

FLORIDA'S *Great Escapes*

Whether you love the salty Gulf, stately Atlantic, wild Panhandle, or all of the above, these three sun-drenched discoveries are full of local culture, great seafood, and gorgeous beaches

By Tracey Minkin Photographs by Jessica Sample





APALACHICOLA

The Panhandle's secret stunner is home to a beautifully restored historic inn, great shopping, windswept and wild beaches, and, yes, oysters

THERE ARE DISCOVERIES, and then there are *discoveries*. You know you're onto something as U.S. Route 98 slides south-east down the coast from Panama City. After heading inland briefly through stands of slash and longleaf pines, you emerge to roll past stately antebellum homes, and within moments arrive at a pristine 19th-century downtown. Just beyond the cluster of brick, stone, and glinting metal roofs, you spy a sky blue waterway with brightly colored shrimp boats lumbering gracefully past.

You meander the downtown, not quite believing this all is *here*: a craft brewpub; an independent bookstore with a knitting shop tucked inside; a Charleston-worthy boutique with tunics and caftans; another little shop with preppy trunks, T-shirts, and koozies; an upscale outfitter with fishing rods; antiques and art galleries. And at the corner of this surprising find sits a deep-porched, elegant inn that's suddenly the coolest spot to stay on the Panhandle.

Welcome to Apalachicola, Florida's stunning surprise, the little up-and-comer that may just steal away the crowd-weary habitués of Seaside and Rosemary Beach to the west. Here lies a tiny city that has endured booms and busts—from being a thriving cotton and lumber port city to a center of the Gulf's oyster fishery (which crashed in 2012)—and which has, in the past decade, built itself up quietly through inventive entrepreneurship into a sweet and stylish getaway that blends those downtown delights with proximity to some of the coast's most remarkable wild beaches.

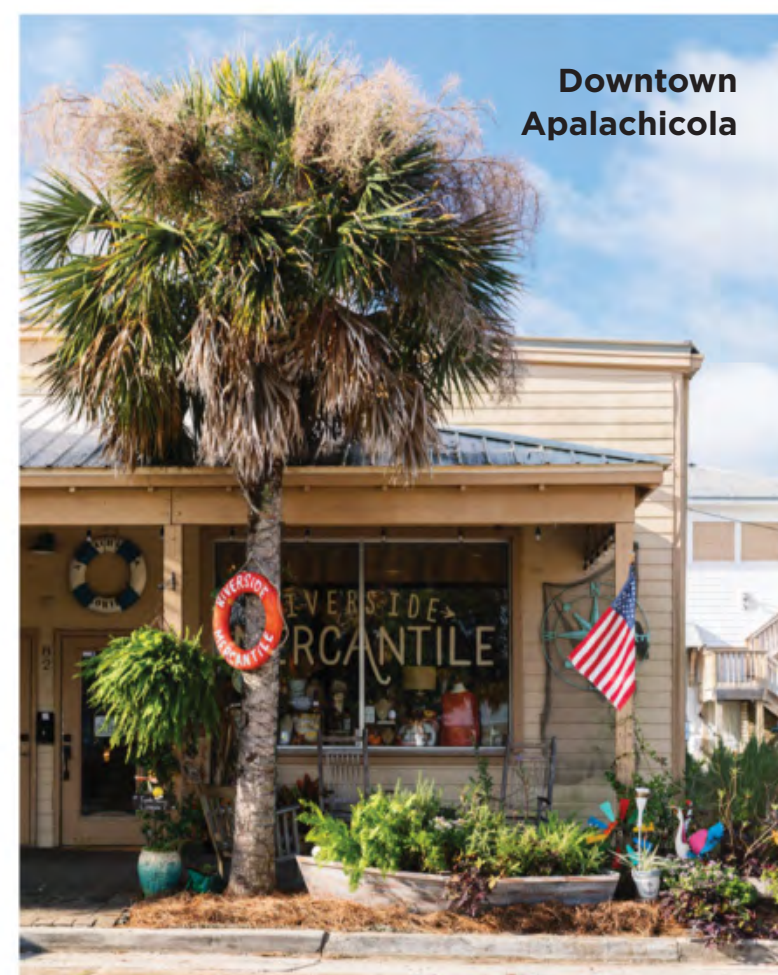
And make no mistake: Apalachicola is having a moment. You can feel it in the vibe of the circa-1907 Gibson Inn, purchased in 2018 by a pair of 30-something siblings—Steven Etchen and Katharine Etchen Couillard—who grew up visiting

the area with their parents and enjoying Shirley Temples on these very porches. “We’ve loved this place forever,” says Couillard, “and when it looked like we could buy it and enhance its potential while maintaining its authenticity, we leapt at the chance.”

