

Panama City Beach: Prepare for Arrival

A new airport makes reaching the shoreline of this beach lover's paradise a breeze
 by *Shaun C. Bean* | Photography *Gary Bogdon*
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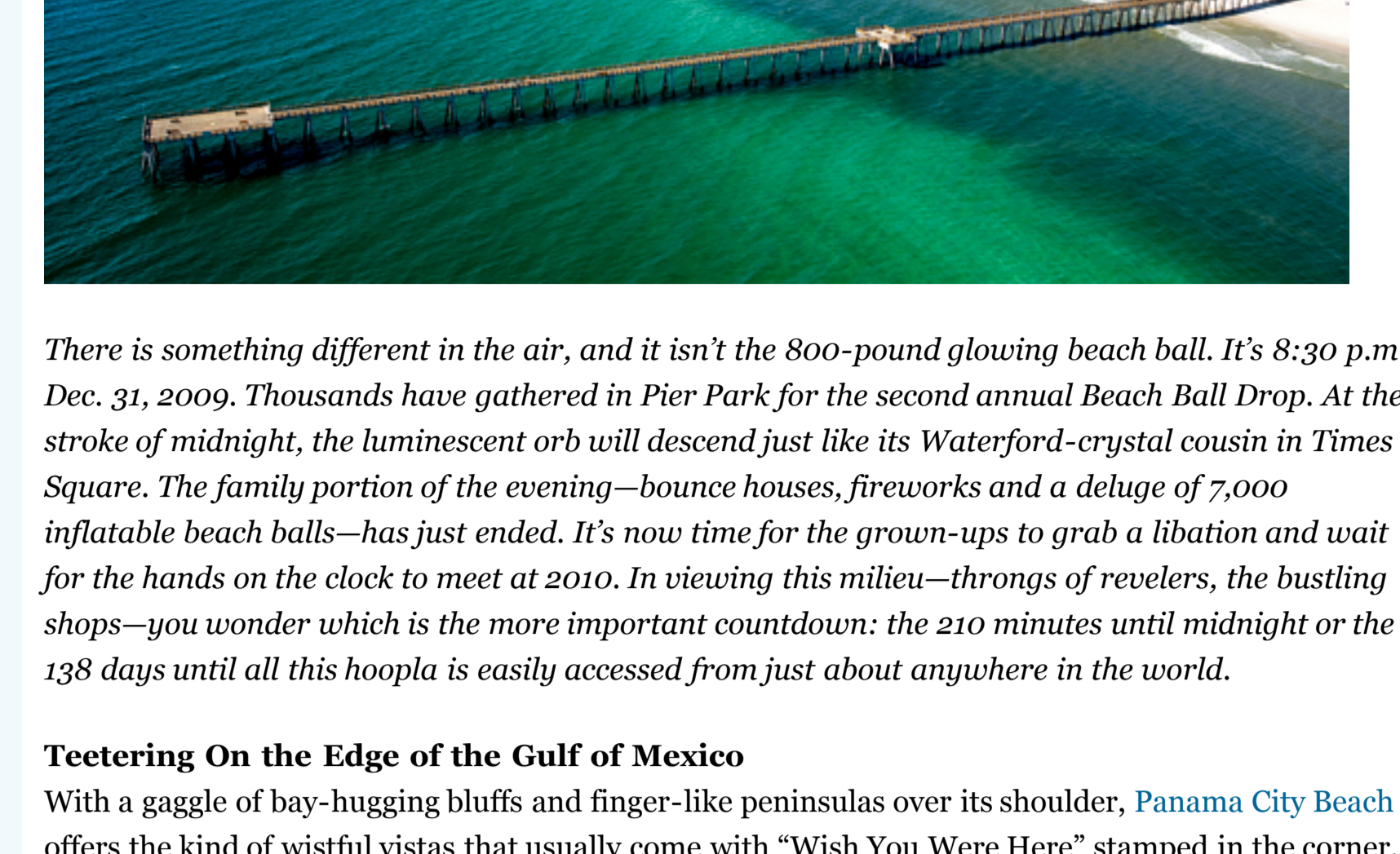
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"Never before has this kind of project taken place," says Kevin Johnson, vice president of economic development for the St. Joe Company. "[The airport] serves as a testament to the level of commitment this company has to the area." St. Joe has also donated land to help build out the city's infrastructure, as it did for the airport and Pier Park. With tourism growing and no discernable "downtown" where people could gather, St. Joe and Simon Mall simply invented one. Pier Park is a 1.1 million-square-foot waterfront shopping and entertainment center with a Caribbean vibe, achieved in large part by the Technicolor pastels that trademark each restaurant and shop. But it's more than a place to swipe plastic. At the western end of Pier Park is a fishing pier; its shade and structure provide a happy home for the nickel-skinned wahoo below. The alfresco "town center" hosts several annual events. Monarch butterflies and the Mad Hatter sipping tea were underfoot at the Madonna Street Painting Festival last November; in February, beads rained down from overhead during the Mardi Gras Festival and Parade.

