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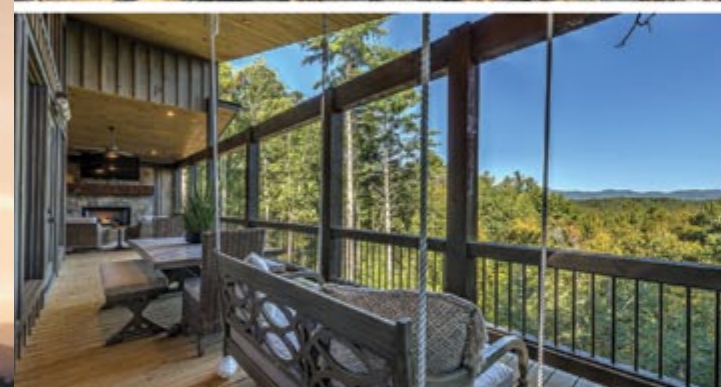
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ADVENTUROUS THOUGHTS

FROM THE  GUY

Përshëndetje from the jagged coastline of Albania!

You've no doubt seen old parchment "treasure maps" with a sinister, serpentine dragon lurking near the map's edge. The edge of a map is always scary. What's out there? And what's just beyond that edge? For early mapmakers, a dragon symbolized the unknown – danger and almost certain death. *Don't go there if being alive is something you enjoy.*

Not terribly long ago, I would've had a hard time finding Albania on a map. But here we are on a two-month road trip through the Balkans, including Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and a place where dragons still loomed in my mind: Albania.

Albania was almost completely closed to outsiders until the collapse of communism here in the 1990s. Prior to that time, Albania's dictatorial-style government was so paranoid and fearful of invasion that they built hundreds of thousands of concrete bunkers all over the country. In towns. In fields. In valleys. In forests. These little concrete pillboxes are littered everywhere – abandoned monuments to one of the world's most xenophobic cultures. Some of them even have eerily cool bunker complexes underneath them, designed to ride out any impending apocalypse in Cold War-era style.

We were advised not to go to Albania. Not because of dictators or espionage but because the roads and infrastructure were so atrocious that our road trip could quickly become a roadside flat-tire nightmare. "The roads are catastrophic," one friend told me. And he should know – he served in the army there some 20 years ago.

We went anyway. And what we found shocked us.

Angela, Ernie (our dog), and I entered Albania from Montenegro to the north, hoping our Balkan rental car was up to the cliffhanging,

pot-holed challenge. After crossing through border security (always a breath-holding moment for travelers, especially when we have variables like a car we don't actually own and a little white yappy dog), we drove toward Tirana, Albania's capital.

A few minutes and miles passed. So far, so good. An hour passed. Still no cavernous potholes or irate dictators. Still no dragons.

I might have been able to guess that Albania had a coastline, but I never imagined that it is home to some of the world's most stunning scenery. Quaint stacked-stone villages. Shepherds crossing the roads with their flocks of sheep. Neon glacier-blue rivers. Mountains and crystal clear waterfalls that evoke memories of Montana. And 280 miles of the most beautiful cliffy coastline found anywhere along the Mediterranean.

As for the roads? After spending two weeks driving all across the country, I can happily report that Albania is now home to some of the best roads I've ever had the pleasure of driving on. Apparently, a lot can change in a relatively short amount of time.

In 1904, in New York City, a group of scientists, researchers, and educators formed a private, invitation-only society called "The Explorers Club." Today, its members include Nobel-prize-winning ecologists, documentarians, archeologists, and astronauts. Think of it as a semi-secretive Country Club for the Indiana Joneses of the world. Their mission? "To push dragons off the map."

I hope you enjoy this issue of *Beach Happy*, full of inspiring stories of adventure and exploration, and of course, the beach. And I hope you resolve to break out the map this year and do a little exploring of your own, whether it's across the ocean, or just across town. The world is a big, fun, exhilarating, and miraculous place if you're brave enough to get out there and face a few dragons.

BEach Happy, my friends!

Mike Ragzdale
Founder, The 30A Company



Follow Mike, Angela, and Ernie's
around-the-world adventures

BEACH HAPPY

Editor

Amandeep Mangat

Art Director

David Coffey

Writers

Abigail Abesamis Demarest, Martin Liptrot,
Lauren Sage Reinlie, Mike Ragsdale,
Carrie Honaker, Gen Handley,
Sean Dietrich, Jenny Etheredge,
Susan Gunn

Photographers

Bear Grylls Ventures, Guillaume LECHAT,
Carrie Honaker, Kurt Lischka, Jason Mudgett,
Abigail Abesamis Demarest, Studio Tran
Photography, Madalyn Giambelluca, Susan
Gunn Photography, Kelpful, Highway1 Road
Trip, Sony Music Entertainment, General
Horseplay, Southernmost Beach Resort,
La Te Da, Hank's Hair of the Dog Saloon,
Holland America Line, Underwater Museum
of Art, Storyteller Network

Design Contributor

Emiliano Neri

Subscriptions Manager

Ragan Smith

Advertising Sales Director

Cory Davis

Advertising Inquiries

advertising@30A.com

Get in Touch

feedback@30A.com

Publisher

Mike Ragsdale

The 30A Company, LLC
755 Grand Blvd Suite B-105, #352
Miramar Beach, Florida USA 32550

www.30A.com

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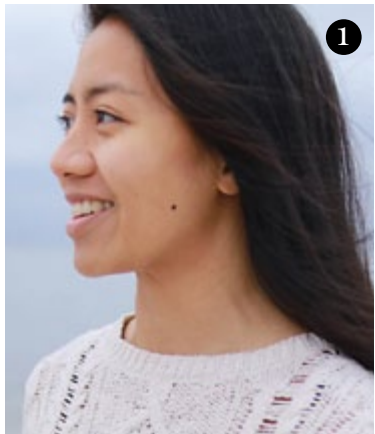


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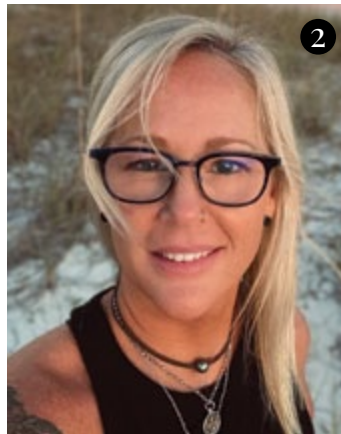


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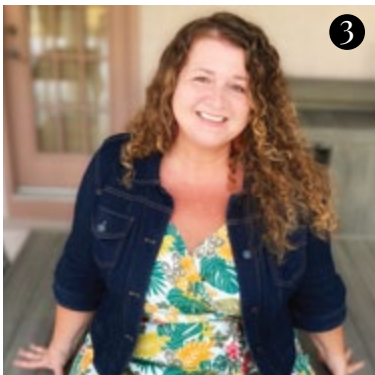
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1. ABIGAIL ABESAMIS DEMAREST is a writer, editor, and former New Yorker based in sunny Panama City Beach, Florida. Her writing has been featured in HuffPost Food & Drink, Forbes.com, Insider, Business Insider, Apartment Therapy, and more. When she's not writing, she's reading up on the latest wellness trends, teaching Zumba classes, or reading a book on the beach.

2. SUSAN GUNN is an Atlanta native and retired paramedic who made Florida her permanent home in 2014. She is a nationally published freelance writer and photographer specializing in night sky, storm, and lightning photography. In her spare time she can be found in the Gulf or exploring the natural world around her. You can follow her photography and writing on Instagram (@sgunnphotography) or visit her online gallery at susangunnphotography.com.



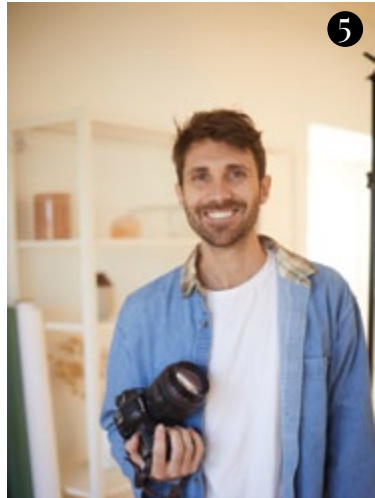
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3. CARRIE HONAKER is a Florida-based freelance writer who is not sure where she will land next, but it will involve messy eating, a spicy Tempranillo and finding the local dive bar. Her work has been featured in Wine Enthusiast, Bon Appetit, and others. You can find her on Twitter and Instagram (@writeonhonaker).

4. MARTIN LIPTROT is British but has lived along Scenic Highway 30A since 2004. After a global career in advertising, he made NorthWest Florida his home and runs a local PR and Marketing Agency (98RepublicPR.com). Martin's passions include soccer, cricket, rugby, Formula One and horse racing. He is a fan of craft beers and fine wines and enjoys good company and long, lazy lunches in any of the spectacular restaurants along 30A.



5



6

6. GEN HANDLEY is a music writer living in Vancouver, BC, where he can be found running its wet streets or trying its many restaurants with his wife and son.

7. LAUREN SAGE REINLIE is an award-winning freelance journalist currently living in Freeport, Florida. Her work has taken her across the South, where she has covered topics ranging from the wily ways of politicians at the Texas state capitol to the storied land of sunshine and swamp sharks (a.k.a. gators) in Florida.



7

5. GUILLAUME LECHAT is a French photographer who recently moved to the 30A area from Paris and fell in love with the Gulf Coast lifestyle. Check out his modern portrait photography at guillaumelechat.com and familyphotography30a.com.

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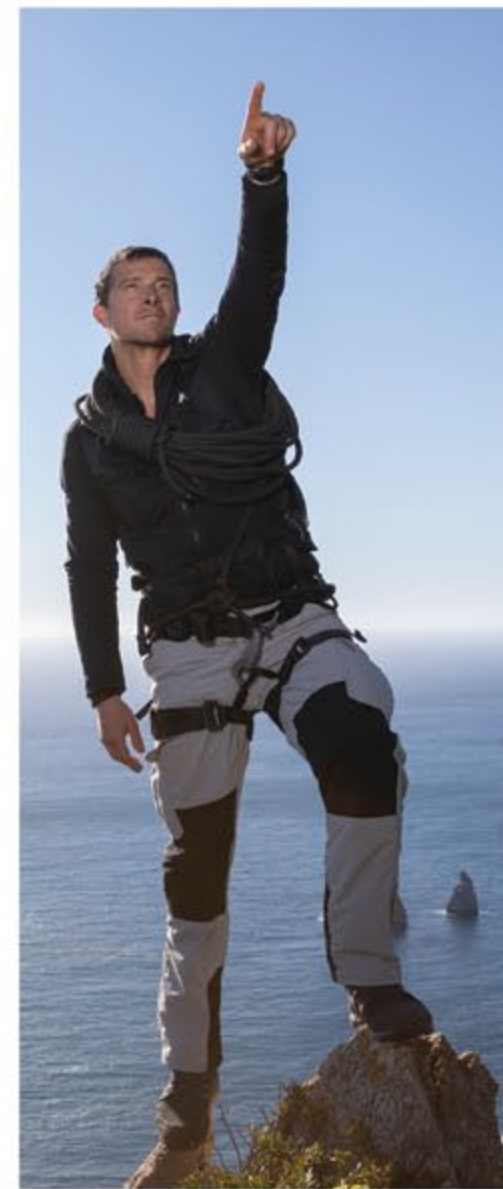
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Questions with Bear Grylls

The trailblazing global adventurer shares how to add more adventure and happiness to your life.

Bear Grylls has made a career out of going on epic adventures around the world. He's a former British Special Forces soldier who climbed Mount Everest just months after breaking his back in a free-fall accident. Bear has hosted a number of extreme adventure TV shows, including *Man vs. Wild* on the Discovery Channel and *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* on National Geographic. On *Running Wild*, Bear took celebrity guests like Barack Obama, Julia Roberts, and Zac Efron along on survival adventures. Bear also hosts *You vs. Wild*, an Emmy Award-winning interactive Netflix series where viewers decide which adventure he goes on.

But the thing that struck me the most in chatting with him was how incredibly down to earth he is. He's a man who needs no introduction and has lived a life full of adventures most could only dream of, but at the end of the day, he enjoys the same simple pleasures that many of us do: a warm cup of tea (or coffee), the feel of the sun on our skin, and quality time with family and friends.



What is your advice for people looking to get outdoors and add more adventure to their lives, which can be challenging with a traditional nine-to-five?

I think even if you live in a city, the outdoors is the great leveler—it's always available for all of us, wherever we live. It's free, it's a natural healer, and it does more for us than almost anything else. Getting outdoors is about putting simple things into place, whether it's just looking out of that train or bus window on your commute and looking at nature or walking those last few steps to work rather than taking the subway.

There's something incredibly natural and healing about just walking, lifting our heads away from the phone, and looking around us. Nature is our best healer—it's hardwired into our evolution. Embrace the power of simple things like walking or getting outside in the morning. I do most of my training outside now, even in the mountains where it's -10 degrees at night. Even if it's dark, I love that I'm outside, and it's even better during the day when the sun is shining. It's brilliant and healing.

What is your favorite beach destination and why?

For me, it's North Wales, where we live. We own a little island up there; it's pretty wild, and there's just one little house on it. It's really remote, it rains a lot, it's windy, it's often cold, but it has the most incredible coastline—rugged, mountainous coastline with pretty wild beaches. We've spent so much time here as a family and will continue to do so. Definitely a hidden gem in the world.

One of your latest projects is a partnership with Ancestral Supplements. What's that all about?

It all started with health. One of the things I've learned over the years is that we need to be our own teacher and doctor. I had a real journey of finding out the things in my life that help me maintain optimum health. It's about so much more than just nutrition; it's also a way of life. There's this wave of millions of people around the world who are understanding that to

function at our best and to have optimal health, vitality, and longevity, you have to listen to nature, be outdoors, get cold, get enough sun, lift some weights, listen to how our ancestors used to eat, and get away from processed foods that create so much disease in people. We need to get back to how nature and millions of years of evolution has allowed us to adapt and to thrive.

