



Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune

The sign above the stage at Flounder's Chowder House, a restaurant and entertainment venue on Pensacola Beach, epitomizes the area: The low-key destination requires no polish to please.

# FLORIDA

## without the flaunting

• On Florida's panhandle, unassuming Pensacola aims to please locals, which makes the action-packed destination a joy for visitors, too.

By KAREN CATCHPOLE  
Special to the Star Tribune

**B**y 5 p.m., the Museum of Commerce, a low-slung brick building in tidy downtown Pensacola, Fla., was filled with the sound of friends scooting folding chairs closer together and the kind of half-whispered conversations that folks have when they know they're about to be gently shsh'd.

Although everyone in the hall seemed to know each other, no one looked up when a stranger walked in and searched

the room for an empty seat. I was there for the monthly Radio Live concert, which is part fundraiser (two canned goods for a food bank get you in), part wholesome entertainment (bluegrass performers come from across the country to perform and be simulcast on the local public radio station) and part excuse to get together with neighbors.

In many ways, Radio Live is Pensacola's version of "A Prairie Home Companion," but without the big names or the big crowds, and that's exactly how Pensacola likes it.

Tourism efforts in this part of the Florida panhandle focus on neighboring Destin (which can keep its spring breakers, outlet shoppers and time-share travelers, Pensacola seems to say). And while many towns with as much to offer as this panhandle beauty flaunt their assets for the benefit of visitors instead of locals, Pensacola seems to be constantly buffing up simply to impress itself. If the rest of us come by to check it out, well, so much the better.

**Pensacola continues:** A city that's rich in history. **G6** ▶



Visitors stroll along Quietwater Beach Pier. Pensacola's waterfronts are relatively uncrowded, so people can enjoy white sand beaches or sit by the pier sipping Bushwackers — the city's official cocktail — without fighting crowds.

**WHAT'S THERE TO DO?**

A quick guide to all things Pensacola. **G6**

## ◀ PENSACOLA FROM G1

You aren't accosted with logo T-shirts and refrigerator magnets, but that doesn't mean you won't feel welcomed by the locals who exude a lovely blend of humble Southern hospitality, military town stoicism and beach town casualness.

I first heard about Pensacola, which is hugged by Pensacola Bay, and Pensacola Beach, a barrier island on the oceanside of the bay, from one of those locals. While traveling through Key West, among the most self-promoting of all of Florida's horn-tooting destinations, I met Tony Hughes and we easily struck up a conversation over \$4 margaritas at Kelly's Caribbean Bar Grill & Brewery (owned by actor Kelly McGillis).

The talk quickly turned to Pensacola, a place Hughes clearly loves. His enthusiasm was so contagious that a few weeks later I found myself at the Radio Live event, happily tapping my foot to the twang, thump and twinkle of bluegrass guitarist Jack Norton.

**Pick your Pensacola**

Hughes was my self-appointed guide to the beaches, restaurants, sights and activities of Pensacola. For orientation's sake — and because we were hungry — we started downtown, where every block seemed anchored by a restaurant or bar even more appealing than the previous one.

As we wandered the attractive lazy streets that wrap their arms around leafy Seville Square, the languid pace, historic buildings and waterfront reminded me of a compact version of Charleston, S.C. With the sun setting and our stomachs grumbling, Hughes and I grabbed an outdoor table at Dharma Blue, where we were treated to views of the square, sushi made with fish caught just offshore and Florida's most cheerful waitress.

As I ate, it occurred to me that perhaps Pensacola's appealingly relaxed self-confidence comes from being the oldest European settlement in the United States. Dating back to 1559, Pensacola will celebrate its 450th birthday this year. Since the Spanish founded Pensacola, the place has been ruled by the French, then the Spanish again, then the British, then the Spanish again, then the Confederacy before finally becoming part of the United States.

It's earned its standing as the City of Five Flags and historic homes, and businesses from all of its many periods have been preserved. There are even open archaeological dig sites, cordoned off with homey picket fences and viewing platforms, in various locations downtown.

