

Sunshine star

Panama City Beach is an up-and-coming alternative to Florida's better-known coastal spots, discovers **Cathy Toogood**



Shell Island,
Panama City Beach

PICTURE: Visit Panama City Beach

"
look to my right, not too far from shore," says pilot Mike Schaeffer as he loops the helicopter around to take a closer look at two black-tipped sharks he's spotted in the sea below.

Even though we're 150 metres above the coastline, the turquoise water is so clear that we also see a fever of cownose rays and a pair of

dolphins. The latter are putting on a playful show for boat-trippers: they dip below the vessel and emerge on the other side, their fins slicing through the water and their flicking tails providing a splashy finale.

On our way back to base, Mike casually points out 'Gary the gator' lounging in the sun next to a pond.

I'm in Panama City Beach, a resort on the Florida Panhandle, ➤

WHERE TO *stay*



Embassy Suites by Hilton

Next to Pier Park's shopping and entertainment complex, and over the road from the beach – 175 out of 255 rooms have Gulf of Mexico views – Embassy Suites by Hilton is in the perfect location for clients who like to be in the thick of the action. The all-suite accommodation has an outdoor pool and fitness centre, and all rates include breakfast. A King Studio Suite starts at £108 per night. hilton.com



Margaritaville Beach Cottage Resort

With pretty, pastel-coloured accommodation ranging from Surf Bungalows sleeping up to six to Beach Villas that can accommodate 18, this resort is ideal for groups of family or friends who'd like their own space but the convenience of hotel facilities. Within the beachside resort, there's a pool, lazy river, waterslides and the poolside Salty Rim Grill and Bar. Surf Bungalows lead in at \$420 per night. margaritavilleresorts.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sunset cruise with Island Time Sailing; a bottlenose dolphin; Thomas Donuts; an airboating trip in the West Bay area of Panama City Beach

PICTURES: Visit Panama City Beach/Michael Booini; Bao Media

where life centres on the 27-mile stretch of powdery, white sand. Less familiar for Brits than other parts of Florida, it's starting to get noticed by UK agents due to its varied accommodation, fun tourist attractions, food and drink scene, wildlife and, of course, its beaches.

SELECT YOUR STYLE

My sky-high sightseeing with Panhandle Helicopter is an ideal way to get an overview of this laid-back destination and its places to stay, eat and drink along main strip Front Beach Road. Here, guests can drink in ocean views and put their toes in fine, golden sand lapped by aquamarine waves.

Clients can choose their own holiday style along this beachfront stretch. If they like to be in the heart of the action, there's the Pier Park outdoor shopping, dining and entertainment centre, with its combination of high-rise condos, big-brand beachfront hotels and pastel-coloured, two-storey beach houses.

In the east of the resort near County Pier, there are big resorts on the sand, including the picture-perfect Margaritaville Cottage Resort and plenty of attractions, plus great places to eat and drink. West of City Pier is a quieter affair with private rentals and the much-loved Thomas Donuts, where residents and holidaymakers queue up for glazed and filled treats.

And those who like to immerse themselves in nature can try glamping in the serene St Andrews State Park.

ISLAND ADVENTURE

Beyond St Andrews State Park and across Saint Andrew Bay is uninhabited Shell Island – seven miles of untouched sand. I'm on my way for a three-hour cruise with Island Time Sailing when, as if ready for our arrival, a pod of dolphins pops up in front of our catamaran to frolic in the twinkling water. With one of the highest concentrations of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins in the world, Panama City Beach offers almost guaranteed sightings.

We're also treated to a flyover by two squadrons of brown pelicans, which skim the water next to us, before we jump off to explore Shell Island. We're the only group in sight and it feels like our own desert island adventure with nothing but immaculate shell-strewn sand and sparkling sea. As we climb back on board after a swim, the friendly crew offers up the company's signature rum punch – and Panama City Beach's chilled way of life is in full swing.

