant always had an adequate supply of fresh seafood. As that market grew, they began selling to other places. Today, the Morgans own 14 restaurants throughout the Southeast, supply and operate the seafood market, and actively encourage residents and visitors to buy and eat authentically fresh and local Gulf Coast seafood.

The Gulf to Table® Initiative

In 2019, Harbor Docks spearheaded a campaign to bring awareness to the public about the bounty of fresh, local seafood available quite literally right here in our backyard. It became an impetus for Gulf Coast restaurants to procure their seafood from local fishermen and to adopt the mission of supporting the communities where they operate.

"We're a seafood restaurant," said Eddie Morgan, son of Charles Morgan. "Why would you get seafood from somewhere else when we have a bounty of such great seafood here? People come down here and want crab legs, but that's not what's here."

Morgan wanted people to know what Destin is all about — to support not just Harbor Docks, but all the restaurants and markets that serve local fish.

"We want to support our local fishermen, not some mass-market commercial trawler," said Morgan.

How does it work?

It all starts on the boat.

"We bring the catch on board, and immediately put it in our cooler on ice," said Morgan. "We use salt water and ice to make a slush, which keeps it fresher. It is important to keep it completely submerged, surrounded by ice. When we get back to the dock, we take it straight to our fish market. They immediately process it, and send it to the restaurant."

The driving reason behind opening the seafood market back in 1981 was simply to supply Harbor Docks with the freshest catch possible. But as the concept evolved, Charles Morgan began selling to other local businesses. Because of their commercial fishing classification and fish market license, as well as their HACCP management certification, they are allowed to sell directly to restaurants. Harbor Docks has expanded the Gulf to Table initiative to include overnight shipping, contingent upon what is in season and available.

Why is it important to buy local?

Aside from the satisfaction of knowing you're supporting a local business, buying fresh-caught seafood helps alleviate carbon

footprints and helps preserve the delicate marine ecosystems of the Gulf. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) institutes limits for different species to help make propagation of the fish sustainable. Cobia is in season in the Spring, for example, but there is currently a two-per-day limit because the population was showing decline.

"Limits vary from fish to fish," said Morgan. "For example, people get confused about red snapper—there's no commercial season. They have what they call catch shares. Boats or markets own a certain number of pounds of red snapper. They can catch whatever they want throughout the year. If you have 10,000 pounds, you can go catch 1,000 today and 1,000 tomorrow, or you can wait and go when the markets are high, but you only have 10,000 pounds total."

That same limit applies to grouper, but the rules are very different with triggerfish and other species. "It's all unique to each fish to best protect the populations."

The locals know the rules, and they abide by them, to ensure healthy marine habitats, upon which their livelihoods are so dependent.

Supporting the Gulf to Table mission also ensures you're reducing the environmental impact of fishing, as the seafood travels less distance to get to your table. Of course, it helps power a community's economy. "You want to support the people that are in your town, the people who sponsor the T-ball teams and soccer games, the people here doing it the right way," said Morgan.

What to look for

So, you are on vacation, you want to make sure the fish you get is fresh, locally-caught. How can you tell? Once it reaches your table, possibly covered in sauce, it is very hard to discern what it might be, or where it might have come from. According to Morgan, one of the best things you can do is ask questions.

Ask your server where the fish comes from. Look at the cost.

"Price is a good indicator," said Morgan. "Real Gulf to Table seafood is going to be expensive. That alone doesn't guarantee it, but if you



“Supporting the Gulf to Table mission also ensures you’re reducing the environmental impact of fishing, as the seafood travels less distance to get to your table.”

HARBOR DOCKS



see inexpensive fish on the menu, then it's guaranteed not from here." Farm-raised fish typically cost less because the investment to harvest, process, and ship is lower.

Mislabeling is one way businesses get away with not serving you a local product. Oceana's nationwide study in 2012 revealed that as much as 87 percent of fish is swapped out for cheaper versions of products. For example, snapper and grouper could get replaced with cheaper fish like tilapia. This practice not only hurts honest local fishermen, but casts a poor light on the industry as a whole.

