



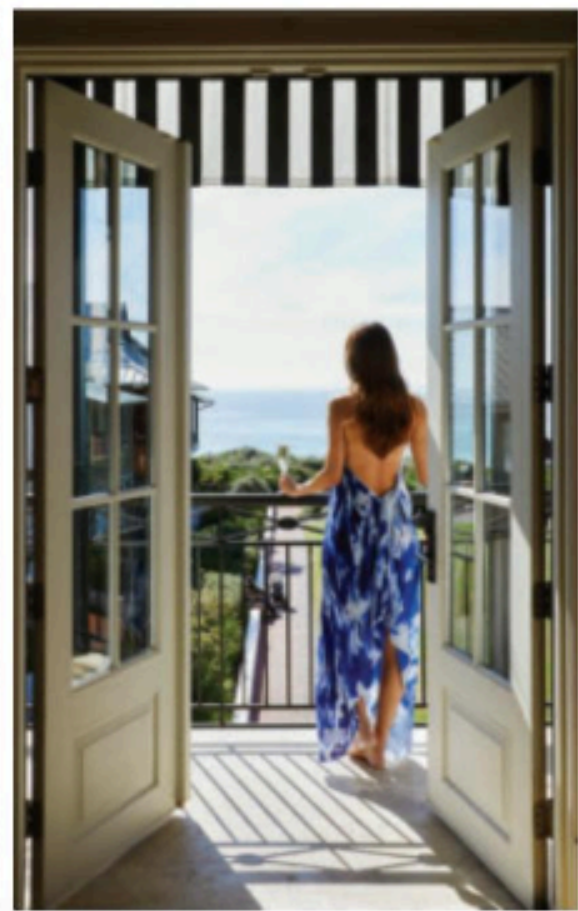
THIS ISN'T THE GULF COAST OF YOUR CHILDHOOD. SURE, the pristine, white beaches and quiet, turquoise waters have always been there. But, for most of the twentieth century, Florida's major tourist destinations were concentrated in the southern part of the state. There, travelers flocked to the glitz of Miami's South Beach, the spring break mecca of Fort Lauderdale, the roar of racing-obsessed Daytona, and the history of Cape Canaveral and the Space Coast. Along the Panhandle's Gulf Coast, there wasn't much between Panama City and Pensacola except seagulls and fishing boats.

PREVIOUS PAGES: The Dolphin Reef is one of four artificial reefs created by the nonprofit South Walton Artificial Reef Foundation to provide havens for sea life and destinations for snorkelers. Other reefs are shaped like a seahorse, a sea turtle, and a cobia fish. **ABOVE:** The Pearl, a 55-room boutique hotel, is located in the heart of Rosemary Beach, Florida. **RIGHT:** The Pearl's rooms look out over Rosemary Beach's Eastern Green to the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

But around the turn of the century, the coast began to change. Kristen Moss grew up in Navarre Beach, between Pensacola and Fort Walton. "It used to be, when you went over the bridge, the only thing there was a Holiday Inn and Juana's, which is still there — a little hut that's right there on the Intercoastal," she says. "Now, it's just covered with houses and condos. It's not the pristine little beach island it used to be."

The march of development was probably inevitable, but if you could point to a moment in time when the area started to take off, it was the summer of 1998. "The first knowledge I had of highway 30A was *The Truman Show*," says Memphian Rick Spell.

The science-fiction comedy, starring Jim Carrey as a man who discovers his whole life has been a twisted reality show, was filmed in Seaside, Florida. The 80-acre planned community halfway between Fort Walton and Panama City was chosen for the film because it was shiny and new — and a little surreal. Designed from the ground up in the early 1980s by superstar



architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Seaside was the flagship community for New Urbanism, a planning philosophy that rejected sidewalk-less suburbia in favor of compact, walkable communities where residents' needs were all in easy reach. After the success of *The Truman Show*, which was nominated for three Academy Awards and won three Golden Globes, tourists turned their attention to the unspoiled area along Florida State Route 30A.

Nowadays, Moss is director of owner services and marketing for Rosemary Beach Cottage Rental Company. Located eight miles down the road from Seaside, Rosemary Beach was designed by Duany Plater-Zyberk, the two architects' Miami-based firm, in 1995, applying the lessons New Urbanism had learned over the previous decades. The 107-acre cluster of cottages and shops sports a distinctive look, says Moss. "It's pan-Caribbean architecture. There are influences from Charleston, and also from New Orleans. And you see things that are reminiscent of the old Caribbean, or even over into Europe, for instance in the Mercado building in the town center. It is a special place. We like to say that it's sort of like going to Europe without a passport."

