

# The Panhandle

POP 1.5 MILLION / 850,386

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## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Up the Creek Raw Bar (p468)
- ➔ Iron (p451)
- ➔ George's at Alys Beach (p461)
- ➔ Kool Beanz Café (p475)
- ➔ Tin Cow (p450)

## Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Hibiscus Coffee & Guesthouse (p460)
- ➔ Wisteria Inn (p463)
- ➔ Aunt Martha's Bed & Breakfast (p456)
- ➔ Pearl (p461)
- ➔ Hotel Duval (p475)

## Why Go?

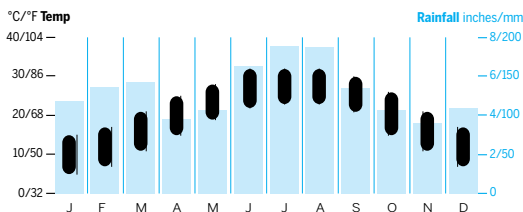
The most geographically northern end of Florida is by far its most culturally Southern side. The Panhandle – that spit of land embedded in the left shoulder of the Florida peninsula – is hemmed in by Alabama and Georgia, and in many ways the region's beaches are effectively coastal extensions of those states.

What beaches they are, though! All powdered white-sand and teal-to jade-green waters, this is a coast of primal, wind-blown beauty in many places, particularly the undeveloped stretches of salt marsh and slash pine that spill east and west of Apalachee Bay. In other areas, the seashore is given to rental houses and high-rise condos.

Inland, you'll find a tangle of palmetto fans and thin pine woods interspersed with crystal springs, lazy rivers and military testing ranges – this area has one of the highest concentrations of defense facilities in the country.

## When to Go

### Pensacola



**Mar–Apr** Destin and Panama Beach are full of spring breakers, and best avoided unless you want to party.

**May & Oct** Enjoy the most temperate weather in South Walton.

**Nov–Feb** Usually too cold for sitting on the beach or swimming, but rates at local lodgings drop.

## GULF COAST

The Panhandle's Gulf Coast has a very specific draw: beach. Its shimmering, curving miles of vanilla-white shoreline were formed from a glut of silicate quartz that has been crushed by geologic eons into sugary powder.

It's not all sun and sand, though. From Naval Air Station Pensacola in the west to Tyndall Air Force Base in the east, one can find a seemingly unbroken stretch of defense installations and military bases, and the towns here reflect that reality – between the resorts and vacation rentals, you'll find a glut of federal contracting offices and cigar bars servicing active duty and ex-service members.

Thanks to clouds of green forest, long acres of coastal marsh and a few remaining stretches of stunning sand dune hills, there is a gentle, breeze-blown prettiness to the Gulf Coast. Be on the lookout for decent dining and nightlife in Pensacola and larger base towns such as Destin.

### Pensacola

☎ 850 / POPULATION 52,700

The Alabama border is just a few miles down the road, which helps explain the vibe of Pensacola, a city that jumbles laid-back Southern syrup with Florida brashness. With lively beaches, a Spanish-style downtown, and a thrumming military culture, this is by far the most interesting city in the Panhandle.

While urban-chic trends (locavore food, craft cocktails, etc) are taking root, visitors still primarily come to Pensacola for an all-American, blue-collar vacation experience: white-sand beaches, fried seafood and bars serving cheap domestics. During March and April, things reach fever pitch when droves of students descend for the weeklong bacchanalia of spring break. Beware.

Downtown, centered on Palafox St, lies north of the waterfront. Across the Pensacola Bay Bridge from here is the mostly residential peninsula of Gulf Breeze. Cross one more bridge, the Bob Sikes (toll \$1), to reach pretty Pensacola Beach, the ultimate destination for most visitors.

### 📍 Sights

A combo ticket (adult \$8, child \$4) gets you seven days access to Historic Pensacola Village, the Pensacola Children's Museum, the

TT Wentworth Jr Florida State Museum and Voices of Pensacola. The combo ticket can be purchased at any of the included museums.

### ★ National Naval Aviation Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p446; ☎ 800-327-5002; www.navalaviationmuseum.org; 1750 Radford Blvd; ☎ 9am-5pm; 🚗)

**FREE** A visit to Pensacola is not complete without a trip to this enormous collection of military aircraft muscle and artifacts. Adults and children alike will be fascinated by the range of planes on display: more than 150! That's before we even get to the high-tech stuff like flight simulators and an IMAX theater. You can watch the Blue Angels (p448) practice their death-defying air show at 8:30am most Tuesdays and Wednesdays between March and November.

### Fort Barrancas & Advanced Redoubt

FORT

(Map p446; ☎ 850-934-2600; www.nps.gov/guis/planyourvisit/fort-barrancas; 3182 Taylor Rd; \$7; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm; 📷) 🌿 On a dramatic bluff overlooking Pensacola Bay, 19th-century Fort Barrancas was built by slaves atop an abandoned 18th-century Spanish fort. The fort, now part of the National Park Service, has endless dark passages to explore but not much in the way of displays. A half-mile away via a walking trail lie the ruins of Advanced Redoubt, a Civil War-era fort. Call ahead to ask about scheduled tours.

### Historic Pensacola Village

MUSEUM

(Map p450; ☎ 850-595-5985; www.historicpensacola.org; Tarragona & Church St; adult/child \$8/4; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat; 📷) 🌿 Pensacola's rich colonial history spans more than 450 years. This fascinating and attractive village is a self-contained enclave of photogenic historic homes turned into museums: it's the perfect starting point for familiarizing yourself with the city. Admission is good for one week and includes a guided tour and entrance to each building.

### Voices of Pensacola

MUSEUM

(Map p450; ☎ 850-595-5985; www.historicpensacola.org; 117 E Government St; adult/child \$8/4; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat) 🌿 Part oral history archive, part interpretive center, this museum highlights, via videos and audio recordings, the different cultural groups that have contributed to the demographic soup that is Pensacola.