

Northwest Florida Weekend Getaways - 2011

The best places in Northwest Florida to stay, eat and play throughout the year.
by Staff and Contributing Editors
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5 NORTHWEST

Destin Beach Time

Best For Family time on a beautiful beach. This is the most family-friendly stretch in the state, with its crystal-clear warm waters and rock-free sandy bottom. All you need is a chair, some toys and a sand pail.

Sleep Rent a beach condo from Sterling Resorts. sterlingresorts.net

Pensacola Beach's Own Margaritaville

Best For Parrotheads or any beach lover.

Sleep Margaritaville Beach Hotel Pensacola beach serves up Jimmy Buffett-lifestyle digs with an airy décor. Drink the songster's beer at the Land Shark Landing pavilion. margaritavillehotel.com

Apalachicola's Florida Seafood Festival & Oyster Roast

Best For Florida seafood and oyster lovers. Among the festival's food offerings, the sweet and salty Apalachicola oyster plucked from nearby waters is king. The bivalves are good on the half shell and in soup, but the tastiest ones you'll find are at Saturday's oyster roast. On Nov. 4 and 5, sample local shrimp, blue crabs and scratch cakes on the waterfront in Apalachicola, a historic fishing village on the northwest Gulf coast.

Sleep Reserve a room early at the Gibson Inn, where the wraparound porch is the gathering spot for lots of local gossip. floridaseafoodfestival.com

Hit the Beach in Panama City

Best For Affordable fun.

Sleep Two sunflower-yellow towers comprise Splash, an aquatic-themed resort with an indoor water park in the lobby. By day, float down the lazy river, and at night catch a flick at the drive-in movie theater. You may even want to bring the kids!

Eat A funky beachfront shack, Thomas Donut & Snack Shop has the best donuts you can imagine. Come in the morning to inhale the aroma of fresh-baked dough. Choose raised donuts filled with peaches 'n' cream or big, fat apple fritters. Dinner is at Firefly, where innovative dishes like pistachio and honey-Dijon crusted grouper top the list.

Play Pier Park is a shopping destination with pizzazz. Find your board shorts at Ron Jon Surf Shop and cold beers at Reggae J's Island Grill with tables facing the beach. visitpanamacitybeach.com

Houseboat Heaven on the Suwannee River

Best For Those with their sea legs.

Sleep Take the entire weekend to travel the 16-hour round trip along the Suwannee River between the tiny hamlets of Suwannee and Fanning Springs, where 72-degree water just might entice you to jump in. Relax as the six-passenger boat chugs along at a leisurely 7 knots past tranquil nature scenes. For the ultimate "mancation," pack your fishing gear and fryer. Psychedelic funkster George Clinton loves the fishing here.

Eat The fried green tomatoes and smoked mullet dip at the Lighthouse Restaurant and the barbecue at Huckleberry Bar-B-Que in Fanning Springs are well worth the short walk from the river. For an old-fashioned, stick-to-your-ribs breakfast accompanied by yummy buttered-then-grilled biscuits, visit Sarah's in Suwannee.

Words from the Wise Regular houseboaters know there's no need to overpack. You'll live in your swimsuit. Pre-cooked food and a fend-for-yourself meal plan add to the ease. suwanneehouseboats.com

Stylish Sands on Alys Beach

Best For The ultimate vacay rental. Dotting Florida's Scenic Highway 30A are fabulous Gulf communities that grew up on white pristine beaches and look like they belong on a tropical island.

Sleep Mediterranean meets New Urbanism in Alys Beach, where rental homes boast elegant courtyards with dipping pools and refreshing waterfalls beg to be lounged in.

Eat Dine poolside by moonlight at Caliza Restaurant, a fine-dining experience open only to Alys Beach residents and guests. You'll love the crab cake served on a bed of corn salsa and drizzled with a chipotle aioli. Catch the sunset over the Gulf from the rooftop terrace while savoring a pomegranate cocktail or two.

Play A stroll at dusk along Alys Beach's cobblestone pathways is the best time to catch the light playing off the Mediterranean architecture. alysbeach.com
30a.com

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