The New Urbanism of Duany Plater-Zyberk posits that the built environment plays a large part in creating the social life of the community. Walkability is crucial to the design. Walking or biking the extensive network of trails that snake through the community and beyond

are the primary modes of travel — one bike trail runs along the coast almost the entire length of 30A.

"The streets in Rosemary Beach are really for parking," says Moss. "You go down the street and you see all the garages, but really the focus is where the houses face one another. The true front door is facing somebody else's front door. And so, you come out of your house, and there is your neighbor," says Moss. "They wanted to maintain a sense of community. It's a Neo-Traditional neighborhood, so they wanted people to be able to come out and meet their neighbors. The intention of the community was to have the town center, where you could do a little bit of shopping and dining, but to be able to have single-family homes and residences, so that you're not overburdening the area."

David Merryman, general manager of The Pearl, the only hotel in Rosemary Beach, says that's part of what makes the 30A area unique. "When you go to the beach and you look to our East, you see the crescent of towers at Panama City Beach, he says. "You're reminded that we're in kind of a — I don't want to say a remote place — but we're much less developed, tourism-wise, than say, South Florida."

"Along the whole 30A stretch between Destin and Panama City Beach that we're part of, you don't have the high-rise condos, and it's beautiful," he continues. "This stretch of road runs right on the coast, and you always have glimpses of the water in between houses."

"You see things that are reminiscent of the old Caribbean, or even over into Europe. It is a special place. We like to say it's sort of like going to Europe without a passport."

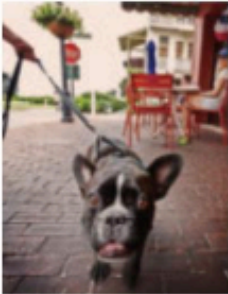
— Kristen Moss

A boardwalk winds through the rippling dunes at Rosemary Beach.

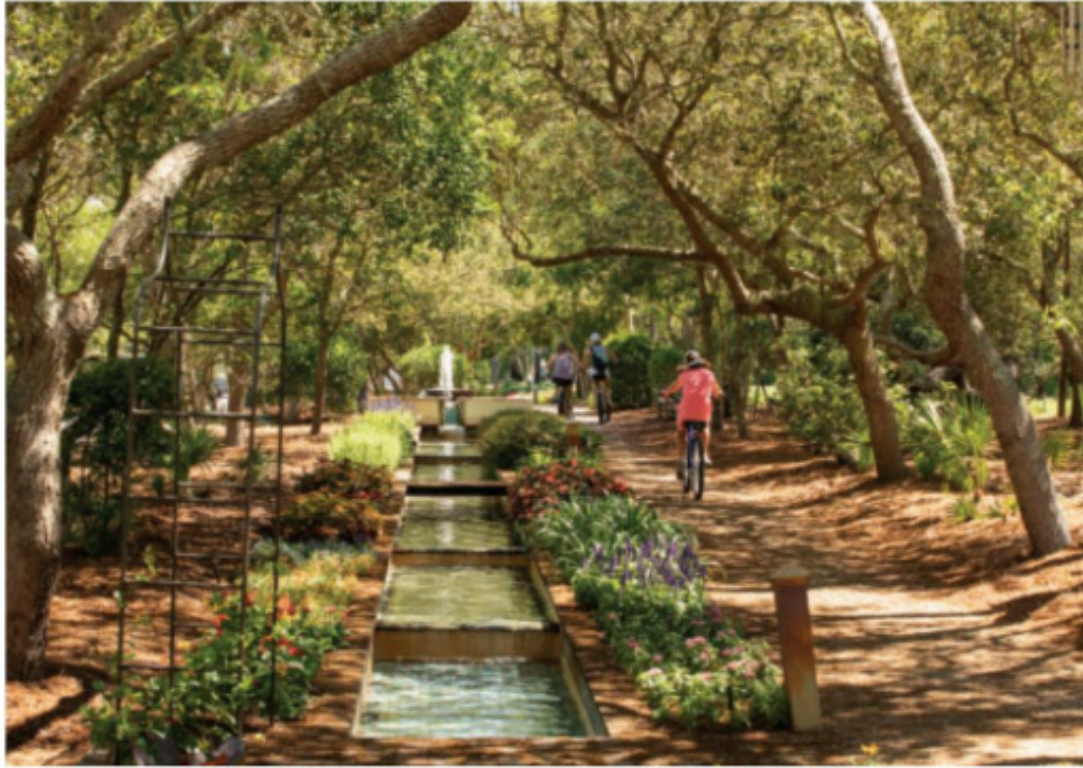


PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY VISIT SOUTH WALTON

30A



TOP: Rosemary Beach's pan-Caribbean architecture reflects influences from Charleston to San Juan. ABOVE: Cafes dot the retro brick streets. RIGHT: Biking is the primary way to get around the 30A area. Bike trails radiate outwards from Rosemary Beach, connecting the coastal communities.



