

Pensacola and Seaside, Florida Travel Story

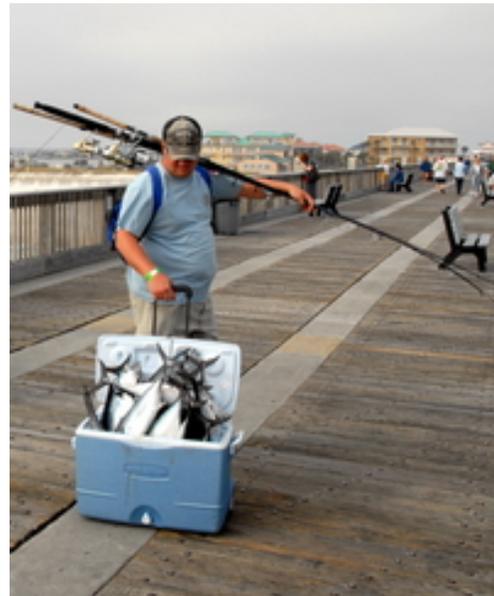
December, 2007

Neither of us had traveled to Northwestern Florida (known to the unsophisticated as the Florida panhandle), so we planned a short weekend and the weather totally cooperated. There were absolutely no hurricanes nor snow storms.

Furthermore, our friends Wayne and Gerry Welch in Alabama were able to drive down, mostly so that Wayne and I could spend a few hours working on a consulting proposal. Below you can see them walking along the beach.



We all stayed on Pensacola Beach, a narrow strip of land facing the Gulf of Mexico, famous for its wide, very white, and very fine sandy beaches. Nearby stood a mammoth structure called the Pensacola Beach Fishing Pier. At a half kilometer long, it is the longest pier on the Gulf. Made out of concrete it undoubtedly replaces an earlier one washed out by a hurricane. An entrance fee is charged, but that does not deter crowds of fisher persons. In the picture you can see someone's morning catch. The fish were about 2 feet long and called bonitas, which means beautiful in Spanish. Apparently they acquired the name because some people don't think they're especially tasty to eat.



On Sunday afternoon we drove almost 2 hours east along the coast to a village called Seaside. It is famous as the first “new urbanist” development in the United States. (The new urbanist development philosophy is the creation of self-contained living areas that maximize community and minimize automobile traffic.) These American structures mimic European villages. The largest such development is currently under construction in the area of the old Denver Stapleton Airport.

I have wondered if such a community would be an ideal retirement town. In fact, Seaside was initially planned to be an “ideal city.” We found it to be unique and very pleasant but not ideal in every way.



Seaside’s location is remote and unlike most Florida shoreline, feels isolated and rural. As you can see in the photo on the next page, even the beaches were largely bare. Seaside was built in the early 1980s and soon there were about 500 housing units and about a dozen shops. The town has at least two good restaurants, a well-stocked grocery store, a good bookstore, a small school, and a church.

The structure of the town is elegant. In the center is the central square, dominated by a large amphitheatre where concerts and festivals are held. See below. This is ringed by a line of shops, and behind that are the homes.



The houses are organized into 7 main clusters. Each cluster has a street leading down to the beach. A wooden structure called a pavilion marks where the street runs into the sand and where each cluster essentially has its own private beach, but without markings between any of the pristine beaches. You can see pavilions in the two photos below.



The streets connecting each cluster with the beach are only wide enough for walking, bicycling, or perhaps a golf cart. In fact, that is true of almost all of the streets.

Seaside has been so successful that it is now impossible to buy a home for less than a million dollars. Success often breeds success, and this can be seen in its replica next door. A very similar village called Watercolor has been built next door and another 10 miles south called Watersound. Ironically they are not called towns but resorts.



Perhaps Seaside should be called a resort too, because as we drove away that night we could hardly see a single home lit up. We were there in the off-season when neither owners nor renters were likely to be in residence.

Seaside would be a lovely vacation spot for a weekend or several weeks, but its isolation means it is not the ideal city for most people to settle down. Hopefully many more urban developments will be modeled after this “ideal city.”