

EXPLORATIONS OF FLORIDA'S FORGOTTEN COAST

By Jenny Wisniewski

If Florida makes you think only of Miami's South Beach and retirement communities, it might pay to reexamine your expectations. There's a lot more to the Sunshine State than many people realize.



St. Joe Shrimp Company has everything you need for fishing, from bait to boats.

Along the southern edge of Florida's panhandle courses U.S. Route 98, a byway that hugs the Gulf of Mexico before the panhandle makes its gentle curve into the mainland of the state. East of Panama City, this stretch becomes quiet and calm, devoid of high-rise condos and bumper-to-bumper cars. What some call "The Forgotten Coast" generally begins in Mexico Beach to the west and reaches over to Carrabelle in the east. It is a meandering pathway that travels through wilderness and towns, and across an area known for great fishing, sugar-sand beaches and a laid-back atmosphere.

A roadside shrimp shack

After Mexico Beach, St. Joseph's Bay (or St. Joe's Bay) is the first stop east along U.S. 98. It is a community of 3,500 people, with a sizable marina and a number of restaurants; but it was a shrimp shack right off the main drag that teased us off the road. While my husband, John, and sons, Will and Ryan, went inside to buy freshly caught shrimp from the bay and frozen bait for their planned fishing adventures, I examined the unique landscaping outside. Piled in the center of the shrimp shack's parking lot was a garden of conch shells, perfectly intact, some 10 to 12 inches in length, and smoothed by years of sand and seawater.

A 60-something woman sat slowly swaying in a rocking chair out front, unlit cigarette in one hand, lighter in the other, just waiting for the inspiration for the two to meet, I



suppose. I asked her about the unique outdoor décor.

"Our fishermen brought them from the bay," she told me in a southern drawl. "The Vietnamese come and buy the meat wholesale. We keep the shells." After some further interrogation, I came to understand that a Vietnamese-American community populates Panama City, 40 miles to the west. Conch is considered a delicacy to them.

The only time I had eaten conch was in a salad, and I don't recall the conch being the size of a steak. But here, the meat is as large as the super-sized shells sitting in front of St. Joe Shrimp Company. Removing a conch from its shell looked about as easy as evicting a delinquent tenant from his apartment; however, I learned that the conch, shell and all, is thrown in a freezer, and after freezing and thawing, the meat slides right out.

A fishing expedition in St. Joe's Bay

Later that day, we realized that the pontoon boat we had rented online

a few weeks back was from the same shrimping company. The shrimp shack, it seems, is more diversified than one might think at first glance. As I stood next to the conch pile on Monday afternoon, a golf cart pulled up and I suddenly found myself standing eye to eye with Clint. With his leathered face, graying mustache and five o'clock shadow, along with his long neon-green shorts and rubber-boot-clad feet, Clint looked every bit a man of the sea.

Clint drove us to the dock on his cart and helped us load our fishing gear onto the boat. After a quick tutorial and a bit of fishing advice, we were nearly on our way. We had the boat rented until five o'clock that afternoon. Where I come from, the sucker who brings her boat back one minute past five is slapped with an exorbitant late fee. Apparently in Clint's corner of the world, things are a bit more *laissez-faire*. As we embarked, he called from the dock that we could bring the boat back by five or not, and, by the way, he may or may not be there when we returned. "Shoot, I just want y'all to have some fun."



If at first you don't succeed...

Though it was a fun day out on the bay, as Clint had hoped, it wasn't a productive one. Our lack of boating expertise led to the unfortunate placement of two poles on the front of the boat; they now rest at the bottom of the bay. Using the only other pole we had, Ryan made one catch that day—an orange starfish. Though it was lovely to look at before returning to its home in the sea, my 11-year-old was hoping for something a bit bigger.

And this is what led us to an old fishing village called Apalachicola, 20 miles further east down U.S. 98. From the town, a causeway led us to St. George Island and SGI Charters. This time, a fishing guide named Coble would assist my husband and two boys with their fishing aspirations on the gulf. Knowing that fish congregate near structures, Captain Coble knew just where to take them. Using GPS, he started with a sunken shrimp boat, where Ryan caught a nearly 30-inch grouper and Will pulled in a seven-foot hammerhead shark after 40 minutes of struggle.