It is hard to recognize this fraud when the fish comes prepared, but if you are in a seafood market looking for authentic Gulf

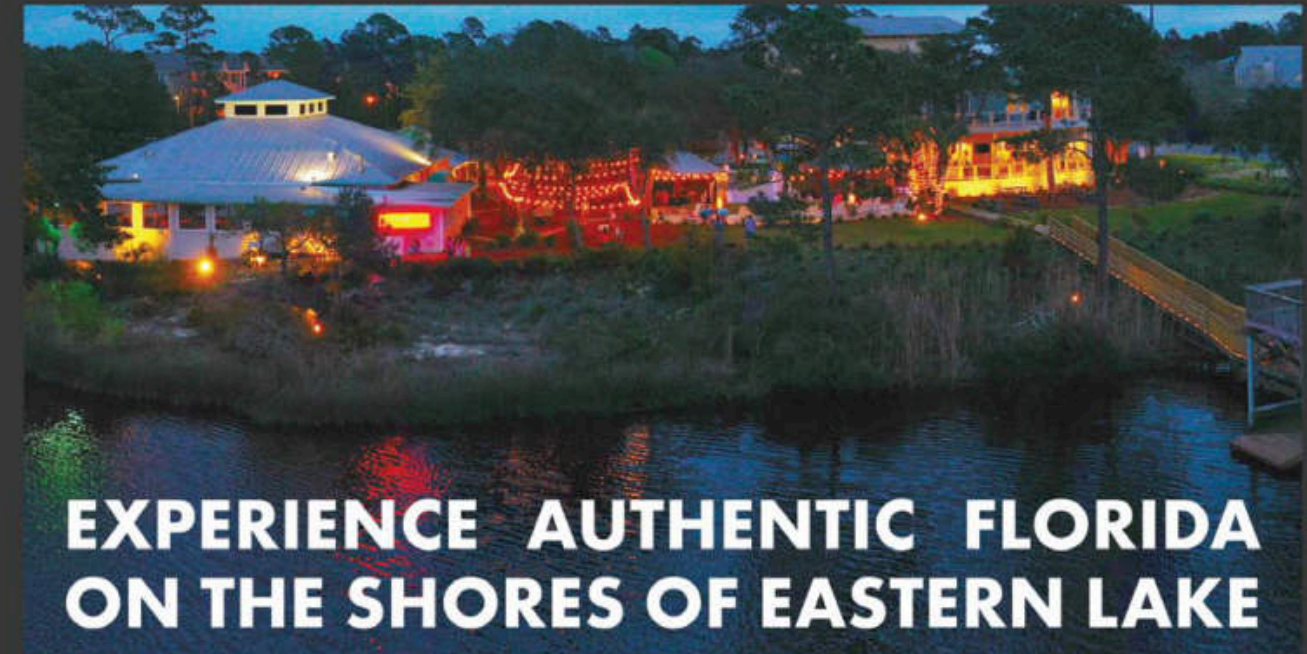
fish, there are some qualities to look for.

"You want bright red gills and clean, clear eyes," said Morgan. "Fish is going to smell, but you don't want it to smell bad. It should smell like fish. Look for firm flesh. If you pick up a filet, and it feels soft and mushy, it's bad. Look to make sure it is being kept dry and iced. We have perforated pans that are set on top of ice. Any liquid on the fish drains out, and it stays cold."

Coming up on their 42nd anniversary, Harbor Docks is clearly doing something right. Four decades and a whole lot of fishing trips later, they're still a family business working to better their community. And they are proud – very proud – to serve the freshest Gulf to Table seafood possible. 🍷



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An Embarrassing Confession

By Mike Ragsdale

My cousin's wedding was over.

Out-of-town friends and relatives had breezed into our backyard that morning. Decorations were distributed. Snacks were set out. Vows were spoken. Photos were taken. Hugs and high-fives were exchanged. Then, just as quickly as it all began, cousins and kin were gone, no doubt hoping to sneak in a little beach time while they were here on the coast.

From my front door, I saw the last lone indication that an event had even taken place here just a few hours before. A single silver balloon swirled around above our mailbox, a beacon to let our out-of-town guests know they'd found the right nuptials. "You're so special," the balloon promised in pinkish-red script.

I untangled the balloon's string from the mailbox and began walking back toward our home. I was simply going to pop the silver balloon and put it in the trash. I wasn't sure if it could be recycled or not.

But as I walked down our driveway, a childish impulse took over.

