



Segment 2

Santa Rosa Sound/Emerald Coast

Emergency contact information:

911

Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office: 850-651-7400

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

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

FPTA Region: A

Begin: Navarre Beach Camping Resort

End: Grayton Beach State Park

Distance: 46 miles

Duration: 3-4 days

Special Considerations: The second half of this segment covers the open waters of the Gulf where paddlers will first encounter the Emerald Coast's famous white sand beaches. We do not recommend this outside route at this time due to some State Parks and Motels still not open due to damage from Hurricane Sally. If you wish to take the outside route, please call ahead and make sure all your accommodations are open. There is an alternate 'inland' route across the north side of Choctawhatchee Bay and through the ICW to Apalachicola if weather conditions are hazardous (see Alternate Panhandle Route, Segs. 2-4). If conditions improve there are several locations where the 'outside' route along the Gulf Coast can be rejoined.

Introduction

Part of the attraction of the Emerald Coast can be attributed to its stark white sand and emerald waters. The sand originated in the southern Appalachian Mountains, primarily from quartz rocks, and was carried down the Apalachicola River system eons ago. Many of the Gulf beaches in this area are currently isolated from sediment-laden rivers, so the water is often clear. Sunlight reflecting off harmless micro-algae suspended in the shallows gives off emerald green hues.

The makeup of the shoreline has changed over time. All of Destin, for example, was once an offshore island. Storms, wind-driven sand, and sea-level changes prompted a gradual transformation into a peninsula.

Human history began with Native Americans about 12,000 years ago. Early paleo Indians were largely nomadic hunters who fished and followed game herds. Eventually, when agriculture was introduced, native people established large villages and ceremonial complexes. Remnants still exist. Modern-day visitors can tour a large Indian Temple Mound Museum in downtown Fort Walton Beach. The 17-foot-tall mound, one of the largest along the Gulf Coast, was created by an estimated half-a-million basket-loads of earth. During the Civil War, Confederate soldiers used the mound area as an encampment in order to guard part of the Santa Rosa Sound known as “The Narrows.” Soldiers set up a tent to display artifacts found in the mound, but Union troops set it ablaze. Once known as Brooks Landing and Camp Walton, the town was named Fort Walton in 1932 when a Civil War cannonball was unearthed from the temple mound. Tourism became popular and the town’s population grew by 700 percent between 1950 and 1970.

The town of Destin, named after an early fishing captain, eventually followed with a huge growth spurt. Once a quiet fishing village, the first condominiums framed the skyline in the 1980s, and the cranes are still at work. While about 14,000 people call Destin their year-round home, the population swells to two or three times that number during the summer tourist season and holidays.

In this segment, paddlers will continue through Santa Rosa Sound and eventually emerge into Choctawhatchee Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. The terrain varies from undeveloped military lands along Santa Rosa Island to Destin’s condominium-lined shores.

Three Florida state parks are featured: Henderson Beach, Topsail Hill Preserve, and Grayton Beach. All three contain unspoiled tracts of wind-sculpted dunes and coastal forest, with Topsail Hill and Grayton Beach being larger and more remote, featuring miles of nature trails and rare coastal dune lakes. The endangered Choctawhatchee beach mouse, which feeds on sea oats and other dune vegetation, can be found at Topsail.

Henderson Beach and Grayton Beach offer tent camping in shaded campgrounds. For camping reservations, visit [Reserve Florida State Parks](#) or call (800) 326-3521. Advanced reservations are advised.

For primitive camping described in this guide, please utilize [Leave No Trace](#) principles.

1. Navarre Beach Camping Resort to Fort Walton Beach, 11-13 miles

You'll be paddling through the Santa Rosa Sound as it gradually narrows near Fort Walton Beach. There are few if any suitable places to stop along the mainland, and a large chunk of land is part of Hurlburt Field, home of the 16th Special Operations Wing and off-limits to non-military personnel. Much of Santa Rosa Island in this segment, however, is undeveloped military land and is okay for rest stops.

Several spoil islands in the Santa Rosa Sound, beginning just before Fort Walton Beach, are available for primitive camping. We have provided a GPS point for one of them (see map).

If a motel stay is desired, the Quality Inn (850-275-0300) is located just after a city park along the mainland, adjacent to a restaurant. You can land on a narrow beach and pull up your kayak near the motel. Several restaurants and a grocery store are within walking distance.