For many years, I thought that if we want to be fit and healthy, we have to eat lots of vegetables and not eat too much meat, and my health really suffered. Slowly, I realized that this wasn't what nature was saying to me; nature is saying we have millions of years of evolving to thrive off animals. The partnership with Ancestral was a really natural coming together of like-minded people, and they've built an incredible community of thousands of people with incredible stories of how getting back to putting into their bodies what society's taken out, putting the natural stuff back in, has transformed them.

If you could pick any place on Earth, but you MUST stay and live in that one place for 12 full months, where would you pick?

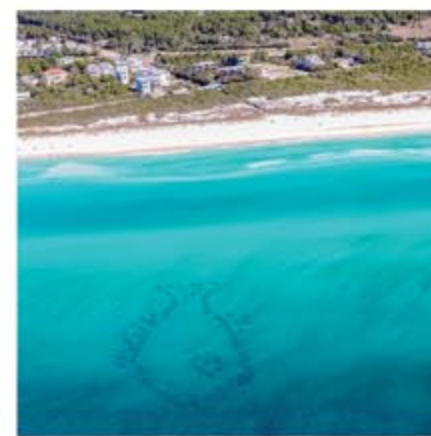
Probably where I am now, in the high mountains in Switzerland. It has everything; I can do all the skydiving and paragliding that I want, and I love the climbing and the community here. I like the fact that I've got my ice trough—my old horse trough that's full of cold water—and access to great sun and great natural mountain food (good cheeses, great meats). I think this is a really happy place for me, and it's where we always head back to after filming. It's a simple life up here, but it's wonderful.

What is your secret to happiness?

The five Fs: family, great friends, follow your dreams, keep things fun, and faith. Those are the things I've always tried to follow.

To learn more about Bear, visit beargrylls.com or follow him on Instagram (@beargrylls). To learn more about Ancestral Supplements, visit ancestralsupplements.com.





diving in

**30A local Walt Hartley
finds his calling,
just offshore**

By Martin Liptrot
Photos: Guillaume LECHAT

It's Spring Break on Scenic Highway 30A - our slice of paradise along the Florida Gulf Coast. Every inch of sand is lined with umbrellas and beach chairs set up for the wave of visitors from Dallas to Detroit. Real estate agents are busy persuading vacation-house hungry buyers that 1200 sq. ft. of new build 'north of the 98' is the beach house of their dreams.

But there is a place along this coast where acres of untouched sand remain. Where you can spend the day miles from your nearest neighbor, and the sound of country-pop, loud telephones-talkers, and screaming kids never penetrates.

The locals know where it is, and for a modest fee, they will take you there.

Ask Walt Hartley.

Walt runs Dive30A and Snorkel30A, and he will happily take you and your party out into the Gulf—away from the screaming and shouting hordes—anchor up above one

of the many dive hot spots and sand bars along this coast, and let you float and cruise through the emerald waters.

Born in Dallas, Texas, Walt moved to Seagrove as a young kid and wasn't immediately struck by the beauty of the beach.

"Like any other pouting pre-teen, I couldn't immediately see what the attraction was to all those miles of empty beach. When I swam in the salty water, it stung my eyes, and I longed for the urban life we'd left behind in Dallas," said Walt.

Walt worked in the Seagrove Village Market his father had bought in 1999 and moodily explored the dune lakes, forests, and beaches in his free time.

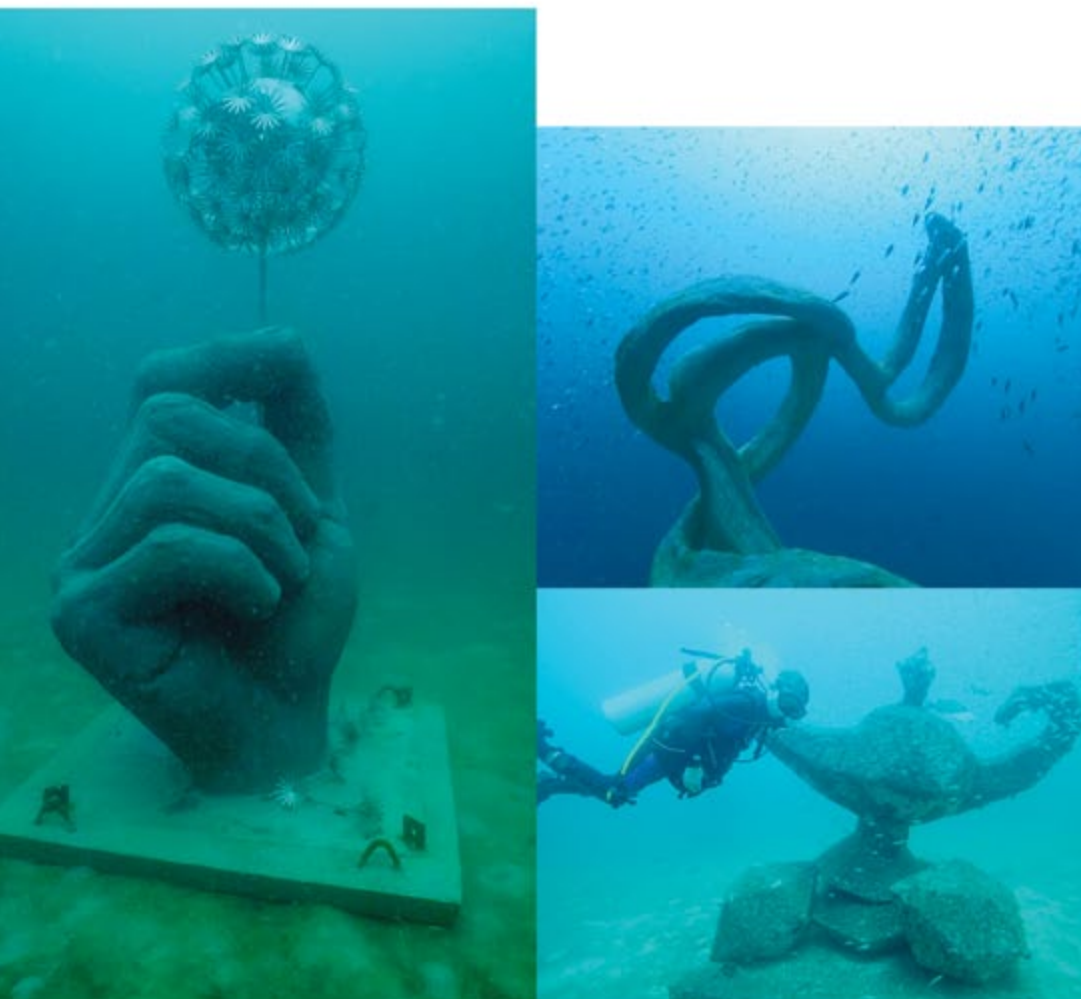
"It was on one of my long beach walks that things changed," he recalled. "Hunting around under the beach access points, I found a battered old surfboard under the boardwalk near our house. Well, it was

probably two-thirds of a surfboard, but for an 11-year-old, it opened a world of possibilities."

"It felt like this new opportunity had just dropped into my lap, and I started spending more and more time messing around in the wave breaks and paddling my beat up old board along the beach."

Things conspired to move fast for Walt. "I got a job offer from Chris Webb who ran one of the very first beach service teams down at Rosemary Beach, so I ditched the kitchens at my dad's place for working on the sand," said Walt. "I met Ridge Nye and his son Nicholas, a huge influence on me, and after spending time in the dive pool in Destin, the summer I turned 12, I picked up my PADI Junior Open Water Diver Certification. I thought I was the coolest kid in school."

But this new-found love of the water and what lay underneath was to shape a philosophy Walt has lived by ever since.



“I needed to have an activity, something to occupy me, no matter what the weather and sea conditions looked like,” said Walt.

“If the Gulf was flat calm then I was out fishing or snorkeling, if there was a decent breeze, I’d pull out the Hobie 16 catamaran, and if the waves were up, I was out on my longboard.”

Diving and working the beach, Walt settled into life along 30A. His parents took him on a diving trip to the Florida Keys where Walt was amazed by the wealth of marine life he saw. Returning north, he started diving and exploring the fresh water springs that dot the landscape of Northwest Florida.

“The water was so clear and pristine, and when I shined a light under some of the ledges, I could see they opened up into a full-on underwater cave system,” recalled Walt. “I knew better than to go into an underwater cave without the proper training and equipment, but my curiosity was piqued.”

Graduating high school, Walt headed off to Boston College but the pull of the warm waters in South Florida saw him transfer to University of Miami to complete his BSc in Film and Motion Pictures.

Bouncing around jobs in Colorado, California, and Texas, Walt headed back to 30A in 2013 to set up his video and film production company.

“I met Andy McAlexander who had recently founded the South Walton Artificial Reef Association (SWARA), and in 2015, when they received their permits to create the first of the now 16 reefs off the 30A coast, they wanted a video created. This was my destiny—working in film, diving, and living along this precious coast.”

Learning more about the work SWARA was doing, Walt joined the board in 2016 and became a passionate advocate of marine conservation, expanding the coastal habitat, and managing issues along the coast of Scenic 30A.

“I started spending more time out on the water,” Walt recalled. “I had a crude GPS. I was trying to master the art of dropping anchor exactly where I wanted to be, and I was seeing sharks, octopuses, and sea turtles up close.”

It was then that Walt recognized there was a business opportunity there.

“There were no dive shops in Walton County. If you wanted to dive the reefs, it was a two-hour boat ride to Destin, one-way,” he said. “I set up Snorkel30A in 2017. We would meet clients on the beach, pile them onto our giant raft, and use our kayaks to paddle them out to the reefs—whether that was the

Grayton Beach Turtle or Inlet Beach Grouper. Arriving by kayak, with no noise in order not to disturb the marine life, and the giant raft we still use served as a great dive platform for guests to explore from.”

Walt decided to expand his underwater adventure businesses to include SCUBA diving.

“I worked closely with the county for the entirety of 2019 to get a new class of beach launch permits created that would allow us to take divers out to our local sites. I got the first SCUBA Launch permit in Walton County and invested in a dive boat, trailer, compressors, and other key operational infrastructure and kit,” said Walt.

In 2018, the Underwater Museum of Art opened off 30A’s coast and attracted a lot of attention. National Geographic wanted to do something and needed a suitably qualified underwater cameraman. They went to see Walt.

In 2020, Walt opened Dive30A, and of course, it was immediately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To deal with the crisis, the authorities temporarily closed the beaches, a challenge for many businesses, including Walt’s fledgling enterprise.

But Walt persevered, and now the business is thriving.

“Last year we probably did just shy of 100 charters in the summer season and took more than 600 snorkelers out to the snorkel reefs. We also offer training, classes, and certification. We’ve offered Dive Master internships and provide expanded support for citizen science and other volunteer dive teams,” said Walt.

And the dive scene in South Walton continues to grow.

The Underwater Museum of Art (UMA) is preparing for its fifth deployment of sculptures and works of art to be submerged on sand bars off the coast. The one-acre patch of seabed off Grayton Beach State Park, the nation’s first permanent underwater gallery, provides a source of biological replenishment and protective marine habitat, offering divers and snorkelers the chance to view creative art and the wonders of the Gulf at the same time.

“We are so lucky to call this place home. I have grown to love this area and 30A’s coastal and marine ecosystems deserve our protection,” said Walt. “While development, traffic, and human activity are changing our way of life on land, out here in the Gulf, the natural world is still king.” 🐠

To learn more about Walt and to join him on his underwater adventures, follow Dive30A + Snorkel30A on Facebook (@snorkel30A).

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shifting GEARS

From Manhattan to Death Valley to 30A and beyond, Jillian Rebekah conquers one unpaved trail at a time.

By Lauren Sage Reinlie

Jillian Rebekah often encounters obstacles she is not sure she can overcome.

The 40-year-old lives a life she never imagined for herself, but it has helped her find meaning and purpose. In turn, she has inspired countless others to seek and overcome challenges in their own lives.

It all started with a pickup truck. Specifically, the tan Toyota Tacoma she bought for herself in 2016, after returning to her childhood home in Southern California. As a recent transplant from bustling Manhattan, where she and her husband had kept a tiny sedan tucked in a garage, the truck was a significant shift. But she was spending more and more time exploring mountains and deserts. And there were places she just couldn't access. She needed the power of a four-wheel drive.





Seemingly endless trail systems wound through the Eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains, about four hours from where she lived. The trails explored all around Mount Whitney, the tallest peak in the United States outside Alaska, and across Death Valley, the lowest point on the continent.

“The diversity in the area is huge,” said Jillian. “That was my playground almost every weekend. I was out there just exploring, but I was also seeking something.”

She recalled a pivotal moment not long after she bought the truck when she had been exploring Kennedy Meadows, high in the mountains, moving her truck through terrain that challenged her. She was miles from civilization, scared she would get stuck, and wondering how on earth she would get out of it. It’s rough on the truck, but also on the mind and body of the explorer behind the wheel.



“You’re putting yourself out there, far away from all the normal safety nets we have,” she said. “You’re on your own. There’s some fear involved.”

Finally, she made it to the end of the trail and discovered an astounding view that took hold of her – the way the sunlight filtered through the trees, the sound of a stream trickling nearby. She was hooked.

“It was this incredible moment where I just felt like, ‘Oh, this is what I’m going to do,’” she said. “I’m pursuing this. Whatever I need to morph into to get more of this, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Jillian said she has learned to combine the experience of these impressive natural phenomena with the relief and pride that comes with challenging herself, overcoming her fears, and conquering obstacles. That sweet spot is

where she feels closest to life’s meaning.

Still, she had no idea that within a short time, she would be swapping suspensions, trading bumpers, and adding gear ratios to her motor, much less getting a rooftop tent for sleeping in her truck, taking days-long trips to remote locations, leading women-only camping excursions, and becoming one of the top influencers in the overland adventure industry.

