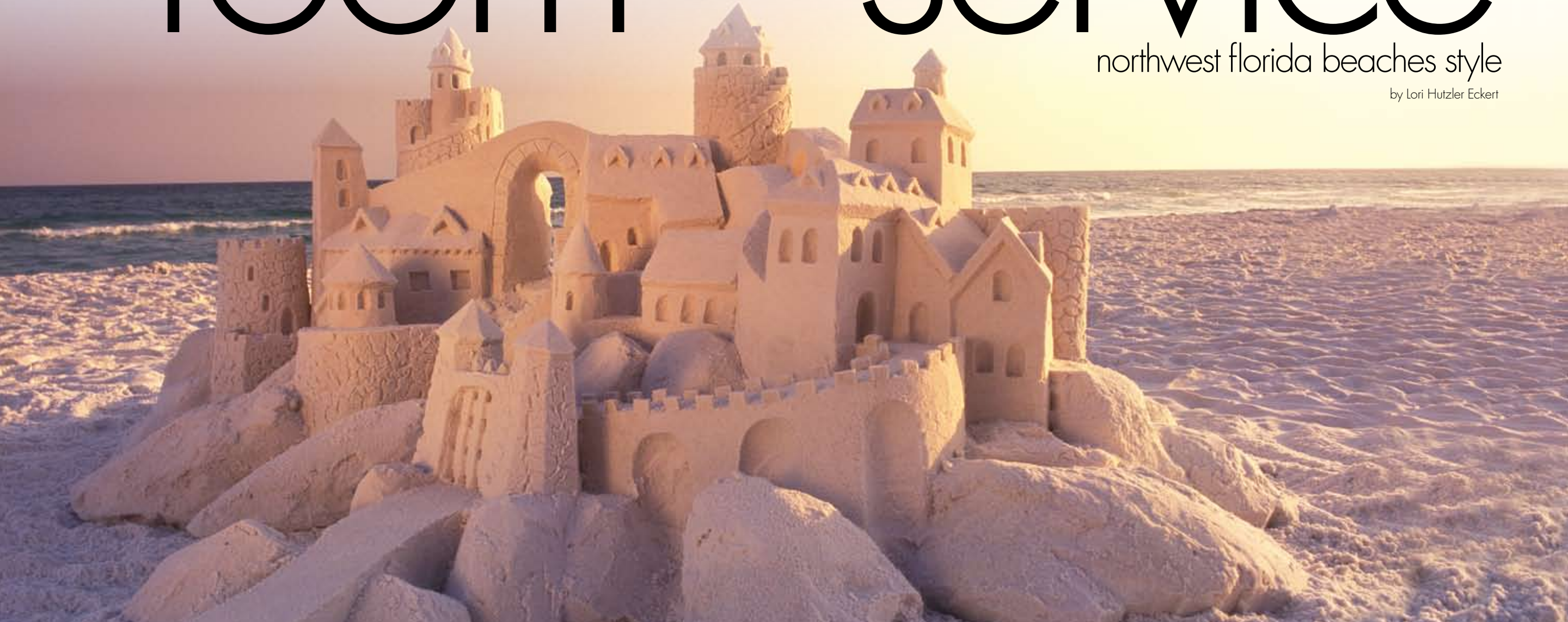


room service

northwest florida beaches style

by Lori Hutzler Eckert



Check into Northwest Florida's accommodations for vacation experiences that are a day at the beach.

Whether you are looking for a romantic retreat, family friendly trip or a group getaway, Northwest Florida's Gulf Coast has your vacation in the (beach) bag.

The area, which features dozens of beaches across a curving coastline that flows along the Gulf of Mexico, offers accommodations to fit any vacationer's vision of paradise. Including hotels, condos and private homes, from quaint and casual to lavish and luxurious, there are more than 80,000 rental options in the area.

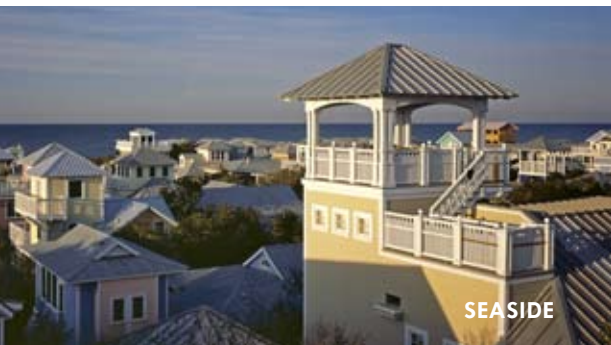
For families, Northwest Florida is a natural fit. With outdoor fun to be found at the numerous parks, beaches and other attractions, kids of every

age can hit the surf, links or trails. But after a day of adventure, it is ideal to return to a condominium or house, complete with a kitchen and washer and dryer.

