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SOUTHEAST | SMALL TOWN WEEKEND



The Town Center is full of shops and restaurants with plenty of style and sophistication, upstaged only by the breathtaking coastline. Many of the homes are designed with second-floor kitchens and family rooms so that cooking, dining, and day-to-day living can take place with an ocean view.

Rosemary Beach, Florida

Along the Gulf of Mexico, you'll find a posh yet laid-back town with high-quality shopping and dining enhanced by the nearness of the shore

YEARS AGO, A WEEKEND IN THE PANHANDLE meant beautiful scenery and fresh seafood; but probably not upscale shopping and fine dining. In the last few decades, though, communities have popped up between Destin and Panama City that dispel any preconceptions of beach kitsch. A jewel in the crown of Highway 30-A is Rosemary Beach, a 107-acre walkable residential and vacation spot named for the native herb that graces the region. Rosemary Beach is serene. It's quiet and peaceful. It's lovely in the fall, when cooler temperatures and minimal crowds make for an especially relaxing vacation. And if you haven't been in a while, there's a lot in store that you might not expect.



Hotel Saba opens at the end of the year with more than 50 rooms, a pool, and a couples spa.

The Lodging

The first surprise I encounter at Rosemary Beach is the accommodations. Lodging options include town homes, lofts, and large beachfront houses with porches for spending hours with a good book. The much-anticipated **Hotel Saba** will offer another choice when it opens later this year.

My husband and I settle on a loftlike flat in the Town Center. No seashell lamps and wicker furniture here; instead we find sleek, modern furnishings and a kitchen decked out with stainless appliances and granite countertops. And even though I've always considered an ocean view a necessity, we love the quaint notion of dashing downstairs for coffee before an early morning stroll on the beach.

The Community

After beachcombing, we decide to take in the views away from the shore. Meandering down paths and boardwalks and happening upon hidden gems, such as the four community pools, the racquet club, and Butterfly Park (where you can help yourself to fresh herbs to use for dinner), is a treat in itself. Soon catching on to *the* way to move around, we rent bikes at **Bamboo Beach & Bicycle Company**. Channeling our inner children, we bike around the town and along the sidewalks of Highway 30-A, which connects Rosemary Beach with other seaside communities.

As we cycle, we take in the architecture. West Indies, St. Augustine, Charleston, and New Orleans-style houses sit alongside each other

circa
INTERIORS AND ANTIQUES

"I love the innate charm and beauty of simple, utilitarian and age-old objects put to new or unexpected uses. Bold architectural elements from European chateaus or country residences add more layers to my design."
Patrick Lewis

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"Our trademark style comes from blending classic and contemporary pieces," says Tracery owner and buyer Paige Schnell.

seamlessly. And peacefully. No grass—only native plants—is allowed at the residences, so there's no noise or air pollution from lawn mowers. This is especially nice considering the houses' close proximity to one another, a design aspect that enhances the community feel.

More than 160 permanent residents, many seasonal guests, and regular renters flock here for that vibe, and with a new airport in the works for nearby Panama City, it will soon be easier for visitors from all over to access Rosemary Beach.

The Food

Wild Olives, where we have lunch, offers salads and sandwiches you can enjoy outdoors, as well as a market to keep the kitchen stocked during your stay. Other casual spots include **Summer Kitchen Café** and **Cowgirl Kitchen**.

Wander through the town around dusk, and you'll find lots of activity—families making their way up the boardwalk from the beach, groups playing bocce on the Western Green, and drinks and music at **Courtyard Wine & Cheese**. Owner Bryan Krutz says he usually sees a late-afternoon crowd in swimsuits, and then another group looking for an appetizer of wine and cheese before dinner. "We also get a late-night crowd wanting one last nightcap," he adds. Some patrons visit his European-style establishment before heading to dinner at nearby **Onano** for Northern Italian entrées that incorporate fresh seafood.

circa
INTERIORS AND ANTIQUES

"I love the history of this chair. It has a story of its own. The chair's form and shape are so comfortable. Use it as it is or let us upholster this French wingback to fit your room."
Cindy Smith

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With other communities such as Seagrove Beach, Seaside, WaterColor, and Grayton Beach so close, however, a dinner excursion is in order for us. We hop in the car our first evening for a five-minute drive to **Café Thirty-A** in Seagrove Beach and are not disappointed with our crab cakes, filet mignon, and standout chocolate flourless cake with raspberry coulis and vanilla bean ice cream.