2. Fort Walton Beach to Henderson Beach State Park, 13-14 miles

After passing through a stretch of the Santa Rosa Sound known as The Narrows, you'll enter the wide Choctawhatchee Bay. This is where the Alternate Inland Route for Segments 2,3, and 4 begins if weather conditions make it a better choice to travel to Apalachicola on the ICW. A short distance beyond the US 98 bridge is Ross Marler Park with bathrooms, several pavilions, an outdoor shower, and restaurants within walking distance. Keep skirting along Santa Rosa Island toward the Destin Bridge and be cautious of heavy boat traffic and strong currents and waves crossing the pass. There are several places to eat in Destin near the waterfront. A great place for a lunch break is the Clement R. Taylor Park about a half-mile east of the bridge near Destin (see map). Mature live oaks and magnolias shade a covered picnic area. There are also restrooms and water.

Once you pass through East Pass, you'll be paddling along the Gulf of Mexico along white-sand beaches. [Henderson Beach State Park](#) offers a natural alternative to Destin's row of condominiums. You may want to first land at the park's picnic area as it is only a quarter-mile to the entrance station where you can register for a campsite. For camping reservations, visit [Reserve Florida State Parks](#) or call (800) 326-3521. About a half-mile or so farther down the beach is the end of the boardwalk leading to the campground.

Since the campground is about 1400 feet away, you'll likely need to pull up your kayak away from the water and possibly lock it up on the boardwalk pilings, carrying your camping gear to your campsite. Make sure to take your paddle with you.

The Henderson Beach Campground is nestled in a pristine coastal forest of oaks and pines, many of which are twisted and bonsai-like due to coastal winds and storm surges. In this scrub habitat, look for wild rosemary, sand pine, wax myrtle oak, Chapman's oak, stunted southern magnolia, saw palmetto, and ground lichens. The wild rosemary, which mostly grows in coastal and deep sand habitats, is the only member of the crowberry family found in Florida.

If you need to stock up on supplies, a supermarket is across the road from the state park. Several restaurants are in the area and a huge outdoor sports store is less than a mile east along U.S. 98.

3. Henderson Beach State Park to Topsail Hill Preserve State Park (first access point), 9.5 miles

Topsail Hill Preserve State Park is a must-stop for exploration, with two large coastal dune lakes and a wide stretch of unspoiled coastal dunes and forest. At the first access point, you can utilize a composting toilet and find the trailhead of two nature trails. The second access point (about 1.3 miles past the first) is for the boardwalk and tram that leads to a tent campground. Like at Henderson Beach, you'll need to pull up your kayak near the dunes, with the option of locking it onto a boardwalk or post. The campground is about a mile from the beach, but you can utilize a park shuttle at the end of the boardwalk that leads to the ranger station. It runs every two hours in winter (9, 11, 1, 3, and 4:30 CST), and every hour in summer, beginning at 9 AM and ending around 7:30 PM. The schedule shift is marked by daylight savings time. For camping reservations, visit Reserve Florida State Parks or call (800) 326-3521.

A private campground about two miles before the state park is the Camp Gulf RV Park (see map). This is an RV campground, but tent camping is allowed near the office, not by the water. No reservations are allowed for tent camping. For more information, call (877) 226-7485.

4. Topsail Hill Preserve State Park to Grayton Beach State Park, 9.5 miles

In this scenic section, you will glide along more high dunes and white sand beaches. There are several small public beach access facilities that have restrooms, picnic pavilions, and showers (see map). These spots are usually marked by flags that tell

swimmers the level of safety for swimming. Red is for extreme caution (strong wind, strong surf, or strong currents and riptides), yellow is for normal conditions, and blue is for potential problems with jellyfish, stingrays, or other marine life.

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 to the campground (see map) 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.

If staying at the campground, you should try to reserve even-numbered sites from 10 through 20 as these are on the water and accessible by kayak. There are also several trails that lead from the water to interior sites if waterfront sites are booked. Odd-numbered sites from 9 through 23 might work for this option, but you'll need to use trails that do not cut through another camper's site. There are also cabins available for overnight stays. If the campground is full, contact the park headquarters about tent camping at a nearby overflow site, at (850) 267-8300. You can still land at the park's campground.

Take time to enjoy this 2,227-acre park that offers three coastal dune lakes, 13 distinct natural communities, and four miles of hiking trails.