It's kind of a throwback — coastal Florida as a lot of people remember it when they were kids."

IF YOUR VISION OF VISITING THE FLORIDA coast involves long elevator rides down to bustling lobbies, then walking along bare concrete in the blazing sun to find a spot on a crowded beach, you will find Rosemary Beach a refreshing alternative. "You can take a quiet walk down a boardwalk under a tree canopy, so you're not sweltering while you're going from your house to the beach and back again," says Merryman. "Everything that they did was very purposeful, and they wanted people to have green spaces. They blocked off some pretty good real estate to be able to have two Gulf-front greens. You can go east to west or north to south, to the beach and back, and not ever have to get on a road."

Visitors can get a taste of New Urbanism by the water from the Rosemary Beach Cottage Rental Company. "We manage over 200 properties," says Moss. "It's everything from studio carriage houses — which are apartment-style accommodations above the garage, like a mother-in-law's quarters — up to a nine-bedroom home."

The relatively low population density of the area has made it a popular destination during the pandemic era. On the beach, the constant breeze and bright sunshine make transmission of the novel coronavirus unlikely.

The relatively low population density of the area has made it a popular destination during the pandemic era. On the beach, the constant breeze and bright sunshine make transmission of the novel coronavirus unlikely.

And if you're walking to your own private cottage, you can easily maintain social distancing.

Rick Spell says Rosemary Beach and nearby Alys Beach have been popular redoubts for many of his Memphis friends during the long quarantine. "The pandemic created an environment where you wanted to be outside, so you could travel by car to get down there," he says. "There were a lot of people working from home, and their kids might've been homeschooled. A lot of the parents had homes down there, or rented homes, and it was just easier and more enjoyable to be down there than it was to be stuck in a home up here."

While the pandemic has devastated most of the travel industry, the 30A area has been booming. Moss says her rentals were full most of last summer, and their busy season was extended for weeks. "Because so many children are still doing virtual learning and businesses have evolved to allow people to work from home," she says, "we've seen a big influx of fall reservations from people realizing, 'Hey, I can change my four walls and give my

family something else to do in between their schooling.' They're coming to the beach to get away from the things that are happening in their hometown and staying for a week or so. You know, October is a great time to be at the beach. The sunsets are spectacular, the weather is mild and you can still get out there, get some sunshine, and go to the pools."



ABOVE: Wildlife thrives along 30A. **BELOW:** The placid beach lakes and inlets attract paddleboarders and kayakers.



30A

Staying Safe

How to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic

BY CHRIS MCCOY

So you want to get away for a little break before the vaccine gets to you. Understand that your trip is going to involve some risk, but there are ways to mitigate it. Here are a few tips to keep you and your family healthy on the road.

Stick to the basics. We've learned a lot about how the SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads in the year since it first emerged in Wuhan, China, but the basic advice on how to avoid infection hasn't changed — with one major exception. The virus is spread by tiny droplets expelled from the mouth or nose when a person breathes, coughs, sneezes, talks, or sings. **Wear a mask.** Masks prevent the droplets from spreading very far. A reusable cloth mask offers the wearer some degree of protection, but if you're traveling, it's a good idea to get some N95 or KN95 masks, which filter out at least 95 percent of the respiratory droplets. It's also possible (although less likely) for you to catch the virus by touching a surface where the droplets have landed and then touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. That's why you should **wash your hands** frequently. Soap and water work best in deactivating viral particles, but alcohol-based hand sanitizers are fine for most situations.

Most of the droplets fall out of the air quickly, so you should **practice social distancing** by staying at least six feet away from people outside your household. However, it has recently been confirmed that the virus can be transmitted by smaller particles which can hang in the air for hours. "Aerosol transmission" is unpredictable, but again, there are ways — first and foremost wearing an N95 or KN95 mask — to mitigate risk. Inhaling a few viral particles probably won't get you sick, but in poorly ventilated indoor spaces with lots of people, a cloud of droplets develop which can deliver a dangerous viral load. Therefore, **avoid crowded indoor spaces.**

While you're on the road, **pack a lunch** to avoid exposure at roadside cafes. If you stop for fast food, use the drive-through. **Plan your pit stops.** Before you leave, check the places along your route, and avoid those with high rates of COVID-19. Public bathrooms can be dangerous, so if you stop at one that doesn't look clean, move along. In any case, do your business, wash your hands, and leave as quickly as possible. Use hand sanitizers when you return to your car.

