

DESTIN FORT WALTON BEACH FLORIDA

Destination Backgrounder

No stretch is more captivating than the sugar-white sand beaches and emerald-green waters that meet along the shores of Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Located in Northwest Florida, the destination is not only an ideal place to unwind and experience total relaxation along a more than 20-mile stretch of beach, but for kids, and kids at heart, to uncover the adventurous side within. Inspired by a study that showed 56 percent* of children spend less time outdoors than maximum security prison inmates and that 49 percent* of surveyed parents find it hard to play with their kids, the destination set out on a mission to get kids on the water to give their adventurous side room to grow. The family-friendly locale offers an environment of discovery on land and water for both parents and kids to play and explore. It's free from the stresses and judgements of everyday life, inviting families to indulge their curiosities.

A Place of Initiation

Destin-Fort Walton Beach is a place of initiation, where play on the water goes beyond sun-drenched fun to a transformative experience, inspiring self-confidence and self-reliance, and nurturing imaginations. Families will uncover a wide variety of opportunities for outdoor adventure inclusive of legendary fishing, boating, watersports and an abundance of wildlife to observe.

The destination's interactive adventure builder, Little Adventures, guides families through their exploration of a collection of activities, expertly curated by local residents, to build an itinerary that best suits their children's ages, skillset and interests. Kids as young as one can enjoy an afternoon splashing and discovering wildlife in crystal clear tide pools. Budding marine biologists will find themselves an arm's reach away from marine life on, and in some instances, under the water. Young explorers can chart their own course via kayak or paddleboard, and teens can challenge themselves to take a lesson out on the water and leave with a new skill like suba diving or eFoiling.

"The World's Luckiest Fishing Village"

Affectionately known as the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village," Destin boasts the largest commercial charter fishing fleet in the country, guaranteeing families an unforgettable day offshore year-round. It's a reminder that a child doesn't need an actual catch to make a fishing trip successful. Children remember the day, no matter what was – or wasn't – caught, ultimately walking away with a fish tale of their own as a prized souvenir.

Fishing outings vary to best suit first-timers and seasoned anglers alike, ranging from offshore excursions with the



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expert guidance of an experienced charter captain, to enjoying the peaceful bayous and bays in a kayak or paddleboard, to casting a line from the fishing pier or along the beautiful shores.

Gulf-to-Table Dining

Part of what makes any destination unique is the distinct flavors one can experience during their visit, and with over 20 types of edible fish available off its shores, Destin-Fort Walton Beach serves up a wide selection of memorable dishes. Aside from menu items that diners may come to expect from a visit to the region, such as grouper, mahi-mahi, royal red gulf shrimp, and even lionfish, travelers can enjoy “cook your catch” services, whether smoked, grilled, fried, or blackened, to mark the end of a successful day spent fishing. For non-seafood lovers, restaurants also offer globally influenced cuisine; traditional American fare, and regional cuisine that’s distinctly southern, paired expertly with locally crafted beers and custom cocktails.

A Story to Share

Visitors to Destin-Fort Walton Beach will not only discover natural wonders and cultural centers, but local experts who are passionate about sharing their inside secrets including hidden fishing holes, breathtaking dive sites, picturesque kayak routes and tips for building a

better sandcastle and surfing the Gulf. The signature sugar-white sand (that remains cool to the touch) and emerald-green water also have a story to share. Appalachian quartz crystals, washed from rivers and tumbled by the tides over thousands of years, have formed the fine white powder sand that exists today, creating the trademark emerald color that results from reflecting sunlight through the surf.

A Home Away from Home

As the sun sets on an adventure filled day families can rest their heads at a wide variety of accommodations, that serve as a home away from home. Those seeking the convenience of having every last vacation detail tended to may book at one of several resorts and hotels. To bring friends and extended family along for the journey, roomy vacation rentals provide a comfortable option. A more peaceful intimate experience awaits, over at RV campsites, and at campgrounds including Henderson State Park where families can sleep under a canopy of stars.

To chart a course for an adventure and learn more, please visit www.destinfwb.com.

