



Segment 3

Panama City Beach/St. Andrews Bay

Emergency Contact Numbers:**911**

Walton County Sheriff's Office: 850-267-2000

Bay County Sheriff's Office: 850-747-4700

Gulf County Sheriff's Office: 850-227-1115

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating
under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

Begin: Grayton Beach State Park

End: St. Joseph Peninsula State Park

Distance: 63 miles, depending on side trips

Duration: 4-5 days

Special Considerations: Large storms and hurricanes may close several inlets, requiring some portaging to campsites and points of interest. No camping is allowed on Tyndall Air Force Base, so a 24-plus mile paddle is required from St. Andrews State Park to Mexico Beach, where motel accommodations can be made. To avoid this long distance an [Alternate Inland Route](#) for Segments 2-4 utilizing the ICW can be accessed if weather conditions are inclement. There are several options for returning to the Gulf route if weather improves.

A GPS unit is critical in this segment as breakers along the beach may make it necessary to paddle farther offshore, and fog can shroud landmarks. Also, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish beachside motels from condominiums, and most motels are not marked on the Gulf side.

Introduction

Emerald waters, sugar-sand beaches and high dunes mark the first two-thirds of this section, followed by a remote stretch of wild barrier islands and peninsulas. There are several points of interest and a couple of nights where motel stays are necessary. Most motels are not marked from the Gulf side, so GPS points are given on the map for motels located at key intervals. Paddling is a straight west-east route parallel to the coast until barrier islands and peninsulas are seen after St. Andrews State Park.

For state park camping recommended in this guide, advanced reservations are essential. Access [Reserve America](#) or call 1-800-326-3521. Phone numbers are given in specific sections to reserve primitive campsites outlined in this guide. There is an 8-person and/or four 2-person tent maximum allowed at primitive campsites. Please keep sites clean and follow all regulations in order for these sites to remain open for paddlers. These sites are “pack-it-in, pack-it-out” only, with campers following [Leave No Trace](#) principles.

Large tracts of conservation lands and waters in the Panhandle are carefully managed for ecological, historical or recreational purposes and remain pristine and largely undeveloped. There are two state aquatic preserves, [St. Andrews Aquatic Preserve](#) and [St. Joseph Bay Aquatic Preserve](#).

1: Grayton Beach State Park Campground to Beachside Resort, 14 miles

Comprising more than 2,227 acres, [Grayton Beach State Park](#) offers 37 campsites, 30 cabins, five picnic shelters, three coastal dune lakes, four miles of trails and 13 distinct natural communities, from beach dune to scrubby flatwoods. There are also 19 listed species of protected animals and plants occurring within the park boundaries. The park’s beach and dunes, like most along the Panhandle coast, consist of quartz sand that floated down rivers and streams from the Appalachian Mountains.

The park has a boat ramp, but what makes this park so inviting to paddlers is that several campsites (even-numbered sites from 10 through 20) are directly along Western Lake, so paddlers can launch or land at their camping area. Western Lake is open to the Gulf via a narrow inlet except when big storms close it with sand. Some portaging may be necessary. Check with the ranger's office for local conditions (850) 231-4210.

From the campground along Western Lake, paddle west approximately a half mile to the Gulf inlet and proceed east along the shore. In about six miles, you'll see an unmarred area of dunes nestled between coastal developments. This is the 1,920-acre [Deer Lake State Park](#). Growing atop the high dunes is a rare plant: the Cruise's golden aster. Numerous other flowering plants can be found in the park's 11 distinct natural communities, including white top and yellow pitcher plants, rosebud orchids and pine lilies.

The long boardwalk from the primary dune to the upland habitats is worthy a stroll as it traverses an unspoiled vista of rolling dunes with a scenic view of Deer Lake to the west. The parking lot area has water and a composting toilet.

Regular public camping is not allowed at Deer Lake. It is also not recommended as a launching spot as the Gulf is 200 yards or more from the parking lot down the long boardwalk unless you use a kayak cart to roll your boat.