"I haven't let a balloon go in since I was a kid," I thought to myself. The spring sky was vivid blue, with a few billowy white clouds just for idyllic effect. A gentle wind blew from the south, and the bay behind our house was as smooth as a mirror. I knew it was wrong to let the balloon go, but in that moment, the mischievous kid in me proved stronger than the responsible knows-better adult.

I let it go. I stood in my driveway smiling as it slowly drifted up, up, up. "Oh no," I thought as it almost got snagged in a pine tree in our front yard. How in the hell would I ever get that thing down from a 40-foot pine tree?

Fortunately, at the last moment, a puff of divine breeze diverted the balloon's ascent, and nudged it north over my house and out across the bay. I scurried into the backyard and watched it sail ever so high. The afternoon sun shimmered off the reflective silver, making it look like a flying saucer.

Up, up and up. I stayed and watched it glide north and upward, until I couldn't see it any more. I sighed a nostalgic smile and walked back into our house, forgetting about it forever.

Or so I thought.

Two days later, I was skimming through my Facebook feed and saw a post that froze me in my virtual tracks. The caption read:

"Non-native invasive Mylar species. Wonder how far it drifted before landing in my tree."

The photo was of a half-deflated silver balloon, tangled up high in a tree. "You're so special," it read.

It was my balloon. There was no mistaking it.

I looked out my window at the bay. It's four miles across to the other side. I could make out tiny white pixels that I know are actually large bayfront houses. With Eglin Air Force Base's vast forest preserve to the west and Choctawhatchee River Basin to the east, I estimated I could see millions of trees in my immediate field of view. Millions.

The photo had been posted by a friend named Lori Ceier. She lives near Ebro, some 25 miles northeast of my house. Not only is Lori a friend, but she's also one of the region's leading environmental advocates as publisher of the highly regarded eco-blog, Walton Outdoors (www.waltonoutdoors.com).

How could that possibly be my balloon?! With millions upon millions of pines as potential drop zones, what are the odds that my one little balloon landed in the yard of someone I actually know, much less someone who lives 25 miles away from my house! What are the odds that some other jerk released the same exact balloon? And then it occurred to me: does it even matter if it's the same balloon or not? One thing was certain: the laws of physics dictated that my balloon landed somewhere, even if it wasn't in her backyard.

I was mortified. I was ashamed. That *wasn't* someone else's balloon. That was *my* balloon. And now it had become dangling garbage in someone else's yard.

Even worse, it was someone I knew and respected personally. "You're so special." We all like to think that. It's just one plastic straw, we tell ourselves. It's just a bottle of water. It's just one balloon.

And yet, the blunt reality is that someone has to pick up every single cigarette butt callously flung from a car window. Those plastic grocery bags end up in ditches and streams and seas – and then in the stomachs of turtles, pelicans and dolphins.

Releasing that balloon gave me a fleeting moment of childlike joy... followed by days of shame when I saw the selfishness of my sin. My self-prescribed penance is to apologize to Lori for junking up her yard, and to share the lessons I've learned:

You are special – but you don't deserve special treatment.

Your choices matter, even – and sometimes especially – the little ones.

True happiness can't be achieved when it's at someone else's expense.

I'm not planning to write each of these lessons on the chalkboard 100 times. Instead, I'm sharing them with you in the hopes that someone, somewhere has a lightbulb moment like I have.

Oh, and there's one more lesson I should've learned a long time ago: what goes up must come down.



What You Get FOR YOUR MONEY

The pandemic not only caused more people to start working remotely, but it also prompted many of us to re-evaluate what's most important in our lives. Family. Friends. Health. Happiness. What better place to find those things than a beautiful beach? In this hot, fast-moving market, these listings might not even be available by the time you read this. Even so, here are a few homes in different price ranges, to give you an idea of how far your sand dollars can go.



