

Category 1  
Best newspaper feature article  
Featuring U.S. Destination

Finding Serenity  
on St. George Island  
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A small boat, hand-crafted wood glistening under the sun, glided along the lapping waves of Apalachicola Bay. Leaning over the side and armed with 12-foot tongs, a husband and wife team slowly culled oyster beds, popping the bivalves into 60-pound sacks that go for approximately \$25 each.

These oyster boats, 20- to 23-foot long and

equipped with a cubicle to protect the harvesters from the sun and a culling board to separate the oysters, haven't changed much since they were developed 100 years ago. Neither have the families that supply the Florida Gulf Coast oyster business or the tiny town of St. George.

Just off the coast of Florida along the Gulf of Mexico, St. George unfurls with long stretches of pale sand

With more seagulls, ospreys and oysters than people, this isolated 22-mile barrier island retains the look and sensibilities of Old Florida.

As a beach lover who covets pristine, under-the-radar sandy spots, I had traveled to the area to experience the St. George Island State Park beach. The park, at the eastern end of the island, was named one of the top three beaches in the United States last year by Stephen Leatherman, a professor of science at Florida International University known as Dr. Beach for his annual list. But what I discovered was a sleepy paradise swimming in natural beauty and quirky charm.

Driving from Tallahassee down Highway 98, the first sign that I had landed in another world was when I arrived in the little fishing village of Carrabelle. Consisting of what appeared to be a few dusty roads and ramshackle fish shacks, the town is the home of the "World's Smallest Police Station."

Stepping up to a narrow phone booth emblazoned with "Police — City of Carrabelle," I blinked with confusion. Turns out that crime is pretty rare in Carrabelle and the police headquarters used to be a call box bolted to a building. But the call box attracted tourists intent on making long distance calls. In 1963, the town erected a phone booth under a chinaberry tree and later removed the dial so people couldn't make calls. The fact that this setup remains in place reveals a lot about the lifestyle and easygoing pace of this spot.

**ECO TOURING**

Farther along on the drive to St. George, a stop at the Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve supplied fascinating details about what makes the bay's ecology so special. Monitoring 246,766 acres of the estuarine system that serves as a nursery bed for the entire Gulf of Mexico, the reserve boasts 186 species of fish, 308 species of birds and 57 species of plants.

The nature center displayed these points in several sprawling aquariums filled with local sea life and an extensive mural illustrating the myriad living things found in the estuary. Interactive exhibits about the local seafood industry, including an oyster boat and artifacts like whale bones, an alligator skull and sea urchin shells were a highlight. My favorites were the nature and paddling trails that presented stunning views.

I glided over the long Bryant Patton Bridge, noticing the oyster boats that dotted the water. On St. George, one of four tranquility seemed to float amid the sea breezes. No high rises, chain stores or crowds marred the view.

Sinking my feet into the nine miles of pearly, undeveloped beach of St. George Island State Park felt like a rarified, luxury treatment designed to lower stress levels. Shells decorated the path to the warm water, where dolphins splashed.

A stroll a few yards down the beach uncovered crabs, sponges, sand dollars and sea turtle nests. It wasn't until I had trekked an entire mile that I spied another human.

After sunbathing on the balcony of my rental home, adorned with bougainvillea and a private pier, I headed out to explore.

An afternoon boat ride to nearby St. Vincent — a National Wildlife Refuge that

is accessible only by boat — uncovered the untamed side of these Florida barrier islands. The trees were windswept and sunburned. Some had fallen and formed makeshift bridges over the hot sand. Tangles of overgrown brush gave St. Vincent the feel of a Robinson Crusoe hangout.

Only nine miles long and four miles wide at its widest point, the triangular island shelters 12,000 acres of protected sand dunes, tidal marshes and freshwater springs. The wildlife thrives here. I spotted alligators, ospreys, and bald eagles but wolves and snakes also lurk.

The island has 80 miles of hiking trails but I opted for a shelling expedition, scooping up two pounds of diverse shells from the white sands.

Back on St. George, I relaxed at the Blue Parrot oceanfront café, eating a fresh grouper sandwich and gazing out at the sun setting over the water. Even

with eager diners filling the restaurant, the mood remained unrushed and brimming with Southern hospitality. When I worried that there was a long wait for my table under a thatched roof with prime views, my waitress drawled, "No m'am, nobody is ever in a hurry on St. George."