Seaside, South Walton, an 80-acre, iconic town-center community, caters to every visitor's agenda, but it is a top pick for families. With multiple awards to its credit, this cottage-filled town offers a professional theater company with various children's shows; dining options, including a promenade lined with converted airstreams selling savory snacks and



PANAMA CITY BEACH



SEASIDE



SEAHAVEN BEACH HOTEL

sweet treats, and movie night in the expansive amphitheater.

Jon Ervin, director of public relations and marketing for the Cottage Rental Agency Seaside, says the 250 rental options, starting at \$175 per night, create a “home away from home” in the quaint neighborhood setting.

Ervin adds, “The Cottage Rental Agency provides the care you would expect from a nice hotel, including housekeeping, onsite maintenance, front desk, concierge and more. And once you are here, there really is no reason to leave, as shopping, dining, entertainment and more are within just a short walk or easily reached by the Seaside Transit.”

Other family-focused vacation options can be found at Seahaven Beach Resorts, in Panama City Beach. Surf, sand and sun are plentiful at this expansive gulf-side destination. The resort, with more than 500 rental units, allows families to customize their getaway with accommodations

that range from plush penthouses to budget-friendly rooms at three lodging options, including the Origin Condominium, Seahaven Beach Hotel and America’s Best Value Inn.

And for the family on the go, beach hopping is easy when booking through Sterling Resorts. With more than 1,200 units and homes across Northwest Florida, visitors can pick locations in Destin, South Walton and Panama City Beach to experience all the area has to offer. Whether seeing the Gulf Coast by road trip or picking one location, Sterling offers vacation specialists, online and by phone, to assist in planning the perfect getaway.

If your vacation is a destination for a group getaway, the Northwest Florida Beaches also offers lodging options that cater to weddings, reunions and meetings.

Bay Point Golf Resort & Spa, the only full-service resort in Panama City Beach, features 40,000 square feet of event space, including ball rooms, board rooms and outdoor catering venues,

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along with two 18-hole golf courses, dining, full catering capabilities and a host of activities.

With 316 rooms and 60 one- and two-bedroom golf villas, the resort, located on St. Andrews Bay, offers an ideal setting for a wedding. "Brides are captivated by our event-space options," says Dawn Wolfe, director of sales and marketing for the resort. "Our certified wedding planners ensure every detail, from ceremony to first dance, is covered and executed to perfection."

Northwest Florida's Beaches also offer sweet deals for couples looking for quality quiet time. For privacy at a great price, Counts-Oakes Resort Properties offers a wide variety of high-end home and condo rentals in Okaloosa, Walton and Bay counties, including Carillon Beach in Panama City Beach and Surfside Resort in Destin. The company's website features a section with current specials that are worth browsing, as well as photos of its available inventory.

Couples passionate about pampering during a romantic retreat can meet their accommodation match with Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, Northwest Florida's largest full-service beachfront resort hotel.

Offering 598 spacious guest rooms, including casual-but-elegant suites with breathtaking beach views, the resort, which underwent a \$6.5 million hotel-wide renovation this spring, is made for a relaxing rendezvous.



Fall for the flavors of Northwest Florida with Taste of THE Beach

When the seasons gently shift from summer to fall on Northwest Florida's Beaches, the sun doesn't set on entertainment and adventure. With temperate temperatures and a focus on year-round hospitality, the area continues to cater to visitors with an abundance of activities.

Topping the list of things to do in autumn is Taste of THE Beach, an annual culinary and wine celebration, showcasing the Emerald Coast, while offering six separate events during four days.

Taste of THE Beach 2011, which is sponsored by Southwest Airlines and will be held Nov. 3 to Nov. 6, will offer wine tastings; several culinary experiences, including an exclusive wine dinner; and a charity auction in various beachside venues, from Destin to Panama City Beach.

Todd Vucovich, executive director of the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation - which is a partner with the Walton Area Chamber of Commerce in hosting

Taste of THE Beach, as well as the arm that distributes the funds to local children's charities - says autumn gives the foundation, "the ability to host and take care of visitors. There's more available lodging, the roads are not as crowded and the weather is just beautiful."

Vucovich, who said last year's Taste of THE Beach sold approximately 3,000 tickets, expects several of this year's six events will again sell out, with tickets to some of the functions as low as \$35. "It's an incredible value with more than 600 wines, artisanal foods and live entertainment. And the events appeal to a wide array of visitors and locals - from those who are serious about wine to people who just want to enjoy a day outside in our beautiful fall weather."

