

Mexico Beach

*“The Unforgettable Coast”
of the Florida Panhandle is
a Place to Remember*

By Wendy O. Dixon



It's summer in this sleepy, small town, as locals and tourists bask in the sun and bury their feet in the sugar-white sands of Mexico Beach, Florida. Children laugh in delight as they splash into gentle waves that wash ashore, trying to catch tiny fish by clasping their hands together. Sand castles, rainbow-colored umbrellas, and seashells are scattered along the beach. Families are enjoying fishing, sailing, swimming, and other fun beach activities. Fishing enthusiasts show off their catches of the day, bringing kingfish, mahi-mahi, and red snapper into the Mexico Beach marina. Here, families have the unique opportunity to experience a pace that is leisurely, relaxed, and easy.

Mexico Beach, now branded as “The Unforgettable Coast,” evokes memories of classic beach vacations of yesteryear. Having been spared the rapid development and commercialization that much of the Florida Panhandle experienced, Mexico Beach offers a chance to experience Florida life as it once was—before chain restaurants and resorts existed—making each day spent here unforgettable.

“Mexico Beach is a unique town,” says Cathey Parker Hobbs, owner and broker of Parker Realty who has lived here most of her life. She's the daughter of Charlie Parker, founder and first mayor of Mexico Beach, and she says the word that describes her town best is “paradise.”

Mexico Beach revels in its everyone-knows-your-name reputation. Jack Kerigan, owner of Kerigan Marketing Associates, explains. “I think the local population can't be more than a thousand,” he says. “And if you walk into the Ace Hardware or Mango Marley's, they'll call out, ‘Hey, Jack. Good to see you,’ and genuinely mean it. In the summer, the town probably swells to ten thousand with tourists. They won't all know your name, but they'll still wave like they do.”

You'll find nary a streetlight, nor a Starbucks, Panera, or Applebee's along this three-and-a-half-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 98, just a wide expanse of pristine white-sand beach, unobstructed by Gulf-side development. And that's just the way the locals like it.

“We like to keep it as it is,” Parker Hobbs explains. “We certainly want people to come and enjoy it. But we don't want it to become commercialized. Everyone who comes here and lives here has the same mind-set or else they'd live somewhere else. It's uncrowded, beautiful, and unique.”

Where to Stay

For a hospitable retreat with plenty of personality, check into the Driftwood Inn. Originally a typical beachfront motor lodge built in 1950, the inn got a major makeover in 1975, when Tom and Peggy Wood bought it. "I started building on to it," Peggy Wood says of the inn, which started out with just seven units. "This was my little project and Tom helped me in every way with it." With lodging reminiscent of a more genteel era, each room features unique "beachy Victorian" style furnishings and antiques.

While walking along a lush plant-enveloped path toward the beach, peek into the tiny chapel, which has a sentimental story. "We used to go to North Georgia a lot, and we noticed a little chapel," Peggy Wood recalls. "I thought it was so cute, and for years my husband said that he would build one for me." That day finally came, and the couple asked Charlie Parker, who was also a Methodist minister, to bless the chapel and christen their granddaughter in it.

Just beyond the Driftwood Inn sits the El Governor Motel, the largest motel in town. "Mexico Beach was almost named Rainbow Beach because our coastline is shaped like a rainbow," Parker Hobbs explains, "and the El Governor used to be called the Rainbow Hotel." All 120 rooms face the pristine white beach and each has a private balcony. The motel has decks overlooking the St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, St. Joseph Bay, and the Mexico Beach Pier, as well as a beachside pool, a tiki bar, and a gift shop that includes a liquor store. Wave runners are available for rental on the beach at the motel.



What to Eat

Sharon's Café serves up breakfast basics in a friendly little place where your coffee cup is never empty. Try the Belgian waffles, cooked perfectly crisp on the outside and fluffy on the inside, with fresh blueberries and whipped cream, or a Western omelet with grits and toast. Make sure to bring cash, as Sharon's doesn't take credit cards.

For some extraordinary seafood, head to Killer Seafood. The blue-canopied facade welcomes you into the unpretentious and casual eatery. Rated one of America's 50 Best Seafood Dives by *Coastal Living* magazine, the restaurant serves fresh seafood dishes, baskets, and sandwiches.

Michael Scoggins and his girlfriend, Kim Halverson, who own the restaurant with Kim's brother, Kevin Crouse, were living quite a different life a decade ago. He was an actor; she, a music marketing executive in Los Angeles. Now, instead of shopping on Rodeo Drive, Halverson wears T-shirts and sneakers while running the place. "We live a mile away from the restaurant and love biking to work every day," she says.

Halverson recommends the Original Killer Fish Tacos, made with fresh grilled tuna and topped with lettuce, tomato, shredded cheese, and Killer Simmerin' Sauce inside corn or flour tortillas. Or try the Killer shrimp, oysters, or scallops served in the Killer Simmerin' Sauce over rice or pasta. "The sauce has a little heat to it, as well as rosemary, thyme, and other spices, for a perfect complement to the seafood," she says. And save room for Kim's Key Lime Pie, voted dessert of the year by Roadfood.com.

Be sure to take home a jar of Killer Seafood Simmerin' Sauce, which can be used as a sauce for fish, chicken, and pasta. The jar comes with recipes, including Killer Stuffed Peppers, Killer Meatloaf, and the Killer Bloody Mary.

For a view of the Gulf of Mexico while dining, head over to Toucan's. Open since 1965, the iconic restaurant serves fresh seafood, steaks, and other dishes. Manager Stuart Summers recommends the Grouper Imperial—sautéed fresh Gulf grouper topped with jumbo lump crabmeat and a sherry cream sauce. Or try Toucan's Peppadew Chicken, a pan-fried chicken breast topped with freshly made Peppadew and pineapple salsa and served on a bed of rice and black beans.

For shopping, check out Beachwalk Clothing and Gifts, the Grove, Frost Pottery Garden and Gift Shop, Emerald Coast Jewelry, and Gulf Foods Grocery and Gift Shop.

Probably the best perk in Mexico Beach is the accessibility to the sugar-like sand beach. While some beach towns have few paths for those not staying in condominiums or hotels, getting to the beach here is easy, Kerigan says. "You just pull up, get out of your car, and walk down to the beach."

Perhaps its distinctive originality is what makes Mexico Beach "The Unforgettable Coast." ▀



Mexico Beach Accommodations and Restaurants

Driftwood Inn

2105 U.S. Highway 98
(850) 648-5126
driftwoodinn.com

El Governor Motel

1701 U.S. Highway 98
(850) 648-5757
elgovernormotel.net

Killer Seafood

820 U.S. Highway 98
(850) 648-6565
killerseafood.net

Sharon's Café

1100 U.S. Highway 98
(850) 648-8634

Toucan's

719 U.S. Highway 98
(850) 648-8207
toucansmexicobeachfl.com

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