

DESTIN FORT WALTON BEACH FLORIDA

Fact Sheet

Captivating 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 beachside relaxation, but to tap into your adventurous side within. The family-friendly community offers an environment of discovery to play and explore, inviting kids to get on the water to embrace their adventurous side. 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 the 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 Airforce Base, the largest air force base in the world, became operational in 1935.

Sugar-White Sand + Emerald-Green Water

Florida is famous for its stunning beaches, but the sugar-white sands and vibrant emerald-green waters of Destin-Fort Walton Beach are arguably some of the most beautiful in the world. This breathtaking coastline owes its unique beauty to a fascinating natural history. As the Ice Age came to an end, global temperatures began to rise, causing ice caps to melt and large volumes of water to flow into the oceans. The Apalachicola River, which originates in the Appalachian Mountains, carried fine quartz particles down to the Gulf of Mexico, depositing them along the shore. Over time, as sea levels rose, the quartz sand formed the pristine shoreline we see today. Remarkably, the sand remains cool to the touch, even during the hottest summer days, and its light-reflecting properties give the water its signature emerald color.

Climate

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



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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, more than 20 species of edible fish can be caught off the coast of Destin-Fort Walton Beach, with a fleet of over 140 vessels bringing in thousands of pounds of fresh seafood daily. This abundant catch inspires the region's renowned Gulf-to-Table cuisine. Whether you're enjoying a casual lunch at a local dock-and-dine spot, popular with both residents and visitors, or savoring a dinner with a breathtaking view, the menu features a variety of local favorites like snapper, cobia, grouper, and mahi-mahi. Diners can also enjoy unique "catch of the day" selections, such as lionfish, adding an element of surprise to the experience. No visit to the area is complete without sampling the fresh, local shrimp, oysters, and crab, often brought in the same day from the boats. Many restaurants also

offer a "cook your catch" option, allowing guests to bring in their fresh haul and have it expertly prepared—whether smoked, grilled, fried, or blackened. In addition to seafood, the area's dining scene offers a variety of traditional and contemporary American dishes, from burgers and steaks to Southern-inspired regional specialties, all paired 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, recently named a Convention South 2024 Readers' Choice Award Winner, 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 including:

Outdoor: Bayview Plaza, a 30,000-square-foot 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.



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In addition to the Convention Center there are unique venue spaces for all event types such as the Baker Recreation + Equestrian Center and the Rigdon Center.

Fun Facts

Overview + Cultural Heritage

- 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 and Fishing Museum
 - Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park
 - Indian Temple Mound Museum
 - Emerald Coast Science Center
 - Air Force Armament Museum
 - Baker Block Museum

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.
- Destin-Fort Walton Beach is home to seven sites along the Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail including the Miss Louise, M/V Janet, and Chepanoc.



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Fishing

- Destin is home to 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 hosts 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.
- The Captain Kelly Windes Fish Aggregating Device Buoy Network is located 60-80 miles offshore. This

extensive network is designed to attract large fish like mahi-mahi, marlin and tuna making it possible for anglers of all skill levels to consistently access a pelagic fishery without traveling hundreds of miles. The deployment is the first in the continental United States.

Golf

- Destin-Fort Walton Beach is home to 9 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



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park is also home to rabbits, bobcats, and gopher tortoises.

- 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.

Event Highlights

Year-Round

- Sinfonia Gulf Coast Symphony
- Mattie Kelly Arts Center Shows + Events

Spring

- Mac and Cheese Festival (March)
- 25th Annual Concerts in the Village (April)

- Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival (May)
- Destin Cobia Tournament (April)
- Old Spanish Trail Rodeo (April)
- Fly Into Spring Kite Festival
- Emerald Coast Open (May)
- Lionfish Restaurant Week (May)
- Blessing of the Fleet (May)

Summer

- Smoke on the Coast (July)
- Paddle at the Park (August)

Fall

- Destin Seafood Festival (October)
- Destin Fishing Rodeo (October)
- Dog Daze (October)
- 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

Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) offers more than 50 flights daily to and from cities across the nation. The airport is serviced by Allegiant, American, Avelo, Delta, Southwest, and Sun Country Airlines. Please visit flyvps.com for a full flight service overview.

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