

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

THE BEACH

Florida's overlooked oasis on northwest coast

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26/09/2009 1:00 AM | [Comments: 0](#)



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THE BEACH at Santa Rosa, Florida. (PHOTOS BY WENDY BURKE)



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Watercolor Inn in Santa Rosa.



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The Gulf of Mexico shoreline.



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Kayaking on rare coastal lakes near Watercolor Inn & Resort, Santa Rosa.



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Rosemary Beach Jazz Brunch



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Russ Gilbert, owner of Fusion Art Glass



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The library at Watercolor Inn

Let us examine the fundamental difference between a vacation and a holiday. A cursory examination of the two words will illustrate this.

The root of the word "vacation" is "to vacate," as in "vacate your premises."

The word "holiday" is shortened from "holy day," something akin to the spiritual, an opportunity to restore one's body and soul, which is best done with all the finer things; Good food, good wine, good company, access to art and culture, and time spent in nature doing something physical, all tempered with the right amount of peace and quiet.

This can all be found on the Northwest coast of Florida in a collection of seven counties known as THE Beach. This oasis is often overlooked by northerners heading out for a vacation, but southerners have enjoyed this Gulf Coast respite for years. It's far enough south to be a winter getaway, but it has much to offer during the rest of the year, as well. A few days here are well-spent.

The Ideal Weekend Plan

ARRIVING at Watercolor Resort at Santa Rosa Beach in the late evening was a welcome end to the slog which is air travel from Winnipeg to Florida. Watercolor is classified as a "boutique" hotel (meaning it has fewer than 100 rooms). The overall impression is warmth, hospitality and a delicious quiet.

That sense of calm is actively cultivated. Off one side of the lobby is a large circular library stocked with books and newspapers, comfortable sofas and armchairs and internet access. The pool off the lobby is designated as a quiet pool: adults only. The lounge is also connected to the lobby and the design ensures the rooms are physically separate from the more active part of the resort: the restaurant and conference rooms.

My first task on Friday morning is to enjoy a Swedish-style massage in the spa. It scores very high on the "wet noodle scale" and is the perfect precursor to the light buffet-style breakfast in the lounge, followed by a walk on the pristine beach.

The beach is a stair-climb over the dune, which rises up between the hotel and the shore (I'm glad for the third-floor view from my room). The land-side of the dune, which is under restoration and protected by lengths of snow-fence (that's what we call it where I come from) and is packed with plants. The plants and the sand cling to each other for dear life. The plants need a place to grow in the dune -- the dune can't hold it's ground without the plants. The sea-side of the dune is mostly sand, sloping down to more sand; which is just that: Perfectly ground quartz that stretches and stretches along the Gulf of Mexico. This the shoreline which gives THE Beach it's name. At first this seems a bit presumptuous.

Until you kick your shoes off, that is.

The water is icy and sharp, but as beaches go this one is awfully close to perfect. A school of long, thin, sharp-finned fish zip by. A very few people are strung out like colorful buoys along the edge of the water.

Some kids are making a sand castle. There are just a couple of seagulls and a dainty sandpiper trips along, leaving tiny footprints in the sand.

The Gulf stretches out to the horizon where a fine indigo line fades into denim blue and finally washes up into a pale bottle green, frayed white where the waves break. To the south, shiny nickels of sunlight skip over the water.

Nature apparently got the memo regarding peace and quiet, because the waves are loud enough to be the ocean, but not deafening. Not so much a roar as a purr.

It's the kind of sound that can soothe you to sleep -- you might be tempted to leave your balcony door open so you can hear it.

I never see a single boat.

It's like this every morning, and every evening I'm here.

I'm not just here to sit on the beach, though. There's culture and food and wine to be had this weekend and I'm just the gal to have 'em. The Taste of THE Beach wine and food festival program is about to begin.

Friday night takes me to the International Wine and Food Experience where wines from North and South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand are being sheltered from the rain under large white tents which have been set up at Pier Park in Panama City. There are pit stops for food here and there along the way. It's well-organized and the people staffing the tables are knowledgeable. The food is good but there isn't much in the way of explaining how to pair. It's a wrinkle that should be ironed out. \$75 per ticket.