About five miles from Deer Lake lies a spot you don't want to miss: [Camp Helen State Park](#). It is marked along the Gulf by a decrepit pier jutting into the water. From the pier, you can reach a trail to the upland areas of the park by heading across the sand in a northerly direction.

Camp Helen, with its 1930s-era lodge and cottages, will give you a glimpse of how Florida tourists spent their vacations several decades ago. If you want to go back farther in history, you can envision the four thousand or more years Native Americans utilized this site. When standing atop the high hill, with striking views on three sides and a cooling breeze in your face, you can fully understand the desirability of this unique geologic landform. Make sure to stroll along the park's short loop hike through a scenic live oak hammock.

There is no camping allowed at the park, but water and bathrooms are available to visitors during daylight hours.

About two miles past Camp Helen along the Gulf is the first of many motels available to paddlers, the [Beachside Resort](#). Advance reservations are recommended (call 1-850-234-5722). A GPS point is provided for you on the map. A small market is across the street; a supermarket is located about a mile west along the highway.

There are other motels as you proceed east, the next one being about a mile away, the [Sugar Sands Beach Resort](#). You can scope out the various motels ahead at [Panama City Beach Online](#). Advanced reservations are recommended, especially on weekends and during college spring break periods in March and April. Your choice of a motel will determine the length of your paddle to St. Andrews State Park.

2. Beachside Resort to St. Andrews State Park Campground, 17.5 miles

Paddle past the gleaming white beaches and numerous motels, condominiums and attractions of Panama City Beach to [St. Andrews State Park](#). A handy reference point is the Dan Russell City Pier, about five miles from the Grand Cayman. A supermarket is about a mile west of the Dan Russell pier, along the beach road. The M. B. Miller County Pier is about three miles past the first pier. These public piers provide public restrooms, drinking water and outdoor showers. Numerous restaurants are in the vicinity. You can shorten your day by staying in another motel along the beach.

About three miles before St. Andrews is the Richard Seltzer Park, which also has restrooms, water and outdoor showers.

To reach the St. Andrews State Park Campground, make a sharp left at the pass between the jetties and Shell Island, and make another sharp left into Grand Lagoon and proceed just past the boat ramp. There are numerous campsites on the water where you can land your kayak (even numbers from 16-38, 96-114, and 101, 132, 134 and 143). There may be rip-rap (large rocks) and marsh grass in front of others. The park offers fresh water, showers and bathrooms.

Human history at St. Andrews State Park began with early Native Americans, who feasted on fish and abundant shellfish and left behind numerous middens (trash heaps of discarded shells, bones and other refuse). In the early 1900s, bathers frequently used the area, generally arriving by boat. The first known full-time resident during this period was a Norwegian-born sailor who wrecked his boat on the south bank of Grand Lagoon during a 1929 hurricane. "Teddy the Hermit" decided to homestead and remained until his death in 1954 at age 74. His makeshift shack once stood between campsites 101 and 102.

The purchase of land for a state park began in 1947 when 302 acres were acquired from the federal government for the bargain price of \$2.50 an acre. Today, after the addition of several adjacent parcels, at a considerably higher cost, the popular park consists of more than 1,200 acres.

The inlets and bays around the park are part of the [St. Andrews Aquatic Preserve](#) . Considered one of the most diverse bays in North America, with over 2,100 recorded marine dependent species, St. Andrews Bay has the largest expanse of ecologically valuable seagrass beds in the Florida panhandle. These beds, along with expansive salt marshes, provide spawning and nursery habitats for a wide variety of fish and shellfish. The beaches and uplands along the preserve provide habitat and nesting areas for several protected species such as loggerhead and green sea turtles, the Choctawhatchee beach mouse, and snowy and piping plovers.

3: St. Andrews State Park Campground to Mexico Beach, 25 miles

This is a long stretch without camping, but one of the most pristine, with little or no coastal development visible. The shoreline appearance is reminiscent of a time before arrival of Europeans. Only occasional fighter jets and motorboats will jolt you back to this century.