A product of the design-savvy vision of the pair and their partner Cutler Edwards, the interiors now vibrate with a modern sensibility that nods to nostalgia, including deep-seated leather sofas and taxidermy in the lobby. The revitalized bar offers craft cocktails and local draft beers, while the house restaurant—the Franklin Café—serves freshly caught seafood and exclusively local oysters. Which means that evenings downstairs at The Gibson are themselves a marvelous blend of all that is Apalachicola—old-timers parked at the bar and longtime families settling in for brunch or dinners out, nodding to happy travelers who know they're onto something really special.

And while the charms of Apalachicola can keep anyone occupied for an entire three-day weekend (falling into Tin Shed Nautical & Antique, an emporium of

Shrimpers heading down
the Apalachicola River



Downtown
Apalachicola

Chef Ken Lumpkin and the local bivalve of choice (below), at The Franklin Café



Old Florida reborn at The Gibson Inn

WHERE TO EAT, STAY, SHOP, AND PLAY

Apalachicola

EAT Although the local oyster fishery crashed in 2012, a new wave of farmers is bringing the delicacy back. Which is to say, when here, eat oysters. Get local varieties at **The Franklin Café**, as well as at **Up the Creek Raw Bar**, a waterfront joint with no pretense and great fresh seafood. Secondly, this is shrimp country, and the local catch is done up just right in fried shrimp po' boys at **Apalachicola Seafood Grill**, a historic corner store-style lunchroom with just enough kitsch to keep it real. (Don't miss the house potato salad on the side.) Nearby, the doors-and-windows-open vibe at **Oyster City Brewing Company's tasting room** is welcoming, and the local brews are excellent. (Check out the classic oysterman culling irons that serve as tap handles.)

STAY The recently restored and updated **Gibson Inn** is a modern historic gem: a relaxed yet sophisticated base to explore Apalachicola and its wild environs. Make time to spend happy hour at the parlor bar (order up a Gibson Breeze, the house cocktail), and book at least one meal at the inn's top-shelf restaurant, **The Franklin Café**.

SHOP From the vintage nautical riot at **Tin Shed Nautical & Antiques** to the trend-forward boutiques **BECA**SA (featuring local owner/designer Emily Raffield's pieces) and **SGI Threads**, the compact downtown has every shopping vibe covered. In the mix: great sporting gear and looks to match at **Apalach Outfitters**, upscale clothing brands and home goods at **The Grady Market**, and terrific books and opulent yarns at **Downtown Books & Purl**. And keep your eyes peeled, while shopping, for Florida tupelo honey. The local variety, made from the nectar of the white Ogeechee tupelo blossoms growing in the Apalachicola River swamps, is rare and highly valued for its rich flavor and silky texture (it never granulates).

PLAY Explore the Apalachicola River estuary aboard the *Half Shell*—a refashioned classic Apalachicola oyster boat—soaking up views of wildlife and scenery, plus learning a wealth of local and natural history from renowned guide and captain Gibby Conrad on one of **Apalach Tours'** two-hour ecotours.

salty ephemera, could occupy a weekend), it's what lies nearby that also lures. And there may be no wilder place than Cape San Blas and the St. Joseph Peninsula, a delicate spit of sand that arcs out from the mainland just west of Apalachicola and parallels the coast for 20 windswept miles of high dunes and untrammled beaches. Partway out the peninsula, in fact, is where the eyewall of 2018's Hurricane Michael came ashore with such ferocity that it carved a navigable channel across the spit before it savaged the mainland town of Mexico Beach. Already, though, the slash is filling back up with sand as nature resets itself. The place feels wilder than ever.

Similarly, the waters reaching inland from Apalachicola—the river that shares its name, chiefly—are potent places to experience that aching wildness that defines the ancient Panhandle. With cool waterways lined with cypress and oak, cedar and tupelo, and populated with leaping fish and darting birds, it's an Audubon escapist fantasy to go upriver here, even for a few hours. To feel yourself the lucky explorer, the discoverer of a small and beautiful world. Shirley Temples on the porch to follow.