“I kind of accidentally fell into this whole thing, which makes it really fun,” she said. “It feels authentic.”

A Sharp Right

In 2011, Jillian and her husband, who have been married for almost 20 years, had hit a rocky place in New York. He was climbing the ladder in the financial industry and had landed a coveted gig on Wall Street, but the couple realized the life they had been working towards was not as dreamy as they had imagined. There was no joy or fulfillment. They needed to find their way back to each other and out of the mess they’d made.

Jillian was asking questions: How am I living my life? What example am I setting? Where is the meaning? What do I want the meaning to be?

They made a break for it, desperate to try anything to keep themselves and their marriage intact. They moved back to Southern California and started piecing things together. At first, they hit the trails side-by-side, but it soon became apparent that this would be Jillian’s thing. It was a calling, and she set out more on her own.

Overlanding, or taking long off-road treks, began decades ago in Australia, parts of Asia, Europe, and South Africa. In the United States, it has enjoyed a significant boom over the last five years, with people setting out on adventures in everything from pieced-together junk vehicles to multi-million-dollar trucks explicitly designed for the purpose. Trips range from overnight to months at a time.

“The vehicles let us drive hundreds of miles off the highway to explore a new mountain range,” Jillian said. “We’re finding these new ways to escape the city and the rat race and the craziness of our heavily connected lives. And, as cliché as it sounds, you really are finding yourself again.”

As one of the few women in a tight-knit and mostly male community, when Jillian started posting pictures of her and her truck on social media, she got noticed. People began urging her to take her explorations farther. As she did, she

realized she had a message to share with others who were already into overlanding or might be interested in taking a leap in their lives, whatever that may be.

It's never too late to re-evaluate, ask questions about your life, make big changes, or take a sharp right turn. "If you felt like you just went through life and colored in the lines for the last 20 years, and now you are wondering, did I waste my life? No, you didn't," Jillian said. "I waited until I was 35 to find this."

Into the Unknown

Since then, Jillian has taken many trips, including down to the border of Mexico, across West Texas, and her longest excursion, 25 days on the road up to Washington state.

The challenges are real. Jillian has encountered shelf roads where she felt she would slide off or flip her truck. She hit rain storms that seemed beautiful until she realized the water turned the road into mud. And not the right kind of mud – the snot kind of mud where she wondered if she'd ever get back to civilization. A man brandishing a knife crashed one of her women-only campouts, and she had to go into mama-bear mode to convince him to leave. Once, she accidentally camped in the middle of a caravan of migrants being smuggled into the country overnight.

"You have to learn how to handle yourself properly," she said. "You have to be as well trained as you can and be aware of your surroundings in a way you maybe weren't before."

Today, Jillian is still driving that tan Tacoma. She leads her Ladies Night Campouts, as she has for the past five years, helping to forge dozens of friendships and give women the confidence to set out on their own. She has over 45,000 followers on her Instagram page (@jillianrebekah), and she has her own podcast, Citizen J, in partnership with Storyteller Overland. She will be a VIP guest at the 9th Annual 30A Sand Rover Rally (30Asandroverrally.com) on April 14–16, 2023, in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida.



When she's not doing all that, she can be found on the trail, pushing herself, scaring herself a little, taking in those moments of pure joy, and sharing them with others.

"I get to watch people go, 'Oh, I'm going to go try something new, because I watched you do that. And it wasn't that scary, and you got to the other side of it, and it didn't kill you. Now, I have some encouragement to go do it my way.' I think we all need each other in that way."

To learn more about Jillian, visit her website (citizenj.com) or follow her on Instagram (@jillianrebekah).

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BEACH READY



2023'S Best Gadgets and Gear for Tropical Adventures

Here at *Beach Happy*, we love the thrill of exploring a new place, going out of our comfort zone, and taking a break from our typical day-to-day. Whether you love hiking, being out on the water, or seeing where the road takes you, having the right gear can definitely enhance your trip. As you plan your future adventures to destinations near and far, we've rounded up a few of our favorite products to take along with you.

By Abigail Abesamis Demarest



LifeStraw Peak Water Filter Straw

Staying hydrated when you're out in nature is super important, and if you didn't pack enough water or your hike goes longer than expected, a filtration straw like this one can be super handy to have. The LifeStraw Peak Water Filter Straw removes silt, sand, bacteria, parasites, and microplastics from water using a membrane microfilter. It weighs just 2.3 ounces and takes up very little space, so there's no excuse not to bring it along.

REI.com
(\$24.95)



GoPro HERO11 Black

When it comes to capturing adventure content, from skiing on mountains to snorkeling in stunning reefs, the GoPro is a classic for a reason. This versatile camera is waterproof up to 33 feet, durable, and takes high-resolution photos and videos.

This particular model has a larger image sensor that captures more of what you see in real life. It also automatically uploads your footage to the cloud and creates a highlight video when it's charging. It's described as "the most powerful GoPro yet," and you can get a discount on one when you sign up for a 1-year GoPro subscription, which includes unlimited cloud backup and auto uploads, plus discounts on the GoPro website.

GoPro.com
(\$349.98)





Earth Pak Summit Dry Bag Backpack

Keep your valuables, snacks, and gear dry with this stylish waterproof backpack by Earth Pak. It comes in three different sizes and is made with a PVC material that offers waterproof and abrasion protection. It has a roll-top closure that keeps water from getting into the top of your bag when you're on the water or caught in the rain, interior pockets that keep your most important things secure and dry, and exterior pockets for things you need to access quickly.

Earth Pak.com
(\$58.45-\$78.85)



Pelican 1050 Case with Carabiner

If you're whitewater kayaking or canoeing along a river and need a place to store your phone and car keys, this Pelican case has you covered. It's a mini version of the original Pelican Case and is large enough to hold a larger cell phone or camera. It's water-resistant, dust-proof, and has a soft rubber liner to keep everything inside from banging around. A convenient carabiner on the outside of the case lets you clip it onto a boat or your bathing suit.

REI.com
(\$31.95)

Costa Fantail Sunglasses

Whether you're kayaking or dolphin watching, sunglasses are an adventure staple--and Costa sunglasses are made for the water. The Fantail is one of their bestselling designs, and their premium polarized 580 lenses are a big reason why. Costa's polarized lenses filter reflective glare (so you can see fish and other wildlife swimming in the water with ease), offer 100 percent UV protection, and have a special coating that makes them scratch-resistant and water-, oil- and sweat-repellent. They're designed as performance sport fishing sunglasses but are well-suited for all sorts of outdoor adventures.

CostaDelMar.com
(\$154.40-\$218.40)



BigBlue Solarpowa 28 SunPower Solar Charger

No matter where your adventure takes you, you're probably bringing along some small electronics to document your travels and navigate. Having something to charge your devices when you're out and about, especially when you're off-grid, can be super helpful. The BigBlue Solarpowa 28 SunPower Solar Charger has three USB charging ports so that you can charge multiple devices at once, and its compact size and lightweight design make it easy to stash into a backpack. The highly efficient power panels convert up to 24 percent of the energy they absorb, and their durable design is said to stand up to the elements.

BigBlue-tech.com
(\$69.99)

YOLO Inflatable SUP Board

Lightweight, durable, and portable, the YOLO Inflatable SUP Board is ready for your next adventure. It's made with the same marine-grade materials as whitewater rafts and features unique artwork created by the brand in-house, yielding a paddleboard that looks great and performs even better. Each inflatable SUP board comes with a rolling backpack, 3-piece adjustable paddle, hand pump, pressure gauge, removable center fin, and bungee system.

YOLOBoard.com
(\$699)

Patagonia Men's Hydropeak Boardshorts - 21"

Whether you're surfing the waves or chilling on the beach, these lightweight, quick-drying boardshorts are soon to be your new go-to. Made of recycled polyester (so they're good for the beautiful planet we call home), the Patagonia Men's Hydropeak Boardshorts have a performance fit (including a contoured waistband that's designed to move), smooth seams (to prevent chafing), and a rear patch pocket with a key loop.

Patagonia.com
(\$75)





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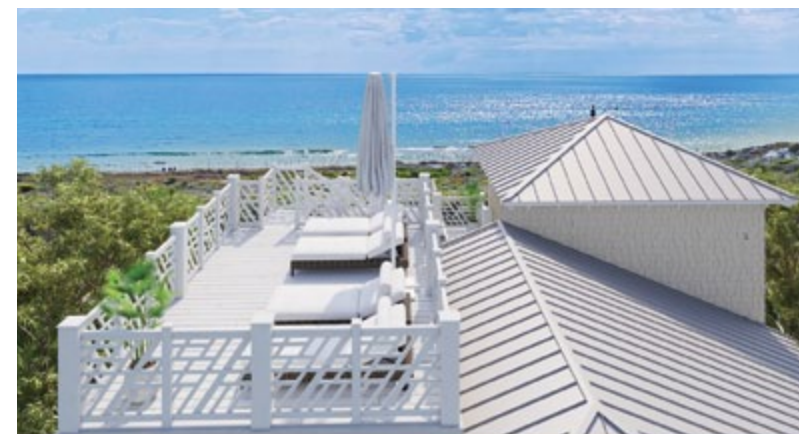
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INDEPENDENT LIVING

PARGA, GREECE

By Mike Ragsdale

Parga is a small coastal town located in the region known as Epirus in Northwestern Greece. Parga is situated on the electric blue Ionian Sea, not far from the Albanian border. The town is surrounded by beautiful natural scenery, including mountains, lush forests, and alluring pockets of beach, making Parga a popular destination for sun-seekers.

WHY GO?

Parga is a picturesque hillside town with narrow, winding streets, colorful businesses and houses, and jaw-dropping views of the sea. It's also home to some of the most beautiful beaches in Greece, with crystal-clear waters and golden sand. Valtos Beach, Lichnos Beach, and Sarakiniko Beach are just a few of the beaches in the immediate area. In addition to swimming and sunbathing, there are many outdoor activities. You can go hiking on various trails through the nearby hills and mountains, kayak or paddle board along the rocky coast, or you can take a boat tour to explore nearby sea caves and islands. Unfortunately, the 11th-century castle that presides over the town was closed while we were there. The castle was initially built by the Venetians, who ruled over the area at the time, but it features a mix of Venetian, Ottoman, and British architectural styles, reflecting the different periods of Parga's jumbled history.

WHERE SHOULD I EAT?

Needless to say, the food here is fresh, flavorful, and profoundly satisfying. You can easily find international cuisine, if you must, but we came here for traditional Greek fare such as moussaka, souvlaki, and tzatziki, as well as fresh seafood and local specialties like pastitsada. We spent a disproportionate amount of our time selfishly squatting on the outdoor tables at Caravel Bistro, right by the pier in the middle of town. Not only does Caravel Bistro serve a great menu, but it's the ultimate spot for people-watching, where local fishermen, children, cats, dogs, seagulls, and tourists collide. Caravel Bistro serves a fantastic brunch for those looking to loiter all day. If it's hardcore authentic Greek cuisine that you seek, look no further than Taverne Tzimas. The hosts of this family-run eatery will ensure that you don't leave with any room left in your appetite, all at very reasonable prices. If you're craving cocktails and pizza, Ponte Cafe and Bistro serves up some of the best in town, and it's located right along Parga's bustling and picturesque waterfront.



HOW DO I GET THERE?

We arrived in Parga via rental car, following a six-week road trip through Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Albania. It was a bucket list adventure that we can't recommend highly enough. But if getting lost in the spectacular bunker-laden mountains of Albania isn't your cup of ouzo, there are several U.S. airlines – including Delta, American Airlines, and United – that offer flights to Athens International Airport (ATH), usually with a layover somewhere in Western Europe. Once you arrive in Athens, you can either take a connecting flight to the nearby Aktion National Airport (PVK), which is about an hour's drive from Parga, or you can book a bus or taxi to Parga. The bus journey takes about 4 to 5 hours, while a taxi takes about 3 hours.

WHERE SHOULD I STAY?

As our dog, Ernie, was accompanying us, we rented a quaint pet-friendly Airbnb just one kilometer above Parga's town center. Our 1-bedroom Villa Ektoras featured a small kitchen, a front porch, parking, and exceptionally friendly hosts. For those who prefer hotels, Salvator Villas & Spa Hotel offers spacious, well-appointed villas with private pools and epic sea views. It also has a spa, fitness center, and restaurant. Prices start around \$170 USD per night, depending on the season. Racconto Boutique Design Hotel is a stylish spot located in the heart of Parga and features elegant, modern rooms with balconies or terraces. Prices start at around \$105 per night. Villa Rossa is a charming guesthouse with comfortable rooms and apartments with balconies overlooking the sea. Prices start at around \$75 per night. And if you're on a tighter budget, Acrothea Hotel is located just a few minutes' walk from the beach and features clean, simple rooms with balconies for around \$50.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Generally speaking, Parga is a relatively affordable destination compared to other parts of Greece and Europe. Budget hotel options start around \$50–60 per night, while mid-range hotels cost around \$80–120 per night. Luxury hotels and villas can range from \$150–300 per night or more. Prices for a basic (but delicious) meal run around \$10–15 per person, while a more upscale restaurant can cost as much as \$30–40 per person. Local wine and beer are relatively inexpensive, just \$3–4 per glass. Besides fishing boats puttering in and out of the harbor, taxis and buses are the most common forms of transportation here. Taxis typically run \$5 for short trips, while longer journeys can cost as much as \$20–30. Bus fares are relatively cheap, with a one-way ticket costing just \$2–3. Despite my penchant for lounging around by the sea and doing absolutely nothing, there are many fun activities in Parga, including water sports, hiking, and visiting various historical sites. Prices for these activities can vary, with entrance fees to historical sites ranging from \$2–5 per person and water sports activities costing around \$20–30 per hour. Or you can sit around and do nothing. I found that to be damn-near free.



