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30A



A Return to the Water

Lulu Gribbin is someone many along this coast have come to feel quietly connected to. Not because of headlines, but because what she went through happened close to home, on a stretch of water so many of us know well. She was just 15 when it happened, and many in the community were quietly rooting for her the whole way through.

Lulu returned to the very place where everything changed. That alone tells you a lot about who she is. She's also taken that experience and turned it outward, through her foundation and the work she's beginning to do now. Even a short time with her, and that becomes clear. She's calm, direct, and very much her own person. What happened to her is part of the story, but it's not the whole story.

That stayed with me as we put this issue together. In very different ways, that same sense of resilience shows up across these stories.

Along 30A, the Emerald Coast Theatre Company has grown well beyond what it set out to be. It began simply, and over time, it has become a place where kids find their voice and where the community shows up for each other. That kind of growth only happens when people keep coming back and putting in the work.

In *Deep Listening*, everything slows down. There's no rush to it. You just sit with it, the movement, the repetition, the variation, and after a while, your mind follows. In a world where we're constantly surrounded by noise and notifications, it's a reminder to pause and listen to something quieter, more connected to the world around us.

Further out, Tofino offers a completely different coastline, wilder and more remote, but with a familiar pull. That feeling of standing at the edge of something vast, being both small and connected at the same time.

Closer to home, the team at Gulfarium is doing the kind of work most visitors never really see. Rescuing injured sea turtles, helping them recover, and, when possible, getting them back into the Gulf. It's not glamorous, and it doesn't happen all at once. It takes time, most of it happening little by little, behind the scenes.

And then, almost without noticing, there's a gentle shift toward the lighter side of coastal living. Fresh herbs, brighter flavors, and simple ingredients come together in ways that feel effortless and new, capturing that moment when everything begins to open up again. There's also a bit of surprise woven in, a story shaped by island roots and flavors that carry their own sense of place. It's a reminder that food carries stories with it, and sometimes you can actually taste that.

Our photographer has been moving through all of this quietly, and you can see that transition happening. The light changes, the colors come back. Even the pace of things feels a little different.

We didn't set out with one big idea for this issue. But looking at it now, there is something that runs through it. People finding their way back to what matters to them, showing up again, staying connected even when things change.

Wherever you're reading this from, I hope something here feels familiar. And if it brings you back to the water at some point, even better.

Beach happy, my friends.

JoAnn Ribaldo
CEO, The 30A Company

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Cover Photo: Guillaume LECHAT

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BEACH HAPPY Team



I've lived along 30A for more than 25 years and built my life around the coastal lifestyle I love. With a strong background in the apparel business, I bring both style and entrepreneurial experience to our brand. I'm passionate about all things outdoors—especially fly fishing, golf, and a lively game of pickleball. I live in the area with my wife, Kajsa Larsson, and together we share a deep love for the Gulf Coast community.

JoAnn Ribaud
CEO



For over 14 years at The 30A Company, I've had the privilege of crafting stories that capture the essence of beach life while celebrating the spirit of those who embrace it. My journey—from Mumbai's bustling coastline to the tranquil beaches of Goa, and now to Vietnam's vibrant shores—has deepened my love for life by the water. My greatest joy comes from weaving together narratives, visuals, and layouts, adding a touch of beauty to the world through each issue of *Beach Happy*. Whether you're landlocked or have your toes in the sand, I hope these stories bring a bit of sunshine to your day and inspire your own sunny moments by the shore.

Amandeep K
Editor-in-Chief



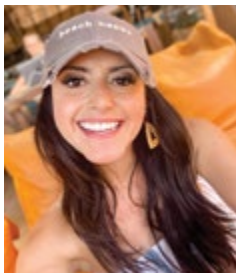
Hailing from the vibrant city of New Orleans and now residing in Northeast Alabama, my fondest memories involve vacationing on Florida's Gulf Coast beaches. Embarking on my design journey quite some time ago, I've been privileged to work across a spectrum of genres and platforms. With time, my expertise has honed in on magazine design and publishing, encompassing topics from travel to healthcare, and from education to transportation, with several others sprinkled in between. At *Beach Happy* magazine, I channel this passion and hope to share a sunny greeting with you on the coast someday. (Featured alongside me is my beautiful wife of 23 years, Bobbi.)

David Coffey
Art Director



I grew up vacationing on 30A and fell in love with the beauty and charm of this area at a young age. As the Marketing Coordinator, I wear many hats—from curating content on social media to assisting with features for *Beach Happy* magazine. My focus is creating content that captures the Beach Happy lifestyle and highlights the natural beauty of this special place. It's incredibly rewarding to share a location that means so much to me with others and show them why 30A is truly a one-of-a-kind destination!

Emma Miner
Marketing Coordinator



My role is full of purpose, balance, and fulfillment while promoting all that we have to offer. You'll find me around town with a drone in my hand, slinging our ever-popular 30A stickers, *Beach Happy* magazine, and everything in between. There's a spark within me that is ignited each and every day as I work with this incredible community. Bringing fellow beach lovers together, near and far, is what makes my role feel less like work, and more like catching up with friends all throughout the year!

Ragan Smith
Brand Ambassador



Hailing from Fort Walton Beach, I am a lifelong 30A local. As a proud Air Force brat with a loving family that includes my wife and twins, I've witnessed the dynamic transformation of the Gulf Coast since the early 1980s. With a degree in Broadcast Journalism from Louisiana State University, I've embraced various roles within the realms of on-air local radio and television, and advertising sales. Now, as I celebrate over a decade with The 30A Company as Director of Advertising, it continues to be an absolute delight to collaborate with both local and national clients in the idyllic paradise we call 30A.

Cory Davis
Advertising Sales Director

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Dallas Jackson has more than 20 years of editorial experience and a passion for turning the interesting, and sometimes unexpected, into compelling stories. He writes about sports, music, the Emerald Coast, leadership, and just about anything that catches his eye.



2

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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 Appétit*, and others. You can find her on X and Instagram (@writeonhonaker).



3

3 GEOFF NUDELMAN

is a journalist and copywriter focused on making the world a better place through compelling copy. His writing often covers the intersection of business and culture with a focus on environmental and social issues. He was inspired to contribute to *Beach Happy* following a summer 2024 drive down 30A, exploring each of the towns along the way. You can check out more of his work at geoffnudeelman.com.



4

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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.



5

5 KARINA CARABALLO

is a freelance designer and marketing creative with deep roots along the Florida Panhandle. She brings a distinctly coastal perspective to branding, real estate, and visual storytelling. When she is not crafting campaigns, she can usually be found soaking up beach life or chasing the perfect sunset photo.



6

6 EMILIANO NERI

is a design contributor with deep roots in Italy's family advertising legacy. He ventured to New York City in the early 1990s, immersing himself in the prestigious world of fashion publishing. Over the past three decades, he has distinguished himself as a Creative Director, with contributions to iconic titles such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Glamour*. His aesthetic blends Old World refinement with New World innovation, shaped by collaborations with industry leaders and driven by an enduring commitment to creative excellence.



7

7 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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SHINING BRIGHT

By Susan Gunn
Photos: Guillaume LECHAT

Lulu Gribbin Transforms Devastating Loss Into Advocacy, Resilience, and Renewed Purpose

For millions of people, the beach is a place to feel alive. It's estimated that more than 143 million people visited Florida's coast in 2024, seeking rest, joy, and moments that become memories. At fifteen, Lulu Gribbin was no different. With her family and friends beside her, she was savoring the Gulf Coast's beauty when, in a split second, everything changed. Her summer day turned into a fight for survival, and the beginning of a story no one could have imagined.

On June 7, 2024, the Gulf looked inviting, its surface rippling and glinting in the breezy sunlight. Lulu was enjoying the warm water with her twin sister Ellie and friends when her best friend began to scream. A shark. Instinct kicked in. Lulu turned and swam toward shore, adrenaline surging. Her brain and body, in fight-or-flight mode, reminded her of something she had heard about sharks: they interpret sudden motion as weakness in potential prey. Later, recalling that moment, she said, "If this is a real shark, I need to be calm. So, I stopped swimming and just stood there."





“
I raised my arm out
of the water, and

there was just
no arm there.”



She was in waist-deep water when she saw it—a shadow, large and fast, closing in. Then came a sudden tug. She remembered feeling no pain. “I raised my arm out of the water, and there was just no arm there,” she said. “It was like a movie. I was kind of hoping it was a dream, but then I realized it wasn’t, and I thought, ‘Okay, this is really happening.’ I didn’t feel the bite, but I knew it was on my leg because it shook me. I knew the situation was very serious, and then I blacked out.”

By then, nearby swimmers had rushed to her aid, and one brave man struck the shark until it released its grip on Lulu’s leg. She was pulled from the water and surrounded by strangers ready to help. On the shore, two nurses on vacation dropped to their knees and began working fast, applying tourniquets to her severely injured limbs as they awaited first responders. Lulu regained consciousness briefly on the sand and, in an attempt to sit up, saw part of the horrific injury to her leg. “I could barely feel any pain. I wanted to scream, but nothing would come

out,” she said. She remembered being lifted into the ambulance that would take her to the waiting helicopter. The last thing she saw was the face of the paramedic before the IV medication carried her into a merciful cloud of sedation.

Lulu was transported by air to a trauma center in nearby Pensacola, receiving blood transfusions mid-flight to replace the life-threatening blood loss. In emergency surgery, doctors worked to repair what remained of her left arm and made the decision to amputate her right leg. When the tube was removed from her throat the following day, she said to her mother, “I made it.” Bystanders and officials believed Lulu had been attacked by a large bull shark. Five days later, she was flown to Atrium Health Levine Children’s Hospital in Charlotte, North Carolina, where her long and remarkable recovery began.

In the weeks that followed, Lulu endured multiple surgeries designed to help prevent infection and give her the best possible chance as she faced months of healing, rehabilitation, and

prosthetic fittings. Before that fateful day, Lulu’s life was filled with the joys of being a teenager. She played on two volleyball teams with her sister, loved to waterski and go to the gym, spent time with her family, and, of course, hung out with her friends. She was, and is, a highly social, active, and competitive girl who suddenly found herself on an unfamiliar path, one where she had to relearn simple daily tasks.

Lulu’s name made headlines quickly, and soon her shark encounter was national news. Though she was sharply focused on her recovery, she began sharing her experience with several media outlets and national news programs. Amid the human-interest headlines and media attention, she said there were definitely good days and bad days. “Some days it’s frustrating seeing everyone able to do normal things, knowing I will have to adapt to different ways. But I’ll try my best to do it, and despite my competitive nature, I’ve learned it’s okay to ask for help if I need it. Sometimes, if I’m having a tough day,



I write in a journal to process my thoughts and feelings or go to a quiet place in my mind.” Every day, she turned to her faith.

“I’m a firm believer in Christ, and I think God has a plan for each of us,” she said. “Whether we like those plans or not, He is going to guide our future. On the harder days, I really try to focus on my family. I pray a lot and ask God to grow my faith more on those bad days. I think this happened for a reason and for a greater purpose than even I can imagine.” She makes no secret of her love for her family and reliance on them.

Those family ties would prove pivotal during Lulu’s recovery when, during conversations about her own limb replacements, an idea was born to help others. People who undergo amputation often experience some level of phantom pain where a limb once existed. Phantom pain is not easily understood by most people, but it is very real. Neuroscience suggests that the brain continues to register the missing limb as if it were still there. Residual nerves and changes within the nervous system can continue sending signals that the brain interprets as pain. This was something Lulu experienced, but she was reluctant to rely on drugs for pain relief.

