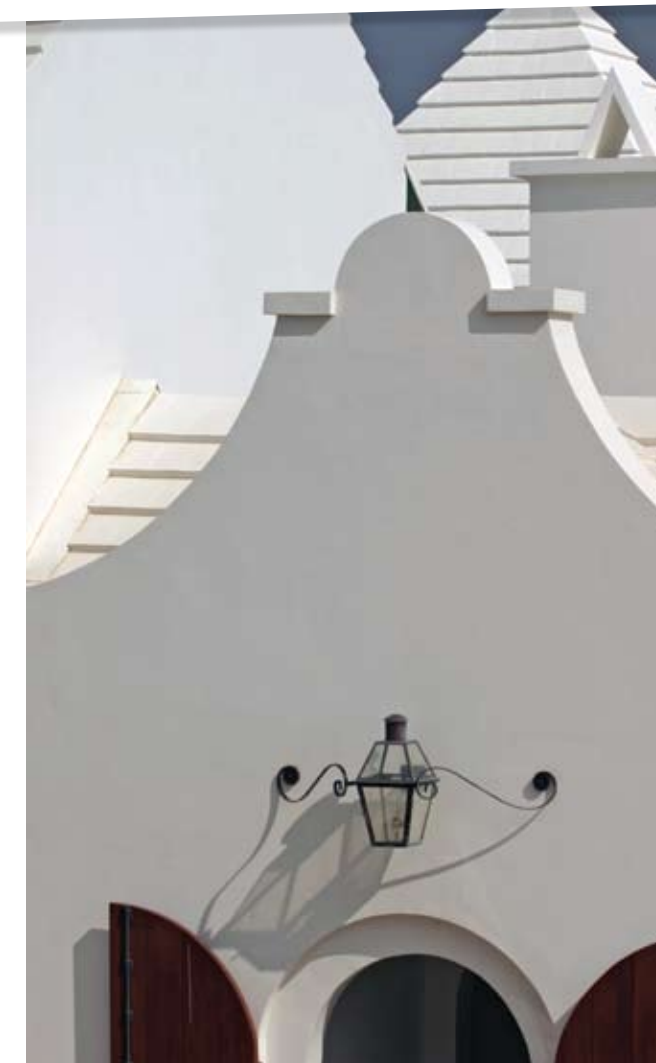


ALYS BEACH

by SUZANNE WRIGHT

Here's a tip-off you are in a swanky neighborhood: a convenience store called Tom Thumb carries Dom Perignon.



The ever-evolving beach communities of South Walton County in Florida's panhandle attract a sophisticated group of vacationers and homeowners—many from Atlanta—so the appearance of pricey bubbly shouldn't come as a surprise. Developers, too, continue to trump each other with eye-popping neighborhoods for second and third-home buyers and vacation rental clientele. Each community along the 19-mile stretch of 30A—Rosemary Beach, Seaside, Grayton Beach—has a distinctive personality. Among them, Alys Beach is the most visually arresting addition to the sugar-white sands and green waters of the Emerald Coast.

A stately row of Medjool palms signals the approach to Alys Beach, affectionately named for founder/developer Jason Comer's mother. My friend—who's a newbie to the area—and I check in for a four-night stay in a \$2.6 million dollar home, one of several in the rental pool. We ooh and aah over the Dominican shellstone flooring, the interior courtyard, the red gum cabinetry in the kitchen, the "cannonball" fireplace, the driftwood floor lamps, and the romantic detached master suite.