Since 2007, our annual 30A Hot Spot Awards have been your opportunity to support and celebrate the people, places, restaurants, shops, and activities that make Florida's Scenic Highway 30A so darn special. We accepted your nominations throughout January, narrowing down the field to the top 10 contestants in each category. Now, with over 50,000 votes cast, it's time to reveal the winners of our 2023 30A Hot Spots Awards!

HOTTEST SPOT FOR CASUAL DINING

WINNER: Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar
2nd Place: The Red Bar
3rd Place: North Beach Social

HOTTEST SPOT FOR FINE DINING

WINNER: Café Thirty-A
2nd Place: Gallion's
3rd Place: The Citizen

HOTTEST SPOT FOR OUTDOOR DINING

WINNER: Old Florida Fish House
2nd Place: Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar
3rd Place: Bud & Alley's

HOTTEST SPOT FOR KID-FRIENDLY DINING

WINNER: North Beach Social
2nd Place: Pizza by the Sea
3rd Place: Pickle's Burgers and Shakes

HOTTEST SPOT FOR DOG-FRIENDLY DINING

WINNER: North Beach Social
2nd Place: The Big Chill 30a
3rd Place: Great Southern Café

HOTTEST SPOT FOR COFFEE

WINNER: Black Bear Bread Co.
2nd Place: Amavida Coffee Roasters
3rd Place: Fonville Press Market + Café

{NOTE: While we sincerely appreciate the votes, 30A's Beach Happy Cafe in WaterColor was excluded from this poll to help ensure fairness.}

HOTTEST SPOT FOR BREAKFAST / BRUNCH

WINNER: Donut Hole
2nd Place: The Perfect Pig
3rd Place: Blue Mabel Smokehouse and Provisions

HOTTEST SPOT FOR LUNCH

WINNER: Chanticleer Eatery
2nd Place: Cowgirl Kitchen
3rd Place: Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar

HOTTEST SPOT FOR SWEETS (BAKERY, ICE CREAM, CANDY)

WINNER: Pecan Jacks Ice Cream and Candy
2nd Place: Blue Mountain Beach Creamery
3rd Place: Kilwins

{NOTE: While we sincerely appreciate the votes, 30A's Beach Happy Cafe in WaterColor was excluded from this poll to help ensure fairness.}

HOTTEST SPOT FOR SEAFOOD

WINNER: Stinky's Fish Camp
2nd Place: Old Florida Fish House
3rd Place: Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar

HOTTEST SPOT FOR RAW OYSTERS

WINNER: Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar
2nd Place: Hurricane Oyster Bar and Grill
3rd Place: The Citizen

HOTTEST SPOT FOR SUSHI / ASIAN CUISINE

WINNER: Shaka Sushi and Cocktail Bar
2nd Place: Nanbu Noodle Bar
3rd Place: Basmati's Asian Cuisine

HOTTEST SPOT FOR ITALIAN CUISINE

WINNER: Borago Restaurant
2nd Place: Mimmo's
3rd Place: Amici 30A Italian Kitchen

HOTTEST SPOT FOR PIZZA

WINNER: Grace Pizza and Shakes 30A
2nd Place: Pizza by the Sea
3rd Place: Bruno's Pizza

HOTTEST SPOT FOR MEXICAN / LATIN CUISINE

WINNER: Amigos 30A Mexican Kitchen
2nd Place: Taco 30A
3rd Place: Red Fish Taco

HOTTEST SPOT FOR BURGERS

WINNER: Pickle's Burgers and Shakes
2nd Place: The Bay
3rd Place: Beach Camp Brewpub

HOTTEST CHEF

WINNER: Chef Camille Withall @ George's at Alys Beach
2nd Place: Chef Jim Shirley @ Jim Shirley Restaurant Group
3rd Place: Chef Jim Richard @ Word of Mouth Restaurant Group

HOTTEST NEW RESTAURANT (OPENED IN 2022)

WINNER: Gallion's
2nd Place: Down Island Gulf Seafood Restaurant
3rd Place: Grace Pizza and Shakes 30A

HOTTEST BARTENDER

WINNER: Tyler Faust @ The Citizen
2nd Place: Nikki Hilbert @ Gallion's
3rd Place: Allie Spears @ NEAT Tasting Room and Bottle Shop

HOTTEST SERVER

WINNER: Jamie Regan @ Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar
2nd Place: Chrissy Parks @ Shades Bar and Grill
3rd Place: Harrison Krause @ The Citizen

HOTTEST SPOT FOR LIVE MUSIC

WINNER: The Red Bar
2nd Place: Red Fish Taco
3rd Place: AJ's Grayton Beach

HOTTEST HAPPY HOUR

WINNER: The Wine Bar in WaterColor
2nd Place: Great Southern Café
3rd Place: Hurricane Oyster Bar and Grill



HOTTEST SPOT TO WATCH THE BIG GAME

WINNER: Shades Bar and Grill
 2nd Place: The Big Chill 30A
 3rd Place: Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar

HOTTEST LOCAL MUSICIAN OR BAND

WINNER: Dread Clampitt
 2nd Place: The Pickled Pickers
 3rd Place: Cadillac Willy

HOTTEST ANNUAL EVENT

WINNER: 30A Songwriters Festival
 2nd Place: Digital Graffiti at Alys Beach
 3rd Place: Seaside School Half Marathon + 5K

HOTTEST ARTIST

WINNER: Justin Gaffrey
 2nd Place: Allison Wickey
 3rd Place: Andy Saczynski

HOTTEST PHOTOGRAPHER

WINNER: Susan Gunn
 2nd Place: Dawn Whitty
 3rd Place: Jonah Allen

HOTTEST FISHING GUIDE / CHARTER

WINNER: Grayton Girl Fishing Charters
 2nd Place: Fishy Booty Charters
 3rd Place: Lil' Lucky Fishing Charters

HOTTEST SPOT TO WORKOUT

WINNER: Grayton Beach Fitness
 2nd Place: TreadFormer30A
 3rd Place: Studio Thirty-A

HOTTEST SPOT TO GET PAMPERED (SPA, SALON, MASSAGE, AESTHETICS)

WINNER: Serenity by the Sea Spa
 2nd Place: The Aesthetic Clinique
 3rd Place: The Spa in Seaside

HOTTEST GOLF COURSE

WINNER: Camp Creek Golf Course
 2nd Place: Santa Rosa Golf and Beach Club
 3rd Place: Shark's Tooth Golf Club

HOTTEST AREA FOR SHOPPING

WINNER: Grand Boulevard
 2nd Place: Seaside
 3rd Place: Silver Sands Premium Outlets

HOTTEST CLOTHING BOUTIQUE

WINNER: Indigo Watercolor
 2nd Place: Willow + Mercer
 3rd Place: Alys Shoppe

{NOTE: While we sincerely appreciate the votes, the 30A Stores were excluded from this poll to help ensure fairness.}

HOTTEST KIDS ACTIVITY

WINNER: 30A Sea-life Discovery Center
 2nd Place: E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center
 3rd Place: REP Theatre

HOTTEST LOCAL PARK

WINNER: Grayton Beach State Park
 2nd Place: Eden Gardens State Park
 3rd Place: Topsail Hill Preserve State Park

HOTTEST HOTEL / INN

WINNER: The Pearl Hotel
 2nd Place: Hotel Effie
 3rd Place: WaterColor Inn

HOTTEST SPOT FOR BEER LOVERS

WINNER: Growler Garage
 2nd Place: Shade's Bar and Grill
 3rd Place (TIE): Grayton Beer Taproom and Idyll Hounds Brewing Company

HOTTEST SPOT FOR WINE LOVERS

WINNER: The Wine Bar in WaterColor
 2nd Place: Gallion's
 3rd Place: Vintij Food and Wine

HOTTEST SPOT FOR A WEDDING

WINNER: Eden Gardens State Park
 2nd Place: The Chapel at Seaside
 3rd Place: Vue on 30a

Congratulations to all of our 2023 30A Hot Spot Award nominees and winners! Be sure to follow 30A on Facebook (@scenic30A), Instagram (@hey30A), and YouTube (@30A) for daily beach and community updates.



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CALIFORNIA'S SLO LANE

Seaweed foraging, rockhounding, and mineral springs complement California's newest wine region

By Carrie Honaker

California wine country always leads to talk of Sonoma, Napa, and Russian River, but in 2022, a new American Viticulture Area (AVA) entered the picture. San Luis Obispo (SLO) is often associated with Paso Robles, but this new AVA brings into focus 30 winemakers planting and producing within six miles of the Pacific Coast. The low temperatures coupled with abundant sunlight, and soils ranging from marine to volcanic, produce wines with vibrant coastal profiles. I hopped in my car and headed to Highway 1 to check it out.

Photos: Kelpful,
Carrie Honaker,
Highway 1 Road Trip



The following was my path, but extensive trip planning resources including where to stay, what to do, and where to eat can be found on the Highway 1 Road Trip website (highway1roadtrip.com).



Avila Beach

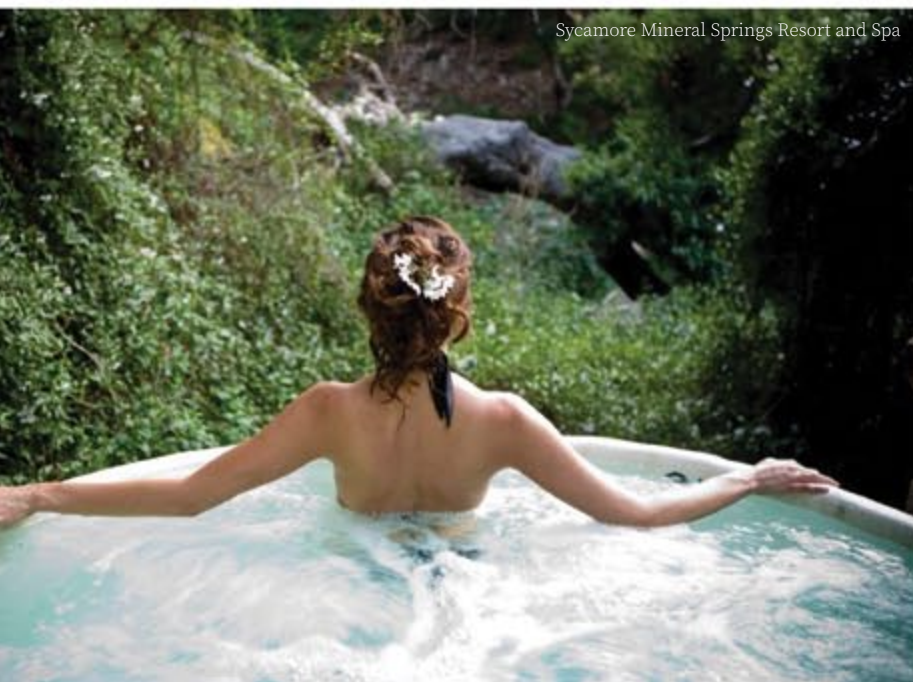
The first stop was to check in at Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort and Spa in Avila Beach. It sits on 125 acres of meadows and forests with 24 open-air, naturally heated mineral spring hot tubs dotting the hillside. The onsite two-acre chef’s garden seeds the offerings at the Gardens of Avila Restaurant, and the Secret Garden is a tucked-in spot for intimate interludes over the Green Sycamore Bridge.

Tucked away under a canopy of sycamore trees, this spot was discovered in 1886 by oil drillers looking for black gold. What they found was hot mineral water bubbling out of a natural well. Known as healing waters, the property became a spa and a resort, and a popular stop on the Pacific Coast Railway, midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Just a few minutes away from the resort, the Avila Valley Barn serves up hay rides, goat feeding, and scoops of locally made ice cream. The Bob Jones “City to the Sea” bike trail was a welcome stretch for my road-cramped legs as I cycled out to San Luis Pier for a bowl of Mersea’s famous steamer clams overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Throughout SLO, there are tasting rooms and tours at vineyards such as Sinor-LaVallee in downtown Avila Beach. Mike Sinor walked me through his and his wife Cheri’s journey of growing grapes 1.2 miles from the coast while enjoying Morro Bay oysters at the Shuck Shack paired with their sparkling Pet Nat (the best I’ve ever had). While slurping oysters, I examined the bottles of wine—they all have the fingerprints of Mike, Cheri, and their two kids etched on the front and back. Their DNA heralds the stories in the bottles.

My last day in Avila happened to coincide with their annual Harvest on the Coast Sip and Savor by the Sea festival. I sampled Stephen Ross’s Blanc de Noir (so delicious), Claiborne & Churchill’s Dry Gewurtztraminer, Talley Vineyard’s Rosemary’s Pinot Noir (named after his mother), and many more incredible wines all against the backdrop of the rugged Pacific Ocean.