Once you arrive at your destination, **control your environment.** If you're staying at a hotel, check their viral protocols and cleanliness beforehand. Don't dally in the lobby. If you're traveling with family, you might find a rental cottage or condo with its own kitchen where you can maintain your household pod. With constant breeze and sunshine to clear the air, **beaches are great** as long as they are not crowded — just skip the smoky beachside bar afterwards. And if you're going to a restaurant, by all means, **eat outdoors** and try to keep your distance from other diners.

COTTAGE RENTALS WEREN'T THE ONLY THING in demand. The Pearl's 55 rooms have been hot commodities during the pandemic. "Actually 30A and the whole South Walton area may have been the most successful area in the country during the pandemic, because it has a reputation as not being very dense," says Merryman. "Visitors were up 11 percent, occupancy was up 5 percent, and room rate was up 8 percent — just huge, huge gains. It seems that we have found a lot of new travelers, people who have just discovered us, because they were not able to go on their regularly scheduled vacations to Europe, to South America, to Mexico, to the Caribbean."

Merryman says the boutique hotel has added stringent COVID-19 precautions to their usual high standards of service. "The last thing that we want is any of our guests falling ill, and we don't want any of our employees falling ill, either," he says. "We really partnered with our sanitation companies to implement best practices and make sure we're doing proper surface cleaning."

Masks are now part of the uniform. Merryman tells his staff, "Let your eyes smile, and let everyone know that you're happy to see them. We're doing this for everyone's protection. Thankfully, since we reopened in early May, we've had no instances of any of our guests calling back saying, 'Hey, we've been sick and we want to let you know.' We've been very, very lucky with that, but I think you just have to stay vigilant."



Waiting for a table at George's.

As opposed to the longer-term stays Rosemary Beach's cottages encourage, Merryman says, "Our average stay is about three days long. They're coming down to get to the beach, because the beaches are phenomenal, the best in the country. They really just want to have that beautiful beach day, get out into the water, and go out at night, because there's so many great little restaurants in Rosemary and Alys Beach, in Watercolor and Seaside, and all up and down 30A. The culinary scene is much more elevated than you would expect. I think we have a pretty sophisticated group of travelers, and so you've got really good restaurants."

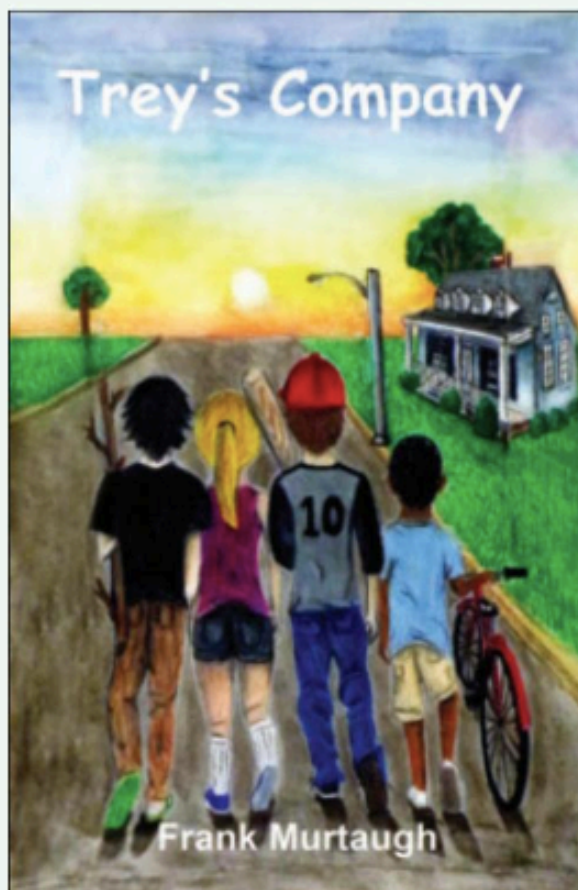
The Pearl's restaurant is The Havana Beach Bar and Grill, which Merryman says serves up "Coastal cuisine with a Caribbean flair. We just finished doing a little upgrade to the dining room and added a full lounge to the bar. It was actually modeled after El Floridita, which was rumored to be Ernest Hemingway's favorite bar and watering hole down in Havana."

