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The diocese encourages individuals to take precautions and use good judgment to guard against the coronavirus, Page 2



Hope in the midst of tears:

Dealing with traumatic situations is never easy, Sarah Reinhard writes, but it's important to remember to look at the crucifix and know that Jesus shares your intense pain, Page 4



Days of reflection:

The diocesan Ethnic Ministries Office is beginning preparations for the 2022 National Black Catholic Congress with three days of reflection this year, Page 15



MORE THAN 500 PEOPLE EXPRESS THEIR DESIRE TO JOIN CHURCH AT EASTER VIGIL

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Capt. Skip Shiver of Apalachicola River Cruises takes Aaron through the bay marshes.

Photos by Beth Ervin Leventhal

By Aaron Leventhal

I am an Ohio “snowbird,” determined to escape winter’s bleak and chilly days

for bright, warm sunshine and sandy seashores. For the past three years, my wife Beth and I have vacationed along South Carolina’s Atlantic Seaboard. This year we were ready for a new adventure.

After checking out several destinations, we traveled in January to North Florida’s Panhandle along the Gulf of Mexico with Lily, our Labrador Retriever. The 50-mile stretch of coastline is promoted as “Florida’s Forgotten Coast,” a term adopted when, in the early 1990s, the state omitted the region on its maps.

The Forgotten Coast is anchored by the historic town of Apalachicola, a Native American word meaning “land of the friendly people,” and extends eastward to the barrier islands of St. George, Eastpoint, Carrabelle and Alligator Point.

A two-day drive of 850 miles south landed us on St George Island in a vacation rental with a view of the gulf (www.buckysbeachaus.com).

With bright, sunny skies and temperatures in the 70s throughout our stay, we spent mornings strolling and shelling along the island’s 27-miles of soft, sandy beach and sparkling, blue waters. We were delighted that Lily taught herself to “body surf” in the Gulf’s gentle waves.

Most afternoons we drove to a variety of state and federal parks and forests, hiking along well-marked trails lined with palms and Spanish moss-draped live oak and cypress or rummaged through locally owned and managed craft shacks, art galleries and thrift shops. We dined at home on fresh fish and seafood purchased at small seafood markets and enjoyed a variety of laid-back restaurants and cafes that enthusiastically welcomed Lily either inside or on the outdoor patios.

According to John Solomon, executive director of the Apalachicola Bay Chamber, “Our ‘Forgotten Coast’ is one of the last places to experience ‘Old Florida.’ There are no big-box stores here and no malls. Legislation limits buildings to three stories. Our businesses are owned

Catholic Travel

EXPLORING FLORIDA’S Forgotten Coast

and managed by locals.

“In reality, we are no longer Florida’s ‘Forgotten Coast.’ Visitors come here from across America and abroad and stay for a few weeks or months. Many return and ultimately decide to move here. They appreciate our authentic friendliness and our laid-back lifestyle.”

Fishing, Boating and Tours

Visitors can fish off piers in the bay and on sandy beaches, and there are numerous boat rental outfits and dozens of skilled captains docked at marinas who conduct fishing charters and sightseeing cruises.

Beth and I had the pleasure of taking a four-hour tour with Capt. Skip Shiver of Apalachicola River Tours (shiverskip@yahoo.com, 850-370-6001). We cruised through river marshes as Capt. Shiver, a fifth generation native, shared stories and history of the Forgotten Coast. He explained how the shoreline remains essentially undeveloped thanks to state and federal government stewardship. “Thankfully they own and manage most of the 50-mile stretch. This assures us we can preserve our history and cultural heritage,” he said. Capt. Skip can customize trips to include the barrier islands, eco tours, sunset cruises and fishing charters.



Commercial fishing boats provide fresh-caught fish and seafood.



There are more than 50 miles of soft, white, sandy beaches along Florida’s Forbidden Coast.

What to Do

Explore Apalachicola's 1830s original town plan and three dozen historic sites on the self-guided Apalachicola Historic Walking Tour. St. George Island State Park offers nine miles of undeveloped beach consistently named among America's "Top 10 Beaches," majestic dunes and salt marshes. At Cape St. George Lighthouse, climb 92 wooden stairs for a spectacular view of the Gulf. Apalachicola National Forest offers hiking, birding, boating fishing, hunting and camping on 564,000 acres. The 18-hole course at St. James Bay Golf Resort is cited as an Audubon Signature Sanctuary and is open to the public with its excellent Crooked River Grill.

Set aside a day to travel to Wakulla Springs, home of one of the largest and deepest freshwater springs in the world. A 45-minute narrated river cruise meanders through the ancient cypress swamp (which provided the backdrop for the early Tarzan movies and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*) offers views of its diverse inhabitants, including alligators, manatees and exotic birds. For lunch or dinner, the Edward Ball Dining Room in The Lodge provides an unforgettable experience with classic Southern fare in its 1937 Art Deco dining room.

Dining

The main attraction is, of course, locally caught fish and seafood. Grouper, snapper, trout, shrimp, oysters and crabs are prepared grilled, broiled, fried, steamed or blackened with sides of homemade coleslaw,

hush puppies and black beans and rice. The region takes great pride in its reputation as "America's Oyster Capital," with local mollusks noted for a pure, mellow, briny bay flavor. Ninety percent of Florida's crop and 10 percent of the nation's output is harvested on 7,000 acres of oyster beds.

Our favorite restaurants include the Apalachicola Sea Grill, touting the world's largest fried fish sandwich; Harry A's Sports Bar and Diner, with live music and karaoke daily; Blue Parrot Outside Café, with a large selection of po' boys, tiki bar and water-



Pam Kelley's eclectic Beach Trader features works by local and regional artists



Apalachicola is the world's Oyster Capital

front deck; and Red Pirate Bar & Grill, with live music and mini-golf.

Shopping

Shopping is an adventure with dozens of small, eclectic shops, galleries and boutiques specializing in local handmade items, paintings, photography, sculpture, jewelry and nautical antiques and collectibles. Of note are the Grady Market, Tin Shed, Apalachicola Sponge Company and Pam Kelley's Beach Trader on Highway 98 in Carrabelle.

Where to Stay

There are dozens of bed and breakfasts and small inns, as well as hundreds of vacation home rentals, RV resorts and parks. It's best to avoid the crowds and prices of the high season of March through September. January and February are ideal for warm, bright days, tranquility and discounted prices.

For More Information:

Apalachicola Bay Chamber
850-653-9419
www.FloridasForgottenCoast.com

Columbus writer Aaron Leventhal has organized a 10-day, small group tour to Alaska in September 2020. Check it out at LeventhalTravel.com.

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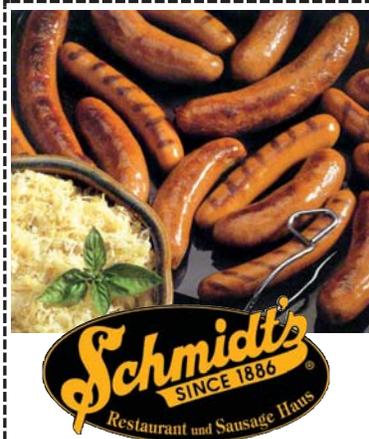
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