



DID YOU KNOW?
Pensacola is nicknamed "The City of Five Flags" due to its history under Spanish, French, British, Confederate and US rule.



Pensacola is your oyster

The Florida coastal town of Pensacola is the ideal destination of indulging in the Gulf Coast's ocean bounty.

"I'm going to grill it with some olive oil, lemon and just a pinch of herbs," says Dave. He's built like a burly American football linebacker and he's telling me what he's going to do with the fish that he just caught at the end of Pensacola Beach Pier. "It's the first time I've caught a blue runner," Dave says in his gruff Southern drawl, "so I don't want to overpower the flavour of the fish."

Dave is one of many locals who jostle for space to cast their rods over the end of the pier into the deep emerald-green Gulf waters. I ask a Vietnamese-American family how their fishing is going and

the father tells me that they've caught some Spanish mackerel, and that he's going to braise it with bamboo shoots. A newly married couple have caught some kingfish, which they are going to use in a Creole fish stew.

The popular Florida coastal town of Pensacola is not only known for its stunning white-sand beaches – the crystal-clear waters here provide some of the finest ocean bounty along the Gulf Coast, and fresh seafood is always on the menu. The local restaurateurs have been diving into the local seafood for years. Or rather, they've been getting someone

else to do the diving for them. "We have a local guy who spear catches all of our fish," James Briscione, executive chef of Angelena's Ristorante Italiano, tells me. "He just brought in two amazing black groupers."

I don't get to try the black grouper at Angelena's, but I barely squeeze out of the restaurant doors after devouring a who's who of other seafood critters: yellowfin tuna crudo, Gulf shrimp mafaldine, squid ink bucatini and a crawfish tortellini that surprises my palate with the additional flavours of andouille and leek. Each dish is as exquisite as the next – you know it's good when you can't stop eating even though you've eaten your body weight in food.

Words: Brian Thacker Photos: Brian Thacker, Dreamstime

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I need something simple for breakfast the next morning. Porridge perhaps? I just didn't expect prawn porridge. The most popular breakfast at Native Café is shrimp and grits, which is made from ground corn and is a mainstay of Southern cuisine. I am somewhat hesitant, but the large grilled shrimp over spicy cheese grits, topped with fried and green onions, turns out to be like a creamy risotto and has just enough of a kick of spices to help wake me up. My server asks if I want dessert. For breakfast? She tells me that I can't miss the Key lime pie with their famous walnut crust, so I order it for take out, but have just a little taste. And then eat the whole thing.

I really liked my breakfast, so I pretty much have the same thing for dinner. But that's also because I couldn't come to Pensacola and not have the "World-famous" Grits à la Ya Ya from the Fish House

Clockwise from the left: Fisherman on Pensacola Beach Pier; The Fish House Restaurant; Lifeguard station on Pensacola Beach; Shrimp and grits at Native Café.

Restaurant, which overlooks Pensacola Bay and Seville Harbor. The restaurant sure is popular with the world-famous crowd: the wall outside is filled with signed photos of happy diners, including Mariah Carey, Shaquille O'Neal, Elton John, William Shatner and even a real space commander, Neil Armstrong. I start with half a dozen mild and creamy Gulf Coast oysters. Each oyster is like a meal itself. The Ya Ya is smoked Gouda grits topped with perfectly seasoned shrimp, applewood-smoked bacon, and a spinach and portobello mushroom sauce. No wonder Neil Armstrong was over the moon when he had it.

I end my seafood odyssey, or more like seafood gluttony, with lunch in two states. The Flora-Bama Yacht Club straddles the border of Florida and Alabama and is only a 20-minute drive along the panhandle from Pensacola. Sitting outside with the sand between my toes, I graze on smoked tuna dip and raw Gulf oysters, which the locals serve with saltine crackers. For my main course, I order a fish I haven't heard of before. The

blackened Gulf triptail comes served with "creamy Cajun dirty rice", which wasn't dirty at all and not particularly creamy, but the fish was firm and white with flaky, sweet meat.

After lunch, the beach beckons but I remember what my mum used to say: wait an hour after eating before you go for a swim. Better make that two hours. After all that serious seafood feasting there's a good chance I'd sink.

GETTING THERE Pensacola International Airport is connected to the UK via US gateways including New Orleans, Orlando, Chicago and Atlanta.

GETTING AROUND Although the city is not far from the airport, hiring a car gives you the freedom to beach hop and move easily between all that seafood.

BEST TIME TO GO July and August are hot and steamy (and it's also US school holidays), so spring and autumn are probably the best times to visit.

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