During recovery, she was introduced to virtual reality technology through a headset that allowed her brain to “see” limbs, helping it respond differently to nerve signals and reducing her pain. The relief was real, but so was the realization: this kind of therapy was expensive, experimental, and out of reach for most amputees. That didn’t sit right with Lulu. Together with her family, she launched the Lulu Strong Foundation, a mission-driven nonprofit aimed at making advanced prosthetics and innovative therapies more accessible and affordable. The foundation focuses on reducing financial barriers, supporting next-generation technologies, and helping amputees manage phantom pain without relying solely on medication. In November 2025, the foundation held its first major fundraiser—a launch gala that brought in critical support and signaled that Lulu Strong was already making waves.

Lulu also used her new platform to help prevent future shark attacks. Determined to help protect others, she began working with U.S. Senator Katie Britt of Alabama to create a system that could warn swimmers when a shark attack occurs nearby or conditions suggest heightened danger. The result: Lulu’s Law. Passed unanimously by the U.S. Senate in July 2025, the legislation would direct the FCC to transmit Wireless Emergency Alerts for shark attacks to mobile phones in affected areas and would empower local, state, tribal, and federal authorities to deploy those alerts. “It’s kind of like an Amber Alert,” Lulu explained, “but it will be a warning that there is a shark in the area, or that an attack has happened. The goal is to keep beachgoers safer.” As of January 2026, Alabama had passed its own shark alert legislation, while the federal version of Lulu’s Law was still advancing through the House.

Lulu’s story has resonated with so many. Her survival and resilience have been nothing short of miraculous. “I think it’s





“
Everyone has challenges.
Everyone has obstacles
they face, some bigger than
others, some more
publicized than others.
”

Location courtesy of
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amazing that people find my story inspiring. When people ask me how I've managed, I tell them I'm just living my life," she said. "Everyone has challenges. Everyone has obstacles they face, some bigger than others, some more publicized than others. I'm choosing to overcome those obstacles." Lulu, now seventeen, continues to practice advanced physical therapy with her prosthetics to support her athletic drive. She has reached a stage in her recovery where she is building her running confidence.

These days, she stays busy working with her foundation, going to school, and using her platform to speak publicly about her ordeal. "I really enjoy public speaking. It's so much fun getting to tell my story now, getting to advocate for amputees, and inspiring others to be strong and never give up. I really love it," she said. On warm days, you can find her waterskiing at her family's lake house or on the links. "I'm really into golf right now, so I'm getting into some tournaments. That's going to be very exciting to see how I do," she said.

Lulu's spirit is strong; without her will and determination, she may not have survived that day on the beach. Feeling confident about her future, she said she is living one day at a time. "My mom always taught me to go with the flow, so I try to do that and to never let obstacles get in my way. I don't get stressed easily. The only thing I stress about is getting bad grades in school," she said.

When asked about her life's trajectory changing so dramatically and the widespread public attention it drew, she didn't hesitate. "There has been so much good that's come from this bad circumstance. I won't let this shark attack define my life," she said. "I have gotten to meet so many people, and that's a gift. I wouldn't change what happened for the world because I've been able to do so much more with my life already than I would have back then. And that makes me smile." 🙌

To learn more about the Lulu Strong Foundation and how you can help, visit lulustrong.com and follow their updates on Instagram (@lulu.gribbin).

“

I won't let this shark attack define my life.

”





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No Small Parts



Nathanael and Anna Fisher

How One After-School Program Became a Cultural Force on the Emerald Coast

By Lauren Sage Reinlie
Photos: Nikki Hedrick | 850 Music & Entertainment

When Emerald Coast Theatre Company founders Nathanael and Anna Fisher hosted 10 elementary school students for an after-school theatre program in 2012, they couldn't have imagined it would grow into a thriving theatre company serving more than 600 students and producing professional performances that draw actors from across the country.

What they did know was that Northwest Florida had a gap.

At the time, no elementary or middle schools in Walton County, where the couple lived, or local educational groups offered theatre programs, either during the school day or after hours. Only one small program served the neighboring county. As theatre educators, the Fishers understood how transformative that kind of creative outlet could be for young people.

"We had seen over and over how theatre can change a child's life," Nathanael said recently during an interview at the company's studio in Miramar Beach.



A Leap of Faith

In 2012, Anna had just earned her master's degree in theatre studies, and Nathanael was nearing completion of his Master of Fine Arts. The couple was living in Virginia Beach with their twins, who were about to turn six, and Anna was pregnant with their third child.

Nathanael, a longtime theatre professional, had performed on stages across the country, including bringing Spider-Man to life for audiences at Universal's Islands of Adventure. But he was ready for steadier work to support his young family.

He got an offer to lead a one-man theatre department at a small college in Barbourville, Kentucky, and he was considering the move.

Before accepting, Nathanael spoke by phone with Anna's father, who lived in Santa Rosa Beach, near where Anna had grown up. The conversation gave him pause.

"My father-in-law said, 'Nathanael, you're a good man. You've got a job. Good for you. But do you really want to move even farther from family? Why not talk with Anna, pray about it, and consider coming home for

a while? Stay with us and see if something better might open up.'"

The idea resonated. The Fishers packed up their home, left Virginia Beach, and moved to Northwest Florida so Nathanael could continue looking for work. What was meant to be a one-year pause became a turning point.

The Ground Was Fertile

The Fishers began making calls, exploring what opportunities might exist.

Nathanael reached out to Jason Hedden, then a theatre professor at Gulf Coast State College in Panama City. One comment, in particular, stayed with him and quietly reshaped his thinking. "He said, 'If you're moving here to participate in the arts, there's not much, especially in the way of professional theatre. But if you're coming to provide the arts, the ground is fertile,'" Nathanael recalled.

Encouraged, the couple kept digging. They connected with local arts leaders and asked questions. What they found was striking: theatre education was nearly nonexistent.

Gradually, the possibility of starting their own company took shape.

The Fishers understood the impact an educational theatre program could have on young people.

"It's not about them going to Broadway. It's not about them having a professional career in theatre," Nathanael said.

"All of that is great, of course. We bless that and honor that — but there are life skills that children learn from theatre. It's about learning to stand in front of people, and it's about learning to communicate, and memorizing lines, and the empathy that is learned when you see the world through a character's perspective. It's that shared camaraderie that kids get."

With that conviction, but little sense of how far the journey might go, the Fishers launched their first after-school theatre program at Destin Elementary, serving 10 students. Their next program drew 30 kids. They ran it as volunteers, with their six-year-old twins and infant daughter in tow.

They tiptoed in.

Today, more than 600 children ages 5 to 18 participate annually in the nonprofit company's 52 summer camps and after-school and weekend programs, a reach that continues to grow.



Open to What Could Be

At the company’s 10-year anniversary, Nathanael and Anna reflected on how far they had come. After one interview, Anna turned to her husband and asked a simple question: When they first launched the company, had he ever imagined it would grow this large?

The answer was immediate. No.

“I think we just care about this community, and we never wanted to stifle the growth,” Nathanael said. “Our programming is meant to be very inclusive, especially when it comes to education. I think our mindset was simply to stay open to the possibilities.”

And so they did.

As word spread, interest surged. Year after year, they found themselves racing to keep up, constantly searching for creative ways to expand capacity.

“In those early years, it was always trying to catch up with growth,” Nathanael said.

The company expanded its after-school programming into DeFuniak Springs in 2019 and Freeport in 2024, bringing theatre education to more students closer to home.

They also launched a weekend program for teens, which now draws 90 students each Saturday morning. The program is divided into three age-based productions, so younger and older students aren’t competing for the same roles.

“We have parents tell us all the time, ‘On Monday through Friday, I can’t get my teenagers out of bed for school. But on Saturday mornings, they’re waking me up saying, “Let’s go. We’ve got to get to the theatre,”’” Nathanael said.

Many stay long after rehearsal ends. About 30 students regularly remain for hours to work on competition pieces or hone their skills further.

For Nathanael, that level of dedication is deeply motivating.

“They could be playing on their phones or doing whatever teenagers like to do in their free time. But they’re choosing to be here,” he said. “Especially in a time that’s so digital, when there’s so much conflict, having a place that builds self-confidence, communication, and empathy, I think it could be an antidote to all that.”

“
Our mindset was simply
to stay open to the
possibilities.
”





Raising the Curtain

In December 2014, while continuing to grow a robust education program, the Fishers expanded into professional theatre.

The first shows premiered at different event venues in the area and empty retail spaces used as black box theatres. As with their education programs, the approach was cautious at first.

“We did the same thing, really. We kind of tiptoed in,” Nathanael said. “We launched a couple of shows, and it just kept growing.”

In 2025 alone, Emerald Coast Theatre Company hosted more than 200 performances and welcomed 23,000 ticketed attendees. Professional actors now travel from across the country to perform on its stage.

For Nathanael, the enthusiastic response from audiences affirms that the company is meeting another community need.

He recalls a conversation with an actor who had performed in *Legally Blonde* and several other productions. The actor, who works regularly at theatres across the Southeast, told Nathanael that audience behavior in Miramar Beach stood out.

In many larger cities, the actor said, curtain call signals a rush for the exits as patrons hurry to beat traffic. At Emerald Coast Theatre Company, audiences linger. They remain in their seats, applauding, then stay to mingle with fellow theatre-goers.

“I feel like that’s their heartfelt thank you to the actors for what they’ve done, and that’s not something you get everywhere you go,” Nathanael said. “Our community is so special.”

Held by the Community

Community generosity has been integral to the theatre’s growth. The company relies on a mix of grants, sponsorships, and individual

donations to keep its doors open.

Nathanael knew the company had loyal supporters, but he was unprepared for the outpouring that followed when the pandemic brought live performance to a halt.

“My mindset was that we were going to have to tighten our belts and figure out how to get through this,” Nathanael recalled. He braced for the possibility of losing sponsors and donors.

Instead, the opposite happened.

“We had people increasing their sponsorships, saying, ‘We know you’re going to need this next year,’” Nathanael said. “Our sponsorships went up. Donations went up. People told us they wanted us to survive.”

The experience left the company humbled.

“We had some survivor’s guilt,” Nathanael said. “At a time when theatre companies across the country were closing at a rapid rate, Emerald Coast Theatre Company, without even asking, was supported more than ever.”

That spirit of generosity has continued, sustaining the company as it grows.

The company now has a staff of 12, including the Fishers, an eight-person board of directors, and numerous guest contributors.

The Next Act

In October 2016, the company found a permanent home when it moved into its current location, a 17,600-square-foot studio at Grand Boulevard in Miramar Beach.

“We use every inch,” Nathanael said.

Today, the facility houses professional productions along with most theatre classes and camps. During the summer, four age-group camps run simultaneously, filling the building with motion.

“It’s a cacophony of noise, joy, and fun,” Nathanael said.

Behind the scenes, every corner serves a purpose. They’ve partitioned it using curtains for a 260-seat theatre, a 100-seat cabaret, a lobby and bar area, and rehearsal spaces. Nathanael’s office and others are tucked into the back. The costume



designer creates roughly 1,500 costumes each year for student and professional productions in a 500-square-foot workspace carved out for the task. Nearby, the set designer uses just 650 square feet to design, build, and assemble 14 unique sets annually.

“We do the absolute best with the resources we have,” Nathanael said.

But as programs continue to grow, so do the limitations.

“If we want to keep raising the standard and serving our community with excellence, it’s time to face the challenges ahead and plan for the future,” he said.

That future may include expanding some operations to locations beyond Grand Boulevard while keeping the heart of the company rooted there.

As always, the approach will be careful and deliberate.

