

featured destination



Panama City, FL

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Panama City is a family-friendly destination so bring the kids!

It is located on a direct line from Chicago to Panama and the new canal that was under construction during the city's founding in 1909, helped shape Panama City as a tourist destination. Centrally located in St. Andrew Bay, Native Americans thrived here for years, living off the seafood they harvested in the bay. By the 1830s, landowners from Georgia and Alabama began visiting more frequently and the settlement mushroomed.

During the Civil War, a drought in the area created an opportunity to capitalize on salt-making, one of the Confederacy's greatest needs when the Union blockaded the port. By 1862, St. Andrew Bay was one of the largest salt-making areas in Florida. At the time, salt served as the only means of preserving meat. The Confederate government pardoned from conscription anyone who'd go to St. Andrew Bay to work in salt production. These men boiled down sea water in converted railroad cars. In 1863, a Union ship attacked and destroyed every building in town. Thirty years later, the lumber industry sprouted up in neighboring Millville, home of the St. Andrews Lumber Company.

Then, as with much of Florida, developers came to town and decided a railroad must pass through the port city they hoped to build. Borrowing funds from Coca-Cola founder Asa Candler, the Gulf Coast Development Company completed the Bay Line railroad in 1908, and Panama City was incorporated one year later.

In the years that followed, the fishing village known as Panama City became a bustling center of industry—paper, seafood and chemicals are produced here and the nearby Tyndall Air

Force Base adds to the population. While the local residents work hard, they also know how to enjoy—and share—the city's natural attractions, whether it's fishing in St. Andrew Bay or strolling the white sand beaches along the Gulf.

Where to Dock

Bay Point Marina (tel: 850.235.6911; www.baypointmarina.net) Bay Point Marina is the premier "jumping off" point along the Gulf Coast for yachts heading across the Gulf of Mexico. It is also a great place to stop for a weekend and enjoy the swimming pool, wi-fi, cable, and fine dining at 30° Blue, Northern Florida's hottest new fine dining sensation.

Panama City Marina (tel: 850.872.7272; www.panamacity-fl.gov/marina.htm) The Panama City Marina is a newly renovated 240-slip marina facility that can accommodate vessels up to 120 feet with cable TV service at all slips. The new Marina Store is fully stocked and has clean showers and laundry facilities and fax and copier service. It is within easy walking distance to numerous restaurants, coffee shops, and more.

What to Do

Panama City is a family-friendly destination. To start, hop aboard the Bay Town Trolley (tel: 850.769.0557) and let it transport you to Panama City's antique malls, galleries, and theatres. At the Panama City Mall (tel: 850.769.3659) you'll find plenty to preoccupy your teenagers.

You can spend a few hours with your younger kids at the Junior

Museum of Bay County (tel: 850.769.6128) on Jenks Avenue. This children's museum features indoor and outdoor science and adventure exhibits. While your youngest ones will enjoy "toddler town," a stroll through the outdoor pioneer homestead will please all ages. Finish off your visit with a walk along the 2,000-foot nature trail that treks across boardwalks through wetlands, an upland pine hammock, a hardwood swamp, and a 1920s dump site.

If you really want to let down your hair, go no further than Panama City Beach, which brims over with entertainment opportunities around the clock. Beat a path to any of the numerous man-made amusements: arcades, surf wear shops, go-cart courses, roller coasters, or dance clubs.

If you want to immerse yourself in the history of scuba diving, visit the Museum of Man in the Sea (tel: 850.235.4101). Artifacts on display range from the earliest animal-skin bladders to the latest, greatest deep-dive gear. Also on site is a saltwater touch pool. If you haven't yet had your fill of creatures, you'll encounter hundreds more at Zoo World (tel: 850.230.4839). There, you can even hand-feed a giraffe.

Don't miss Gulf World Marine Park (tel: 850.234.5271) for dolphin and sea lion performances, scuba demonstrations, shark and turtle feeding, and parrot acts.

The white sand that fills Panama City Beach is actually quartz crystals that over time have been broken down, bleached, polished, and deposited on the shoreline. This natural process has made Panama City Beach home to the "World's Most Beautiful Beaches." If you want to enjoy the beach without all of the frills, you'll find it at 1,260-acre St. Andrews State Recreation Area (tel: 800.326.3521), located on a peninsula near the Grand Lagoon. In addition to picnicking and walking trails, you'll also find a reconstructed "Cracker" turpentine still, and a turn of the century saw mill. Charts and diagrams interpret the use and mechanisms of the still, and living history demonstrations are offered a few times a year.

Where to Eat

You'll be spoiled for choice in this neck of the Panhandle. Along Massolina Bayou (near Panama City Marina), a few fine choices are steps apart. Get casual at Bayou Joe's (tel: 850.763.6442), a popular hangout. Bay Point Marina offers the exquisite 30 Degree Blue (tel: 850.236.1115), serving innovative entrées that you won't soon forget. Its wine list changes monthly, and casual attire is the rule—but not too casual. Shorts and collared shirts are OK, but leave the jacket and tie home with your beach wear.

If you're out by the beach, make a stop by the Grand Lagoon at Captain Anderson's Restaurant and Waterfront Market (tel: 850.234.2225), where the local tradition is to dine early and watch the fleet unload their catch.

Right next door, you'll jump coastlines and feel as if you're already in Key West at the Boat Yard (tel: 850.249.YARD). Its chefs bring their hometown Key West creations—like conch fritters and Key Lime pie—and the island feel to the shore of

the Grand Lagoon. The motto here is simple—"real good food and cool music."

On the south side of Grand Lagoon, climb aboard the Treasure Ship (tel: 850.234.8881). This full scale replica of Sir Frances Drake's Golden Hind offers a feast at any of the three restaurants on site, including the main dining room, Hook's Grille and Grog for dockside-dining, and the open air Captain Crabby's. Next door, let J. Michael's Dockside (tel: 850.233.2055) set a fine table for you and your crew. [ml](#)

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