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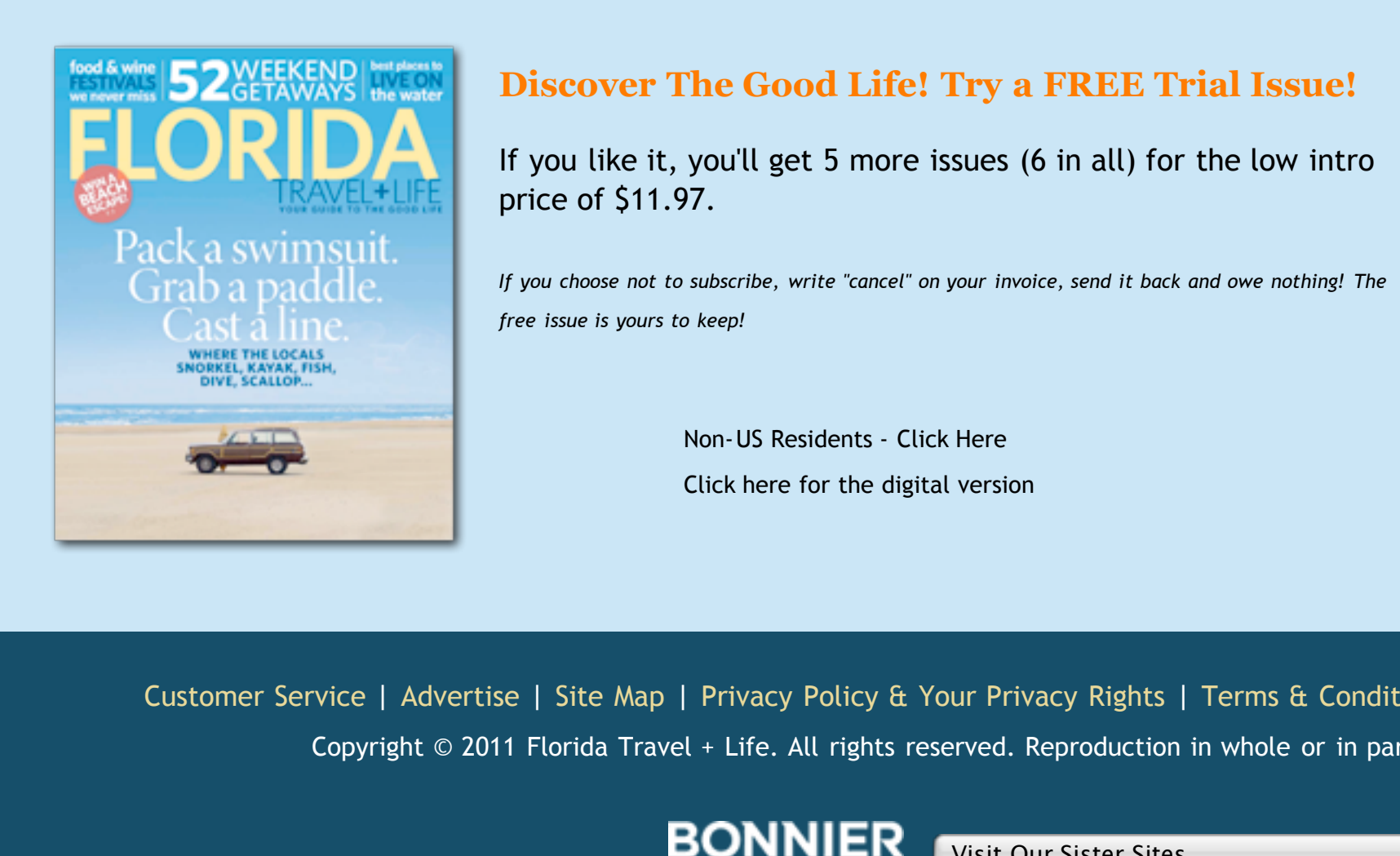
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Where to Stay

- 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 eat at the poolside grill. At night, catch a flick at the "dive-in" movie theater.
- Shores of Panama** is a 23-story resort tower and one of the newer high-rises in Panama City. While the beach is only a stone's throw from the entrance, most guests congregate around the 14,000-square-foot swimming pool.
- An ideal spot for families, **Sterling Beach** not only has fully equipped condominiums with plenty of space, but a 4,000-square-foot pool, a private theater and outdoor grill.
- From the six pools to the full-service tiki bars, **Grand Panama Beach Resort** makes it as easy as possible to get into vacation mode. It doesn't hurt that the 299 condominiums have the amenities of home (beach towels, DVD players, and a washer and dryer).

Where to Play

- One of the most infamous beaches is **Shell Island**, a party destination in **St. Andrews State Park**. To get there, take a ferry or rent a pontoon boat.

Where to Eat

- Established in 1967, **Capt. Anderson's** is the most popular seafood restaurant in this beach town.
- With an interesting menu that depends on what's fresh from the sea, the new **Firefly** keeps things ever-changing (try the tortilla-crust Gulf grouper).
- The cozy, always bustling **Boatyard** is known for serving seafood myriad ways, from seared grouper to shrimp and grits to sashimi.

Where to Shop

- With more than 1 million square feet of retail space, **Pier Park** is the Emerald Coast's largest shopping destination. Throw in the 16-theater cine