They’ll tiptoe in.

And go from there. 🎭

To learn more about Emerald Coast Theatre Company’s programs and upcoming performances, visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org.

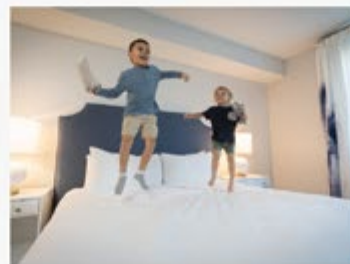
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Humpback Whales, Tonga
Photo: Howard Hall



Joshua Sam Miller performing at COP28, Dubai
Photo: Daniel Cervenka

LISTENING

An Immersive Oceanic Experience
Blending Whale Song, Visual Art,
and Mindfulness to Inspire
Deeper Ocean Care

By Lauren Sage Reinlie

“
I think that if we can connect people with the majestic creatures that share this planet, it's a natural next step to care more about protecting them and where they live.
”

When Joshua Sam Miller was 10, he learned to scuba dive in the glacial waters of a New Hampshire lake, captivated by what it felt like to enter a world beneath the surface.

Three decades later, Miller recreates that sense of immersion for audiences around the world, without anyone entering the water.

His project *Sounds of the Ocean* blends deep-sea field recordings, including whale song, original ambient compositions, and immersive visual art. The goal is to foster personal well-being while deepening emotional connections to ocean conservation. The award-winning work has been presented around the world, including at United Nations ocean conferences and international climate summits.

“I think that if we can connect people with the majestic creatures that share this planet, it's a natural next step to care more about protecting them and where they live,” Miller said from his home in Paia, Hawai'i, where he lives with his wife and baby. The family also spends part of the year in Potsdam, Germany.

The Call of the Ocean

Miller worked in film for about a decade before stepping away to travel internationally. During that time, he saw how deeply connecting with nature could affect people and, in turn, the planet. A lifelong musician, he became intrigued by nada yoga, or the yoga of sound, and by sound therapy and healing. He



Live show at Planetarium Mannheim, Germany
Photo: Philipp Barten



studied in India and Portugal before settling in Santa Cruz, California, to teach and host immersive sound experiences focused on well-being.

At one of these events in 2019, a marine biologist, Dr. John Ryan of the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI), pulled Miller aside and suggested he explore recordings from the institute. There, an underwater research station located about 21 miles offshore and 3,000 feet below the surface uses hydrophones to record the sounds of passing marine life and the ambient ocean environment.

Miller was captivated. The recordings were dense and alive, teeming with sound. The songs of the humpback whales were especially moving.

“I knew that the sounds of these whales were very special,” he said. Sound healing and meditation were already popular in California, but this felt like a way to add a conservation message, something deeply important to him.

That October, Miller hosted his first event. It combined the whale and undersea recordings with his original ambient sound compositions. About 50 people showed up with their yoga mats and pillows and sat in a circle.

“Most people just closed their eyes and dove into the ocean,” Miller recalled.

Feedback was good, so Miller kept going, but he had doubts along the way. “I was

shocked that many people came just to that first event,” he said. “Like most artists, you often doubt yourself at the beginning. Is this any good? Will people like it?”

He wrote the word “ocean” on a piece of paper and stuck it to the wall. Each morning, especially on days when he lacked motivation or felt clouded by that artistic doubt, he looked at it and reminded himself of the larger purpose behind his work.

“I’d think, ‘That’s worth the effort. That’s worth pushing through the doubts. Let’s keep going.’”

Immersion in Sound

At first, Miller performed live, playing the clarinet, handpan, harp, and other wind and percussion instruments. The piece was primarily an audio experience, best enjoyed while sitting or lying down with eyes closed.

“It’s incredible what your imagination can fill in visually,” he said.

Eventually, he expanded his team to include artists from 10 countries, collaborating on the version now playing in theaters. Miller said he and his collaborators understood early that “the ocean is really a global story,” and built the project accordingly, inviting artists, scientists, and storytellers from around the world to contribute.

Sounds of the Ocean blends Miller’s



Elise Lein, Los Angeles 2022
Photo: Noah Lipsitz



Live at UN Ocean Conference, Lisbon 2022
Photo: Ricardo Sousa Costa

“
People have
told us it’s the
most relaxed
they’ve ever felt.
”



Featuring WHAIA, Māori Artist, Berlin 2024
Photo: Manaf Azzam



Live at COP28, Dubai 2023
Photo: Daniel Cervenka

original music with Māori vocal traditions, featuring artist WHAIA, alongside deep-sea recordings, including whale songs and the sounds of other marine life, and immersive visual art, all designed to guide audiences into a state of deep relaxation and openness.

Many audience members report feelings of calm and happiness after attending live performances or screenings. Others describe more profound, life-changing moments.

“People have told us it’s the most relaxed they’ve ever felt,” Miller said. “Some say they felt connected to loved ones who had passed away. Others are blown away by what the ocean really sounds like and all that is happening beneath the surface.”

Miller believes nearly everyone can benefit from setting aside time to slow down, whether in a planetarium hosting a screening or a yoga studio offering meditation.

“Taking that amount of time to turn off the phone, slow down your mind, and practice mindfulness is only going to add value to your life,” he said.

From Wonder to Protection

Miller believes projects like his can serve as a powerful voice in the climate movement.

“Stories are what move people,” he said. “When those stories are felt on an emotional level, we tend to pay closer attention.”

Viewing a film, attending a concert, or reading fiction, poetry, and personal narratives can offer softer and sometimes more impactful entry points into climate

conversations than scientific journals or protest movements, Miller said.

“Even someone who does not believe climate change is something we need to pay attention to may still be moved by an emotional connection to an animal, such as a whale or an elephant. If they learn that the animal’s environment is in danger, I think that connection has the potential to motivate them more strongly.”

At live events, the production team partners with local environmental groups working to protect oceans and waterways, along with its nonprofit education partner, Oceanic Global, offering attendees immediate ways to get involved. For screenings, 10 percent of proceeds go to local or regional conservation organizations.

“First, we have to know what the needs are, and then be guided to help by the people who are doing the work,” Miller said. “We are definitely not going to solve the problems individually.”

He sees the project operating at the intersection of environmental protection and human healing, helping audiences see how interconnected the concepts are. “Ocean health and human health are really one and the same.”

Listening at Sea

Recently, Miller was scuba diving off the coast of Maui when he heard humpback whales sing underwater for the first time. He couldn’t see them, but their voices surrounded him in every direction.

“It was a moment I’ll never forget,” he said.

Now, while continuing to expand screening venues worldwide, the *Sounds of the Ocean* team is developing a new “on-sea” program in Hawai’i to offer others a version of that unforgettable experience. Participants will travel by sailboat into open water, where a submerged hydrophone will carry the sounds of whales and other marine life directly to listeners wearing headphones on deck.

For the boy who once wanted to enter the underwater world, it is a fitting next step: helping others experience that same feeling of wonder by listening closely enough to feel immersed in it. 🐳

To dive deeper into Sounds of the Ocean, upcoming screenings, and ocean-listening experiences, visit soundssoftheocean.com.

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BEACHES ABROAD

By Geoff Nudelman

Schooner Cove
Photo: Jeremy Koreski for Tourism Tofino

TOFINO, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Tofino's history extends back millennia through the rich heritage of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, one of the Nuu-chah-nulth nations of Vancouver Island's west coast. That heritage traces a throughline to the arrival of the earliest non-Native settlers in the 1850s, who eventually named the area after Spanish naval officer and cartographer Vicente Tofiño.

The next hundred years would see immense growth in commercial fishing, logging, and the harvest of other natural resources, which eventually led locals and visitors to recognize the need to preserve this special ecosystem through the establishment of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve in 1971.

Other preservation laws and standards would follow, and that's a large part of the reason Tofino and its surroundings remain such a draw for Canadians today. It's a stunning nook of Canada's northwestern coast, filled with discovery and intrigue for anyone remotely interested in nature.



Long Beach in Pacific Rim
National Park Reserve
Photo: Kyler Vos for Tourism Tofino

WHY GO?

The park reserve alone is worth the trip. Nearly 200 square miles of coastal rainforest and interior are divided into three units, with the 47-mile West Coast Trail serving as one of its main backpacking highlights. There are also plenty of day hikes for more casual exploring.

The town of Tofino itself is quite small, but it packs plenty of character. Surfers have long been drawn to the craggy waves of the area, and that laid-back culture has seeped its way into the character of the town. It is very much a seasonal place, with a population of fewer than 3,000 entertaining more than half a million visitors each year.

Wintertime is particularly special on this corner of the island, where hardy Pacific storms meet the rocky coastline for some incredible viewing of nature's fury. Summertime is the high season, with many visitors coming to see the majestic landscapes and endless Pacific views.

HOW DO I GET THERE?

Speaking of remote, that's one of the first things a quick online search will reveal about its location, and it makes getting there half the fun (depending on your perspective). The easiest way is a plane ride (both seaplane and wheeled) from a few locations in or near Vancouver that will get you to Tofino-Long Beach Airport in under an hour.

The longer, more adventurous option is to drive from Victoria or Nanaimo on the other side of Vancouver Island. You'll need to take a ferry from one of Vancouver's ferry terminals or from Port Angeles, Washington, to the island, then begin a 3.5- to 4.5-hour drive to Tofino. There is plenty of natural splendor and many sites to see along the way, so many travelers choose to turn the trek into a longer one. Having your own vehicle is essential for exploring the region.



Wahous Wilderness Lodge



Wolf in the Fog

WHERE SHOULD I EAT?

The larger area puts a strong emphasis on what's local and what's in season. Not surprisingly, there's a big focus on seafood and also a strong local imbibing culture.

Most of the dining in and around Tofino is fairly casual, with lots of local favorites. Wolf in the Fog offers hearty bar fare perfect after a day out adventuring. Down the street, The Schooner captures a quintessential local seafood vibe.

Just to the south of town, Moss & Milk Cafe graduated from a booth at the seasonal Tofino Market to a permanent spot at Tsawaak RV Resort by Tinwis. The cafe is a beloved stop for fresh, healthy, Mediterranean-inspired fare.

Tofino Brewing Co. is perhaps the most popular beer stop in the area, with the perfect blend of indoor and outdoor seating to take advantage of sudden rain showers (or imminent sunshine).

WHERE SHOULD I STAY?

Tofino, as a region, is much larger than just the town. Visitors can stay as far south as Ucluelet, about 40 minutes away, or even on a nearby island. One of the most anticipated openings in recent memory is Wahous Wilderness Lodge, slated for later this year. The floating property, owned and operated by the Ahousaht First Nation, is a 25-minute boat ride northeast from Tofino into Quait Bay. It will feature 16 rooms, four private cabins, and endless access to even more remote British Columbian wilderness.

Closer to civilization, Hotel Zed Tofino is a popular and reasonably priced choice off the main highway. Its location situates visitors nicely between Tofino and nearby Long Beach. Right in town, Himwitsa Lodge offers the ideal locale to explore the shops and artisans of Tofino's core while enjoying views of the harbor and the mountains.



Wolf in the Fog



The Schooner



Photo: Jeremy Koreski for Tourism Tofino

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

The best value comes during the off-season, typically October through May. There's plenty to do during this time, but some seasonal activities may start to wind down, and the weather becomes much more unpredictable.

As of mid-February 2026, hotel pricing was running from \$175 to around \$300 per night. There are also Airbnbs available throughout the area with more price variability. Prices tend to stay stable through the busiest months, but expect a wider range once the tourist season is over. With so much to do, activity prices also run the gamut. Surfing lessons can range from \$70 to \$140 per person, depending on whether you want group or private lessons. A day out on kayaks can cost upward of \$100, but that may include a guided tour through the more popular routes.