The Shopping

Back at Rosemary Beach, I find that the seaside shopping at the Town Center—another unexpected plus—is worth the time away from the ocean. After waffles at Cowgirl Kitchen our second morning, I take my time wandering through the town tempting myself with stylish finds while my husband plays golf in Panama City.

I feel the fun vibe as soon as I walk in the door at **Gigi's**. With a toy train circling the store, art supplies, colorful toys, and great dress-up clothes for kids, the store is a must for little ones. **Tracery**, the sister company of G; Branding & Design and Birmingham-based architecture firm Dungan Nequette, offers design services as well as accessories by Roost, Lee, and Barbara Cosgrove, to name a few. It's a great stop for local homeowners and visitors alike. "We take clean, modern elements and mix them with soft textures and French and English antiques," says owner and buyer Paige Schnell. Another home furnishings store, **Shabby Slips**, offers custom slipcovers.

Even though casual is usually the way to dress at the shore, you may

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around the world.

Rosemary Beach Rundown

Bamboo Beach & Bicycle Company
Rent bicycles and beach toys for the whole family. 850/231-0770.

Courtyard Wine & Cheese Enjoy a gourmet cheese plate and wines by the glass or the bottle. 850/231-1219, www.courtyardwineandcheese.com.

Cowgirl Kitchen Texas-style menus for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. 850/303-0708, www.cowgirlkitchen.net.

Hotel Saba New luxury hotel with Gulf views, a spa, and a signature restaurant. www.thehotelsaba.com.

Gigi's Fabulous Kids' Fashions & Toys
Clothing, art supplies, books, dolls, and more. 850/231-0110.

Moonpize Specializes in shoes, but you'll also find jewelry and original art. 850/231-1930.

Onano Neighborhood Café Tuscan-inspired cuisine. 850/231-2436, www.onanocafe.com.

Pish Posh Patchouli's Skin care and hair care boutique. 850/231-2005, www.patchouliis.com.

Rosemary Beach Cottage Rental Company Find the perfect cottage, flat, or carriage house. 888/855-1551, www.rosemarybeach.com.

Shabby Slips Linens, slipcovers, furniture, and accessories. 850/231-4164.

Solace Day Spa & Salon Massages, facials, body treatments, and hair and nail services. 850/231-6801, www.solacesalonspa.com.

Summer Kitchen Café Sandwiches and salads, with fresh seafood at night. 850/231-6264, www.summerkitchencafe.blogspot.com.

Tracery Design services and home furnishings. 850/231-6755, www.traceryinteriors.com.

Wild Olives Market, deli, and bakery with an olive bar, imported meats and cheeses, wine, and tapas. 850/231-0065, www.wildollivesmarket.com.

Willow Contemporary designer fashions for women. 850/231-0433

For more restaurants and shops, visit www.rosemarybeach.com.

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SOUTHEAST

find yourself in need of a new outfit to complement your sun-kissed glow.

Willow offers upscale apparel from designers such as Milly, Rebecca Taylor, and Tory Burch. Find footwear at **Moonpize** shoe and gift boutique, and complete your beach look with a massage and facial at **Solace Day Spa & Salon**.

After dropping off shopping bags in my close-by flat, it's time to spend the rest of the day by the ocean before heading back in to decide whether to cook or go out for our last dinner. As I consider the delicious fare, activities, and shopping we've discovered at Rosemary Beach, I'll admit that the white-sand beaches remain my main reason for coming here. But even while feeling the Gulf breeze and settling in with the book I had saved especially for the trip, it's nice to know that a bike ride, high-end shopping, a luxurious pedicure, and even a game of bocce are waiting just a few steps away. ♦

Along 30-A

Just down the road, these restaurants are worth the few minutes in the car.

Bud & Alley's Classic gathering place in Seaside with great food, views, and a fun roof deck bar. 850/231-5900, www.budandalleys.com.

Café Thirty-A For the best crab cakes, it's a toss-up between this Seagrove Beach restaurant and The Red Bar, which is farther west in Grayton Beach. 850/231-2166, www.cafethirtya.com.

Fish Out of Water Gourmet dining and an award-winning wine list. WaterColor, 850/534-5008, www.watercolorresort.com.

The Red Bar Funky, casual, and lots of fun, the restaurant offers a limited but delicious menu, presented to you on a chalkboard by your server. Grayton Beach, 850/231-1008, www.theredbar.com.