Sycamore Mineral Springs Resort and Spa



Mersea's, San Luis Pier



Sinor-LaVallee



Sinor-LaVallee Pet Nat

Cayucos

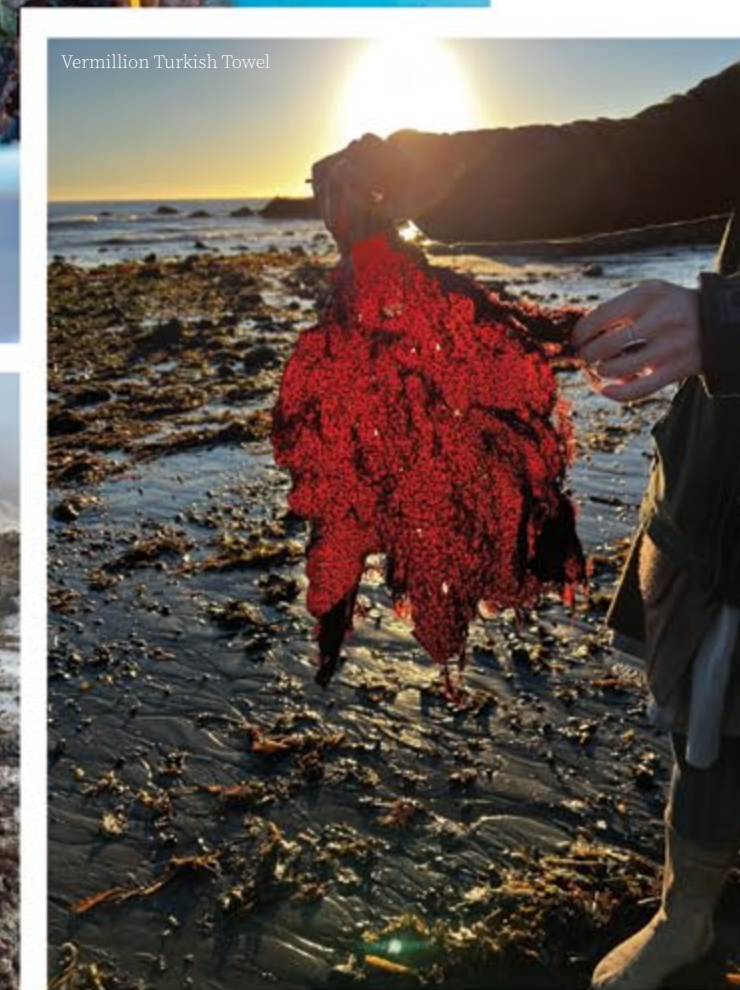
Just up Highway 1 in Cayucos, Kelpful runs seaweed foraging out of Estero Bluffs. It was cold, but I wasn't going to miss this opportunity. Our guide, founder Melissa Hanson, walked our group down the cliffs to the beach where we huddled up with some seaweed popcorn to learn about the Chumash tribe who harvested seaweed and seafood here for tens of thousands of years. Hanson handed out a mesh bag and scissors as she went over the species we would come across while foraging.

"I was working in the solar industry at a non-profit when I heard a podcast about kelp farming on the East Coast," said Hanson. "It checked all my boxes. My dad is an oceanographer. I've traveled the world on the water for weeks on end. Feeding myself and my family from the ocean has always been a part of my life."

I lucked onto a vermillion Turkish Towel and some briny Sea Grass as our fearless leader guided us around the tide pools, being careful of shy octopi and extracting some of the 15-plus varieties of kelp.

"Seaweed foraging offers people a chance to connect with this vital ecosystem and connect to where their food comes from," said Hanson. "Look at all the varieties of seaweed that can be found right here. I believe as a species, we have to shift how we meet our needs. Seaweed meets that—it heals as it grows,"

After watching the sunset over the rugged cliffs, I headed into town to grab an iconic brown butter sea salt cookie from the Brown Butter Cookie Company to warm my 58-degree Fahrenheit chilled bones post-foraging.



Cambria

Back in the car, I made my way to Cambria, a small town that eschews anything corporate. Sitting at the end of Moonstone Beach Drive, I found Oceanpoint Ranch. Driving up, the welcoming bonfire and sounds of impromptu guitar pickin' filled the air. Outdoor lawn games like croquet populated the property, and my room had a wood-burning fireplace for the chilly Central Coast night.

A short drive from the ranch sits Stepladder Creamery. Once you find it (there's no WI-FI so directions are a must), you enter a world of abundant avocados, winding passionfruit vines, and goats... lots of goats. Smooth Criminal, the head male goat, watched us carefully as we learned how to milk and make cheese on the 750-acre farm.

Settling down on one of the picnic tables, I dove into samples of their award-winning cheeses. The Pasa Vino soaked in wine from a local vineyard was firm and full-bodied. The Ragged Point, a triple cream named for the gateway to Big Sur, had a beautiful peppery flavor and smooth texture. The Chevre blew them all away. The creamy, tangy cheese changes seasonally—in spring it's mild, but in the fall it's tangier and goatier as hormones change in the goats. Paired with a dab of honey made from onsite avocados, it was sublime.

Walking off all that cheese was not a problem in Downtown Cambria. Small boutiques, antique shops, and artist galleries dot Main Street. In Sea + Green, I found a hand-dyed, quilted coat I couldn't live without and some advice about the infamous moonstones Cambria is known for. Turns out they are actually chalcedony, a form of quartz that resembles the opalescent moonstones. Still beautiful and definitely worthy of a beachcombing outing.

On our way back to the ranch, I had to stop at Linn's for a piece of their famous olallieberry pie. Back in 1977, the Linns moved to the Central Coast to start a farm. They grew olallieberries, a cross between a blackberry and a raspberry, which they used in the pies they sold at the farmstand. In 1989, they opened Linn's Restaurant in Cambria's historic East Village, and people have been flocking here for pie and preserves ever since.

Pie secured, I headed to Moonstone Beach to do a little rockhounding. A storm passed the night before, littering the beach with abundant bits of jade, agate, and the prized moonstones for me to collect. I gathered my precious gemstones and followed the private beach path back to the awaiting bonfire for one last evening of fellowship and music on the ranch.

Just another day in the SLO lane.

To learn more, or to plan your own trip, check out highway1roadtrip.com.



NOW
PLAYING
ON 30A
RADIO



Niko Moon's *Good Time*

No Sad Songs
Niko Moon's *Good Time* is the
perfect summer jam to celebrate
those beach happy days

By Gen Handley

Early in his 2006 book, *The Tao of Willie: A Guide to the Happiness in Your Heart*, Willie Nelson said, “Once you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, you’ll start having positive results.”

These are wise words that the country legend has learned over his influential career, and his words have resonated with artists of more recent generations, such as Niko Moon, who may be the biggest songwriter you’ve never heard of. He’s penned songs for artist such as Dierks Bentley, Zac Brown Band, and Rascal Flatts.

With spring now upon us and glorious summer up next, it’s time to think about the music you play grilling on the deck or on the beach with friends. ‘Summer Music’ should definitely be an official genre. A shoo-in for that category is *Good Time*, Moon’s aptly titled debut record and album that is perfect for the sunny days in our near future.

Like the playful rhythms and instruments that hold the record down, Moon’s lyrics and content are upbeat and positive with shout-outs to Willie Nelson, Hank Williams, and apple pie moonshine. He reminisces in his summer hit “Paradise City” about “piña coladas down in PCB,” aka Scenic 30A’s next-door neighbor, Panama City Beach. His music perfectly bottles the vibes of summer days in Florida’s Panhandle.

From the opening track, “No Sad Songs,” the positive tone for Moon’s beach bonfire is set, literally, with the Texas artist declaring:

*“I don’t wanna hear no sad songs,
I just wanna have some fun tonight.
Dancing all the way till last call,
Drink in my hand got me feelin’ right.”*

The album is also a labor of love, writing all but one of the songs with his wife Anna, also a singer-songwriter. The final song is a cover of Travis Tritt’s popular 2000 take on Darrell Scott’s song, “It’s a Great Day to Be Alive.” (While sonically different, Moon clearly follow’s Tritt’s devotion of the brevity of a simple country tune about good times – as well as some heartache of course.) But *Good Time* shows the power of simplicity and straight-to-the-point songwriting, which is perfect music for the dog days of summer when you just want to relax.

Scenic Highway 30A and the surrounding beaches have always attracted musicians and singers. Moon has great memories “down in PCB,” but what makes those memories even better are the soundtracks we have going in the background, scoring our lives with words and melodies of hope. That sunny demeanor and energy is felt throughout the album’s 14 songs, with snapshots about life and enjoying that life to its fullest – how every summer should be lived.

To learn more about Niko Moon, visit his website (nikomoon.com) and follow him on Instagram (@nikomoon).



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PHOTO CREDIT: NIKO MOON / SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT

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illumination

DIGITAL GRAFFITI AT ALYS BEACH TURNS THE SPOTLIGHT ON GLOBAL ARTISTS

Photos by Kurt Lischka

For one weekend each year, the pristine white walls, pathways, and rooftops of Alys Beach, Florida, become a giant blank canvas for digital artists from all over the globe. Now in its 16th year, this unique celebration of art, architecture, and technology will be held on May 19-20, 2023.

To learn more about Digital Graffiti, visit digitalgraffiti.com and follow @DigitalGraffitiFestival on Facebook.



ART BY SCAD STUDENTS



ART BY EMILIA FOSTRUETER

The vibrant and dynamic exhibits are different every year, created by digital artists from all around the world.



ART BY JINKU KIM

During Digital Graffiti, homes in Alys Beach explode with color and movement, creating a sensory feast.



ART BY LUKE HILDRETH

Many exhibits are interactive, inviting guests to actually become part of the art.



Bartender Matt Carmony serves up an Island Sidecar at General Horseplay



Key Lime Colada at Southernmost Beach Cafe

Advice from a Conch

Six Stand-Out Bars in Key West

By Carrie Honaker

Everybody knows Key West for boozy Duval Street. Jimmy Buffett's song "Last Mango in Paris" memorialized Capt. Tony's Saloon, and Ernest Hemingway spent many nights at Sloppy Joe's. But there's so much more to the bar scene in the Conch Republic, including some great out-of-the-way spots for live music. Jason Mudgett, director of rooms at Southernmost Beach Resort, and local resident for almost a decade, shared his favorite watering holes where you can also enjoy great music.



Hank Jr. and two of his friends.
Credit: Hank's Hair of the Dog Saloon



Hank's Hair of the Dog Saloon

"This spot is a very young and hip place for locals to hang out. They have great music and the best part is they are dog-friendly. I always get a Mermaid Water. It's gin, lemon, and a little bit of lavender—so delicious. And you don't need to dress up. You are fine in shorts and a T-shirt just relaxing, having one of their crafted cocktails or a beer, and hanging out listening to amazing music."

**409 Caroline St,
Station Key West, Florida 33040
(305) 509-7758
hankskeywest.com**



La Te Da

"This is an old bed and breakfast, but inside there's a bar with nightly music," said Mudgett. "They have a group called Threesome, and they are amazing. It's all live singing, and they do everything from the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and today. The vocal ranges of these singers will blow you away! I usually order a glass of wine here because of the classic setting. The fun thing about La Te Da is they have a dance area and do anything from Luther Vandross to Tina Turner to K.C. and the Sunshine Band. It is such a great little place to go to."

**1125 Duval St,
Key West, Florida
(305) 296-6706
lateda.com/cabaret**



Mango martini at Virgilio's.
Credit: Jason Mudgett

Virgilio's

"It's a popular spot for locals," said Mudgett. "It's on the back side of La Trattoria in Old Town right on Duval. They have wonderful live music, but something that's a bit special is on Mondays, they do \$7 Martini Mondays. I always order the Razzle Dazzle—it has raspberry vodka, Chambord, and sour mix in it. So perfect after a warm Key West day. They also serve a full menu of La Trattoria's food, but most people are there for the intimate ambiance and fabulous martinis."

**524 Duval St,
Key West, Florida
(305) 296-1075
facebook.com/VirgiliosMartiniBar**



Southernmost Beach Cafe

“Obviously, I love Southernmost Beach Cafe. We have a delicious Key Lime Colada made with Captain Morgan Spiced Rum, pineapple, coconut, and topped with Keke Key Lime Liqueur... so good,” said Mudgett. “It’s right on the beach. There’s a great atmosphere in a relaxed setting. They have a concert series and live music with great musicians by the pool daily. They do have games on, so if you want to come and watch the game while you’re here, you have a dream spot right on the sand, and it’s open to the public.”

**1405 Duval St,
Key West, Florida
(305) 295-6550
southernmostbeachresort.com/dine/southernmost-beach-cafe**



Point 5

“This is the only place on my list without live music, but they do have a DJ and draw a young crowd. It’s upstairs from the restaurant Nine One Five, which is so good as well,” said Mudgett. “Upstairs, they have an indoor bar, outdoor seating, and a DJ area. The atmosphere is colorful—the music, the personality, and everybody’s attitude is so upbeat. It’s friendly but relaxed and chill at the same time. And they have an insanely incredible Espresso Martini. I probably go there four times a week just to get that Espresso Martini. They also serve the full menu from the restaurant downstairs—it is one of the best places to eat in Key West, hands-down.”

**915 Duval St #5,
Key West, Florida
facebook.com/Point5**



General Horseplay

“I like this spot because it’s different. It stays very authentic to Key West by bringing its own vibe. Most of the bars here are either sports bars or what we think of as traditional bars. General Horseplay is unique, from the décor and the way the bartenders dress in their funky outfits to the drink choices. They have a Salted Caramel Martini that I absolutely love. It comes with a little sushi cupcake on the side. They also have an indoor and outdoor bar with live music in both areas. I just love the backyard bar. It has a retro 90s diner feel with little diner chairs and booths. Sometimes you can even spot a cat on the roof of the patio listening to the band. It’s a great bar to grab a drink and hang out with friends.”

**423 Caroline St, Key West, Florida
(305) 741-7599
generalhorseplay.com**

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GLACIAL BEACHES



ALASKAN ADVENTURE

Inside my 7-day Alaskan cruise with my mom

By Abigail Abesamis Demarest



Photos: Holland America Line
Abigail Abesamis Demarest

Growing up, I was lucky enough to go on some amazing family vacations. My mother, a cardiac nurse who immigrated from the Philippines to America in her early twenties to make a better life for her family, worked and saved to not only take care of our basic needs but also take us on trips around the world. Past vacations have taken us to a luxury resort in the Bahamas, island hopping in the Philippines, and we've even done a European bus tour that took us through London, Paris, Lucerne, Venice, and Madrid. Last fall, I finally got to take my mom on a vacation—an Alaskan cruise with Holland America Line.

When I called my mom to ask her if she'd be able to drop everything and take a cruise to Alaska in a few short weeks, she was overjoyed. For one, Alaska had been on both of our travel bucket lists, and since I moved from New York (where she lives) to Florida at the end of 2019, we hadn't spent as much time together as we're used to. We booked our respective flights to Seattle (the embarkation port) and got ready for a week of good food, adventure, and quality time together.

