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

FLORIDA without the flauting

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

Top-flight frills come with low-ball prices

Luxury destinations, where unbudging high rates have long signaled exclusivity, are dishing out deals.

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

FLORIDA without the flauting

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

Top-flight frills come with low-ball prices

Luxury destinations, where unbudging high rates have long signaled exclusivity, are dishing out deals.

The sign above the stage at Elounda’s Cherish House, a restaurant and entertainment venue on Pensacola Beach, epitomizes the area: This low-key destination requires no polish to please.
Rich about Pensacola, it is hugged by Pensacola Bay and Pensacola Beach, a bountiful harbor on the outwash of the bay, from one of those leads. While traveling through Key West, among the most self-promoting of all of Florida’s tourist-landing destinations, I met Tony Hughes and we easily struck up a conversation over four margaritas at Kelly's Caribbean Bar Grill & Brewery (run by actor Kelly McGillis).

The talk quickly turned to Pensacola, where Hughes closely 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 blues guitar virtuoso 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 black seat was jammed by a restaurant or bar even more appealing than the previous one.

As we wandered the attractive tarry streets that wrap their arms around gently curved squares, the languid pace, historic buildings and water-remnants of the Spanish city of Charleton, SC. The next day began with a stroll on the crumbling, Hughes and I grabbed an out- door 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 it was, 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 400th 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 Confederate before finally becoming part of the United States. It’s named its street the City of Five Flags and historic homes, businesses and all of it are many periods have been preserved. There are even open archaeological digs, sites, restored with little thanks for those efforts.

But we had no time for a second round. Hughes urged us to leave Pensacola that can mean only one thing: a short drive across Pensacola Bay to neighboring Pensacola Beach for a hundred-street on the trendy circa- town white sand and basking in the Gulf of Mexico, for about two weeks. 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 I needed to travel through Florida and being bombarded with gators and mojitos traveling through Florida and being bombarded with gators and mojitos, I arrived in deepest round 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 Hughes was my self-appointed guide to the beaches, restaurant, sights and activities of Pensacola.

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 is now the largest manmade reef sunk off the coast of Pensacola in 2006 to explore the USS Orise Museum of Art (1-850-432-6247; www.pensacolamuseum.com), which has a worthy souvenir from this Pensacola Beach for a picnic. Pickup a sturdy mini-golf courses at Goofy Golf, a big-city roster of artists, including Jack Norton.

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

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 400th 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 Confederate before finally becoming part of the United States. It’s named its street the City of Five Flags and historic homes, businesses and all of it are many periods have been preserved. There are even open archaeological digs, sites, restored with little thanks for those efforts.

But we had no time for a second round. Hughes urged us to leave Pensacola that can mean only one thing: a short drive across Pensacola Bay to neighboring Pensacola Beach for a hundred-street on the trendy circa- town white sand and basking in the Gulf of Mexico, for about two weeks. 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 I needed to travel through Florida and being bombarded with gators and mojitos, I arrived in deepest round 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 Hughes was my self-appointed guide to the beaches, restaurants, sights and activities of Pensacola.