Saturday afternoon is a sunny walk around the Seeing Red Wine Festival in Seaside. Once again, tables and tents are strung out, local chefs are offering tasty morsels and happy adults are wandering from table to table, all for a good cause, of course. The entire festival weekend is also a fund raiser for children's charities. There's a stage featuring jazz and everything is surrounded by boutique-style shopping. One store to see is Fusion Art Glass Gallery, which is like stepping into a giant kaleidoscope with extraordinary pieces of art glass of every size and shape on shelves, walls and hanging from the ceiling.

Saturday night is another outdoor venue on the Watercolor property, the Telluride Mountain Film Festival which features the theme "Energy." The series of short films opens with a montage of skiers (the kind of guys that like to get tossed out of helicopters) backed up by the Fat Boy Slim re-mix of Magic Carpet Ride. It's shown on a giant inflatable screen, back lit with a few coloured lights which show off the pointy outlines of scrawny evergreens. It has a folk festival feel to it, but colder. As the evening goes on, the cold creeps in. I thoroughly enjoy the films, but I'm also grateful I brought hat, mitts, scarf and a warm jacket. I also appreciate the paper bucket'o chili I Hoover down during the intermission. Admission is \$25 one night or \$40 for both.

Sunday morning is the Rosemary Jazz Brunch (\$50 per ticket) which features live jazz and a superb gourmet buffet. The dessert finale was unapologetically southern: pumpkin cake fried in butter and topped with chocolate syrup and ice cream. All desserts should be fried prior to serving, for good measure.

Another must-see on the Watercolor site is the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. It's a small museum, a brand-new satellite of New Orleans' Ogden. One of the goals of the Ogden is to reflect the changing south through the eyes and hands of many artists.

I wrapped up the weekend with an easy-going one hour paddle on one of the 17 coastal dune lakes, which run parallel to, and are separated from, the Gulf of Mexico by the sand dunes on the shoreline. This is a large concentration of these extremely rare bodies of water, a very few of which are also found in Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

THE Beach has much to offer all year-round. You'll find more about it at www.foragingforgottencoast.com or www.watercolorresort.com and www.thebeachfla.com and

www.beachesofsouthwalton.com.

How to DO an Outdoor Wine Festival

1. Dress to walk, dress for the weather.
2. On arrival, you will receive a wine glass and a brochure. Don't break your glass. It will not be replaced.
3. Seek advice. You will see a number of people at the tables sipping wine and making notes in their brochures. They are usually very slender and serious. Stay away from these people. They don't know any more than you do and they don't understand the meaning of the word "festival." Instead, seek out your rounder, jollier types. They will be slightly red in the face. They are having a good time and they want you to have as much fun as they are. Talk to them. They are generally glad to tell you what is good and why.
4. Strike out on your own. Seek out wines you might not ordinarily buy. Try the ice wines and the various champagnes, the organic wines. It was at this point that I sought more advice on the reds. The fellow who advised me was very enthusiastic about a particular red and waxed on about the "eucalyptus." "Can you taste it?" he asked breathlessly. He was right, you could really taste the eucalyptus in the wine. Bleeecch. (Memo to vintners: If you have eucalyptus growing next to your grapes, tear it up.)
5. Find something to eat. You will be eating standing up with a plate in your hand. Here's how: flip your wine glass upside down and slide the stem between your fingers, thus creating a flat surface on which to rest your plate. This leaves you with one free hand to eat your food. You are advised to drain your wine glass prior to flipping it.
6. By now you have tasted many wines, you have chatted with cheery people and nibbled on some food. You can no longer distinguish between one bottle and another. It is now time to look for "the pretty bottles." These are the wines that have the nicest packaging. This is how I stumbled across the Francis Ford Coppola table.

Pretty bottle = not bad wine. I think.
7. Make your way back to your hotel room and drink a gallon of water. Get up the next day and do the afternoon portion of the festivals. Get up again the next day and do the wine festival brunch.
8. Organize your own intervention when you get home.

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