



ROSEMARY BEACH

Article and photographs by Sally Walker Davies

BEACH VACATIONS ARE, BY DEFINITION, SUPPOSED TO BE RELAXING - A GETAWAY FROM THE STRESSES AND PRESSURES OF EVERYDAY LIFE, WITH THE DECISIONS OF THE DAY NO MORE DEMANDING THAN WHAT BEVERAGES TO BRING TO THE BEACH, OR WHICH OF THE FOUR SWIMSUITS YOU PACKED TO WEAR.

Truth be told, however, it is not often that those of us who are electronically tethered to our work lives find a retreat that is truly a refuge from the rest of the world; a place that offers luxury and nostalgia, a place that positively discourages cars, encourages strolls and bike rides, and practically commands one to banish any modern technology to the suitcase.

But there is such a sanctuary among Florida's beach communities, and it is called Rosemary Beach.

Rosemary is almost the last development along County Road 30A, the Gulf Coast of Florida's two-lane road that connects the diverse collection of beach communities between Destin and Panama City. While each of those communities has a distinct flavor - from the bustle of Seaside to the relative solitude of Seagrove Beach - nowhere is getting back to the basics of a beach vacation easier than at Rosemary.

Part of the reason is an understated approach to vacation rentals. Just fewer than half of the luxury homes and condominiums participate in the rental pool; full-time residents and out-of-town owners comprise the other half of the community. The

mix of full-timers, part-timers and vacationers provides a low-key energy instead of the usual hectic pace often found with rental communities.

BUT THE REAL CHARM AT ROSEMARY COMES FROM THE ATTENTION TO DETAIL, BOTH ARCHITECTURALLY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY.

Throughout the community there's a feeling of nostalgia. The design of the homes and commercial buildings pay homage to the grace of Southern coastal cities such as Charleston and Savannah, yet incorporate plenty of Caribbean influence as well. Finishing touches are wood and stucco, both materials stained in muted, eye-pleasing color combinations or soft white and pastel washes that gleam in the setting sun.

Cars are practically exiled for the duration to garages. The narrow lanes that serve as roads are meant for walking and biking, as are the pathways that wind from the beachfront homes to the shops in the town square, to the far reaches of the village.





Homes are close together, with wide porches and balconies facing the boardwalks that lead to the beaches. The close proximity of the porches from one home to the next is no accident but is meant to encourage a sense of community and the **OLD-FASHIONED, SMALL-TOWN ATMOSPHERE THAT IS ALL PART OF ROSEMARY'S ALLURE.**

The footpaths and boardwalks, along with a series of secret cut-throughs, play out almost like a game of hide-and-seek: the prize is finding your way to one of four neighborhood pools, the pocket parks and playgrounds, even a butterfly garden with vibrant flowering plants and hundreds of flitting butterflies to chase. Facing the beach are two large green spaces that are often tented and used for weddings but are equally accessible for games of Frisbee and football.

The beach, of course, is the main draw - and again, the toned-down atmosphere prevails, even in the high season. Chair and umbrella rentals, as well as non-motorized boat rentals, are available, but most folks are happy to spread their towels on the sugary sand and just enjoy the typically mellow waves the Gulf offers up. Two giant staircases lead down to the beach, which is quite a hike when toting kids, chairs and gear. Rosemary's other four staircases were torn away during the 2004 hurricane season, along with an 8-foot width of the protective dunes. Both dunes and staircases are slowly being rebuilt.

Rosemary has its own downtown - a quaint main street that boasts a town hall, post office, day spa, and a collection of stores. The Trading Company offers comfortable logo wear in faded hues, as well as gifts and trinkets; there's a toy store and wine shop, and two restaurants that continue the village-wide theme of relaxed elegance.

Summer Kitchen/Blue By Night is a split-personality eatery - casual offerings such as muffins for breakfast, wraps and salads for lunch, and then morphing at dinner to a more gourmet fare of Gulf seafood specialties.

Down the street, Onano Neighborhood Cafe serves Northern Italian cuisine on the first floor of the Pensione B&B.

Perhaps the second biggest draw for the kids, after the beach, is The Sugar Shak. This small sweet shop is packed with barrels of candies, as well as ice creams, and is the perfect, well, enticement for good behavior, eating vegetables, or whatever it is that parents need to encourage their kids to do.

Oh - and all those gadgets you brought along - the PDA, laptop, cell phone? Yep, they'll work at Rosemary Beach. The question is: Will you?