Boat outings are generally affordable, with even a full-day tour coming in at less than \$200 per person. There are plenty of options based on your tolerance for adventure: short island hops, whale watching, or even bear spotting along the shorelines.

You'll be spending most of your time outdoors, and many of those attractions are free or have a low-cost day pass. Just keep in mind that you're visiting a thriving, sensitive ecosystem, so tread lightly and do your part to keep it pristine for the next season of visitors.



Photo: Marcus Paladino for Tourism Tofino



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Healing THE GULF

INSIDE GULFARIUM'S C.A.R.E.
CENTER, WHERE SEA TURTLES RECOVER
AND RETURN HOME
BY DALLAS JACKSON

Warm light hits the Emerald Coast of Florida with a particular brightness, a glittering, salt-kissed sheen that feels alive with movement. On quiet mornings in Fort Walton Beach, pelicans skim low over the Gulf's breathing waters, and somewhere just beyond the horizon, sea turtles glide through unseen currents. From the outside, Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park looks like many of our beloved coastal destinations—welcoming, lively, and full of families. Yet just beyond its public pathways is a space powered by something deeper: not spectacle, but stewardship.

The Gulfarium Sea Turtle C.A.R.E. Center embraces an open-air setup that offers visitors a glimpse into a world of quiet urgency. Here, rescued turtles rest in tanks of carefully monitored seawater, their shells bearing the evidence of their journeys, some smooth, some scarred, all remarkable. The acronym C.A.R.E. stands for Conserve, Act, Rehabilitate, Educate, and every part of that mission is visible in the rhythms of the space. Staff and volunteers move with practiced calm and purpose, checking vitals, preparing food, scrubbing tanks, and documenting every detail. This is not a place of quick fixes. Though some patients may only spend a day in their care, most often, it's an exercise in patience, science, and deep respect for creatures that have roamed the oceans for millions of years.





“We want to continue to grow the number of turtles we’re able to take in, improve the healthcare we provide, and ultimately return them to Gulf waters so they can reproduce and strengthen their populations.”

Patrick Berry, Gulfarium’s President and CEO, spoke about the work with both professionalism and unmistakable affection. “It’s a great way to learn about animals and conservation—and to connect not only with them, but with your family,” he said during a tour, standing near the viewing windows where guests often press their palms to the glass in awe. For him, the C.A.R.E. Center represents both a responsibility and a privilege. The Gulfarium has been part of this coastline for more than 70 years. C.A.R.E. opened in 2015, and under Berry’s leadership, its conservation role has only grown stronger. He describes plans for a new multi-use hospital building: “We want to continue to grow the number of turtles we’re able to take in, improve the health-

care we provide, and ultimately return them to Gulf waters so they can reproduce and strengthen their populations.” His vision is rooted not just in numbers, but in the belief that every individual turtle matters.

Inside the C.A.R.E. Center, that belief takes shape in tangible, sometimes surprising ways. Dr. Julie Cavin, the Director of Veterinary Services, compares much of the work to human medicine because, in many ways, it resembles it. Blood work is analyzed, fluids are administered, and X-rays are taken, and carefully interpreted. The turtles are patients, each with their own story, their own injuries, their own path back to the wild.



This is not a place of quick fixes, though some patients may only spend a day in their care; most often, it's an exercise in patience, science, and deep respect for creatures that have roamed the oceans for millions of years.

Julie noted that the center treats all types of animals and has seen tremendous success supporting the recovery of green sea turtles. She also spoke about the plight of Kemp's ridleys, the smallest of all sea turtles, which are currently critically endangered. "You only care about what you know, and you don't know it until you see it," she said, underscoring why public access to this work is so important. Sea turtles are not animals most people encounter regularly along our shoreline, yet they are keystone species essential to the health of marine ecosystems. When people can witness their rehabilitation firsthand, the connection becomes personal.

That connection has deepened over time, in no small part because of people like Sarah Kamen, the Assistant Stranding Coordinator. When the C.A.R.E. Center began its rescue program in 2015, it was modest in scale, driven by a handful of dedicated individuals. "Starting kind of small and then getting the word out there, having more people interested in what we're doing, having more people interested in assisting us with what we're doing is impactful," Sarah reflected, describing how community involvement has fueled the program's growth. From 22 turtles in the beginning to 119 in 2025, with 983 rescued so far, the program's growth is a testament both to increased need and increased capacity. Boating traffic, fishing activity, and envi-

ronmental changes have all contributed to more strandings, but they have also inspired more volunteers, partnerships, and support.

“You only care about what you know, and you don’t know it until you see it.”

Spring on the Emerald Coast comes alive at CARE on the Coast TurtleFest, Gulfarium's biggest annual fundraiser, and one of the most joy-filled days on the calendar. This isn't just a festival; it's a full day of music, fun, and celebration, all for a great cause. Local bands and DJs set the soundtrack, while stilt walkers, roaming performers, a pirate band, and mermaids bring surprises at every turn.

Food and drinks are ready for all tastes, with all-you-CARE-to-enjoy options and alcoholic beverages for guests 21 and older. Families can dive into fun throughout the park, from a dedicated Kids Zone packed with crafts, games, and activities to booths hosted by Gulfarium's conservation partners. Together, they turn curiosity into connection through sea turtle and marine conservation, including the hands-on rescue work of the C.A.R.E. Center.

With laughter, music, and movement everywhere you turn, TurtleFest delivers a festival atmosphere that is as vibrant as the Gulf itself. Perfect for locals and visitors alike, it's a day to celebrate, explore, and support the incredible animals that call the Emerald Coast home.

One of the most meaningful experiences is the Sea Turtle Rehabilitation Showcase, where staff set up stations that mirror their intake process. Visitors can see how turtles are measured, learn how radiographs (X-rays) are taken, and understand what happens from the moment a stranded turtle is rescued to the day it is released. Conservation partners from across the region, including state parks, local universities, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey, gather to share their work. Local vendors add

another layer of connection, offering handmade goods and products that reflect the spirit of the coast.

For Sponsorship Coordinator Lorren West, TurtleFest represents something deeply personal. A relatively new resident of Walton County, she moved to the area two years ago after leading a maritime museum in Mississippi. Since then, she has thrown herself into community and conservation work with enthusiasm. "People are hungry to learn, but they don't know how to access that," she said, explaining why she is so passionate about the C.A.R.E. Center. She often encountered visitors at the gallery she manages on 30A who wanted to see and understand sea turtles, but didn't know where to go. The Gulfarium became her answer, and TurtleFest became the perfect bridge between curiosity and action.

Lorren also speaks with clarity and conviction about environmental stewardship. To her, caring for sea turtles is inseparable from caring for dunes, tides, and the broader coastal ecosystem. "If I can help that cause and give back to the Walton County and Bay County residents, how cool is that?" she asked. For her, the 30-mile drive from 30A to Fort Walton Beach is never a barrier when the mission is meaningful. TurtleFest, in her view, solves the "where and how" problem for people who want to help but don't know the appropriate first step to take.

As the day fades and the sun dips lower over the Gulf, TurtleFest settles into a quieter hum. Families linger, children clutch small turtle-themed souvenirs, and behind the scenes, the C.A.R.E. Center continues its steady work. The turtles in rehabilitation tanks are unaware of the celebration in their honor, yet they are the reason it exists. Each one represents resilience, the possibility of recovery, and the impact of a community that chose to rise to the occasion.

In that sense, the Gulfarium Sea Turtle C.A.R.E. Center is not just a facility; it is a promise. A promise that when these ancient creatures are in trouble, someone will answer the call. A promise that science, compassion, and community can work together. And at TurtleFest, that promise is made visible in music, laughter, shared meals, and a collective commitment to the sea. 🐢

This year's CARE on the Coast TurtleFest takes place on Saturday, April 18, from 3:30 to 7 p.m., with VIP guests welcomed in early to kick off the celebration. Tickets are on sale now at go.gulfarium.com/turtlefest.





SEA TURTLE RESCUE & CARE: WHAT'S REALLY AT STAKE

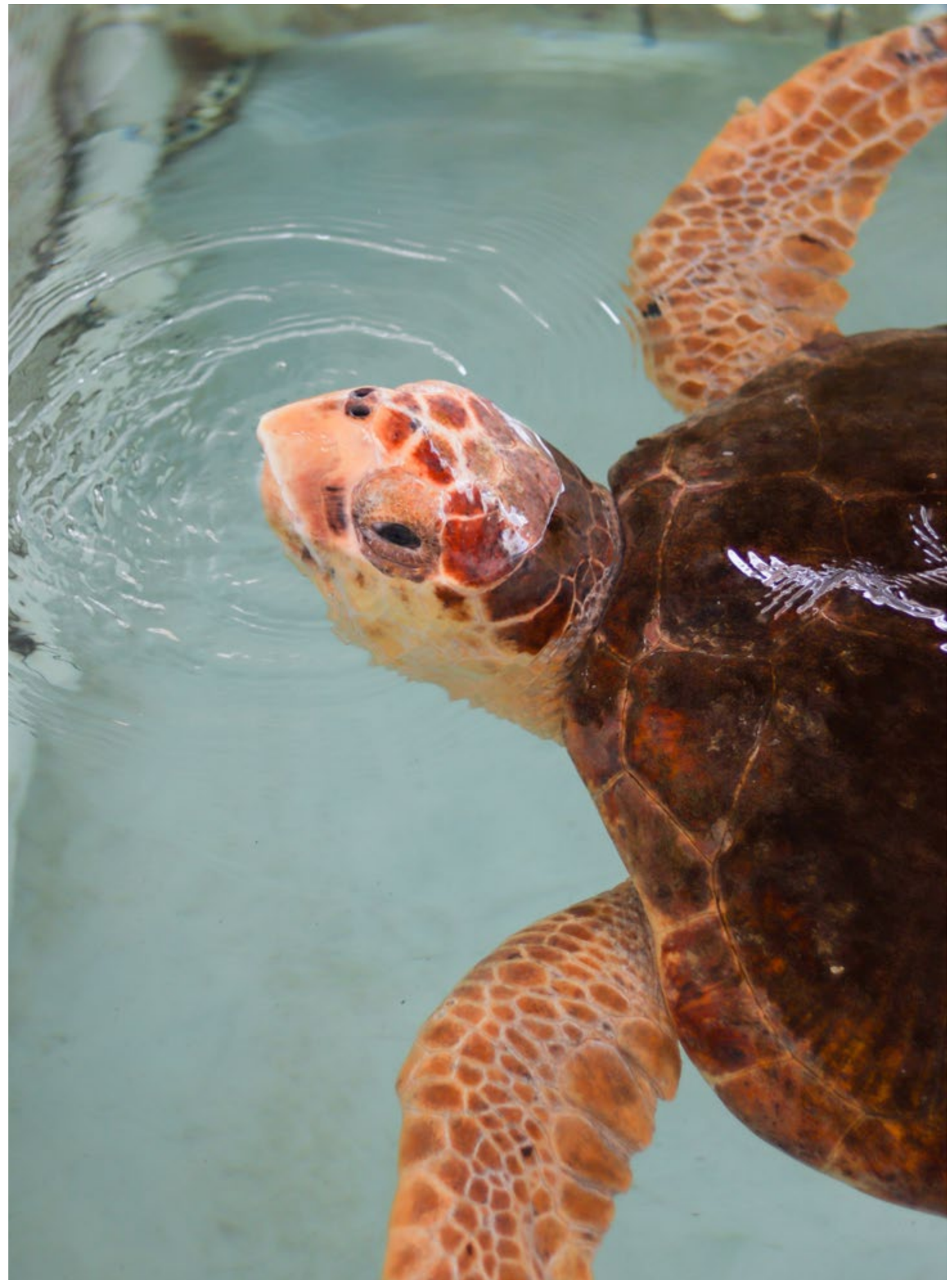
Sea turtles are keystone species, meaning their presence supports entire coastal and marine ecosystems. Their feeding and movement help keep seagrass beds and nearshore habitats in balance, improve water quality, and sustain nursery grounds for fish, crabs, and shrimp. By moving between nearshore and open waters, they also help connect different marine systems, allowing energy and nutrients to flow across the Gulf.