This warm, laid-back welcome is one I feel throughout my trip, especially in Andy's Flour Power, where owner John Certo greets us at 9am, recommending the restaurant's famous breakfast martini alongside bright-green pistachio muffins, ➤

SELLING tips



Jodie Sharpe, product and commercial executive, Ocean Holidays

"I was blown away by the number of activities available. Whether you're an adrenaline junkie or someone who just wants to soak up the sun, Panama City Beach has it all. The best part is that every experience immerses you in the natural beauty that makes the destination so special."



Santa Lavrenova, sales and marketing executive, Jetset Holidays

"What surprised me about Panama City Beach was how stunning the sand and sea are – the beaches are powdery white, the water is crystal-clear and there are breathtaking views in every direction. It felt like a little pocket of paradise."

French toast, frittatas and biscuits (an American breakfast staple similar to a savoury scone), which set me up for a day exploring nearby St Andrews State Park.

One of the two state parks in Panama City Beach, St Andrews is a peaceful spot where clients can relax on pristine sands, look for alligators and other wildlife in its freshwater Gator Lake and spot seabirds including protected least terns. At one point, a preening heron poses proudly at the end of the pier, its grey silhouette standing out against the rainbow of brilliant blues behind it. Entrance to the park is \$8 per vehicle for two to eight people, \$4 for a single-occupant vehicle and \$2 for pedestrians and cyclists.

HURRICANE HELPERS

These sandy stretches, rolling dunes and abundant wildlife are a big part of the appeal and identity of Panama City Beach. After hurricane

Michael passed through in 2018 – the strongest hurricane ever to hit the Florida Panhandle, causing devastation to Mexico Beach, which lies southeast of Panama City Beach – a voluntourism initiative was set up.

Stay it Forward allows both holidaymakers and locals to volunteer to make a difference. Initially set up to help Mexico Beach with the recovery and clean-up operation, the project has been extended and clients can now volunteer during their trip to plant sea oats in the dunes behind the town's beaches (for dates, email info@visitpanamacitybeach.com). The massive root system of sea oats, a type of grass native to the Florida dunes, can hold sand and soil in place during extreme weather such as hurricanes and tropical storms.

We head to the beach kitted out in branded hats and T-shirts, which make passers-by stop to ask what we're doing as we scoop

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BOOK IT

Jetset Holidays offers seven nights' bed and breakfast in Panama City Beach from £811 per person, based on two adults and two children sharing a Studio Suite at the Embassy Suites by Hilton. The price includes flights from Heathrow for departures in December. jetsetflights.co.uk

Ocean Holidays' 11-night North Central Florida fly-drive round trip from Tampa features two nights at Panama City Beach's Splash Resort. Prices start at £1,679 including room-only accommodation, American Airlines flights from Gatwick, car hire and listed activities such as a catamaran snorkelling and dolphin-watching tour. ocean-florida.co.uk



FROM LEFT: Writer Cathy Toogood (far right) with fam trip group planting sea oats; SkyWheel, Panama City Beach **PICTURE:** Visit Panama City Beach

up the sand with our hands to dig holes for the sea oat plants.

Organiser Steve Bailey from Visit Panama City Beach tells me that as well as protecting the dunes, sea oats are mini wildlife sanctuaries for endangered beach mice and turtles, and their seeds provide food for birds. They are so important to Florida that it is illegal to pick, cut or remove them.

"I've seen the devastation from storms first-hand," says Steve. "There's no doubt that this will definitely make a difference. We've covered at least 50% of the dunes so far through this project."

Watching the sun go down from Schooner's beach club after dinner and a spicy margarita, I try to capture the beauty of Panama City Beach's sands in a photograph.

The orange setting sun is reflected on the water with the silhouettes of pelicans swooping by and a boy surfing on the waves.

As I snap my final shot, the sun disappears, Schooner's fires a cannon to ring in the start of the evening's festivities and everyone cheers. It's a fitting way to celebrate the end of another beautiful day in this special setting. **TW**



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