

Florida's Best Kept Secret

Maybe you heard the term before. Twenty-thirty years ago, it was used to refer to the Panama City-Destin area. That was before the yuppies made Destin one of the most expensive areas of Florida and the Spring-Breakers claimed Panama City Beach as their favorite stateside destination.

Today, the term can best be used to refer to tiny Mexico Beach. Located in the Florida panhandle about 30 miles east of Panama City and 75 miles southwest of Tallahassee, it is still a haven for those who prefer reasonable prices, and peaceful living.

One of the reasons Mexico Beach remains relatively unspoiled may be the fact that it's not the easiest place to reach. There is one main road - in one side of town and out of the other side of town - and one two-lane secondary road that dead-ends into the middle of town. If you are driving, you must exit I-10 either at Hwy 231, heading south to Panama City, then east on Hwy 98 to Mexico Beach, or exit at one of the small two-lane roads between Hwy 231 and Tallahassee and make your way south over back roads, thru small towns until you reach the water.

There is no airport. If you are flying, the closest airport is Panama City, which at best is a small-market airport with a limited number of flights in and out. (They plan to build a new one and expect to have it completed by the end of 2009.) Then you have to rent a car and drive about an hour.

There are no Wal-Marts, no fancy malls, no rock n roll nightclubs, no arcades, no upscale boutiques, and no amusement parks. These reasons alone may be why the in-crowd, looking for easy access and fast-paced action, has not gravitated to this area.

But these are the very reasons that make Mexico Beach one of the best values for beach vacations. The white sugar sand beaches are beautiful – and not crowded. The sunsets are some of the best in the world. The fishing is fabulous. The people offer true Old South hospitality.

The last couple of times through Mexico Beach I have noticed more activity than usual. It is rumored that St. Joe Paper Company's real estate arm, Arvida, will be building an upscale community on the edge of town. I don't know if that is true, but if it is, it may signal the beginning of the end of Mexico Beach's reign as Florida's best-kept secret.

I don't know about you, but I'm going to enjoy it as much as I can before it disappears.