A Pre-Cruise Mini Adventure

I met my mom in the Seattle airport. As a travel writer, I've spent more than my fair share of time in airports, and since my flight arrived two hours earlier, I decided to meet my mom at her gate. We took a shuttle to the Sheraton Grand Seattle (both pre-arranged by Holland America Line), checked in, changed, and headed to the famous Pike Place Market—just a short walk from our hotel. It was golden hour, and the line outside the Pike Place Starbucks (the world's first!) was far too long. The



market itself was also buzzing with activity—fishmongers tossing the day's catch back and forth to each other, and people perusing the fresh flowers, prepared foods and pantry staples, and jewelry crafted by local artisans. We saw the gum wall, which was as gross as it sounds, stopped for dinner at a tiny Chinese restaurant within the market, and grabbed some sweets from Mee Sum Pastry (a Chinese bakery) before heading back to our hotel after a long day of travel.

On the morning our cruise departed, my mom and I woke up at around 6 a.m., which I attribute to our excitement and the fact that we had traveled from the Eastern and Central time zones the day before. So we did what anyone awake at that hour would do: go to Starbucks. And at 7 a.m., right when the Pike Place Starbucks opens, there was no line. In fact, the store was practically empty. We got to take all the photos we wanted, peruse the various branded tumblers and glassware, and order an exclusive drink only served at this location: pumpkin pie nitro cold brew. As two lifelong Starbucks fangirls, we were thrilled.

The Food and Drink

Dining aboard the Westerdam far exceeded my expectations. Most mornings, I'd head to the Lido Market (the ship's buffet-style dining



venue) after a group fitness class and enjoy a made-to-order omelet and crispy hashbrowns or a warm bowl of congee topped with scallions, crispy garlic, and an egg. For lunch, we'd usually eat at The Dining Room (the ship's main sit-down restaurant). On port days, an abbreviated menu was served to ensure everyone could get to their excursions in a timely manner, and in general, there was a wide variety of dishes to choose from. Small plates like fried calamari (served with three different dipping sauces) and crispy roasted cauliflower, and mains like the catch of the day and a Southwest quinoa bowl, were some of our go-to's. In the afternoons, The Dining Room served afternoon tea, complete with a tower of mini sandwiches, tarts, and pastries.

The dining options onboard expanded even further for dinner. While The Dining Room and Lido Market are open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner at no added cost, for a small fee you can dine at the ship's premium restaurants. These include Pinnacle Grill (a fancy steakhouse) and Canaletto (an Italian restaurant). At Pinnacle Grill, you'll find appetizers like steak tartare and clothesline candied bacon (a David Burke recipe), prime steaks (including a dry-aged Delmonico, filet mignon,



and a 36-ounce tomahawk ribeye), and seafood dishes (like Alaskan king salmon, seared scallops, and lobster tail). If you manage to save room for dessert, I recommend the Jacques Torres chocolate soufflé. Canaletto has a rotating menu of daily specials, plus classic dishes like jumbo lump crab risotto, lasagna bolognese, and spaghetti alle vongole that will happily send you into a food coma.

Over the course of our cruise, we also enjoyed a variety of beverages onboard—a Veuve Clicquot Champagne toast on our private veranda, impeccably crafted cocktails enjoyed during happy hour, hot afternoon tea that warmed our insides, a sommelier-selected bottle of Sonoma County pinot noir that paired beautifully with our Italian feast, and cozy lattes enjoyed in the Crow's Nest (an observation floor with panoramic views)—just to name a few. In short, Holland America Line has you covered on both the food and drinks front.

The On-Board Entertainment

If you're looking for something to do before or after dinner, there are plenty of options on board. As someone who played the violin for more than a decade, I was particularly interested



in the performances at Lincoln Center Stage, where a quartet of music virtuosos played enduring classics and pop song covers. Even if you aren't a musician, it's difficult to not be moved by the talent and passion of the professionals on stage. The B.B. King's Blues Club hosts live bands covering classic soul and rock-and-roll hits, and on my cruise, a stand-up comedian performed on two of the nights. Billboard Onboard hosted music trivia and singalongs with the help of two pianos, and the World Stage was the backdrop for dance-centric performances and some movie nights.

The Excursions

Our first big excursion took place in Juneau: a helicopter ride to Mendenhall Glacier, followed by a short trek on the glacier. Go big or go home, right? My mom had never been on a helicopter before, and it was fun to see the look of excitement on her face.

The views of the landscape below were stunning (despite some rain and clouds), and the tour company made sure we were properly suited up to walk along the icy, bright blue surface of the glacier. Some of my favorite photos from the trip were taken on this excursion—our happy faces say it all.

Seeing Alaskan wildlife was also high on our to-do list, so in Sitka we selected a "best of" tour that included otters, raptors, and bears (oh my!). We kicked off our day of adventure on a catamaran, where an onboard naturalist gave a talk about the area's ecosystem and pointed out sea otters, marine birds, and whales as we passed them. The whale sightings were particularly thrilling, and I (mostly) resisted the urge to snap photos as they came up for air and lifted their tails out of the

water before taking a deeper dive. Next up was the Fortress of the Bear, a rescue facility that protects and cares for orphaned bears. I loved watching the bears sunbathe, swim, play, and live their best lives. Our last stop was the Alaska Raptor Center, a non-profit that works to promote and enhance wild populations of raptors and other birds through rehabilitation, education, and research. We got to see the bald eagle flight training center, where rehabilitated birds regain their flight skills.

Final Thoughts

It's been a few months since our Alaskan adventure, but my mom and I still talk about it during our weekly calls. I love looking back at the many photos I took, even though they capture only a fraction of the many things we experienced. The trip, at face

value, was amazing—the meals, the shows, the breathtaking natural scenery—but, to me, the best part about it was getting closer to my mom. Living more than 1,000 miles away from her is hard, and I miss her so much, but it means that we appreciate the time we spend together more than ever before. During the cruise, there'd be moments when I'd worry about the weather or some other trivial matter, and she'd say over and over that no matter what happened, the best part of the cruise was spending time with me. Alaska and this cruise will always have a special place in my heart, and I look forward to many more meaningful adventures with the people I love. 📸

To learn more about Holland America Line, visit [hollandamerica.com](https://www.hollandamerica.com).

NO BULL



Three near-death experiences in as many years gave dentist Ryan Thibodaux a new perspective on life.

For most people, one close run-in with a life-threatening situation would be enough. Two and you may consider yourself unlucky.

But when a third strikes in a few short years, you could be forgiven for thinking, “Why me?”

NOT RYAN THIBODAUX.

By Martin Liptrot
Photos: Studio Tran Photography



The New Orleans-based dentist and 30A regular sees it as a reaffirmation that every day is for living.

The 48-year-old who practices dentistry in Metairie, LA, and Southern Colorado, got the first of his trio of bad news in 2018. He was diagnosed with Follicular Lymphoma – a Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma that develops when white blood cells cluster together to form lumps in your lymph glands or organs.

Ryan’s had grown to the size of a peanut butter jar, and after 24 months of chemotherapy, his immune system was down to nothing. Just in time for COVID-19, days before Christmas 2020.



Weakened by the cancer treatment, Ryan was in no state to fight off the pandemic that took millions worldwide as victims in that first wave.

“Three fevers a day at 101.9 or above, weight loss, lack of taste and smell, severe fatigue, a mental fog, over stimulus to light and sound – you name it,” said Ryan. “I thought I was going to die.”

He was in the hospital for several weeks, often in strict isolation.

“It was intense suffering, gasping in the fetal position for multiple days, no sleep,” he recalled.

But having a sense of purpose, being focused on recovery, and telling himself – repeatedly – it was going to be alright, helped pass the long, brutal weeks. “I would repeat a chant: ‘Every fever eventually passes. Every fever eventually passes.’ You have to have hope.”

And that hope slowly helped him recover.

After spending months in the hospital – first for chemotherapy, then for COVID – Ryan decided he would focus the rest of his life with “an attitude of gratitude.” He prayed and gave thanks. “Give me one more breath, one more step, and guidance on how to use them.”

After two close calls, Ryan decided to accept that God had complete control of the future. “All the time you spend worrying about what’s going to happen in a year, six months, who’s going to do this, and what’s going to happen, it’s all wasted energy,” he said.

Prior to these two close brushes with death, Ryan had led an active life. A father and husband, a busy dental practice, trumpeter and founding member of the Bucktown Allstars, a fitness enthusiast, and a man who goes on service missions to rebuild hurricane-ravaged communities in Puerto Rico.

Last summer, when a friend invited him to Camino De Santiago, a hiking and religious pilgrimage in Spain, he had no hesitation. Ryan found himself walking through the countryside of Northern Spain and stumbling across the town of Los Arcos, a population of 1,200 people in the East Estrella region, about 40 miles from Pamplona.

Spain likes a fiesta, and small communities in rural Spain go all in for these celebrations. Ryan likened it to Mardi Gras. The whole community was involved, no one’s a stranger, there are parades, porch parties, great food, plenty of beverages, and amazing music and dancing in the streets.

“I’m blowing my whistle; the marching band is coming down the hill. I know the clarinet player, he’s like hugging me, it’s amazing.” Ryan forgot his health worries of the previous year and was living for the moment, all caught up in this spontaneous outpouring of joy.

For those who know their Spanish fiestas, you’ll know Pamplona is famous for its festival – Running of the Bulls. While the headline event takes place in the city, the surrounding towns and villages





stage their own version too. Los Arcos is no exception. Caught up in all the excitement, Ryan was carousing in the middle of the throbbing crowd.

“For 40 minutes, the bulls are running back and forth, and locals are running with them, but they are smaller bulls, and I’m like, ‘I can do this. They’re getting tired.’”

What Ryan didn’t know were the rules and customs of the Running of the Bulls.

“In the last 15 minutes of the event, they pull the younger bulls,” said Ryan. “Then they let out these more aggressive bulls, disoriented, a little bit frustrated, drooling, smelling terrible, like they’re just not wanting to be there.”

Overcome by the desire to be involved, Ryan joined in. “I’m running in the street, but foolishly, I’m blowing my whistle as I’m running,” he laughed. “It was the whistle that did me in.”

That and making a schoolboy error – turning his back on the bull.

“I learned afterward that before they hit you, they give you a warning: they dip their heads, and obviously if you’re looking at them, you can step out of the way,” winced Ryan. “I didn’t know that.”

Ouch.

Ryan was caught from behind; the angry and frustrated bull gored him in his upper thigh, then drove him forward on the cobblestone road. Ryan was bloodied, battered, and bruised, and with a broken wrist and a shattered ankle. There is a picture in the local newspaper showing the one-ton piece of beef standing on Ryan’s leg.

Residents rushed to his aid, trying to get the bull away from him, and shepherded him into the safety of a doorway, but the event had to be suspended and an ambulance came and took the unfortunate pilgrim to Hospital de San Pedro de Logroño.

Locals looked on with concern. Not just because tourists and pilgrims being trampled by angry bulls has to be bad for your town’s reputation, but because in the hours before the incident, Ryan had made an impression on the townsfolk. Esteban Fernández de Las Heras, the clarinet player Ryan had recognized in the marching band, recalled that the American visitor had been an enthusiastic follower of the performance and had started a conversation about their shared love of music.

So, here he was again, being rushed to the hospital for emergency medical care. Three times in a couple of years, Ryan had been close to meeting his maker.

But even this latest run-in didn’t dampen Ryan’s spirit of adventure and gratitude. The stoic Ryan put it into perspective.

“After spending three to six months lying in the fetal position, gasping for air, to be sitting in a wheelchair breathing comfortably was less of a concern,” he said.

So, what’s next for Ryan? He is planning a trip back to Spain this summer to pray and give thanks to the many people in Los Arcos who helped him in his time of need. But this time, he is wisely giving the bulls a miss and, instead, bringing his trumpet to reconnect with his new-found musician friends.

Ryan, and his maker, have a plan. 🐂

To learn more about Ryan, follow his adventures on Instagram (@dr_bossfloss).

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

Fishing

By Sean Dietrich



Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will come home late, severely dehydrated and malnourished, because the only thing he had in his cooler was Natural Light beer and a package of expired Oscar Mayer bologna.

I hate Natural Light beer. It tastes like something that has been passed

through the system of a diabetic house cat. But long ago, this was the beer we young fishermen bought because it was super cheap. We would stock our coolers with Natural Light, and whoever gagged first lost a substantial bet.

Today, I went fishing with my buddy because I haven't fished with him in years. We didn't bring any Natural

Light. My friend had some medical troubles a few years back and decided to quit drinking.

I have to admit, it was a little weird, fishing with a cooler full of nothing but raspberry-flavored La Croix, but whatever.

Because fishing is not truly about

fishing. It never has been. If a man ever looks you dead in the eye and tells you that fishing is actually about fishing, this man is the kind of man who will lie to his own mother.

Every fisherman knows that fishing is not really about fishing. It is about the outdoors, the sound of an outboard motor, the clicking of a baitcast reel, and most importantly, about raspberry-flavored La Croix.

Case in point: I have a friend who bought a very fancy boat. I'm talking a ridiculous superboat. It came with GPS, depth-finder, two trolling motors, and ten

I am not a good fisherman. I have never claimed to be. In fact, my wife often tells people that I am the most unlucky fisherman ever. And when she says this in public it embarrasses me so badly that we end up having a "conversation" about it on the ride home.

Married couples are always having "conversations" instead of "arguments." Once my friend Ted and his wife had a serious "conversation" about when Ted slow danced with his ex-girlfriend at his twentieth high school reunion. This controlled, but heartfelt "conversation" eventually led to Ted's "black eye."

And I don't know how it's even possible for a guy to love something he's so bad at.

Anyway, I haven't seen my old friend in decades. I met him at lunchtime. When we saw each other, it was like we'd never lost a beat. He let me borrow a rod and reel and we went to a pond on his neighbor's land.