**Global study of 12,000 families with kids aged 5-12 initially commissioned by the Real Play Coalition*

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Fact Sheet

Captivating sugar-white sand beaches and emerald-green waters await visitors in Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Located in Northwest Florida, the destination is not only an ideal place to unwind and experience total relaxation beachside, but to tap into the adventurous side within. The family-friendly locale offers an environment of discovery to play and explore, inviting kids to get on the water and give their adventurous side room to grow. Visitors enjoy abundant watersports, pristine beaches, Gulf-to-Table seafood, championship golf, lively nightlife, and numerous attractions, festivals and events designed to thrill all ages.

History

Affectionately known as “The World’s Luckiest Fishing Village” for decades, Destin has a rich historical heritage. Captain Leonard Destin moved to the region from New London, Connecticut around 1845, pioneering the fishing industry, which continues to be an important part of present-day community. In 1852 after multiple voyages to Florida’s Gulf Coast, Captain Destin established the small fishing village, which continued to grow and thrive.

Fort Walton Beach’s Native American history dates back 14,000 years. The earliest permanent settlers began arriving not long after Florida became a territory in 1821. During the Civil War, the Walton Guards established an encampment in the area, named Camp Walton after Colonel George Walton, the acting governor of Florida. The area’s population rapidly grew in the decades that followed the war and the charming, small town was officially founded in 1937, shortly after Eglin Air Force Base, the largest Air Force base in the world, became operational in 1935.

Sugar-white sand + emerald-green water

While Florida is well-known for its beautiful beaches, the sugar-white sand and vibrant emerald-green water in Destin-Fort Walton Beach are arguably some of the most beautiful in the world. At the end of the last Ice Age, the world’s temperatures began warming, icecaps began melting and large volumes of water were carried by rivers to the world’s oceans. The rising Apalachicola River, originating in the Appalachian Mountains, carried quartz particles down into the Gulf of Mexico and deposited them along the coast. Over time, the sea level rose, and the quartz sand formed the shoreline. The beautiful white sand remains cool to the touch, even in the heat of summer, and gives the



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water its trademark emerald color by reflecting sunlight back up through the surf.

Climate

Average highs reach the 80s in summer months, while winter temperatures are typically in the 60s.

Accommodations

Accommodation options vary to best suit visitor's vacation needs and preferences. Those seeking the convenience of having every vacation detail tended to can book a stay at one of the many resorts and hotels. For larger group getaways, roomy vacation rentals provide a comfortable option, and nature lovers will discover a peaceful, intimate experience at several RV campsites and campgrounds.

Gulf-to-table Cuisine

At any given time, there are more than 20 species of edible fish to be caught off the coast of Destin-Fort Walton Beach, and a fleet of more than 140 vessels that brings in thousands of pounds of seafood daily. The abundance of catch serves as inspiration to the chefs behind the area's unique Gulf-to-Table cuisine. From lunch at a casual dock-and-dine option that is beloved by locals and visitors alike, to dinner with a breathtaking view, menu items reflect what diners have come to

expect from a visit to the region, such as snapper, cobia, grouper, and mahi-mahi, and also specialty "catch of the day" selections that will surprise and delight including lionfish.

No visit to the area would be complete without sampling local shrimp, oysters and crab, which are readily available and served fresh off the boat, often times having been brought in the same day. Many local restaurants also offer a "cook your catch" option, a service to mark the end of a successful day spent fishing. Whether smoked, grilled, fried or blackened, restaurants will happily prepare a guest's catch. In addition to seafood, diners can enjoy traditional and contemporary American fare, from burgers and steaks to regional cuisine that's distinctly southern, paired expertly with locally crafted beers and custom cocktails.

Meetings + Groups

Located approximately 10 miles from Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) The Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center offers an array of event spaces, services, and amenities to customize events of all sizes and configurations. The professionally staffed facility assists with the planning and execution of all details from audiovisual services to catering, and offers several room options



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Outdoor: Bayview Plaza, a 30,000 square feet venue with water views and several other terraces that offer covered options for events

Indoor: The Emerald Grand Ballroom, a column-free, 21,200-square-foot space. Additional indoor spaces include eight smaller meeting rooms, ranging from 425 to 1,575 square feet.

