

# the soothing sands and surf of south walton

by Chad Young

**Eager to bask in beach-bound beauty? Well, look no further than the Sunshine State's glorious Beaches of South Walton for your family's next fun-in-the-sun vacation.**

**T**here are many fun destinations your family can experience on a getaway, but nothing really beats a great trip to Florida's beautiful Emerald Coast.

Soaking up sun on the powdery white Beaches of South Walton and splashing around in the emerald green waters of the Gulf Coast are the perfect relaxation catalysts for busy moms and dads as well as thankful-to-be-away-from-school kids of all ages.

The Beaches of South Walton boast 26 miles of luxurious white-sand beaches in 15 different, very distinct communities. And that's the wonderful aspect of the area — you're family has lots of options for where to stay that run the gamut from quiet and docile to activity-heavy fun. Popular spots to stay include Rosemary Beach, Seaside, Seagrave, Grayton Beach, WaterColor and Sandestin.

## Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort

During my recent trip to the Beaches of South Walton, I thoroughly enjoyed my stay at the magnificent Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort ([sandestin.com](http://sandestin.com)). Sprawling across 2,400 acres, this resort has it all, both beach side and the Choctawhatchee Bay side with 1,400 accommodations nestled amidst 30 communities, ranging from condos and villas to town homes and hotel options.

Sandestin offers something for everyone in your family. Four championship golf courses adorn the property along with a family-friendly course for junior golfers to enjoy. Take a dip in one of the 19 pools, or better yet, hop aboard the trolley (or

reserve complimentary bicycles) and head to the beach for fun in the sand and surf.

Kid-friendly activities include a trek to explore the Jolee Island Nature Park, Capt. Joe Lee's Tree House and Nature Walk, sailing instruction and Club KZ, a day camp for kids ages 3 - 12 offering a variety of indoor and outdoor activities from 9 a.m. - 2 p.m. on select days (\$55 per child). Lunch is included, and programs include a treasure hunt pirate adventure on Jolee Island, beach activities ranging from shell hunting to sandcastle building contests and beach games, pool activities and fun in The Village of Baytown Wharf. In addition, Club KZ offers a Children's Evening Out on Fridays from 6 - 10 p.m. for \$45, which gives Mom and Dad an opportunity to experience a romantic dinner or take in some of the nightlife on their own while the kids enjoy dinner, movies and a variety of activities.

The Village of Baytown Wharf is a hopping community filled with eateries, shopping and several fun play opportunities. Make a point to have breakfast at Another Broken Egg Café, which boasts a wide menu with gourmet omelets and bananas foster French toast ... and everything in between!

Kids will be quick to have a blast in the Baytowne Adventure Zone. Everyone in your family can enjoy climbing the tower and zooming 300 feet across the lagoon and back via a zipline before testing skills on the massive ropes course. For a real adventure, get rigged up on the EuroBungy and spring into the air. Want to impress the onlookers? Go for a mid-air summersault. Little ones will enjoy a spin on the carousel and everyone will get

a chuckle out of the giant Hamster Water Balls! It's harder than you can imagine, but it's great fun — give it a whirl!

A fun dining option is the Solaris Dinner Cruise ([sunquestcruises.com](http://sunquestcruises.com)). Departing from the Baytowne Marina, embark on a three-hour cruise of the bay while enjoying a great dinner (the beef tenderloin and gulf shrimp saute are best bets!) and a spectacular view. The onboard entertainment is infectious enough you and yours might find yourselves in a conga line!

## Nearby Activities

While you can easily stay on the Sandestin resort property during your entire vacation and have plenty to do, a few nearby attractions are musts on your things-to-do list.

Head up the road to the colorful Seaside community and rent bikes to tool around town. You'll find lots of great shops and art galleries in this area and if you're feeling a bit peckish, head to The MeltDown on 30A and choose from a wide option of grilled cheese sandwiches.

Take in natural wonders at Grayton Beach State Park with a guided tour by Walco Eco Tours ([walcoecotours.com](http://walcoecotours.com)) and learn about the coastal forest full of scrub oaks and magnolias bent by the salty winds. Kids will have fun searching for animal tracks, and if they're lucky, they'll spot a lizard or ghost crab along the way. While you're there, Walco can hook you up with a kayaking excursion on Western Lake, which is enjoyable for all ages.

For a more intense on-the-water experience, try a YOLO (You Only Live Once) Board adventure

([yoloboard.com](http://yoloboard.com)). This stand-up paddling sport is a combination of surfing and kayaking/canoeing in that you stand up on a flat board and paddle yourself around the water. It definitely gives you a great core workout, and having a healthy sense of balance is a great ally — YES, I was the one on my trip who wound up going for a swim! Kids as young as 6 can enjoy this sport, and there were lots of them having a ball the day of my excursion.

For die-hard nature enthusiasts, a 30-minute drive to Freeport is a must in order to visit the exquisite E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center ([eowilson-center.org](http://eowilson-center.org)). The center is in its second year, and up until now has only been available to school groups in the area. Beginning Saturday, June 4, the facility will be open to the general public on weekends, and you simply must go, because it is absolutely one of the best nature centers I have ever seen.

The word "biophilia" was coined by E.O. Wilson and means "innate love for all life." Each weekend, the center focuses on a different topic, and guided trail hikes are available on occasion. Inside the center, young and old can learn about a plethora of critters indigenous to the area, including bees (visit the live bee hive and watch them busy at work), snakes, birds and turtles. Through exhibits and interactive programs, kids can learn a great deal about wildlife, the ecosystem and the importance of conservation. While exploring, be sure to make a little music at the "Nature's Symphony" exhibit.

Enjoy a show in the theater and be sure to catch one of the live animal presentations where kids can get up close and personal with birds,

snakes and turtles. Turtle Bob, one of the educators, gives a wonderful snake presentation, and with a parent's permission, kids can have the opportunity to hold one of these creatures.

Finally, your visit to the Beaches of South Walton won't be complete without a dinner trip at Fish Out of Water. This upscale restaurant located at the WaterColor Inn and Resort ([watercolorresort.com](http://watercolorresort.com)) is the perfect place for experiencing the fresh catch of the day, and the atmosphere makes for a great romantic evening with your spouse. Hint, this is the time to take advantage of the Club KZ Children's Evening Out offering at Sandestin, although Fish Out of Water does offer a children's menu with standard kid-friendly favorites.

## Getting There

If you're a road-trip loving family, the Beaches of South Walton is roughly an eight-hour drive from Nashville. The best way to do it is get up early and hit the road by 5 a.m.

If your budget affords flying, Southwest now offers a direct flight from Nashville to Panama City. Beachside Express (850-685-3586) offers shuttle service to any of the beach communities you opt for. Sandestin is about 45 minutes from the airport.

One thing's for certain if you go — plan on having an absolute blast that your family will never forget! And I bet you'll soon be planning your next visit. ☺

*Chad Young is managing editor for this publication.*



*Kids enjoy the ropes course in the Adventure Zone area of Sandestin's The Village of Baytowne Wharf.*

## more info

Learn more about everything the Beaches of South Walton offers at [beachesofsouthwalton.com](http://beachesofsouthwalton.com).