

A Natural Escape: Franklin County's Barrier Islands

Many visitors to Florida get their first impressions of this state from watching movies or TV. They see the flash of Miami (south Florida) in such iconic television series as Miami Vice and CSI: Miami. Or on the wide screen in Marley and Me. Or they catch glimpses of the Orlando area (central Florida) in such flicks as Silent Night: Agent Down and Ocean's Eleven.



But unless they happen to catch Lonely Hearts, it is unlikely that the silver screen will give them a glimpse of northern Florida. Which, if you talk to some of its residents in the Panhandle, the northwest part of the state, is just fine. Because after all the film crews move on to their next Florida location, these proud residents will still be living and loving the same lifestyles they've had for generations.

And they may do this most proudly in Franklin County, located along the Gulf of Mexico 80 miles southwest of Tallahassee, FL and 85 miles southeast of Panama City, FL. The county is bordered by the Gulf of Mexico to the south, and by three counties to its north, east and west.

Within its 545 square miles Franklin County's two municipalities - Apalachicola and Carrabelle - contain evocatively-titled communities - with names like Alligator Point, Dog Island, Eastpoint, St. George Island and St. Vincent Island. Their titles reflect the county's Native American history, its resident population of alligators, and some of the most pristine wildlife environment that can be found in the southeast part of the United States.



Much of its historical and environmental preservation is due to the fact that more than 87 percent of the County is either state or federally protected land. This protection has enabled Apalachicola Bay, a nursery area for the entire Gulf of Mexico, to remain a pristine and productive estuarine system.

This fact is not lost on anglers who visit the County for the chance to catch such prized Gulf of Mexico fish as snapper, amberjack, tarpon, and sheepshead. Others prefer inland fresh-water opportunities and both types of trips are available from local tour guides.

Family heritage means a lot in this region. Even the most casual of observers notes that, what other cities may have discarded in their rush to upgrade their 'tourist-worthiness', Franklin County has made a concerted effort to retain and sustain. Which is why visitors can just as easily find unpretentious cafes as well as swankier restaurants serving locally harvested oysters, clams, shrimp and blue crabs.

But, like their competitors, Franklin County businesses also keep their finger on the pulse. Which is why when college spring break twenty-somethings head to the Panhandle this year Journeys of St. George Island, a local sports outfitter, offers paddleboard lessons to keep the youth in town and happy to spend time also in its bars, restaurants or shopping and sightseeing in the beautifully-restored community of Apalachicola.



It's also why the Franklin County Tourist Development Council promotes not only larger tour guides but also small tour operators who serve kayakers, hikers, and birdwatchers in such areas as Tate's Hell State Forest and Bald Point State Park. The Council has also beefed up promotion of its lodging options in anticipation of tourist interest in its recently-opened LEED-certified Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve which houses both a visitor center and research labs. Accommodations range from houses and condo units, primarily rented through vacation rental companies and local rental agencies, to historic inns, local hotels, bed and breakfast inns as well as RV and campsites.

With its big expanses of sky, gorgeous sunsets, locally sourced seafood, abundant wildlife and colorful residents, Franklin County seems like a no-brainer destination for indie film producers. It's a natural escape on an epic scale that no deep-pocketed Hollywood production could afford to reproduce. And a destination no adventurous tourists should ignore.

Getting There

Both Delta Airlines and Southwest Airlines service Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, which is approximately one hour and 30 minutes away by car from Franklin County.

For More Information

Franklin County Tourist Development Council

www.anaturalescape.com

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