

Florida minus Mouse

By Barry Wigmore, Daily Mail

For most people, Florida means Mickey Mouse and the theme parks of Orlando. But up in the top left-hand corner of the Sunshine State is a little gem of an area for those who prefer a quieter, more laidback break. Those in the know have tried for years to keep the place a secret. Here, along the north shore of the Gulf of Mexico, is Florida's Forgotten Coast - a 100-mile stretch of seaside that Disney and the developers missed. Still little-touched by tourism, it is an area where most locals earn a living from the key industries of oysters and scallops. They employ the age-old method of scraping up the shellfish from cultivated beds, using a contraption like two rakes scissor together over the side of small boats. Those who don't, run deep sea boat charters, hunting shark, swordfish and other game fish in the teeming waters. The map of Florida looks like a gun, with the barrel pointing west towards Alabama and Mississippi. Up there, just about where the trigger would be, are the little towns of Carrabelle, East Point, Apalachicola and St Joseph's, along what Americans also know as the Florida Panhandle. There are no high-rise apartment blocks, no five-star hotels, and not a single traffic light in the entire county. If you are looking for an unspoiled part of the world where you can be a beach bum not too far from civilization, this could be for you. Just offshore are miles of silver sands along a chain of barrier islands with names such as Dog Island, St George, St Vincent, and St Joe, where the clear waters are glorious for snorkeling. Most have bridges and causeways across to them; some can only be reached by boat. Last summer, one beach at Cape San Blas in St Joseph Peninsula State Park was voted the best in the U.S.

On the mainland, sheltered by the islands from the tropical storms that occasionally pound the region in late summer, are the shallow oyster beds, and river estuaries that are great for exploring. Another favorite way to travel, both along the beaches and inland, is on horseback. Everything from kayaks to horses can be rented fairly cheaply. The area is Florida's seafood central. Ninety per cent of the oysters consumed in the state, and 52 per cent of all its shellfish, come from the fertile shallows where a dozen rivers drain out of the swamps and become the clear blue waters of the Gulf. Name a fish - salt or freshwater - and you can probably catch it somewhere along this coast. Or you can find fish the easy way, and simply eat in the rickety cabin restaurants that line the shore. You get driftwood decor and the freshest seafood in the world, straight off the boats that tie up at the packing stations next door. They started painting the outside of one cabin a couple of years ago, broke for lunch halfway up the first wall, and never got back to it. This is not sophisticated eating, but it is delicious. Oysters come any way you want them, grilled, fried, or raw. A sandwich containing a dozen fit for a king cost me about £4. There are two main holiday seasons here. The area is cooler than further south and closes down completely in January. In February, March and April, it attracts birdwatchers, beachcombers, campers in big American motor homes and history buffs on lighthouse tours. From May until September, beach lovers and fishermen (and women) take over. Locals tell you they have not had a hurricane for decades, but there is always a chance of that towards the end of summer. The Forgotten Coast is still so tourist-shy that no package tours go there. And you'll find that the main hotels and holiday-home rental companies do not have British agents.

This would have to be a build-it-yourself holiday, for which you definitely need a car. Major airports served by flights from Britain are Atlanta, Georgia, and Orlando (both a six-hour drive away), and Tampa (five hours).

Alternatively, you could fly on to one of the regional airports, at Apalachicola or Tallahassee (two hours' drive from Carrabelle).

If staying there with a family, I would opt for renting one of the large, luxurious houses right on the beach on any of the islands. All are well-equipped, with at least two or three bathrooms, TVs, microwaves and barbecues.

Prices range from \$1,000 (£715) a week in the low winter season to \$4,500 (£3,200) for the peak season from the end of May to the end of August.

More quaint accommodation is provided at the Old Carrabelle Hotel, an 1880s B&B (ask if the

Hemingway Room with its huge bathroom is available). It charges between \$75 (£50) and \$95 (£67) per room, single or double occupancy. All rooms have ensuite bathrooms. For \$75 a night, I stayed at the Gibson Inn in Apalachicola. It advertises itself as a restored Victorian hotel, but frankly could do with a bit more restoring and another lick of paint. It's a small quibble for a place that takes you back in time to a Florida that has been all but forgotten. If it sounds the sort of place for you, it's well worth a visit. But don't leave it too long - the secret could soon be out.

Travel facts

Most hotels can be booked through your travel agent or online. Or you can phone direct:

Georgian Motel: 011 850 697 3410.

Old Carrabelle Hotel: 011 850 697 9010. Gibson Inn: 011 850 653 2191.

For more hotels and information, log on to Carrabelle Chamber of Commerce at

www.carrabellechamber.org or Apalachicola Chamber of Commerce at www.baynavigator.com

Estate agents renting houses include Anchor Vacation Properties, 011 850 927 2625,

www.florida-beach.com, and Gulf Coast Vacation Rentals, 011 850 648 5449,

www.gulfcoastvacationrentals.com