Fun Facts

Overview + Cultural Heritage

- Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) is America's fastest growing airport with arrivals from more than 40 destinations.
- Destin earned its nickname, "The World's Luckiest Fishing Village," after former Florida Governor Leroy Collins visited the area and reeled in 29-pound king mackerel.
- Destin Harbor boasts the nation's largest and most elaborately equipped commercial charter fishing fleet.
- Eglin Air Force Base's free Air Force Armament Museum houses military aircrafts from the World War II era to the present day. It is also the only facility in the U.S. dedicated to the display of Air Force armament.
- Destin-Fort Walton beach is home to several educational centers and sites: Destin History & Fishing Museum, The Gulfarium Marine Adventure

Park, Indian Temple Mound Museum, and the Emerald Coast Science Center.

Water-based Adventures

- The best way to explore Destin-Fort Walton Beach is on the water, whether off the shores of The Gulf or in the protected bays and bayous. Visitors of all ages can experience catamaran cruises, sailing charters, watersports, and boating excursions both with the assistance of a captain or guide, or on their own.
- The deep water off the destination's coast attracts some of the widest arrays of marine life in Florida. Divers can explore artificial reefs, wrecks and a limestone shelf at depths of up to 90 feet spotting underwater species such as flounder, dolphin, sea turtles, and various tropical fish along the way.
- The area's white sand and crystal-clear water make the perfect background for snorkeling. An extensive artificial reefs project is currently deployed creating a total of four separate snorkel reef sites, and one of the most active reef programs in the state of Florida. The reefs are arranged in different shapes on the Gulf of Mexico floor, in designs that are visible from above including starfish, sea turtles and dolphins.



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- Destin-Fort Walton Beach is home to six sites along the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail including the Miss Louise, Destin Liberty Ship and Tugboat “Zuess.”

Fishing

- Destin is home to nearly 200 fishing charters offering an opportunity to get out on the water and reel in the catch of a lifetime with an experienced captain and crew.
- The 100-Fathom Curve is located just ten miles offshore (closer than any other location in Florida), providing the fastest access to deep sea fishing on the Gulf of Mexico.
- Destin plays host to the Emerald Coast Open, the world’s largest lionfish tournament. The invasive species arrived in the Gulf of Mexico in 2012, and now Northwest Florida has the highest concentration in the world. The goal of the tournament is to raise awareness of the issue, remove the species from the water to lessen the threat to native wildlife, and delight in their surprisingly delectable taste.
- The Destin Fishing Rodeo has taken place since 1948. Held from October 1st through the 31st, the tournament welcomes over 30,000 anglers from around the country, including first timers,

expert fisherman, and everyone in between. The all ages tournament welcomes all, and celebrates its youngest participants by awarding them a rod and reel if they reel in a fish over one pound.

Golf

- Destin-Fort Walton Beach is home to 8 championship golf courses.

Eco-Tourism/Nature + Parks

- Nearly 60 percent of the beaches in Destin-Fort Walton Beach are preserved in perpetuity.
- Approximately 40,000 dolphins call The Gulf home, and the best way to spot them is to head out on the water. A number of dolphin cruises run seasonally, to place guests face to face with playful pods and aquatic life.
- Henderson Beach State Park is a 200-acre gem and home to 60 campsites and a winding nature trail that provides a rare view of some of the last remaining endangered coastal scrub communities in Northwest Florida. With 30-foot sand dunes and 6,000 feet of scenic shoreline boarding the Gulf of Mexico, the park is a haven for shore birds, including six listed and protected species. and monarch butterflies. The park is also home to rabbits, bobcats, and gopher tortoises that may be seen occasionally.