Turtles come to the C.A.R.E. Center for many reasons, including boat strikes, hook-and-line injuries, illness, and, increasingly, cold-stunning events. In recent years, the Emerald Coast has experienced more frequent and unusually cold winters. When shallow Gulf waters drop rapidly, turtles can become lethargic and strand along local beaches, making timely rescue especially critical.

Each rescued turtle receives a full veterinary intake, including exams, blood work, and radiographs. Some recover in hours; others require months of care before release.

The C.A.R.E. Center achieves an 85 percent rehabilitation success rate, and the community has helped raise nearly \$700,000 specifically for sea turtles. Thanks to so many concerned residents, more than 22,000 volunteer hours have supported rescue, care, and education efforts.

If you encounter an injured, stranded, or cold-stunned sea turtle along the Emerald Coast, contact a licensed wildlife or stranding response organization immediately and do not attempt to move the animal yourself.






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GARDEN

**RESORT COCKTAIL PROGRAMS INSPIRED BY
GARDENS, FARMS, AND BOTANICALS WORLDWIDE**

to Glass

By Carrie Honaker

You've heard of farm-to-table, but lately, a quieter, more intimate trend is taking hold in luxury hospitality: garden-to-bar. Imagine stepping into a sun-dappled terrace or a lush tropical garden, the air rich with mint, basil, or blooming hibiscus, and watching a bartender snip the herbs and fruits that will go straight into your glass. Each cocktail becomes a direct reflection of the season and the soil, bright with citrus, earthy with root vegetables, or perfumed with flowers picked just hours before. It's a ritual that engages all the senses: the soft crush of leaves under fingertips, the aroma of fresh herbs as they hit the shaker, the burst of a ripe fruit pressed into the glass. This isn't just mixology. It's a connection to place, a nod to sustainability, and a sensory escape, all poured into a single glass. Here are some standouts from garden-to-bar programs around the globe.

Pilina, Fairmont Kea Lani, Maui

The cocktail program doesn't just nod to Hawai'i. It tastes like it. Opened in 2024, the resort's open-air lounge, Pilina, sits just off the newly transformed lobby, where palm fronds sway in the trade winds and the ocean hums in the distance. But the real magic starts with the fresh herbs and island fruit that find their way into the glass, ingredients Cameron Hall and his team muddle, shake, and mist into drinks with an unmistakable sense of place. Pilina's menu is an 'āina-driven journey across the islands, built around local distilleries and a deep respect for Hawai'i's cultural mix. Hall traveled more than 1,400 miles across three islands, tasting spirits and meeting producers, including makers at Waikulu Distillery. A focus on sugarcane runs through the program, honoring Maui's cane-to-glass legacy even after the island's last sugar mill closed in 2016. Local sourcing shapes the menu, from citrus dehydrated in-house to cocktails that make thoughtful, layered use of fruit. A signature pour like the 'Āina v.3, built with taro vodka, passionfruit, guava, citrus, and Champagne, tastes like drinking the islands at golden hour.

fairmont-kea-lani.com



Playa Cativo, Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica

On Costa Rica's wild Golfo Dulce, this eco-resort feels like the kind of place the world forgot, accessible only by boat and tucked inside a 1,000-acre private reserve powered entirely by hydroelectric and solar energy. Cocktails begin not with a bottle, but with a walk through Playa Cativo's lush gardens, redesigned by American expat Rob Petterson to flow with the land and celebrate native biodiversity. Along winding paths, you'll find vibrant heliconias, towering palms, medicinal plants, fruit trees, and flowering shrubs alive with butterflies and birds. The adjacent Cayetano's Organic Farm—tended by organic farmer Andres Medina—supplies more than 30% of the resort's ingredients, from basil and cilantro to tropical fruits and edible flowers. Even the "100 happy hens," two pigs, and on-site bee farm play a role in this regenerative ecosystem. At the bar, fresh-juice cocktails arrive in playful toucan-shaped glasses, bright with farm-picked garnishes and tailored to the moment. As the team puts it, "Our cocktails are special because they combine the freshness of ingredients from our farm with different spirits, always achieving a drink to your liking and served at the right moment."

playacativo.com



Primo, JW Marriott Orlando, Grande Lakes

A door off the terrace opens onto the Primo Garden, thick with rosemary, basil, thyme, edible flowers, and passionfruit blossoms climbing the perimeter like a living garnish tray. “We use rosemary in one of our late-summer cocktails, and we literally go out and take it off the terrace every day,” said General Manager Alexa Delgado. “We walk 10 feet from the bar entrance and pick a bunch of rosemary. You can’t get more local.” That immediacy shows up in the glass. On the upcoming menu, a Mediterranean Martini infuses olive brine with garden herbs—rosemary, thyme, and basil—while another drink arrives in a pink pig-shaped glass, finished with fire stick flowers grown specifically for garnish. Even the classics get a farm-forward twist, like a ricotta-washed daiquiri topped with basil oil made from freshly picked leaves. Delgado is also proud of Primo’s espresso martini, shaken with rosemary for a bitter, dark-chocolate finish that surprises you on the back end with a herbaceous note. Beyond the garden, Primo sources extensively from the property’s Whisper Creek Farm and local partners, proof that “local” here isn’t a buzzword.

primojw.com



Hacienda de San Antonio, Colima, Mexico

Mixology comes with a sense of provenance at this spot. Guests can book an intimate cocktail class that feels less like a bar demo and more like an immersion into the region’s flavors. But what truly sets the program apart is what’s growing beyond the bar. The Hacienda and its sister property, Cuixmala, draw on extensive organic gardens and farm produce, which supply herbs, fruits, and vegetables used throughout the cocktail menu. The team incorporates those herbs, fruits, and vegetables directly into the cocktail recipes, treating farm-grown ingredients as an essential part of the region’s culinary heritage. The result is a cocktail culture rooted in soil, season, and tradition.

haciendadesanantonio.com



East Winds Resort, Saint Lucia

This boutique resort is tucked into 12 acres of tropical gardens—lush with fruit trees, herbs, and an organic kitchen garden that supplies the beachside bar and the Bamboo Lounge, a favorite spot for pre-dinner drinks. “When you’re surrounded by all this bountiful nature, it’s hard not to be inspired to create cocktails using these ingredients,” said Bar & Restaurant Manager Titus Poleon. That inspiration shows up in everything from a Basil Smash to a Mojito bright with freshly picked mint and lime. Fruit-forward daiquiris rotate with what’s ripe: mango, pineapple, guava, and banana. The resort even maintains a living banana museum, preserving rare varieties in shades of red, green, and purple. Some end up in cocktails, others on the plate, proof that here, the garden isn’t scenery; it’s the menu.

eastwinds.com



KO Lounge, Conrad Koh Samui, Thailand

The team here draws on ingredients from the property’s Iris Farm, including butterfly pea flowers, pandan, mulberries, and ginger, to shape the cocktail program. Drinks include Coconut & Rose Kombucha, a refreshing mix of coconut juice, syrup, and house-fermented rose kombucha from Botanikka Café, and Begin Again, a gin cocktail brightened with butterfly pea and pandan leaves harvested on-site.

conradkohsamui.info/ko-lounge-menu

Sol & Sao Bar, Four Seasons Resort The Nam Hai, Hoi An

Nestled along Vietnam's central coast, Sol & Sao Bar opened in summer 2025 as a vibrant, day-to-night destination where local flavors shine. The bar's mixology team draws from the resort's own herb and vegetable farm, using coconut, hibiscus, jackfruit, pineapple, and pandan in inventive cocktails. Guests can sip sherry cocktails alongside Vietnamese-style tapas with Spanish influence, including the Eco Nam Hai Garden, made with seasonal ingredients from the resort's herb and vegetable farm. "Sol & Sao Bar is a tribute to the breathtaking coastal landscapes of Vietnam," said General Manager Marcel Oostenbrink.

fourseasons.com/hoian/dining/lounges/sol-and-sao



Sipping Tiger Bar, InterContinental Phuket Resort by IHG

Rooted in Thai botanicals and modern mixology, the bar sources ingredients from its on-site garden and local Phuket growers, while ongoing work with Kasetsart University helps shape the botanical program; techniques like sous-vide infusion and distillation maximize flavor while minimizing waste. Designed to balance nature and craft, the space includes a main bar for social sipping, The Den for more private, spirit-forward exploration, and a Botanical Room where herbs and produce are grown, harvested, and used fresh. Signature cocktails celebrate homegrown ingredients: Dessert Island layers pandan-aged rum with tea infusion and upcycled coffee liqueur, Rum Cartel highlights chocolate mint, and Take It or Leave It showcases coriander-infused tequila. Every botanical contributes structure, aroma, and balance, making each drink a reflection of Phuket's flavors and Sipping Tiger's zero-waste ethos.

phuket.intercontinental.com/dining/sipping-tiger



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33 Heron's Watch Way, Santa Rosa Beach, Florida

Apéritif Bar, Viceroy Bali Hotel

Nestled in Ubud's jungle, this Secret Retreats member draws from its on-site greenhouse, where vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers thrive. Mixologists use these fresh botanicals to craft cocktails and apéritifs that showcase Balinese flavors, weaving garden-inspired notes into every drink.

aperitif.com

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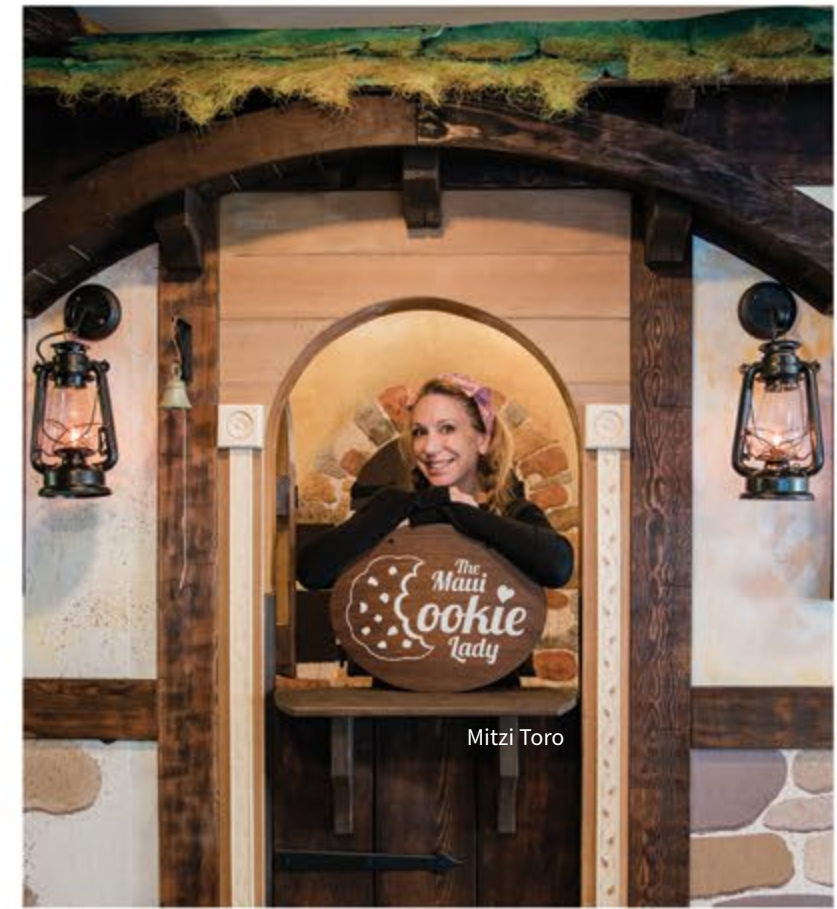
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The Lilikoi White Chocolate cookie is a fan favorite that captures the bright, tropical flavor of Maui.

