

Sailing the Bayous of

FLORABAMA

A charter in the Florida-Alabama Panhandle serves up heaps of southern charm and hospitality

Story and photography by David Liscio

Dogs of all shapes and sizes are snoozing in the sand beneath the wooden picnic tables, oblivious to the flying Frisbees, teenagers playing volleyball, and the shouts of waitresses carrying trays of cheeseburgers, corn dogs and French fries.

On the front porch of the Pirate's Cove Yacht Club in Josephine, Alabama, standing beside his bull mastiff Tiki, co-owner Karl Mueller surveys his sandy empire, with its informal bar and restaurant, a slice of beach, and a maze of hurricane-smashed docks under reconstruction. Beyond is the Intracoastal Waterway with its flow of boat traffic.

We're visiting on advice of sailing friends who live on the Panhandle and contend that Pirate's Cove is among the region's more unique stopovers, with heaps of local color and characters, not unlike Foxy's in the British Virgin Islands, or Sloppy Joe's in Key West.

Directly across the ICW from the more affluent community of Orange Beach, the entrance channel can be difficult to spot, but we motor *La Reine*, our chartered Beneteau 380, past a dozen runabouts and pontoon boats anchored to the beach, and a few not anchored but nosed into the sand with outboards left running just above idle to keep them firmly lodged. The channel is barely seven feet deep.

Behind Pirate's Cove is a peaceful, picturesque bayou of green water. We drop a hook and ride the inflatable to the restaurant's rear dock where local kids are fishing for whatever will bite. Just about everyone says hello. All around the edge of the bayou boats are lashed to small, private docks that lead to modest homes tucked in the woods. A few mid-sized sailboats at the far end of the bayou remain partially submerged, victims of past storms.

Inside the bar, it's all surfer shorts, bikinis, T-shirts, ball caps and straw cowboy hats, and it's easy to feel out of place if you don't have a tattoo. The walls and ceilings are covered with nautical paraphernalia, photographs, fishtraps

and all sorts of signs, some of which warn that smoking is not allowed. The ashtrays on the tables are brimming with cigarette butts and more dogs are dozing in the cool corners, only feet from the "No Dogs Allowed" signs.

Some of the locals are drinking beer and talking enthusiastically about an outdoor concert scheduled two weeks hence at Pirate's Cove, featuring the band Swamp Thang. The event was expected to draw thousands of fans from across the Panhandle and Mueller was trying to figure out where to put them all.

Mueller said his grandparents founded Pirate's Cove just over 50 years ago.

"We had room for more than 100 boats but they all got wiped out in the last hurricane

You don't have to be a geography expert to know that Alabama got short-changed in terms of coastal access. Alabama reaches south toward the Gulf of Mexico, only to find itself mostly blocked by Florida. But sailors aren't likely to notice any border crossings because the culture in these parts is regional, not political. It's a hybrid place the locals refer to as Florabama. In fact, there's a wild-and-wooly restaurant and nightclub along the border with the same name, home to the annual Interstate Mullet Toss. Standing on Alabama soil, you drink a lot of beer, pick up a dead fish and sling it as far into Florida as you can. Simple fun.

We explored the Florida Panhandle on three previous charters, covering the coast roughly from Pensacola to Apalachicola. Emerald seas, sugar white sand beaches, and protected sounds and bayous behind the barrier dunes made these trips a pleasure.

To get a sense of what it feels like to sail in Alabama, we headed for Perdido Bay, one of the more celebrated open expanses of water in Alabama with miles of scenic coastline, much of it forested. We spent hours sailing into the arms of the bay, eventually doubling back on a beam reach to re-enter the ICW. At Big Lagoon, part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore and a place of splendid natural beauty, we spent a quiet



Christine steers *La Reine* out of Josephine, Alabama, in search of the next bayou. Above, a heron, facing page, checks out the boat anchored in the skinny water just off a beach.

April night anchored under the stars. Without an ambitious float plan, we meandered eastward, beneath the Perdido Key Bridge and back into Florida, settling on a gunkhole near Fort McCree. At midafternoon, the place was abuzz with runabouts, jet skis and other watercraft. Little kids surfed inflatable toys down the sand dunes, their shrieks carrying over the water. But as the day wore on, a tie-dyed sunset flooded the sky and the gunkhole came into its own. Pelicans glided across the water. Herons tiptoed in the shallows. Fish jumped. You could hear porpoises breathing as they swam next to our sloop.

along with the docks," he said. "We'll still have a small marina and a dock for transients and day trippers, but that's about it." Our boat is chartered from Emerald Coast Yachts and Sailing School in Pensacola, Florida, less than 30 miles east. To get here, my wife Christine, teenage daughter Juliana and I sailed across Pensacola Inlet and Big Lagoon, succumbing to the engine only when the ICW traffic thickened with tugs and barges.

This is sweet home Alabama, a contradictory state, both laidback and rebellious. Confederate flags are abundant. Compared to Florida, the water is browner, mostly due to sediment from a confluence of big rivers pouring into the sea.

Christine walks the beach near the gunkhole off Ft. McCree.



BACKYARD
Charters

From our anchorage we could see the outline of big Navy ships moving through the twilight, and every so often fighter planes from the Pensacola Naval Air Station would roar overhead. We barbecued grouper, tossed a fresh salad of assorted greens, and sipped cold Red Stripe beer until long after dark.

On the second night in the gunkhole, which is like anchoring in a river between two long stretches of lofty sand dunes, we rafted up with Rick and Peggy Van Sleen, friends who own a sailboat chartering company in Pensacola, and their two children.