Panama City Beach, Florida



207 Bainbridge Street, 3 bed / 2.5 bath 1,926 sq. ft.
\$370,000



1709 Skimmer Court, 4 bed / 3.5 bath 3,206 sq. ft.
\$645,000



8504 Lydia Lane, 4 bed / 4 bath 3,566 sq. ft.
\$1,175,000



7911 N Lagoon Drive, 5 bed / 5.5 bath 4,787 sq. ft.
\$2,000,000

Listings by: Brittany "Britt" Matthews Gonzalez, Beachy Beach Real Estate, 850-660-7626
www.beachybeachon30a.com

Santa Rosa Beach, Florida



43 Dune Breeze Lane, 4 bed / 4 bath 2,400 sq. ft.
\$875,000



Sawbuck Drive, Lot 214, 4 bed / 4.5 bath 3,256 sq. ft.
\$1,595,000



469 Turquoise Beach Drive, 6 bed / 6 bath 8,230 sq. ft.
\$4,249,000



107 Blackwater Street, 8 bed / 8 bath 6,442 sq. ft.
\$6,925,000

Listings by: Brad Reese, Beach Properties of Florida, www.southwaltonfl.com, 850-797-7930

Seaside, Florida



202 W Ruskin Place, 5 bed / 5 bath 5,526 sq. ft.
\$3,550,000



Listings by: Brad Reese, Beach Properties of Florida, www.southwaltonfl.com, 850-797-7930

A SYMBIOTIC

A NEW ECO-HOTEL
IN ALABAMA, WHERE
ECONOMICS AND
ENVIRONMENT EXIST
HARMONIOUSLY.



By Abigail Abesamis Demarest
Photos: Julie Soefer

The Lodge at Gulf State Park isn't your average hotel. Located in the heart of a public recreation area on the Gulf of Mexico with two miles of beaches, The Lodge is a stunning example of a development that promotes environmental and economic sustainability.

RELATIONSHIP





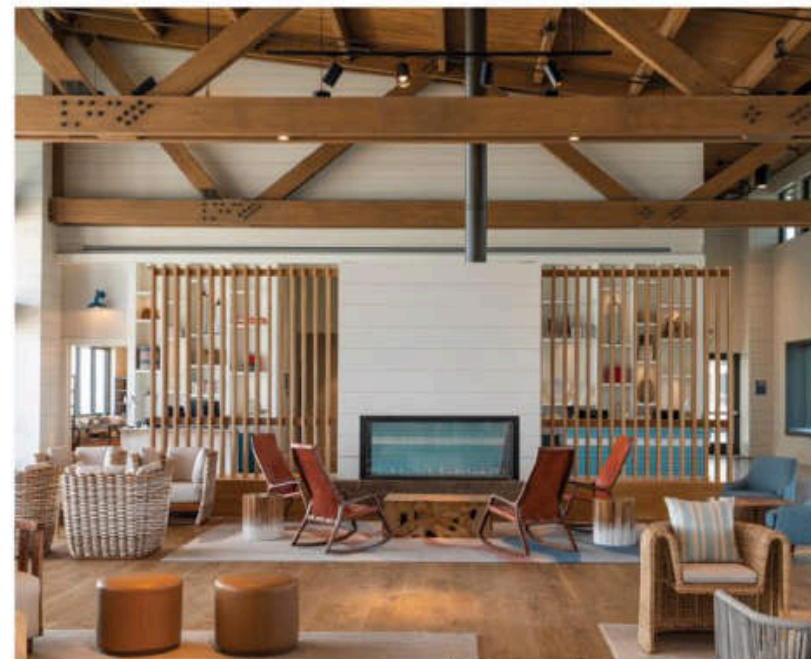
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15% PERCENT OF THE BUILDING
MATERIALS USED WERE
RECYCLED, AND 70 - 75% OF
THE CONSTRUCTION WASTE
WAS RECYCLED AND DIDN'T
END UP IN A LANDFILL.
11

Take a quick look at the hotel website, and you'll find over a dozen sustainability initiatives related to the building and operation of The Lodge. 15% percent of the building materials used were recycled, and 70 - 75% of the construction waste was recycled and didn't end up in a landfill. The buildings that make up The Lodge have been designed to reduce energy usage by 32 percent and interior water use by 35 percent compared to typical facilities of the same size. This reduction in energy usage is accomplished via passive cooling techniques like building orientation and wood screens to filter sunlight. Additionally, condensation from the HVAC system is collected and recycled to replace the water in the pool, 2,000 gallons a day on average.

The hotel was a project that was years in the making and not without its challenges and controversies. Environmentalists were quick to oppose the building of the 350-room Hilton branded lodge when it was first proposed, mainly because settlement money from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill was being used to fund the project. Tye Warren, a developer who directed the \$140 million enhancement of Gulf State Park, saw the potential for a symbiotic relationship between economic and environmental interests.