BEACH BAKED

By Carrie Honaker



Mitzi Toro

Mitzi Toro Turns Island Ingredients Into Cookies Worth Crossing Oceans For

The first sign you're close to The Maui Cookie Lady isn't the storefront—it's the air. Somewhere along Baldwin Avenue in Makawao, the upcountry breeze starts carrying the scent of warm butter and caramelized sugar. It's chocolate melting into heat, vanilla blooming like perfume, and toasted nuts lingering like a campfire afterglow. You can practically taste the brown sugar before you've even seen the door.

The Maui Cookie Lady's Makawao shop delights with a treasured clock, a playful window display, and a whimsical interior that feels as imaginative as its famous cookies.



Then you open it, and the world shifts from Maui to make-believe. Lantern light flickers against knotted wood. Giant flowers bloom from corners like something enchanted. Tiny cottages and crooked stumps dot the space, as if a handful of woodland creatures might come out at any moment with aprons on. The shop feels like it was carved out of a storybook—Willy Wonka meets Bilbo Baggins, with a little Keebler elf treehouse energy thrown in for good measure.

Behind it all is Mitzi Toro, the woman locals call The Maui Cookie Lady. She moves fast, greeting regulars, laughing with her team of “cookie elves.” “Every time I come through the door,” she said, “I get excited.”

When she first took over the space, it was bare: four white walls, uneven floors, and not much money to work with. Instead of calling in contractors, Toro did what she’s always done. She scavenged. She repurposed. She grabbed pieces of what other people were discarding—wood, furniture, odds and ends—and transformed them into something magical.

From California to Maui: Teacher by Day, Baker by Night

In a California classroom during her freshman year, Toro’s quiet loneliness began to lift when her English teacher, Mrs. Merrick, brought in homemade chocolate-chip walnut cookies. After asking for the recipe, Toro began baking them again and again, using cookies as her way of finding her voice. “Food is the common language,” she said.

That recipe followed her through the years like a secret key. By her junior year, she was experimenting with whatever sounded fun: Snickers chunks, M&M’s, candy bar mashups. It was long before artisan cookie shops became trendy, before “limited drops” and Instagram dessert culture turned sweets into spectacle. Eventually, her parents retired to Maui, and she followed. She built a career as a history teacher and school counselor. A responsible job. A steady life. But baking never disappeared. It stayed tucked into the corners of her days: holiday trays, late-night batches, cookies for coworkers.

In 2012, Toro’s father passed away. The loss left a hollow space in her life, the kind of grief that makes the world feel too quiet. But amid that ache, she felt something else too: gratitude. The nurses at Maui Memorial Hospital had cared for him with compassion, and she wanted to thank them in a way that felt real.

So she baked.

She made trays of cookies—thick, oversized, packed with chocolate and sweetness—and sold them at a local farmers’ market. She handed over the money to the ICU nurses who had taken care of her father, thinking

that might be the end of it. A one-time gesture. But everyone still wanted her cookies. Word spread fast, the way it does on an island. Regulars started showing up not just for the cookies, but for the feeling they carried. At the time, Toro was still teaching, still counseling, still living a life that looked stable on paper. But the farmers’ market table was quietly changing everything.

When Toro finally left teaching, her colleagues pooled money to buy her first mixer, which is still in her kitchen today. Ever since, she and her Maui-born husband have fixed and patched their own equipment, embodying an island make-do spirit while keeping the business fiercely independent: no loans, no investors, and one intentionally small, self-funded location.



The Cookies: Colossal, Stuffed, and Completely Over the Top

If the shop feels like a fantasy, the cookies are the main attraction, and they don’t do subtle.

Toro’s cookies are thick, heavy, and unapologetic. Some weigh 8 ounces. Some push 16. They’re dense and stacked with fillings. Her closest thing to “classic” is the Butter Rum Triple Chunker, rich and nostalgic, like a chocolate chip cookie that spent a semester abroad and came home with a better personality. But the real thrill is the way she treats cookies like a blank canvas. Since opening the shop, she’s created more than 325 variations and is constantly experimenting.

For all the wild imagination in her flavor combinations,



The point is the cookie itself:
*the moment someone bites into one
and feels a flicker of joy.*

Dark chocolate meets locally roasted Kona coffee
in this espresso cookie, created in collaboration
with Oma Maui Brewed Coffee.



The Maui Cookie Lady with a
bowl of her favorite flavors.

her cookies always circle back to place. Maui isn’t just her home; it’s her pantry.

Hawaii’s volcanic soil and constant sunshine create an agricultural abundance that feels almost unfair. Toro folds these flavors into the dough whenever she can: Waihe’e Valley macadamia nuts, Hawaiian sea salt, lavender from Ali’i Kula Lavender Farm, mango, calamansi, lilikoi. She works with local honey, local caramel, and local coffee. Even spirits make their way into the mix—rum, beer, whatever she can use to turn Maui into something edible.

“Sustainability is vital to Hawaii,” she said. “It’s important to me to source locally as much as possible.” Her cookies are decadent, yes. But they’re also a love letter, a sweet proof that Maui is more than beaches and resorts. It’s farms. It’s forests. It’s fruit trees and salt air and people growing things with their hands. Some of her most memorable flavors are born from collaborations with local makers. There’s the Maui Brewing Company cookie, infused with Coconut Hiwa Porter, giving it a dark richness and roasted depth. Then there’s Anuhea Upcountry Breeze, created with Hawaiian singer-songwriter Anuhea: lavender buds, salted macadamia nuts, calamansi lemon, and white chocolate truffle, all finished with a lemon meringue reduction drizzle that lands sweet and tart at once.

But somewhere along the way, the little fairytale bakery in Makawao escaped the island. Toro’s customer list reads like a pop culture fever dream: Elton John. Goldie Hawn. Bruno Mars. But the moment that truly launched The Maui Cookie Lady into the national spotlight came when Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson posted about her cookies.

“This is not a drill,” he wrote, describing a colossal 16-ounce creation—handmade, decadent, “dangerous,” the kind of cookie that could “slap someone in the face ‘cause it tastes so good.” It was filled with all of his favorites: Reese’s, Snickers,



A riff on red velvet in cookie form.



The Honu Collection highlights the bakery's most popular cookies, from the original Butter Rum to the “Grown-Up Samoa,” baked with Coconut Hiwa Porter from Maui Brewing Company.

Oreos. The post triggered chaos in the best way. Orders poured in. Fans who’d never been to Maui suddenly wanted a taste. Backorders stacked up. Then came Ludacris, who chartered a helicopter from Oahu just to pick up cookies. For Toro, celebrity attention is flattering, but it’s never the point. The point is the cookie itself: the moment someone bites into one and feels a flicker of joy.

Her motto says it all: “Make the world a smaller place one cookie at a time.”

And she has something new in the mix. For years, she’s been working on a project that feels like the natural next chapter: cookie butter. Not just any cookie butter, but one that tastes like Hawaii. Trader Joe’s cookie butter, the cult-favorite spread mainland shoppers stock like peanut butter, is a suitcase prize in Hawaii. It’s a gift people bring back because there’s no Trader Joe’s on the islands.

And Toro kept thinking: why should Hawaii have to import comfort? “I make cookies,” she thought. “Why don’t I

make cookie butter using local ingredients?”

Now she has two lines: Tropical Cookie Butter, infused with mango, pineapple, and lilikoi, and a Crème Brûlée version built on caramelized sugar and vanilla, rich and toasty, like the crisp top of a custard cracked with a spoon. In 2026, she’s set to debut them at the Summer Fancy Food Show in New York City, carrying a piece of Maui all the way to Manhattan.

What started with a teacher offering cookies to a room full of nervous teenagers carried through to a daughter baking in honor of her father and the nurses who cared for him. And now it lives here, in Makawao, in a crooked little shop where the cookies are colossal, the décor is repurposed, and joy is baked fresh every day. Because Mitzi Toro isn’t just baking dessert. She’s baking belonging. 🍪

For more cookies, cravings, and Maui magic, visit TheMauiCookieLady.com or follow @MauiCookieLady on Instagram.

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Celebrating Light

PHOTOGRAPHS AND WORDS BY SUSAN GUNN

Western Lake in Grayton Beach is easy to miss on a busy day, but by evening its shoreline becomes an extraordinary place to watch the sunset. Framed by iconic longleaf pines with the beach just beyond, it is a longtime favorite along Scenic Highway 30A for photographers and anyone drawn to its remarkable light. Both sunrise and sunset here are breathtaking.

Fall heralds winter, and darkness descends as the days grow short, but not before the mighty sun has the last word. The shifting atmosphere and weather of day's end become the palette from which the sun paints her nightly exit—our beautiful beach, her dynamic canvas. On a whim, our yellow dwarf shines through at twilight, even on days when she lingers beneath a heavy blanket of clouds. She is not greedy, but quick to share the sky with lightning, rain, smoke, or fog, creating singular masterpieces that embrace water, horizon, coastal wildlife, and humans.

Neither cold water nor the chill of the evening beach breeze deters witnesses from her nearly nightly performance. Participants blend like rich oils into each evolving, color-drenched scene, leaving quiet observers breathless as blue hour settles in. Light lingers low and gold, stretching across crisp sands as if reluctant to leave us alone with the cold. The sky deepens into bruised purples and embered oranges, mirrored in still tide pools, in what feels like a dimming illusion but is, in fact, a stunning, immersive vista. For a brief, breath-held moment, everything is hushed.

Coastal winter sunsets can be among the most magnificent, yet they carry a certain weight, ushering in long nights that call for stillness, endurance, and patience. The darkness that follows is not sudden but earned, a gradual dimming that invites reflection and retreat.

And yet winter’s darkness is never an ending, only a pause. Trust is key in knowing that beneath the frost and silence, time is already tilting back toward the light. Almost imperceptibly at first, the days begin to lengthen. As spring approaches, the mornings respond with a different kind of beauty. Sunrises, pale and tentative at first, break the horizon like a promise kept. Light spills gently into the cool air, warming it by degrees, softening the sharp edges of the world. Once again, the sun steps onto the stage—now matinee style—rising with radiant, color-swept brilliance. Every successive dawn carries a pastel-laden reassurance that what receded will return, that warmth is quietly gathering strength.

Amid such beauty, the symbolism is impossible to ignore. We emerge alongside the light, drawn outward by gentler mornings and longer days. The sun no longer slips away so quickly, and we are renewed by warm waters and sun-warmed skin. In this transition, we are reminded that darkness has its purpose, but it is never permanent. Spring sunrises fill us with a sense of beginning again. Winter sunsets invite us to settle in, reflect, and release what has passed. Spring sunrises remind us we can begin again, and again. In these rhythmic transitions, we flourish and grow with the light and warmth of each returning season.