**Raw oysters and Blue Angels**

The next day at Flounder's Chowder House, Hughes suggested I sample a Bushwacker, the official cocktail of Pensacola. Although Flounder's is not where the Bushwacker was invented — that honor goes to the nearby Sandshaker Lounge, which claims to have perfected the blended rum, Kahlua and ice mixture in 1975 — the Flounder's version was dangerously drinkable, more like a slushy dessert than an adult beverage.

But we had no time for a second round. It was Wednesday and in Pensacola that can mean only one thing: a short drive across Pensacola

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The Pensacola area has 40 miles of seashore, much of it secluded, like this beach on the east end of Santa Rosa Island.

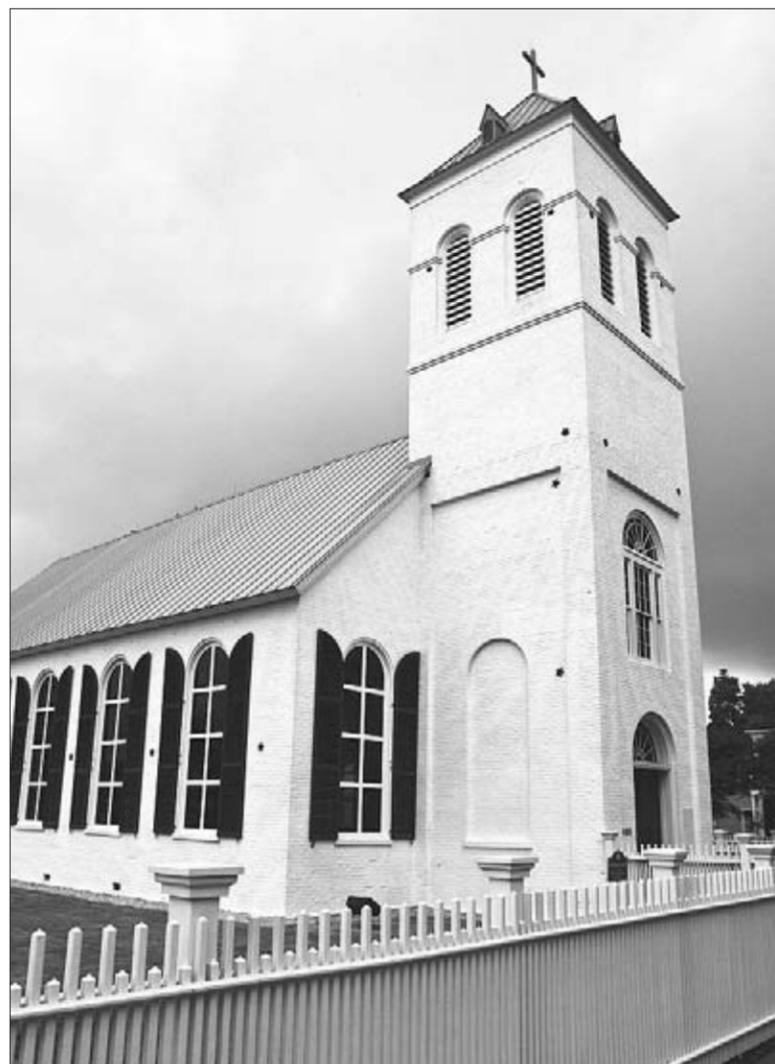
Bay to neighboring Pensacola Beach for a barefoot stroll on the town's famous white sand before hitting Peg Leg Pete's for their weekly oyster-palooza featuring famed Apalachicola oysters for just \$5.50 a dozen (that's 46 cents each).

I could easily have spent a month sipping and grazing my way through Pensacola, but there were many other things to do besides eat and drink. I broke away from the dining table long enough to spend a morning in the National Naval Aviation Museum at the Pensacola Naval Air Station, where tours of the displays (including 150 restored planes) in the 300,000-square-foot museum are given by a gaggle of volunteer retired servicemen, servicewomen and their spouses.