"This project was unique in that the funding for the project was meant to restore the environment and the economy that was damaged by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill," Warren said. "Some people only heard the environment word and some people only heard the economic word, but as a legal matter, those two things had to coexist. I think one of the most enjoyable outcomes of this project is to be able to point to specific examples of how those things are not in conflict."

Warren explained that if they had spent all \$140 million on creating public access amenities, there



wouldn't be a system in place to fund long-term maintenance. "Many of these trails are made of wood and elevated to respect the ecosystem that sits below them. They will need to be replaced after about 7 to 10 years," he said. "The Lodge was built to be the economic fountain to stabilize the whole park." Once The Lodge makes enough money to support itself, any additional money made goes to the 6,150-acre park.

Since its official opening in November 2018, The Lodge has generated enough income to fund new bathrooms at the Lake Shelby picnic area located across the street from The Lodge. The revenue generated by the lodge also invested in a free tram that runs through the park, a free bike share, a dog park, and a playground that cost almost \$300,000 to build.

"All of these improvements came from a fountain that some people viewed as an economic enemy. The thought that it was taking something away from the public access part or the environment part," Warren said. "But now, because of the revenue The Lodge generates to support the park, we're set up to be able to do things like help with dune restoration and so much more."

The multimillion-dollar enhancement of Gulf State Park was a massive undertaking that was made possible by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, and the state of Alabama, which owns the park.

Warren was honored to have the opportunity to lead the project and feels that the end result exceeded expectations. "I'm really proud of the team that put it into place and the hundreds of people that rallied around the vision to make it become a reality."

To learn more about The Lodge at Gulf State Park, visit lodgeatgulfstatepark.com. To learn more about Gulf State Park, visit alapark.com/parks/gulf-state-park. @



Planting Memories

Destin retiree digs deep to
beautify and immortalize

By Carrie Honaker
Photos: Brandan Babineaux
Trees on the Coast

Allen French likes planting trees. The retired Navy dentist planted trees at every house on every base where he was stationed. He later planted trees in Alpharetta, Georgia, as part of that community's Tree Commission. After moving to Florida, he finally created his passion project, Trees on the Coast.

When he retired to Destin, French saw a need. "I saw a billboard haven with no trees," he said. "That kept me going in the early days. I was angry about the beauty of the bays and gulf, next to the ugly streetscapes. I had to help make the rest of this area beautiful."

But, it wasn't as simple as digging in the loamy dirt and giving a sapling a new home. French needed money to buy trees, people to help plant those trees, and permission from locals to put those trees on publicly-owned land. Trees on the Coast was guided by three principles: preserving trees, planting trees, and education. Once he had his vision, French hit the ground running.

"I started looking for projects and doing fundraisers," he said. "Within about four years, we planted over 500 trees in the Panhandle. It was a labor of love. I was never looking for accolades. All I wanted to do was get trees in the ground."

“It’s very simple—
plants and trees keep our area
clean and beautiful.”

This passion for bringing new life to barren areas birthed what is now the driving focus of Trees on the Coast — something called “Honor Trees.” The board of The Historic Gulf Cemetery in Santa Rosa Beach heard about French’s work and reached out to him about adding some trees to beautify the landscape. “Why don’t we plant Honor Trees?” French thought. People could donate money in exchange for a new tree planted on public land, along with a plaque to honor their loved one.

That project led to Honor Trees being planted on Airport Road in Destin in remembrance of the servicemen who perished in a 2015 helicopter crash at Eglin Airforce Base.

“Families from all over the country came down,” said French. “We had a flyover, and the fire department was there with their cranes lined out for people to walk through. Each of those twelve servicemen who perished now has a tree on Airport Road along with a plaque to honor them.”

Today, Honor Trees can be found all along the Gulf Coast, with more being planted daily. And now there’s a new tree-lover at the helm, Bobby Wagner.

“The thing I fell most in love with was the Honor Tree program,” said Wagner. “It’s very personal—you don’t have to own a piece of land here to feel like you’re part of this.”