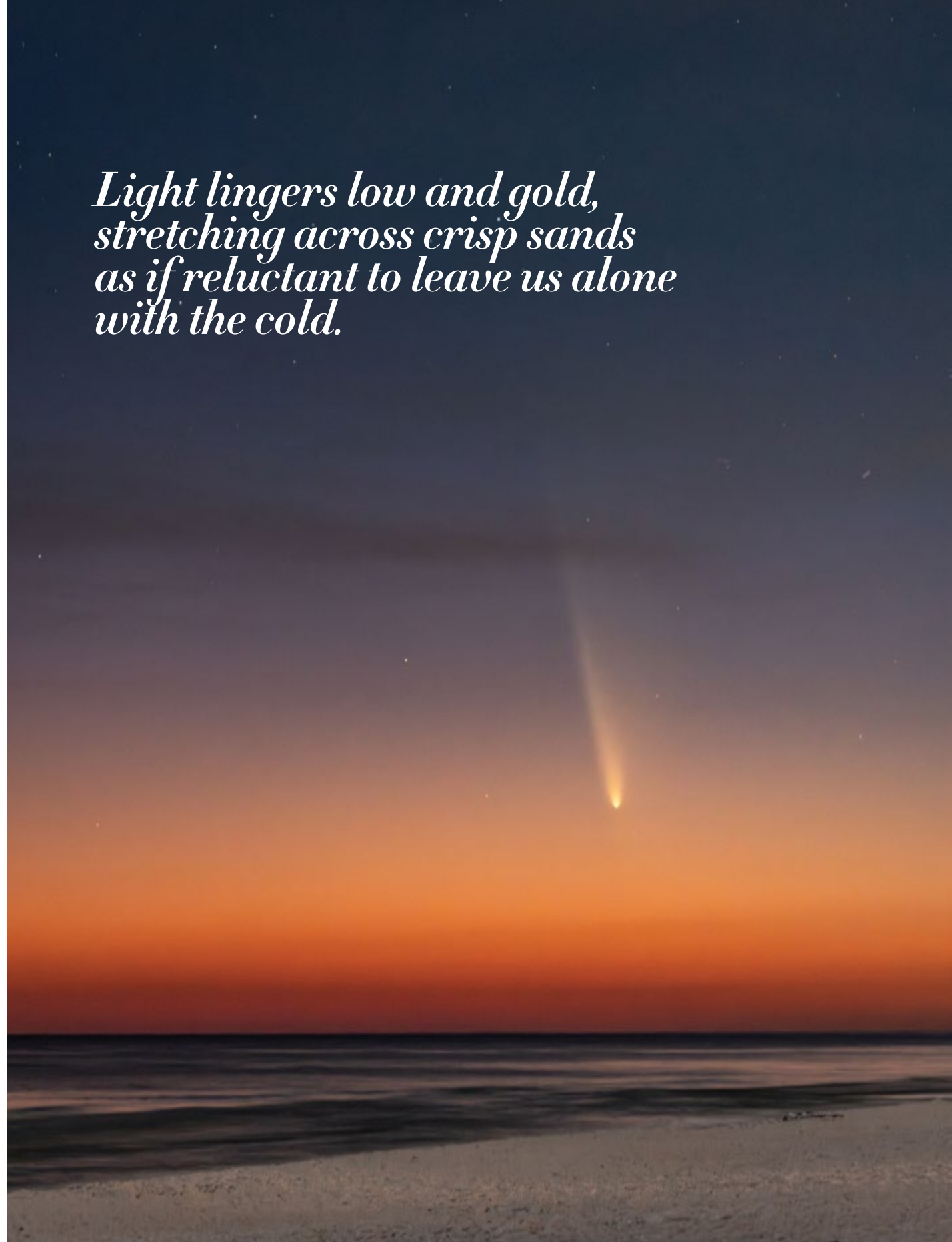
For more luminous coastal moments, follow Susan Gunn on Instagram at @susangunnphotography.



In winter, altocumulus clouds sometimes scatter across the shoreline sky like a million brushstrokes. Standing on the beach beneath them at sunset can feel immersive and exhilarating, washing away the winter blues. These clouds can also signal unsettled weather aloft, so rain or storms may follow.

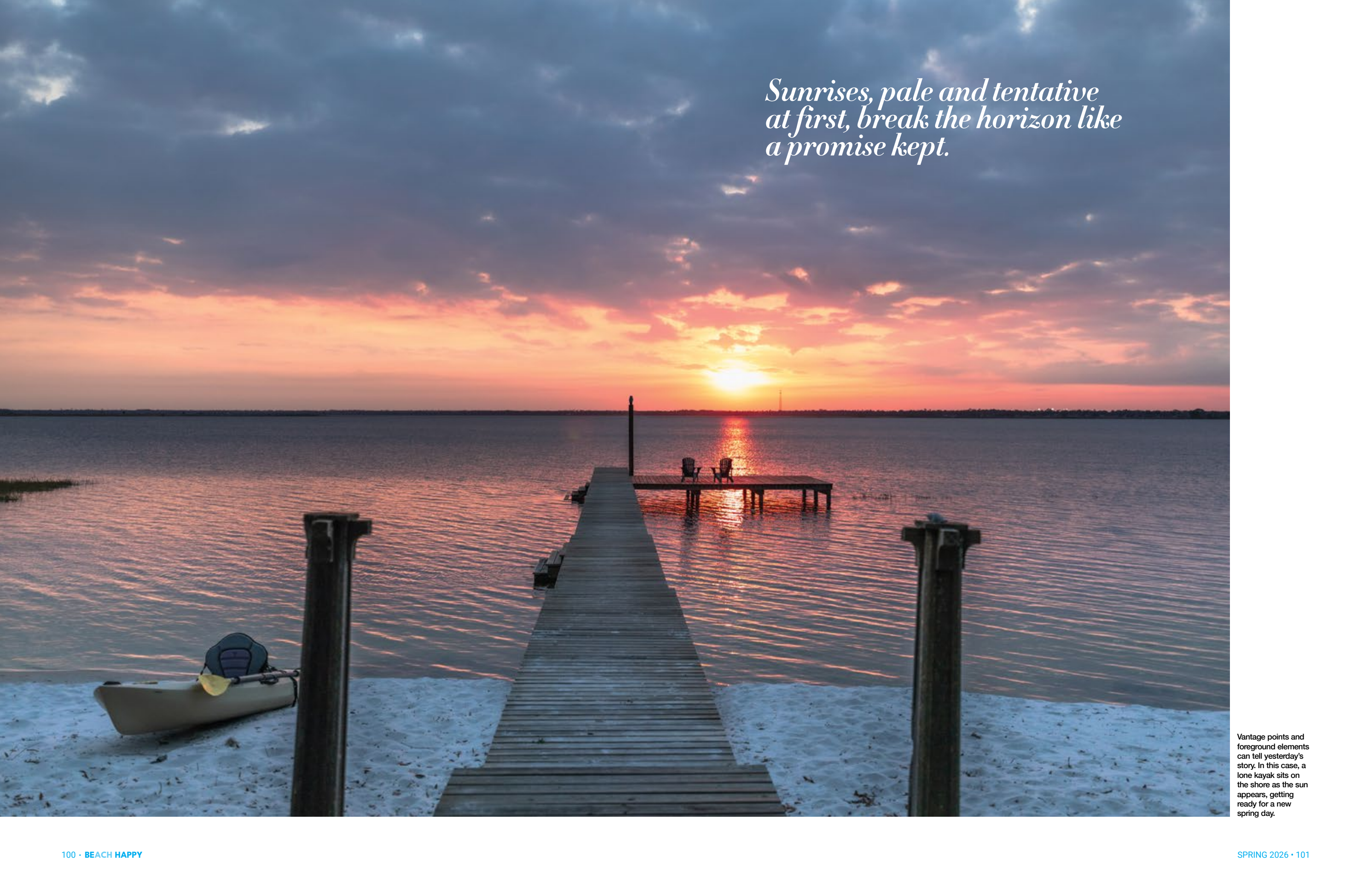
*Light lingers low and gold,
stretching across crisp sands
as if reluctant to leave us alone
with the cold.*

This late-winter sunset, captured in telephoto, felt quietly thought-provoking. When I spotted this lone paddler braving the lingering chill, I imagined her standing like a sentry, keeping watch for spring. Perhaps she was lost in thought, or simply pausing to take in the view, happy to be back on her board. The contrast between her small silhouette and the vast, glowing sky was unforgettable.



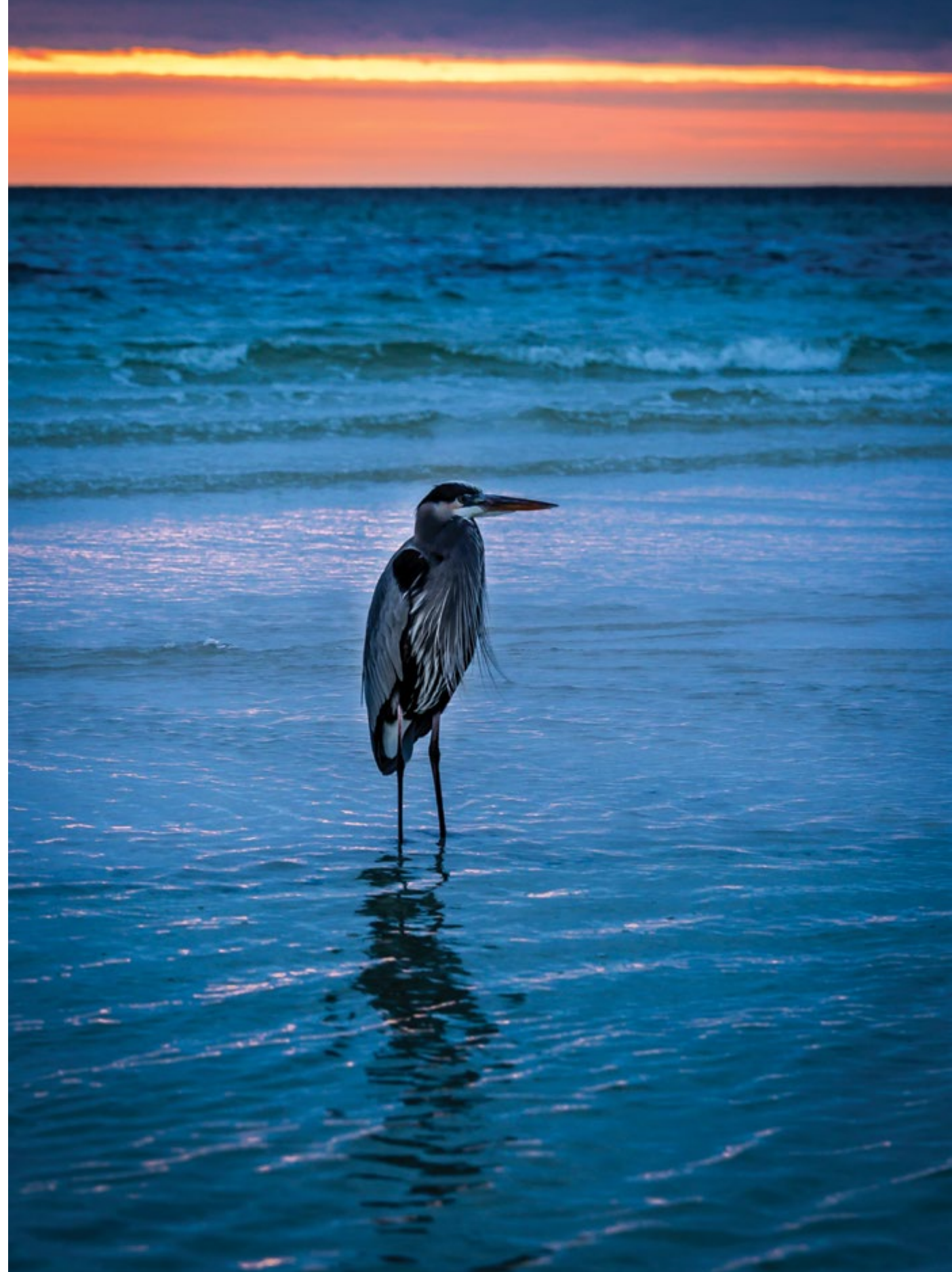
In fall 2024, Earth's skies were graced by Comet C/2023 A3 Tsuchinshan-ATLAS. On this October evening at sunset, the comet became the radiant centerpiece of a blue-hour beach scene lit by violet and orange twilight and the first emerging stars. It is a surreal low-light photograph I will always cherish.