My favorite docent was an elderly lady who herded the excited crowd of visitors out of the museum and onto rows of bleachers after the sudden announcement that the Navy's Blue Angels aerobatic team, who are based there, would attempt to fly their morning practice despite the dismal visibility. As the docent smiled and gently urged us along, her earrings — a pair of impressively detailed 3-inch replicas of fighter jets — bobbed festively on either side of her head.

I waited on the packed bleachers certain that the overcast conditions would force the cancellation of the Blue Angels' practice, which is free and open to the public most Tuesday and Wednesday mornings. Even the cheery docents were not optimistic. "It ain't happening," predicted one. "Pity." Then, as if the pilots were unwilling to disappoint the crowd, four F-18 Hornets slowly made their way out of the hangar and eased down the runway in an arrowhead formation before blasting almost straight up into the air to gasps and applause.

My visit to Pensacola came just in time. After more than a month of



As the oldest European settlement in the United States (and proud of it), Pensacola is full of preserved historic buildings, like The Old Christ Church, which was built in 1832.

traveling through Florida and being bombarded with gators and mojitos and G-strings and Mickey Mouse, I arrived in desperate need of a town that wasn't "sleepy" (a transparent travel euphemism for boring), but which wasn't a theme park, either. My days in Pensacola affirmed that I'd finally found such a place.

I certainly didn't want to leave, but when the day came to move on, Hughes gave me a CD autographed

by one of the acts I'd seen at Radio Live and said he hoped it would remind me of Pensacola. As if I needed any reminding.

Travel writer Karen Catchpole, along with her husband photographer Eric Mohl, embarked on a road trip through North, Central and South Americas more than two years ago. After clocking more than 90,000 miles, they are now in Mexico. Follow along at [www.trans-americas.com](http://www.trans-americas.com).

**IF YOU GO**

**Other things to do:** The Pensacola Museum of Art (1-850-432-6247; [www.pensacolamuseumofart.org/](http://www.pensacolamuseumofart.org/)), is housed in a beautiful Spanish revival building and displays work from a big-city roster of artists, including Alexander Calder and Salvador Dali. Play both of the charmingly retro 18-hole mini-golf courses at Goofy Golf, ([www.goofygolf.biz/index.php](http://www.goofygolf.biz/index.php)). Scuba dive in the warm, clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico to explore the USS Oriskany, a 911-foot-long decommissioned aircraft carrier that was intentionally sunk off the coast of Pensacola in 2006 and is now the largest manmade reef in North America (Pensacola Dive Co.; 1-850-434-8464; [www.pensacoladivecompany.com](http://www.pensacoladivecompany.com)).

**Eat and drink:** Grab a freshly baked baguette and a container of house-made roasted vegetable dip at **Joe Patti's Seafood Co.** (1-850-435-7843; [www.joepattis.com/](http://www.joepattis.com/)) and head to Pensacola Beach for a picnic. Pick up a sturdy ceramic stein from **McGuire's Irish Pub** (1-850-433-6789; [www.mcguiresirishpub.com/about1.html](http://www.mcguiresirishpub.com/about1.html)) and you'll have a worthy souvenir from this Pensacola institution. Grits Ya-Ya, a creamy, fluffy mound of hearty grits jazzed up with spicy grilled shrimp and crunchy chopped green onions, is the signature dish at **The Fish House** (1-850-470-0003; [www.goodgrits.com/](http://www.goodgrits.com/)), which has received the Wine Spectator Award of Excellence every year since 2004.

**Where to sleep:** A recent top to bottom renovation has transformed an old motel on the edge of downtown into the hip new **Sole Inn and Suites** (from \$89 including cocktails and breakfast; 1-850-470-9298; [www.soleinnandsuites.com/](http://www.soleinnandsuites.com/)).

The much-anticipated **Lee House Bed & Breakfast** opened on Dec. 27, nestled between Seville Square and the waterfront (from \$195 including daily breakfast; 1-850-525-3766; [www.leehousepensacola.com/](http://www.leehousepensacola.com/)).