But the value goes beyond the price of the tickets. Last year, Taste of THE Beach raised \$125,000 (net) for all children's charities. "It's double the pleasure. People enjoy

having a good time at our events, but they also can feel good about knowing they are helping children in critical need," says Vucovich.

We will gladly raise a glass to that fact!

That's the Taste Ticket:

Taste of the Beach 2011 will feature six events, located on Florida's Emerald Coast. Check out tasteofthebeachfla.org or call 850-267-0683 to see the schedule and find your ticket to great food, wine and a guaranteed good time.



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The resort's amenities include two expansive beachside pools, access to championship golf courses, and several dining and recreation options. Couples can also indulge at Serenity by the sea, a day spa featuring luxury treatments such as couples massages, and Seagar's Prime Steaks and Seafood, the Destin area's only AAA Four Diamond award-winning restaurant, which offers private dining for two in its intimate wine room.

"We have always prided ourselves in providing guests with excellence in full-service amenities, and it's this commitment that has positioned us as a premier destination," says Gary Brielmayer, general manager of the resort.

AND THE BEACH GOES ON

With more than 200 miles of pristine coastline, dozens of beachside communities come together to preserve and promote Northwest Florida as a shore thing for tourists.

As the sun slips above the seemingly endless horizon that separates the clear sky from the turquoise-tinted Gulf of Mexico, the sugar-white sand sparkles and seagulls glide on a salt-kissed breeze. It is the breaking of another beautiful day in Northwest Florida, a vacationers' paradise found that fringes the region with 227 miles of coastline.

And while the setting is truly post-card perfect, representing the idyllic getaway for rest and relaxation, the business of the beach churns in the background at high speed. Beyond the flip-flops and frozen drinks, dozens of cities, towns and communities join forces with tourist development organizations and private groups to promote, and preserve, this six-county stretch of the Sunshine State.

At the heart of Northwest Florida is South Walton beach neighborhoods, a collection of 15 eclectic beach communities that repeatedly rank in national vacation-award listings. The South Walton Tourist Development Council

IMAGE COURTESY OF HILTON SANDESTIN BEACH GOLF RESORT AND SPA

travel promotional series | northwest florida beaches



HILTON SANDESTIN BEACH GOLF RESORT AND SPA

recently initiated a new, comprehensive branding campaign, "Visit South Walton," with "Find Your Perfect Beach" as the promising tag line.

As distinct as the area is, with locations including Alys Beach, Rosemary Beach and Seaside, Dawn Moliterno, executive director of the South Walton Tourist Development Council, understands that visitors don't always recognize the geographical lines that sepa-

rate brands, but they do see advantages from marketing with a united message. "Through the collaborative efforts of the region's tourism bureaus, our visitors feel the warm, Southern hospitality and exceptional service that ensures each family finds the experiences that match their interests," says Moliterno.

Bordering South Walton, to the east, is Panama City Beach. The area has long been known as a spring break locale, but

it is rapidly shifting to more of a year-round destination under the guidance of the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau. Promoting tourism under the brand banner of "REAL. FUN. BEACH.," the CVB is widening its net through social-media initiatives, including engaging more than 200,000 Facebook fans.

As their strategic outreach grows, so do their objectives. "Our goal is to put

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Panama City Beach and Northwest Florida on the international travel radar. And with the success that the new [Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport] has experienced thus far, we look forward to continuing to showcase all this Florida gem has to offer," says Dan Rowe, president and CEO of the CVB.

But the efforts of the tourist development organizations don't stop at positioning the region as a top vacation destination. South Walton and Panama City Beach, along with other public and civic groups, also share a passion for preserving the very beaches they are promoting.

"Natural-resource preservation is vitally important to the tourism industry in Gulf County and the entire Northwest Florida area," says Tim Kerigan, tourism director for the Gulf County Tourism Development Council. "In Gulf County, specifically, we pay special attention to protecting our shorebirds, turtles, dunes and grasses."

Gulf County, which is nestled on the region's eastern-most end, is home to quaint and quintessential Florida towns such as Cape San Blas and Port St. Joe. The county, known as Florida's Forgotten Coast, also features 50-foot sand dunes and a bay where scallops thrive, among the many other resources worth protecting.

In 2009, the county successfully completed a beach-nourishment project along the gulf side of the St Joseph Peninsula. And in South Walton, where nearly 40 percent of the total acreage is preserved, the ongoing beach nourishment program recently added 100 feet to the beach on the western end of Walton County.

These concerted efforts at preservation and the abundant funds aimed at tourist development prove their worth, as millions of visitors flock annually to the area. And while they may not be fully aware of the behind-the-scenes business that makes their vacations memorable, their experiences are undeniably shaped by this unique regional alliance that is the spirit of Northwest Florida.