While the boys fished, I decided to explore Apalachicola. I visited a few unique spots—an art gallery in a century-old home, and a one-of-a-kind pet shop to complement the dog-friendly atmosphere of the area. Taking a walk around the town led me to view other old southern homes, large and small, several quaint park squares and

even a small museum that displays the history of John Gorrie, who invented the first ice-producing machine.

When we regrouped later that evening, of course we dined on seafood on the way out of town. Papa Joe's Oyster Bar & Grill served one of the best grilled groupers I have tasted. Though it would have to wait a few days, I couldn't wait to get home to grill the grouper Ryan had pulled out of the bay earlier that afternoon.

We headed back west towards Mexico Beach, stopping in Cape San Blas. The cape is a finger of land that points into the bay towards St. Joe's. A turn south onto State Road 30A from U.S. 98 leads straight to the cape, which then swerves westward and travels straight to the tip. Though the entire area is unassuming, Cape San Blas is even more so. Four restaurants, a small general store and a shop for renting bikes and kayaks are about the only commercial establishments to be found.

Beach houses line both sides of the cape. A paved bike path along State Road 30A is enjoyed by joggers and bikers daily. A beautiful state park and wildlife sanctuary covers the top third of the cape.

Lots of families mingled on the white, windswept beach, but it never reached what I would consider crowded. As for beach rules? They were about as laid-back as Clint from the shrimp shack—dogs, vehicles, horseback riding and bonfires were all allowed.

Eateries on the Forgotten Coast

Part of what makes a spot charming is a few quirky establishments, and Cape San Blas has several of them.

It is impossible to miss Skully's when driving along State Road 30A; in front hangs a giant sign with the restaurant's name next to skulls and crossbones—a nod to Florida's bygone days of piracy. Skully's Low Country Boil is run by a young couple brimming with Southern hospitality; they handed us a menu (consisting of a total of three items) as we walked up.


Because dinner is served in a bucket at Skully's, takeout seems to be popular. For those who dine in, several picnic tables are set up on the grassy area in front. Like at many other restaurants and shops on the forgotten coast, dogs are welcome, so our golden doodle Tilly sat with us, greeting the other customers and keeping an eye on Obama, the resident cat.

We ordered the five-pound bucket. It was filled with shrimp, andouille sausage, potatoes and chunks of corn-on-the-cob, all boiled perfectly and topped with Cajun seasoning. And although they don't sell beer, guests are invited to help themselves to a Pabst Blue Ribbon or Rolling Rock from a tub in front. Next to that is a bucket of markers that customers use to leave their autographs on the picnic tables. Skully's couldn't feel more "down home."

Left: Who needs plates? Get your meal served in a bucket at Skully's Low Country Boil in Cape San Blas.

Even more famous in the area is Indian Pass Raw Bar. On any given night, you can drive down U.S. 98 and see crowds of people gathered out front listening to live music or karaoke. Though the wait for a table was two hours on the night we went, no one seemed disgruntled. The music and beer kept us all in high spirits.

The menu features seafood and is decadent in a laid-back, Old Florida sort of way. We sampled stuffed shrimp, crab legs, and oysters baked with parmesan cheese, all served on tin platters. Though the food tantalizes customers, it is the atmosphere that makes the raw bar a hit. The vibe is lively and playful. When one of the employees loudly shouts out a birthday, the entire place breaks out into a roaring round of song. Customers sit either at long cafeteria-style tables, or at a bar behind which an assembly line of cooks prepares the food. Along the back wall is a full line of coolers filled with beer and soda. Customers help themselves and keep a tally on a sheet they are handed when they walk in the door. A lively restaurant filled with beer-guzzling customers would be the last place that I would trust the honor system, but, surprisingly, it seems to work.

We finished up our exploration of the Forgotten Coast with full bellies, lungs full of sea air, a cooler containing fresh-caught grouper, and, proving that the Forgotten Coast is anything but forgettable, loads of fantastic memories. 

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