

Discover Florida's best kept secret

► Locals have kept Emerald Coast under wraps for years ► Surf town U.S.A. meets New England in these colourful beachside communities

GIZELLE LAU
LIFE@METRONEWS.CA

One of Florida's hidden gems is far from the bright lights of Miami's South Beach or the amusement park wonderland of Orlando.

Here, wispy sand dunes protect the white shores that are so white that, at a glance, you could swear you're looking at mounds of snow — that is, until you remind yourself that you're in Florida.

Welcome to the beaches of the Emerald Coast in northwest Florida — a region made up of several beachside destinations right on the Gulf Coast that local Florida natives have tried to keep under wraps for decades. They may have gotten away with it, too — until the Obama's visited the region's Panama City Beach in August and the



► Region boasts white-sand beaches and dunes.

tourism board's website received 8 billion views within 36 hours.

From Panama City to the beaches of Fort Walton, Destin and Pensacola, the atmosphere is "white-picket fence" meets "surf town U.S.A." with a New England passion for fresh seafood, finished with a unique twist of southern hospitality.



► Don't miss Seaside, where trailers sell cupcakes, shakes and grilled cheese sandwiches.

Vacation like the Obamas in Panama City Beach by staying at the Bay Point Marriott Golf Resort & Spa. Discover the outlet shops at Pier Park, try your hand at surfing at St. Andrew's State Park, and head to Firefly restaurant for the beach's best She Crab Soup with a side of fried Apalachicola Oysters.

Don't miss the town of Seaside where the Truman Show was filmed — its picturesque trailers selling cupcakes, specialty grilled cheese sandwiches and organic shakes — or Grayton Beach State Park where you can go for eco tours, hikes through sand dunes or YOLO boarding (stand-up paddle boarding that originated in this area).

If you're into fishing, then Destin is the place for you. Known as the "world's luckiest fishing village," Destin has the largest charter fishing

When to go



fleet in all of Florida.

Here, you can fish for grouper, tuna, marlin or red snapper in the morning and take your catch to Destin's Fisherman's Wharf Seafood House where it will be grilled, broiled or blackened for lunch.

Pensacola is the historic capital of the region where you can enjoy the beach in the morning and explore the sights in the afternoon. Discover historical Fort Barrancas built in 1797 and the National Naval Aviation Museum's incredible col-

- **Best time to visit:** April to October
- **During spring and fall:** Travellers can take advantage of hotel and apartment/condo rental deals with ResortQuest.com
- **For more information and travel deals:** VisitFlorida.com

lection of aircrafts, or go for a tour of the Historic Pensacola Village.

Hotel options range from Hiltons to Hampton Inns or the luxury Portofino Resort & Spa, where you can finish off the day with a visit to the spa. The Fish House offers delicious seafood and the chef's specialty is Grits a Ya Ya: smoked gouda cheese grits with a shrimp, mushroom, spinach and bacon sauce. (At a rumoured 1,000-plus calories, it's worth every bite!)



► Learn to surf at St. Andrew's State Park.

3 life

Shop Gotham



Shop Gotham, which offers insider shopping tours of New York City for women, will offer men's tours starting Feb. 18.

The three-hour Men's NYC Shopping Tour: Fashion, Home & Art for the Discerning Man, will take guests into the chic Bowery district and wind through the neighbouring ever-fashionable Soho and Nolita.

Tours will run every Friday at 2 p.m. Visit shopgotham.com.

● METRO



Dubai restaurant offers dining in high style — at 642 metres above ground.

Compare travel deals online fast

tripcentral.ca

Phones are open until 10pm EST
Call Toll Free 1-800-665-4981

Duration	Meal Plan	Star Rating	Current Settings			
1 week	All meals included	3 stars or more	Departing from: Toronto \$			
Includes all taxes & surcharges						
Punta Cana, Dominican Republic	Ja-05	Ja-12	Ja-19	Ja-26	Fe-02	Fe-09
Bahia Principe Punta Cana (4+)	1267	1267	1297	1401	1320	1420
Barcelo Bavaro Beach & Caribe (3+)	1295	1275	1375	1375	1425	1435
Barcelo Bavaro Casino (3+)	1059	1045	1135	1125	1145	1185
Barcelo Bavaro Palace (4)	1227	1275	1312	1396	1316	1416
Barcelo Dominican Beach (3+)	1122	1145	1180	1225	1180	1270
Barcelo Punta Cana (4)	1092	1092	1102	1222	1122	1222

Our 'grid' is the fastest way to find the best travel prices at a glance

tripcentral.ca

Prices shown are not current, please visit our website for up-to-date rates.