From the campground, paddle across the channel and continue your journey west along Shell Island through St. Andrew Bay. This island was formerly known as Lands End Peninsula and was connected to the mainland, but the Army Corps of Engineers dredged the current pass as an easier and safer channel into St. Andrews Bay.

Interestingly, in 2004, Hurricane Ivan closed the natural pass at the other end of Shell Island, known as East Pass. It is one more reminder that storms, winds and currents are constantly reshaping the coastal landscape. After you cross the channel take the Gulf side of Shell Island. Be careful of breakers along this pass and others. Take a wide turn around them.

The east end of Shell Island and the adjacent Crooked Island is controlled by Tyndall Air Force Base. You can land on these inviting, sandy shores for rest breaks, but no overnight camping is permitted. You'll need to stay on the Gulf side for the rest of this section. Otherwise, some portaging will be necessary (Crooked Island is not a true island).

Mexico Beach is a small coastal community that was severely impacted by Hurricane Michael in 2018. The town is slowly rebuilding and open establishments include a hardware store, restaurants, and a post office. While the Buena Vista Motel was destroyed, the [El Governor Motel](#) is rebuilding and may open in late 2020. Check website or call 850 648-5757 to check status. For more information, visit [Mexico Beach](#).

If you want to use Mexico Beach for a mail drop, address letters or packages to: (your name) c/o general delivery, U.S. Post Office, Mexico Beach, FL 32456. The post office is located one mile inland on 15th Street.

4: Mexico Beach to St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, 6.5 miles.

Note: Due to damage from Hurricane Michael, the western part of the park, including the campgrounds and all primitive campsites, is closed until further notice. Check the “What’s New on the Trail” link for any updates.

[St. Joseph Peninsula State Park](#) is a fitting end to this section, offering a true coastal wilderness experience. The St. Joseph State Park’s Wilderness Preserve, one of only six in the state park system, encompasses the northern 7.5 miles of the peninsula (over 1,750 acres). This is an unspoiled landscape of large dunes and coastal scrub and grasslands. The Preserve is accessible by foot or by boat, and circumnavigational paddlers can primitive camp in the preserve at a designated campsite with advance

reservations. Call 850-227-1327 to reserve a site. Calling ahead avoids conflict with other users. The site capacity is set to protect the wilderness quality of the area. Payment is due on the day of arrival and is normally paid at the ranger station, although a long-distance paddler can pay by phone with a credit card the day of arrival (\$5.00 per person per night). No fires are allowed and campers must follow "Leave No Trace" principles. Paddlers need to check in at least two hours before sunset and check out with park personnel.

There are paddler campsites that can be accessed from the bay or from the Gulf. Campsites 2 & 7 can be accessed on the bay side. Campsite 3 can be accessed from the Gulf where you must hike in from the beach following marked trails and camp in the designated camping site. There is a limit of five campers per site and most sites can accommodate 2-3 small tents.

From the Wilderness Preserve, paddle through the clear waters of the [St. Joseph Bay Aquatic Preserve](#). The shallow bay waters are homes and nurseries for numerous fish and sea animals such as sea urchins, scallops and snails. Seagrass beds are lush and abundant. Fishing and summer scalloping are popular recreational activities. Nearing the halfway point, water and restrooms are available at the southern end of the state park at the picnic area and boat ramp (see map). Outdoor cold showers are at the beach restrooms, across the road from the park's boat ramp along the bay. The park also offers canoe and kayak rentals. A small grocery store can be found about five miles outside the park boundary along 30E.

This stop is an excellent place to take an extra day off to paddle along St. Joseph Bay or to hike along the park's many trails. The peninsula is a birdwatcher's paradise; 247 species have been observed at the park. Following the passage of fall cold fronts, you can spot hundreds and sometimes thousands of migrating hawks and falcons passing over and resting at the park on their way to Mexico and South America. In winter, look for gannets, loons, cormorants and ducks. Spring migrants include snowy and piping plovers and black-throated and chestnut-sided warblers.

Summertime brings green and loggerhead sea turtles to the beaches for egg laying.