Wagner has big plans for Trees on the Coast. He has expanded Honor Trees to an online community where anybody in the world can select a tree of their choice, an area that is important to them, and purchase a tree to be planted in honor of whatever or whomever they choose, from births, to graduations, to memorials. The purchaser chooses the type of tree, the exact location using a Google Map pin, and the physical form of the plaque, as well as its message. Also included is the ability to upload pictures or longform stories and messages to be digitally archived along with the plaque pin.

“We wanted to make ordering an Honor Tree very convenient,” said Wagner. “We also wanted to give

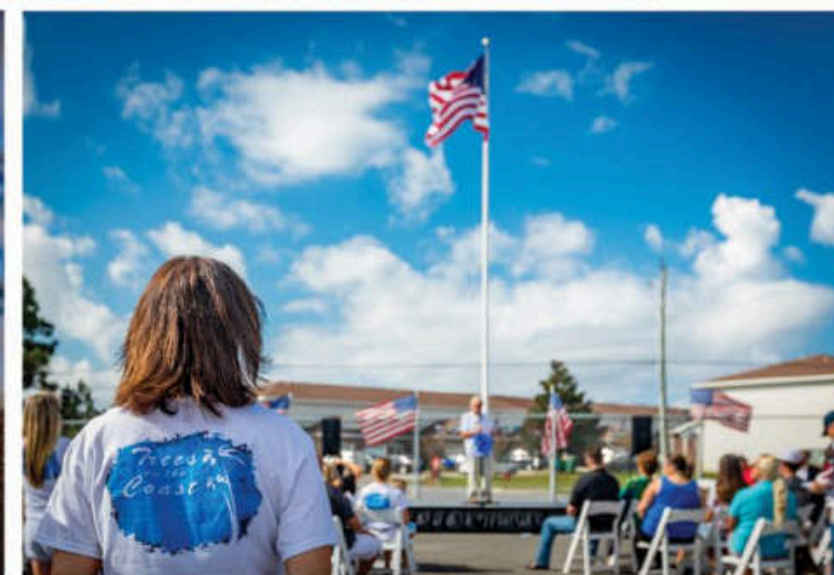
people the ability to know exactly where it would be in the world. At the end of the day, it’s about putting a story with these trees in the ground. Our online platform allows people to get involved, and feel like they’re a part of our community.”

Trees on the Coast also organizes coastal cleanups for volunteers who want to help beautify the area. “It’s come as you are,” said Wagner. “We have the bags, the gloves, the picker uppers, the tongs, the rakes, and the location. We’ve even formed an underwater dive team that goes to Destin Harbor to clean up trash from the bottom of the water.”

Wagner hopes awareness of the need for more trees, and cleanup efforts will spread. They now partner with local businesses and community organizations to create new beautification projects.

Local hair stylist Allen Padgett recently spearheaded a new “giving back” program at Salon Trinity in Miramar Beach. Each month, they partner with a worthy local cause, spreading awareness of the organization through their social media, and donating a portion of their proceeds to the cause. Trees on the Coast helped Salon Trinity organize a beautification project at Destin Elementary. The centerpiece? An Honor Tree for 11-year-old Kohltan Ward who passed away in October 2020 after being struck by a car while riding his bicycle near the school. Kohltan’s Honor Tree went into the ground on May 24, 2020, along with a plaque with his name on it. Classes came out, dug, and planted a tree in Kohltan’s name. They learned about trees and their value to the earth. They also honored their friend and classmate. This tree will now grow each year, serving as a memorial for a life taken too soon.

“We want people to understand this is everyone’s beach, whether you’re here for a long time, or just a good time,” said Wagner. “This needs to be a group effort. It can’t come from the government. It can’t come from just one organization. It needs to be a culture of wanting to do better for the environment. It’s very simple—plants and trees keep our area clean and beautiful.”



What is 30A?

Thanks to Deb Morella for suggesting we add a map of our hometown to each issue!

Old Florida State Road 30 started at the Alabama state line and meandered 283 miles east across the panhandle. Several "alternate routes" (hence the "A" in 30A) offered drivers a slower scenic option, usually along the beach. But we don't think of 30A as disconnected miles of soulless asphalt. 30A® is a celebration of small town beach life – the kind that's been enjoyed by families for decades all along the Gulf Coast. 30A isn't just a line on the map. It's a lifestyle; an attitude. It's that happy place we all dream of when we need to unwind, unplug and celebrate life. – 30A.com



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