

## **Segment Two**

### **Santa Rosa Sound/Emerald Coast**

**Emergency contact information:**

911

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

Walton County Sheriff's Office: 850-892-8186

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

**Begin:** Navarre Beach Bridge

**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. While this means that paddlers can land virtually anywhere to stretch and take a rest break, it also means they will be more vulnerable to high winds and waves. Special care should be taken during stormy, windy or foggy periods.

Advance reservations are recommended for motels and campgrounds, especially during holidays.

#### **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 the 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 and 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 12,000 people call Destin their year round home, the population swells to 40,000 during the tourist season. More than 80 percent of the Emerald Coast’s 4.5 million annual visitors are directly attributed to Destin.

In this segment, paddlers will continue through Santa Rosa Sound and eventually emerge into Choctawhatchee Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. 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 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. To learn more about these three parks, log onto [www.FloridaStateParks.org](http://www.FloridaStateParks.org).

Henderson Beach and Grayton Beach offer tent camping in shaded campgrounds. For reservations, contact Reserve America at (800) 326-3521 or log onto [www.reserveamerica.com](http://www.reserveamerica.com).

For primitive camping described in this guide, utilize Leave No Trace principles <http://www.lnt.org/>

#### 1. Navarre Beach Bridge to Fort Walton Beach, 12-13 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 Bayside Inn 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 are within walking distance.

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

After passing through a narrow stretch of the Santa Rosa Sound known as the Narrows, you'll enter the wide Choctawhatchee Bay. Keep skirting along Santa Rosa Island toward the Destin Bridge. A great place for a lunch break is the Clement R. Taylor Park about a half mile before 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. 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 State Park (first access point), 9.5 miles

Topsail Hill 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 new tent campground opening in the spring of 2009. 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), and every hour in summer, beginning at 9AM and ending

around 7:30 PM. The shift is marked by daylight savings time. For reservations, contact Reserve America at (800) 326-3521 or log onto [www.reserveamerica.com](http://www.reserveamerica.com).

A private campground about two miles before the state park is the Camping on the Gulf Campground (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 or log onto [www.campgulf.com](http://www.campgulf.com).

#### 4. Topsail Hill 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.

Near Grayton Beach State Park, you'll need to take an inlet leading into the park and to the campground (see map). Hurricanes or other strong storms may close this inlet to Western Lake, so you may need to make a short portage over sand. If staying in 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. 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.