Just across the street from The Pearl is another of Rosemary Beach's dozen restaurants. Edward's is a

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY VISIT SOUTH WALTON



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSE DAVIS



Love a little, die a little and break the law.

Trey Milligan did all three in the summer before his 14th birthday.

From Sartoris Literary Group, the debut novel by
Frank Murtaugh.

Available NOW at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Paperback (\$19.95) and eBook (\$8.95).

Also available at Burke's Book Store (936 S. Cooper)
and Novel (387 Perkins Extd).

of Mexican. And so you either expected what we were serving, or you didn't."

Terry wanted a transition to a more Latin coastal menu. "We were able to hire a chef, Eric Bartholomew, who was out of Denver, and he had experience in that specific type of kitchen," he says. "He has been able to revamp our menu and upscale it tremendously. The feedback and reception from the locals and our guests has just been absolutely fabulous. So now we're getting to our last step in that process. We don't like to make a lot of big changes too quickly. LaCo is both a shortened version of La Cocina and short for 'LAtin COastal.'"

"Even in the off season, it's beautiful down here. It gets dark early now, and the sun, when it set last night, was the deepest, most brilliant orange color that I had ever seen."

— David Merryman



RICK SPELL SAYS THAT, EVEN THOUGH he grew up surfing on the California coast, his greatest affection is for the beaches of 30A. "You've got a beautiful area that's upscale where people go to just have fun," he says. "We call it fantasy land. It's just a different environment, where people are down here to have a good time, and it's our job to assist them in having a good time."

Merryman says even for the professionals at The Pearl, the natural beauty of 30A never gets old.

"Even in the off season, it's beautiful down here," he says. "Last night, the staff and I were getting ready for dinner service. It gets dark here early now, and the sun, when it set last night, was the deepest, most brilliant orange color that I had ever seen. We all literally stopped setting tables and lighting candles. I looked around and we were all looking at it, going, 'That's just beautiful!' And that says something, when all of us who work here every single day have to kind of pause and look out at what you've got, take a step back, and say, this is amazing."

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY VISIT SOUTH WALTON

fine-dining establishment owned by the Spell Restaurant Group, along with East Memphis' Brookhaven Pub & Grill and Babalu in Overton Square. "It's beach casual, but a little more upscale," says Rick Spell. "You can come in with shorts, and half of the seating is outside."

Outdoor dining is in demand during the pandemic, which Spell says has worked to the advantage of his six Gulf Coast eateries. A former investment banker originally from California, Spell first came to 30A when he bought the legendary George's at Alys Beach.

George's doesn't take reservations, and there's usually a line to get in. But that doesn't stop it from being a favorite of the Gulf Coast glitterati.

"I believe that George's is the most popular restaurant in the South, because people from so many cities know about it," he says. He recalls what his friend, banker David Popwell, said when he heard Spell had purchased George's. "He said, 'Rick, I don't even go to my home down there. The first thing I do is drive straight to George's and get the grouper sandwich.'"

George's doesn't take reservations, and there's usually a line to get in. But that doesn't stop it from being a favorite of the Gulf Coast glitterati, such as Nashville country stars, New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton, Alabama coach Nick Saban, and former Tennessee governor Bill Haslam.

Christy Spell Terry, who relocated to the 30A area from the Bluff City to manage the family's growing culinary empire, says it's home away from home for many Memphians. "It was funny. I guess it was probably our first trip down here to meet with the prior owners, and it was Memphis fall break week," she says. "Nobody knew the restaurant was for sale. We were trying to be very low-key and not draw any attention to ourselves. We go to George's at 5, because you need to get there early if you don't want to wait. And we saw eight tables of people from Memphis that we knew!"

George's sister restaurant is La Cocina, a beloved Mexican restaurant nestled between Rosemary Beach and Alys Beach on 30A. The Spells closed the restaurant in late 2020 for an extensive remodel. It reopened in the new year with a new name, LaCo. "The remodel is going to be really different," Spell says. "We're completely redoing the bar, and I think people will enjoy that."

Terry says the dining public is getting much more sophisticated about the cuisine, so the restaurant had to evolve. "We have a lot of Texans in the area. Everybody has their preconceived notion of what Mexican food should be, and there's so many different types



Premier Flowers • Pretty • Personal • Exceptional

10 N 2nd Street #105 • Downtown Memphis
901-618-2661 • premierflowerstn.com