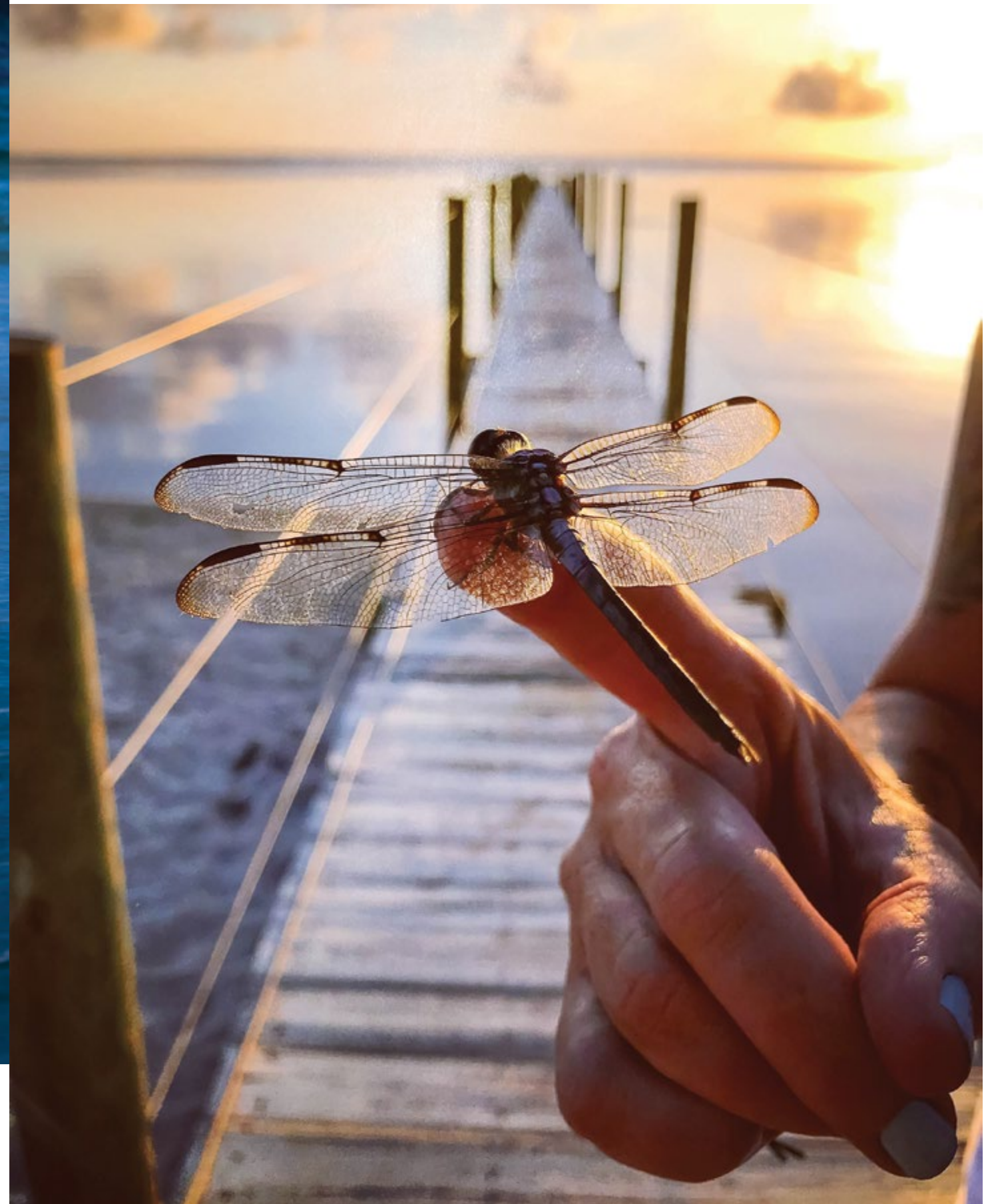
*Sunrises, pale and tentative
at first, break the horizon like
a promise kept.*

Vantage points and foreground elements can tell yesterday's story. In this case, a lone kayak sits on the shore as the sun appears, getting ready for a new spring day.



On any given morning along Florida's shores, wildlife is often part of the sunrise. Like us, birds and animals seem to sense the changing seasons and the shift from cold to warmth. This blue heron was wonderfully tolerant of me and my camera as she hunted for breakfast in the morning breeze.

After overnight thunderstorms passed through Santa Rosa Beach, I spent the night photographing lightning along the coast. As the storm cleared, I anticipated a beautiful sunrise and chose to sit quietly on the dock at The Bay on the Choctawhatchee. There, this first gossamer dragonfly of spring joined me in a timeless moment of peaceful solitude and became a graceful subject for my camera.



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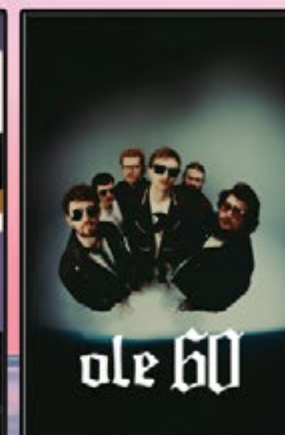
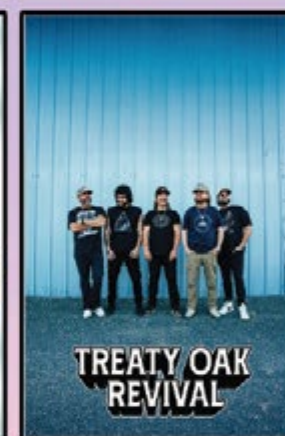
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By Karina Caraballo

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Alys Beach, FL

3 BED | 3.5 BATH | 2,739 SF

Fronting the Sea Garden Pedestrian Path, this 2,739-square-foot courtyard home blends striking architecture with seamless indoor-outdoor living. A vaulted living space, warm natural finishes, and a fireplace anchor the interiors, while French doors open to a private courtyard with a dipping pool and an outdoor fireplace. Upstairs, guest suites lead to a rooftop terrace overlooking the pedestrian path, completing this thoughtfully designed coastal retreat.



This striking Gulf-front residence offers 87 feet of private shoreline and thoughtfully designed living across four levels. Crafted by Historical Concepts and Alys Beach Construction, the home features elevated interiors, a chef's kitchen, reverse-living design, and panoramic Gulf views. Outdoor spaces include a private plunge pool and summer kitchen, while direct access to Lake Powell and nearby 30A communities complete this rare and refined coastal retreat.

112 E Lupin Beach
Inlet Beach, FL

4 BED | 4/2 BATH | 3,667 SF



Tucked within Sandestin's coveted Bayside community, Osprey Pointe captures the effortless rhythm of coastal living. Steps from The Village of Baytowne Wharf and moments from the resort's private Gulf-front beach, each residence connects you to the very best of the Emerald Coast, boating, dining, golf, and sunsets over Choctawhatchee Bay.

Osprey Pointe
Sandestin, FL

2/3/4-BEDROOM FLOOR PLANS



Thoughtfully designed for comfort and entertaining, this WaterColor home features expansive living spaces, a chef's kitchen with premium appliances, a private courtyard with pool and spa, and seamless indoor-outdoor living. Modern upgrades, smart home technology, and access to WaterColor's renowned amenities, including pools, beach club, and fitness facilities, complete this exceptional retreat.

116 Wiregrass Way
WaterColor, FL

6 BED | 6.5 BATH | 5,529 SF



Tucked within the charming Sugarwood Beach, this newly built coastal retreat offers over 3,200 square feet of refined, single-level living. An open-concept layout filled with natural light features a warm, inviting living space with a fireplace and designer finishes throughout. The standout kitchen, complete with a grand island, quartz countertops, and professional-grade appliances, is designed for effortless entertaining and everyday coastal living.

414 Wood Beach Drive
Santa Rosa Beach, FL

5 BED | 4 BATH | 3,205 SF





Located on the west end of 30A, this seven-bedroom, four-story home offers more than 5,600 square feet of elevated coastal living, with Gulf views and exceptional space for entertaining. Designed for both comfort and income potential, it features multiple living areas, a chef's kitchen, a private pool and spa, and an outdoor kitchen. A rooftop sun deck with panoramic views, along with proximity to Gulfview Heights Beach, completes this standout luxury retreat.

3959 W Co Hwy 30A
Santa Rosa Beach, FL

7 BED | 7.5 BATH | 5,622 SF



45 Dunns Circle
Watersound, FL

3 BED | 3 BATH | 2,388 SF

Located in NatureWalk at Watersound Origins, this move-in-ready Panama floor plan offers refined single-level living with three bedrooms and three baths. Designed for comfort and privacy, the home features a bright open layout, a chef-inspired kitchen with quartz countertops, and a serene primary suite with spa-like finishes. A private lanai and rare three-car garage add to its functionality and appeal.



Located in the sought-after Crystal Beach community, this turnkey coastal retreat offers five bedrooms across a main home and separate carriage house—ideal for guests or added rental income. Designed for flexibility and strong investment potential, the property features a private pool, generous outdoor space, and no HOA. Fully furnished with proven rental performance, it's a standout opportunity for both lifestyle and income.

4569 Luke Avenue
Destin, FL

5 BED | 4 BATH | 3,260 SF



114 Pine Needle Way
WaterColor, FL

6 BED | 6.5 BATH | 4,552 SF

Nestled in the Forest District, this WaterColor cottage blends classic Florida charm with modern comfort. Five bedrooms feature en suite baths, while a bright open second-floor living area, chef-ready kitchen, and dining space spill onto a 34' deck overlooking a private preserve. Additional kids' and sitting rooms, a tower with mini kitchen, and multiple porches provide ample space for relaxation and entertaining. A golf cart is included, and the home is just a short ride to Camp WaterColor and the Gulf front beach club with three pools.

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LOCATION COMING SOON. @GRAYTONBEER

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Text **SAFETY** to **31279** for surf conditions



DOUBLE RED FLAGS
WATER CLOSED TO PUBLIC*



RED FLAG- HIGH HAZARD
High Surf and/or Strong Currents



YELLOW FLAG- MEDIUM HAZARD
Moderate Surf and/or Currents



GREEN FLAG- LOW HAZARD
Calm Conditions, Exercise Caution



PURPLE FLAG- STINGING MARINE LIFE
Man O' War, Jellyfish, Stingrays

For a complete guide on beach rules, visit BeachSafety.com.

**Entering the Gulf during double red flag conditions can result in a \$500 fine and criminal charges. Absence of flags does not assure safe waters. Swim at your own risk. For emergencies call or text 911.*



SOUTH WALTON
FLORIDA

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