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- Ideal for all ages, the Norriego Point Tide Pools are formed by rocks and roped off from the open waters of East Pass. This creates ideal conditions for getting into the water, exploring and discovering wildlife.
- Located between Navarre and Fort Walton Beach on the Santa Rosa Sound, Spectre Island is an ideal location to get out on the water with your family and observe the quiet haven for wildlife.
- During sea turtle nesting season (June-October) visitors can learn how the endangered species provides a cornerstone for everything that happens along the shoreline and emerald-green waters – and why protecting them is so important.
- Twelve birding hot spots in the area provide visitors a glimpse of shorebirds, seabirds, songbirds, raptors, and more.
- Destin-Fort Walton beach is home to several educational centers and sites: Destin History & Fishing Museum, The Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park, Indian Temple Mound Museum, and the Emerald Coast Science Center.

Event Highlights

Spring

- Mac and Cheese Festival (March)
- Concerts in the Village (April)

- Destin Outdoor Expo (April)
- Burning up the Beaches (April)
- Destin Cobia Tournament (April)
- Lionfish Restaurant Week (May)
- Blessing of the Fleet (May)

Summer

- Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival (May/June)
- Smoke on the Coast (July)
- Paddle at the Porch (August)

Fall

- Greek Festival (August/September)
- Destin Seafood Festival (October)
- Destin Fishing Rodeo (October)
- Dog Daze (October)
- 25th Annual Mattie Kelly Arts Festival (October)
- Take A Kid Fishing Day | Harbor Docks (November)
- Emerald Coast Classic (November)

Winter

- Holiday on the Harbor/Boat Parade (December)
- Noon Year's Eve at LuLu's (December)
- Pelican Plunge (January)
- Mardi Gras Masquerade (February)
- Shrimp and Grits Festival (February)



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Getting There

By Car

U.S. Highway 98 edges along the Gulf of Mexico through Destin-Fort Walton Beach. From exit I-10, exit onto Highway 85 south at the Crestview/Fort Walton beach exit and head straight to the beach.

By Air

The Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) is serviced by Allegiant, Delta, United, Silver and American Airlines. Direct flights are available from a number of cities.

Please visit flyvps.com for a full flight service overview.

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Water Adventures

Known for pristine sugar-white sand and vibrant, emerald-green waters, Destin-Fort Walton Beach naturally welcomes families to explore together and set out on memorable, water-based adventures. The Gulf waters are typically calm and crystal clear making ideal conditions for not only snorkeling and diving, but for kids to take their first steps from the shore and dive right in. These adventures are not only possible but welcoming for every member of the family with activities ranging from legendary fishing and boating to watersports, and an abundance of wildlife to observe along the way.

Sugar-white Sand + Emerald-green Water

The signature sugar-white sand beaches found in Destin-Fort Walton Beach are some of the most beautiful in the world and have a history all their own. Appalachian quartz crystals, washed from rivers and tumbled by tides over thousands of years, form the fine white powder sands that exist today. The sand remains cool to the touch year-round and gives the water its trademark emerald color by reflecting sunlight through the surf, creating a picturesque backdrop for a perfect photo.

Getting Out on the Water

Play on the water isn't just fun for kids it's a

transformative experience. With more than 20 miles of coastline, plus protected bays and bayous, the best way to explore is on the water. For memories that will last a lifetime, guests can rent a pontoon, kayak or paddle board to explore the waterways with Island Watersports Company, experience underwater beauty with Destin Snorkel, or opt instead for a cruise on the Cattywampus Catamaran that boards from The Gulf on Okaloosa Island.

Nature Lovers

An environment that is diverse in nature awaits including vibrant reefs, coastal waterfronts, inland forests, and cultural centers. It's a setting that encourages kids to not only interact with their surroundings, but with parents and siblings. The destination's many parks provide an opportunity to be immersed in a coastal landscape whether checking out the endangered coastal scrub at Henderson Beach State Park, or spotting herons, pelicans, and other coastal bird life along the walkways of Liza Jackson Park. For an up-close encounter with some of the destination's most well famous residents, seasonal Nighttime Educational Beach Walks (June through October) provide locals and visitors alike information about protecting the sea turtle population. Offshore adventurers can spot an abundance of marine life including



Water Adventures

dolphins, goliath groupers, angelfish, Spanish mackerels, spadefish, octopus, and more. The calm, clear waters of The Gulf are as ideal for first-time snorkelers as they are for those that are PADI certified. Divers can explore artificial reefs, wrecks and a limestone shelf at depths of up to 90 feet.