Since they know every inch of the coast near here, we tucked into a mini-bayou where the skinny water was exactly the depth of our keel. Coming from New England where the rocks are unforgiving, it makes you appreciate a soft bottom. We drank wine, ate mounds of barbecued shrimp and laughed until we hurt, mesmerized by the stars and the bonfires and tents on the beaches all around. Again, there were children's voices, and flashlights dancing in the dark like some Spielberg movie. It was camping, only afloat.

The gulf was choppy as we headed east and anchored off historic Fort Pickens, using the inflatable for a short run to the beach. We spent a couple of hours climbing on the parapets and cannon, peering into old stone jail cells, tunnels and gunpowder rooms. Geronimo was among the Apache warriors held prisoner here by the U.S. government. We all got excited when an armadillo crossed our path and quickly scurried out of view.

Sated by our adventure ashore, we headed for Santa Rosa Sound, by no means a sacrifice to sailing in the gulf because it's three miles wide and 30 miles long, with forest on the north shore, dunes on the south, and lots of pretty day anchorages.

Despite the ravages of multiple hurricanes, the ICW from Santa Rosa Sound to

Choctawhatchee Bay offers cruisers an assortment of marinas, waterfront restaurants, public beaches and stores for provisioning. Juana's Pagoda at the Navarre Bridge is a sailor's haunt, with restaurant and bakery buildings conical in design to resist strong winds. Putting in here gives access to cold beer, frozen drinks, jumbo-sized burgers, fish sandwiches and, should it be morning, a mighty breakfast.

At Fort Walton, the heavy-surf warning flags were flying so we didn't swim, but it was fun to relax on the beach. The last time we visited, the water had been glassy calm. Farther east at Destin, known for its fleet of sportfishing boats and cut to the sea, there were more bars, restaurants, galleries and shops.

From the ICW, sailors with masts less than 50 feet high can pass beneath the fixed Destin



Juliana and Christine do time at Ft. McCree.

Bridge and bear hard to port, dropping a hook in the harbor protected by barrier dunes. A warning: nightclubs blare music into the wee hours until it's time for the commercial fishing boats to rev their engines.

As we approached Choctawhatchee Bay, multihull racers were zig-zagging across the wide open, relatively shallow body of water that's protected from the Gulf's mood swings. The Bluewater Bay Marina in Niceville, near the top of the bay, offers an easy overnight at the dock with a decent restaurant.

Had we more time, we would have again sailed to Panama City, explored Shell and Crooked Islands, and perhaps gone farther east to the dilapidated mill town of Port St. Joe and Cape San Blas, but our foray into Alabama made that impossible. Both Panama City and Port St. Joe have amenities for sailors, and real



Cooking up a batch of mudbugs at the Pensacola Crawfish Festival, above. The cannons still remain at Ft. McCree, top. The Pirates Cove in Josephine, Alabama, severs up Florabama hospitality, facing page top. The Beneteau 380 slips into skinny water off Pensacola, left.

estate developers are only now discovering the potential of the latter community as it makes the transition from industrial cluster to waterfront resort.

Back in Pensacola Beach, our Beneteau safely in its slip at Sabine Marina, we followed the sound of Cajun music along the boardwalk to the local Crawfish Festival at Bamboo Willie's.

People were lined up at the makeshift food tent where for about \$10 you got a cardboard beer box piled with cooked red crawfish, an ear of corn and a baked potato.

The boardwalk was alive with tourists and locals soaking up the sun and the music from five different bands near an amphitheater shaped like a clamshell. The beach was packed with muscular young guys and bikini-clad gals, some wearing cowboy boots and hats, vestiges of spring break that ended days earlier.

Hobie cats were hauled up on the sand and a small fleet of Lasers drunkenly navigated a course among the bathers.

The sun radiated a hot white light that hadn't seemed so intense when we were aboard the boat. On land, everything was different. Juliana decided to get a Henna tattoo. Christine went with her to browse the shops. I beat it for the shady veranda at Hemingway's Island Grill where the waitress suggested a Papa Margarita to quench my thirst: Cuervo 1800, Cointreau and fresh lime with shaved ice. She was right on.

Hemingway's is upscale, some of its tables fitted out with fighting chairs, the walls laden with vintage photos of the famous writer. It's a fine place for a drink but the food is lackluster. Better to take a short cab ride to Peg Leg Pete's Oyster Bar, which is where the locals eat in Pensacola Beach. There's room for five transient boats in the Lafitte Cove Marina directly out back and overnight dockage is available for \$1 a foot per day.

The restaurant help is friendly and the food mouth-watering. If you're going to sample the region's shrimp, Cajun-fried catfish, blackened grouper sandwiches and oysters from nearby Apalachicola, this is the place to do it. Nobody will rush you.

As I sipped a cold beer at one of the outdoor tables and thought about our weeklong cruise, it became clear why this place is so special.

Unlike the more congested stretches along Florida's Gulf Coast, the Panhandle hasn't been ruined by wall-to-wall highrises and traffic thick enough to make a veteran commuter wince. The atmosphere is still graceful and unhurried, and there's a slightly unpolished edge to the people and the place, which in these days of pretension can be as refreshing as the afternoon sea breeze. That alone is reason enough to sail Florabama before it's gone.

For more information on this charter, contact Emerald Coast Yachts, Inc, in Pensacola, Florida, by phone at (888) 204-0241 or visit the company on the Web at www.ecsailing.com.

Another company in the area is Pensacola Yacht Charters, (850) 432-3199, www.pensacolayachtcharters.com.

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