We fished for almost two hours, which is a far cry from the all-day trips of our youth. And I wish I could tell you that we did a lot of talking, but that's not the way fishing works. Fishermen are not talkers. We barely said four words to each other.



So you can't tell me that a guy spends that kind of money on a boat because he's serious about fishing. No. It's about more than that.



outboards that were powerful enough to blow the water out of the Baltic Sea.

When we asked how much he paid for the boat, he told us a price and I almost choked on my Oscar Mayer bologna.

That next weekend, he took several of us fishing. It was swanky. He had a cooler full of expensive craft beer, and Boar's Head cold cuts. On his high-definition stereo was Debby Boone singing, "You Light Up My Life." It was the worst fishing trip I have ever been on.

Afterward, I did some math and calculated that, considering the price of his boat, each fish we caught that day figured up to be roughly—not including sales tax—\$13,210.08 per pound.

So you can't tell me that a guy spends that kind of money on a boat because he's serious about fishing. No. It's about something more than that.

Take me, for instance. I love to fish, but

Maybe I like fishing because when I was younger, fishing was about all there was to do. But then, this was back in the day when nobody had ever heard of the internet, when school kids were still using typewriters, and Alexander Graham Bell had not yet invented the Graham cracker.

We basically had three choices when it came to leisure activities. Reading, blowing up mailboxes with barely legal fireworks, or fishing.

So we'd fish. I would always catch less than everyone else. In fact, I had a longstanding reputation as the worst fisherman around. Sometimes, we could fish for a whole day and I wouldn't catch anything but a sunburn.

My friends would always tease me about my bad luck. They would laugh and act like a bunch of complete—pardon my French—têtes de noeu.

Still, I've never lost my love for fishing.

We just stood on shore, throwing spoon lures into the water, cranking reels.

But it was a good day. He caught a trout and a bream. I caught the remains of an old beaver carcass and a decomposing plastic diaper.

When we finished, we parted ways. I had a long drive home, and he had to go pick his kids up from school. We are adults now, not children. And it's funny how old he looks and how very young I still look.

We said all the usual goodbye stuff. "Don't be a stranger, man!" And "Gimme a call sometime!" And "Let's do this again!" But of course we know we won't. We're different people now. With different lives. That's just how adulthood works.

Before we left each other, he went to his truck and retrieved a tiny cooler. Inside were two Natural Lights on ice.

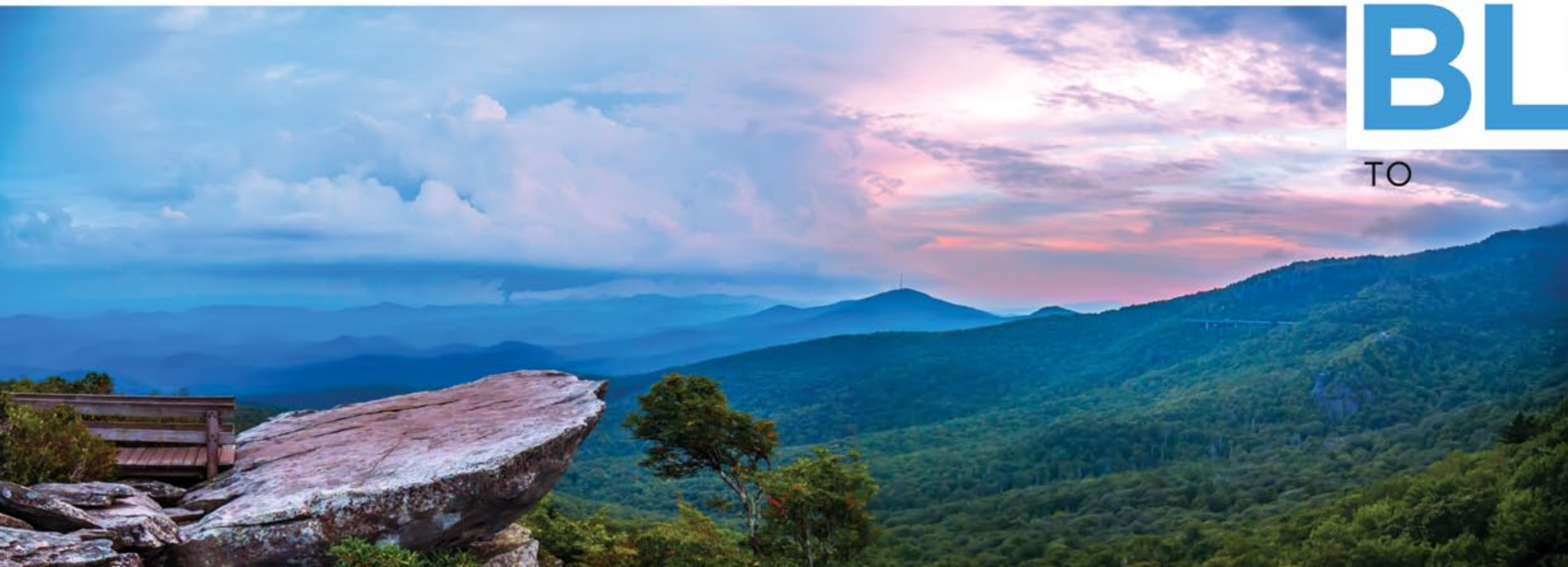
It tasted better than I remembered. ☞



FROM

SEAS

BLUE



TO

MOUNTAINS

BLUE

When summer crowds flock to the beach, many locals head to the hills.

By Lauren Sage Reinlie



Photo: Edward Sanford

Edward Sanford grew up in Blue Ridge, Georgia, then a sleepy town tucked along the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains abundant with natural beauty, awe-inspiring vistas, and outdoor adventures. Almost anywhere one stepped was only a stone's throw from the sound of water—trickling along a stream, rushing down a waterfall, or lapping the shores of a lake.

Edward, now 33, learned to love the land from his family, who had lived there for generations. Both his parents eschewed the office or factory life for the outdoors—his dad in the woods and on the water, his mom in the air, soaring above the mountaintops as a championship skydiver. From age 10, Edward remembers going with his father to his work as a surveyor, measuring mountains and plotting paths through the woods. On the weekends, they retired to their houseboat on Lake Blue Ridge along with many other families for fishing, sleeping under the stars, and running wild on the lake.

When he was grown, Edward left home for Atlanta and then Napa Valley, but in 2019, he was drawn back home—to the year-round outdoor activities, the absence of snow, the incredible beauty, and the tight-knit small-town community. “It’s just my favorite place on earth,” said Edward.

Blue Ridge is located about 90 miles north of Atlanta near the crossroads of the state’s border with North Carolina and Tennessee. It’s still a tiny town by almost all measures (population 1,290), but visitors and new residents have been flocking to the area in recent years, bringing with them architectural influences and high-caliber restaurants—all with a keen focus on protecting their incredible natural setting and unique small-town vibe.

We recently asked Edward—a longtime fan and frequenter of Florida’s Gulf Coast—to let us in on some of the reasons he loves Blue Ridge.

Where to Play

The natural setting of Blue Ridge is often breathtaking. “It looks like something out of a Tolkien story,” Edward said. Shady hemlock groves make way for sweeping, sometimes 360-degree views of the rolling Appalachian Mountains. Running water is abundant from the feeder streams to the Toccoa River and numerous waterfalls. “If you want the sound of water, that special energy in moving water, you will be able to find it, always.”

Blue Ridge is an outdoor enthusiast’s playground. Edward recommended a few ways to get out and enjoy it.

The Toccoa River flows northwest towards Tennessee, where it goes by the name Ocoee and is known for its world-championship-level whitewater rapids. On the Georgia side, the Toccoa is a perfect spot for kayaking and tubing for those who may not yet have reached elite athlete status.

Several spots along the Toccoa offer tube or kayak rentals and excursions. Edward prefers kayaking for the sport aspect. “It’s great exercise with some decent rapids, so it can be a bit of an adrenaline rush as well.” For more relaxed or family-friendly fun, tubing is a great option. Check out the Aska Adventure Area for access.

Some of the cleanest and clearest water in the region can be found at the 3,290-acre Lake Blue Ridge. Eighty percent of its shoreline is located in the Chattahoochee National Forest.

Campsites, boat ramps, swimming and picnic areas, and a marina are all available. The marina has a nice bar and restaurant, too, Edward said.

Over 100 miles of trout streams flow through Blue Ridge, and the area is famous for fly fishing. He



ROE Blue Eidge



Tipping Point Brewery



Photos: Madalyn Giambelluca

“Even if I won the lottery, I would still do this.”

recommended a few tour companies for visitors that are also popular with locals. Cohutta Fly Fishing is located downtown and offers private fly fishing lessons and tours. On the Fly Excursions offers trips to a private, secluded river stocked with rainbow trout and more. “It’s a pretty special experience,” Edward said.

Bill Oyster is a world-renowned bamboo fly fishing rod maker who has set up shop in Blue Ridge. Everything he creates is hand-carved and hand-engraved. He’s crafted rods for presidents and other dignitaries and offers six-day training sessions, which boast a hefty, usually years-long waitlist. People can also visit his shop downtown and often catch a glimpse of him at work.

Blue Ridge is home to 106,000 acres of Chattahoochee National Forest and 300 miles of hiking trails, which offer access to some of the most beautiful views in the area.

The Aska Adventure Area boasts 17 miles of hiking and biking trails to some of the most scenic spots in the area. Fall Branch Falls Trail runs along a creek lined with mountain laurel and rhododendron with views of two cascading falls. The Swinging Bridge Trail over the Toccoa River is a great hike for families with young kids. It’s the longest swinging bridge east of the Mississippi. The spectacular 729-foot Amicolola Falls is the tallest cascading waterfall east of the Mississippi.

Strolling through quaint and historic Downtown Blue Ridge is another way to enjoy the outdoors. Edward said the business owners care deeply about what they bring to the community and work hard to maintain the city’s authenticity and not become a tourist trap like other nearby towns.

The historic Blue Ridge Scenic Railway has its main depot downtown and offers several train rides running through secluded areas with beautiful views.

Where to Dine and Drink

Edward said one of his favorite ways to enjoy the area is eating and drinking outdoors. “We have great patios and breweries; everything is family- and often pet- friendly.”

The culinary scene has bloomed since 2008, when the area lifted a ban on serving alcohol. “That was a game changer,” Edward said. “From there, things just started to evolve organically.” People with track records in beach communities, like those around 30A, started moving up to Blue Ridge to open unique restaurants, bringing a passion for food and the area’s natural beauty.

A few recommendations are Tipping Point Brewery, which has a great view of downtown from its second-story patio with outdoor games and live music.

ROE. Blue Ridge has the best patio in the area by far, Edward said, with beautiful stonework forming an open courtyard. The fine-dining seafood and steak restaurant is owned by Patrick Padilla, who used to manage Caliza in Alys Beach.

Ott Farms and Vineyard, located in nearby Ellijay, features mountain views, wine tastings, gourmet food trucks, and live music.

Where to Stay

Blue Ridge Inn is a whimsical, unique boutique hotel in one of the first residences built downtown in 1890. Mountain Mama’s Coffee Lounge, located at the inn, is a popular hangout among locals.

Escape to Blue Ridge offers year-round cabin rentals.

Edward, a local realtor with Corcoran Classic, said that Blue Ridge is still an undervalued market, though maybe not for long. In other words, if you love it, it’s a great time to buy. From historic homes and log cabins to more rustic modern architecture rarely found outside of Montana, Edward said anyone could find their perfect home here.

Edward’s father passed away recently, and he feels nothing else clarifies how important finding a home can be. “It’s not just about finding real estate that makes sense, numbers-wise, but there is an emotional component, as well,” he said. “It’s the place where you’re going to raise your family or be surrounded by the people you love. I love helping people find that, especially here, where I have so much history. Even if I won the lottery, I would still do this.”

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EMERALD COAST

By Jenny Etheredge

The Emerald Coast is a region in Northwest Florida that comprises several coastal communities, such as Miramar Beach, Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Navarre Beach, and Pensacola Beach. The area is characterized by its stunning white sand beaches and emerald-green waters that sparkle in the sunlight. Each town has its distinct charm, with Destin bustling with nightlife and attractions, while Navarre offers a more laid-back, old Florida feel. There is a diverse selec-

tion of housing options available in different price ranges, ranging from Gulf-front high-rise condos to bay-front retreats, making it an attractive destination for anyone looking for a place to call home.

The beaches of 30A were once a hidden treasure, but now they are famous worldwide for their breathtaking coastlines, unique Gulf-side towns, and an abundance of high-quality dining, boutique shopping,

and outdoor activities. The area's appeal extends beyond beachcombing, as approximately 40% of the county's land is protected state parks or forests, making it a desirable destination for nature lovers. The towns of Seaside, Rosemary Beach, WaterColor, and Alys Beach are designed with a New Urbanist style that prioritizes walkability, allowing visitors and residents to conveniently travel by foot or bike.

\$5,750,000

35 Wiggle Lane | Rosemary Beach
6 Bed | 7 Bath | 4,636 sq. ft.

Intricately nestled among the characteristic oaks of Rosemary Beach, this immaculately modernized residence offers a unique opportunity for a family or vacation compound. Dual kitchens and dual master suites on both floors of the main home plus a detached carriage house with full kitchen and a bedroom ensuite make this property a rarity. Boasting over 4,600 square feet with 6 bedrooms and 7 bathrooms along with a newly reconfigured, luxe courtyard creates the perfect welcoming retreat for large families and their guests. An extensive renovation from the exterior to interior has refreshed this spectacular residence leaving bright, elegant spaces that feel brand new. Updates include interior design by Ashley Grant Interiors, custom-finished white oak wood floors throughout, remodeled bathrooms, fresh interior and exterior paint, new windows, and so much more.



