

Travel



Thursday, May 24, 1984 O&E

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The panhandle is discovered

White sand, Florida sun

FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla. — I can see the whole world from here, flat on my back on a beach chair. It is in three stripes of color: a strip of white sand, a spread of blue-green sea and a crown of cobalt-blue sky, with a fishing pier walking across the water to my left and a beach umbrella just visible under the edge of my hat to the right.

The promenade of girls has gone by several times, long flowing hair, bikinis low on the hips and high on the haunches. The boys have made several invasions into the surf. Children scratch with their sand pails at the edge of the sea.

Grey heads lean over hooks in the sun or walk past, feet in the water, shoes in hand. A huge watermobile with paddy green plastic tires, paddles across the sea and settles like a great green bug on the sand.

This sand is, of course, what makes everything else happen here. It is not ordinary coarse golden sand but powder white, washed down from ancient rocks, forming the barrier islands that parallel the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

A DEEP intercoastal waterway full of sea life makes a great wet highway between the barrier islands and the mainland, luring boaters and fishermen to resort towns like this.

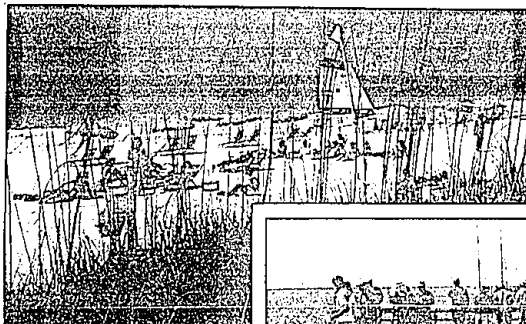
That's a good reason to come here, but for most of us it means sand, glorious sand, 100 miles of it in a white ribbon from Pensacola past Navarre to Fort Walton Beach and Destin, and then on past Panama City to Mexico Beach. There, according to beach connoisseurs, the sand turns to ordinary brown.

They call this panhandle of Florida "undiscovered Florida" because so many sun-lovers have ignored it in their race for the concrete jungles of the south, but it was actually discovered long ago, long before a railway magnate turned the south Florida swamps into resort country.

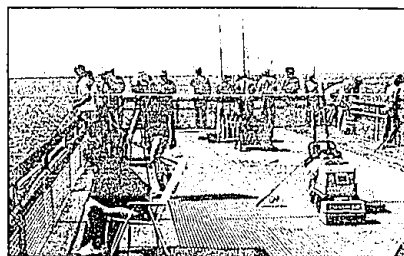
The Spanish were here, building forts at the entrance to Pensacola Bay. Slaves were brought in along this coast; many escaped and earned the Spanish name Cimarron (wild). British, French and Portuguese sailing ships were here, sometimes leaving rebellious crew members to join the Cimarron sailors. Thus did we add the word "marooned" to our dictionaries.

THESE FORMER slaves and abandoned sailors became pioneers under Billy Bowlegs, whose attempts to form a nation of his own are celebrated every year in a June Festival here in Fort Walton.

When the United States bought Florida in 1821 they built forts along this panhandle coast. You can still see them on either side of the entrance to Pensacola Bay. The armed services have thus been here a very long time and are



1-of-a-kind traveler
Iris Jones
contributing travel editor



The beach at Fort Walton Beach is part of a 100-mile stretch of white ribbon along the southern edge of Florida's panhandle — from Pensacola to south of Panama City. Along the way you can find any number of fishing piers.

PHOTO: Mickey Jones

an integral part of every community, its economics and its social life.

The Navy is at Pensacola. The Air Force has a base the size of Rhode Island wrapped around Fort Walton, and another base at Panama City.

It is really only the sun lovers who have just discovered "undiscovered Florida" and even that needs to be qualified, because plantation owners knew about this place a hundred years ago. During the last few years it's been discovered again, an explosion of snowbirds, vacationers from nearby states and investors building condos as fast as the dunes will support them.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS ARE, in fact, worried that the dunes won't support the construction that is changing the skyline for 100 miles, but the impetus is so strong that no local ordinances seem capable of slowing down the growth.

If you want to see this panhandle as it once was, visit the Gulf Island National Seashore which preserves the barrier islands in long stretches along that 100 miles of white sand. In the Seashore, only the sea oats make a fringed skyline against the Florida-blue sky and birds are its only residents.

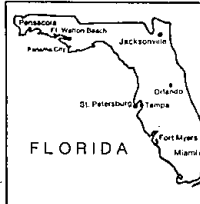
The most tourable part is at the Pensacola end of Santa Rosa Island, where the ruins of Fort Pickens face across the Sound to the restored brick walls of Fort Barrancas. The dunes shift constantly from east to west so the third fort, once on Perdido Key, is now underwater.

The beach resorts start there, where the National Seashore shares its stretch of protected barrier island sand with chain hotels and small motels on Pensacola Beach.

SANTA ROSA Island goes on in

patches of Seashore, resort area and Air Force base, past a five-mile stretch of resort and at Navarre to this community of Fort Walton Beach, and the neighboring community of Destin, once a fishing village now a condo-lovers delight. The last resort stop to the east is Panama City, which has a long strip of motels and amusement parks on the beach as well as condos, resorts and a favorite sunning place called Shell Island.

Anywhere along the way you can broil yourself pink or brown in the sun like this, with a fishing pier somewhere in sight and the deep sea fishing boats making their own horizon.



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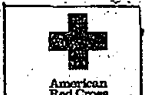
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