Along the Shores

Beachgoers can lay out on the sand, letting time slip away or break up their stay discovering treasures on land. Strolls down Destin’s HarborWalk Village or The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island are feasts for the senses. Savor Gulf-to-Table seafood served at restaurants just steps away from the fishing boats that just recently pulled them from the water or chart a course for shops brimming with sweet treats, gifts, and beach apparel.

A bit further inland, antiques and unique shops line Downtown Fort Walton Beach, and well-known brands can be found at Destin Commons, an open-air mall, that is home to a multitude of shopping and dining destinations. You may book at one of several resorts and hotels.

To bring friends and extended family along for the journey, roomy vacation rentals provide a comfortable option. A more peaceful intimate experience awaits, over at RV campsites, and at campgrounds including Henderson State Park where families can sleep under a canopy of stars.

To chart a course for an adventure and learn more, please visit www.destinfb.com.

**For more information on Destin-Fort Walton Beach’s water adventures, please visit destinfb.com/little-adventures.*

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Gulf-to-table

Part of what makes any destination unique is the distinct flavors travelers can experience during their stay, and Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Florida serves up just that and more. With more than 20 edible species of fish swimming just off the coast, many local restaurants offer a wide selection of fresh catches, brought in daily by local fishermen. Aside from menu items that diners may come to expect from a visit to the region, such as grouper, snapper and mahi-mahi, travelers can enjoy specialty “catch of the day” selections they may find surprising, including lionfish. No visit to the area would be complete without sampling local shrimp, oysters and crab, which are readily available year-round, and served fresh from the docks, often times having been brought in the same day.

The Largest Charter Fishing Fleet

As home to North America’s largest commercial charter fishing fleet, more than 200 vessels bring in thousands of pounds of fresh fish and seafood each day. The abundance of fresh catch combined with the region’s rich and diverse culture have inspired local chefs to introduce innovative fusion cuisine and continue to recreate the classics that have delighted for decades. Diners visiting the establishments operated by Saltwater

Restaurants don’t have to look far to learn the origin of their dishes, as the group’s dedicated commissary operates at the home of three of their restaurants, The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island. The commissary processes 2,000 lbs. of fresh fish straight off the boats daily, and delivers to the group’s myriad of restaurants along the Gulf Coast including The Crab Trap, Floyd’s Shrimp House and Rockin’ Tacos.

Dock + Dine

After returning from a day on the water, visitors have many options to “Dock and Dine” in the area, with restaurants along the Gulf of Mexico and Destin Harbor offering the opportunity to simply tie up and dive into a delicious meal. A long-standing favorite among locals and visitors is Dewey Destin’s Seafood Restaurant, a local gathering place on the water that offers picturesque views and some of the best seafood in town. Other popular locations include The Gulf on Okaloosa Island, which features a revolving menu of dishes with an emphasis is local ingredients, as well as Dock on the Island’s innovative menu of Gulf Coast flavors.

Cook Your Catch

For a truly memorable dining experience, many local



Gulf-to-table

restaurants also offer “cook your catch” service to mark the end of a successful day spent fishing. Smoked, grilled, fried, or blackened restaurants, such as Jackacuda’s and Harbor Docks are ready to prepare a feast cooked to please fishermen of all ages and accompanied by sides that are bursting with flavor.

Moving inland, those looking for true farm-to-fork options will be happy to taste the locally grown produce, sourced directly from the area’s many family-owned farms and served same day, in local restaurants like The Local Market and Camille’s. For non-seafood lovers, restaurants also offer traditional and contemporary American fare, from burgers and steaks to regional cuisine that’s distinctly southern, paired expertly with locally crafted beers and custom cocktails.

**For more information on Gulf-to-table dining in Destin-Fort Walton Beach, please visit destinfwb.com.*

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