\$2,300,000



8123 Gulf Boulevard | Navarre
4 Bed | 3 Bath | 1,953 sq. ft.

Experience beachfront paradise every day from this custom-built, gorgeous home located on the pristine beaches of the Gulf of Mexico. Boasting picturesque views of the Emerald Coast from the 1,000 sqft deck, this 4-bed, 3-bath home was designed to be the perfect vacation/primary residence. Its shake siding is reminiscent of traditional beach homes and captures the essence of laid-back Navarre Beach. An open-concept gourmet kitchen featuring two kitchen islands + abundant cabinet space makes for an entertainer's dream. Homeowners/guests can admire spectacular views via the panoramic wall of windows from the kitchen, living, and dining areas. Two primary bedrooms with recently remodeled en-suite bathrooms and an additional two bedrooms + loft area ensure plenty of space for sleep and relaxation.



\$1,203,000



56 Cypress Circle | Santa Rosa Beach
3 Bed | 2.5 Bath | 1,700 sq. ft.

Nestled in the gated Cypress Dunes community on 30A's peaceful west end, this thoughtfully designed 3-bed, 2.5-bath single level home is perfectly suited as a full-time residence, second home or as a rental property. No detail has been overlooked with standout finishes including brushed oak hardwood floors, 10-foot ceilings, custom cabinetry, and designer lighting. The welcoming

and open living area offers plenty of room for entertainment and the fully equipped kitchen offers stainless appliances including a gas range and large island. Two large porches, one screened, provide ample room to enjoy the warm Gulf breeze. Additional highlights of this one-owner home are Rinnai tankless hot water heater, 9' interior doors, attic storage, and yard irrigation.

\$1,699,000



110 Emerald Ridge | Santa Rosa Beach
4 Bed | 2.5 Bath | 2,576 sq. ft.

This 4-bed, 2.5-bath custom Mediterranean-style home with 10-foot ceilings, custom built-in bookcases, a private heated pool, and deeded beach access is located within the rental-restricted gated community, BellaMar, next to the Santa Rosa Golf Course on the peaceful west end of 30A. It is within walking distance to locally owned shops and restaurants at Gulf Place and across the street from the Santa Rosa Golf & Beach Club, offering plenty of natural light and a spacious backyard.



\$5,500,000



221 Sand Cliffs Drive | Inlet Beach
5 Bed | 4.5 Bath | 3,690 sq. ft.

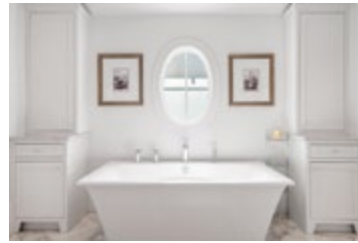
Sweeping Gulf views, new construction, and a premium location define this luxury seaside estate. Situated in the gated, non-rental Sand Cliffs community, neighboring Alys Beach and Kaiya Beach resort, this home sits on the second tier of the beach with unrestricted views. Because of the 18' height restriction on the Gulf front homes throughout the Sand Cliffs community, this home has sweeping views from second floor and a spacious third floor deck overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. From the French door front entryway, you'll notice exceptional features including wood floors, shiplap walls, and plenty of windows letting in an abundance of natural light.



\$4,499,000

43 Coast Bridge Way | WaterSound Beach
4 Bed | 5.5 Bath | 3,300 sq. ft.

Located in the premier Peninsula district, find refined spaces defined by exquisite design and impeccable construction at this stunning property with 3,300 square feet of interior space and over 600 square feet of covered porches including a tower with beautiful views across the community and the Gulf of Mexico. Luxury finishes masterfully incorporated throughout include Venetian plaster, shiplap, and coffered ceilings, intricate tile accents, hardwood floors, wainscot walls, and custom built-ins. On the first level, the welcoming and spacious living and dining area is centered around a gas fireplace and filled with abundant natural light. The gourmet kitchen features a large quartz center island, Wolf and Sub-Zero appliances.



\$5,475,000

51 Shingle Lane | WaterSound Beach
6 Bed | 5.5 Bath | 4,257 sq. ft.

As you walk through the dunes of WaterSound Beach 51 Shingle Lane sits on the edge of the Dune Ridge overlooking the conservation area leading to the beach. The tower's double deck sits proudly collecting breezes and sunsets. Created as the coastal retreat of a family whose roots gather friends and family from all corners, it provides all you need to make memories and capture the gifts the beach provides. The center of the home is a large gathering room with a soaring vaulted ceiling and a magical artistic chandelier lighting the space. Anchored by a gourmet kitchen with room for many cooks and a corner gas fireplace to warm and welcome all. This is the dream beach home you have been looking for. This 6-bed, 6-bath home has everything – heated pool, elevator, carriage house, and so much more!



\$1,850,000

280 Seabreeze Court | Inlet Beach
4 Bed | 3.5 Bath | 2,963 sq. ft.

This elegant, custom-built home is situated on a secluded cul-de-sac lot, offering a large private lot with an in-ground pool, outdoor fireplace, and deeded beach access. Located just off of the renowned 30A area, in a section of Seabreeze that does not allow short-term rentals, this home offers the ultimate in privacy and tranquility. This is the perfect setting for a primary residence or second home. The home boasts 24' cathedral ceilings in the entryway and 12' main level ceilings, adding grandeur and spaciousness to the home. With 4 bedrooms and 3.5 bathrooms, this home is designed to accommodate the needs of any modern family. The gourmet kitchen is a chef's paradise, featuring Viking appliances, custom cabinetry with soft close drawers and doors, and beautiful quartz countertops.





\$3,599,000

44 Tranquility Lane | Destin
5 Bed | 5.5 Bath | 4,750 sq. ft.

Newly renovated, this custom designed home in Destiny East is a must-see! Award winning architect and homeowner Charlie Clary personally designed this home with Charleston and New Orleans influences, including the double porches and private courtyards. The home has many custom touches including crown molding throughout, ample storage, with a 1000 sq ft renovated third floor that was converted to playroom and bunk room. The home was built with reinforced rebar block masonry structure with real stucco, Icynene insulation, and hurricane shutters. A carriage house above the garage is where the fifth bedroom and fifth bath are located. The carriage house includes a large living and dining area, which could be rented separately.



\$2,900,000

319 Stillwater Cove | Destin
5 Bed | 4.5 Bath | 4,310 sq. ft.

The views are remarkable from this Jones Bayou waterfront home tucked behind the private gates of the illustrious Kelly Plantation community. This custom-designed home greets you with a grandiose entryway and Roman columns that instantly catch your eye. Upon entering, you are welcomed by a spacious dining room to the right and a master suite to your left. The gourmet kitchen and breakfast nook come fully equipped with a Sub-Zero refrigerator and a top-of-the-line gas range. The palatial living area is open with a sunken wet bar and wine refrigerator with plenty of storage that makes entertaining a must. The front office suite has direct access to the lovely back patio with views of the Bay.



\$3,890,000

136 Silver Laurel Way | WaterColor
5 Bed | 3.5 Bath | 2,780 sq. ft.

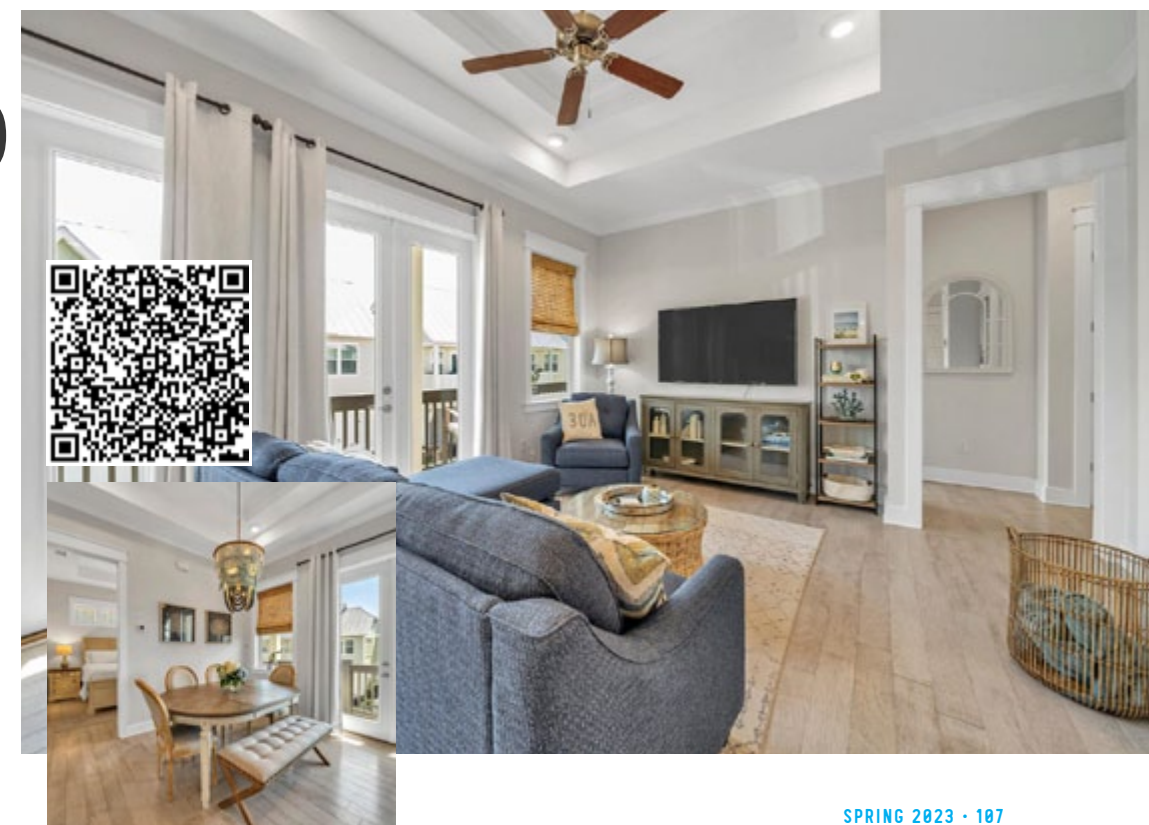
Rainbow Row, located in the Park District of WaterColor, is one of the closest phases to 30A. This location is arguably one of the most sought-after year-round destinations. Conveniently located two blocks from the new Gulf-front WaterColor Beach Club and nestled between the village centers of WaterColor and Seaside, everything is within walking distance. 136 Silver Laurel Way is a charming, yet spacious cottage designed for friends and family to gather in the open concept floor plan with first and second floor suites. This home underwent a full remodel and is ready for you to enjoy.



\$875,000

309 Milestone Drive Unit C | Inlet Beach
2 Bed | 2 Bath | 1,182 sq. ft.

Indulge in luxury living at this highly desired end unit Aruba condo, boasting two bedrooms and two baths with a chef's dream kitchen featuring carefully chosen appliances, a spacious dining area with seating for 6 and 4 extra places at the bar, open living and dining areas with 10' ceilings and plenty of windows, and an oversized balcony for entertaining. The master suite features a king size bed and a second bedroom with a queen over queen bunk, all sold fully furnished and ready for you to relax and unwind on the Emerald Coast.






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Wild — *Circa 1491*

Photo and text by Susan McKinney Gunn

The sunset from this beach on 30A is hypnotic. I look into the last light, awake and dreaming of this place in a time from long, long ago. Closing my eyes, I visualize a different version of myself sitting on a forested sand dune, waves rolling in over an evening's foggy beach, 532 years back in time. Staring out from my hiding place in the brush, I watch as white-tailed bucks and young does with their fawns frolic along the shoreline, investigating the surf in the misty twilight. I hold, keeping my arrows quivered, my bow still and quiet on my back. I have had my meal for the day—fish caught in the clearest, coldest springs not too far from where I am resting now. I stare in gratitude for their previous sacrifices, and I silently rejoice as I watch them play.

I hear the whispers of my father and grandfather, and their fathers before them, “Take only what you need.”

The last evening cries of the ever-warring eagle and osprey sound overhead. They have almost settled their arguments for the day. I am surrounded by thick rows of young sea oat shoots and a plethora of purple lupine, just beginning to bloom. The beach mouse is still skittering through the foliage here, tripping quickly over my worn moccasins. The tides and time have not yet eroded the naturally-graded high, hilly dunes. Morning glories lay low in the salty breeze, closed tight while they wait for the oncoming night to end. They prepare to welcome the sun as they creep down toward the beach, vining in the fading light with a foothold on the sugar-white sand.

The great-horned owls have begun their deep-timbered calls to one another from the tallest trees up and down this pristine beach and its greenest wilderness. I listen as the

cacophony of smaller owls, cicadas, crickets, and young frogs begins to rise from the nearby coastal dune lakes, the rarest of rare wildland jewels. From my spot on the dune, the sound is loud and rich, singing in unison with the strong gulf waves—a song written by nature thousands of years old, in this moment, still unaffected by man.

The waning moon is on the rise in the east. My heartbeat is regular, strong, and steady. My eyes are relaxed and acclimated to the dwindling of the beautiful evening light, now transforming into a softly moonlit night. As the evening cools down, the moisture builds on my dark skin. The night has all but fallen. My body is calm but still on guard. I have been looking behind me, hearing sounds from the thick brush—palmettos, mossy oaks, and long-leaf pines. I think I might not linger too long after the golden sun – newly set at the horizon's edge – ceases the remnants of its burnt orange glow. I know that here in this time, the night belongs to the wild things – the black bear, the panther, the coyote, and the bobcat. It is time for my little orphaned red fox companion and me to go. But not before I turn my face to the emerging galaxy of stars, so many millions of lights in an endless twinkling sky. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, taking it all in.

My soul is peaceful and gracious, abundantly thankful for another day here in this perfect paradise of Wild. I wish I could stay forever on this dune, frozen in time.

I wish this place could have forever remained the same.

Follow Susan Gunn's photography and writing on Instagram (@sgunnphotography) or visit her online gallery at susangunnphotography.com.

Stargazing after midnight at Oyster Lake with the sound of waves crashing on the shore just to the south. Single Exposure, self-portrait under the Milky Way.

What is 30A?

This is a map of our little beach community. Old Florida "State Road 30" once 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 disjointed 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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