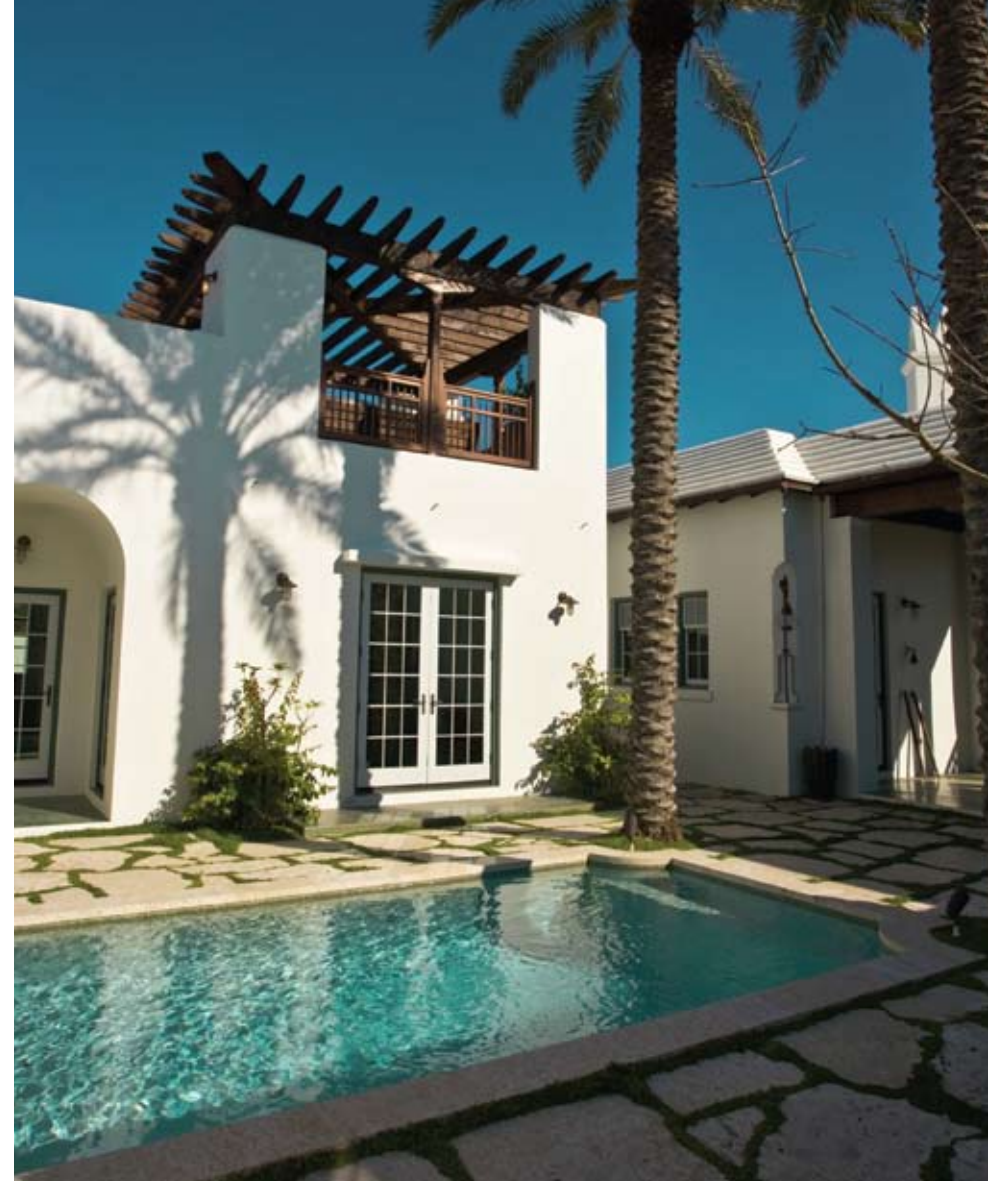
around the world: Sidi Bou Said in Tunisia, Miami's South Beach, sun-soaked Southern Spain, Santorini, Bermuda, Antigua, Essaïouira in Morocco, Guatemala. The eye-pleasing design is executed with a flourish and confidence that is both exhilarating and tranquil, contemporary and timeless. Though construction began just two years ago, Alys Beach looks and feels like centuries-old towns of the Mediterranean and Caribbean.

Alys Beach benefits from 21st century technology, although the nature of its appeal is more traditional. Designed by master New Urbanist planners Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, Alys Beach is an uncompromising blend of coastal sensibility, community focus, and innovative, storm-proof engineering. Hurricanes are an omnipresent threat,



The weather is mercurial during our visit, the sky mutable: from Persian blue to indigo, cornflower to slate, and an eerie, almost greenish white. The bright white Alys Beach architecture includes interesting angles, curves and ziggurats; as the light changes throughout the day, the white stuccoed facades take on gentle pastel tints of pink, lilac, peach, celery and powder blue. It's unabashedly alluring, dramatic in a low-key way.

Exploring the cobblestone footpaths of Alys Beach, the development evokes the architecture of beach communities



but the buildings of Alys Beach are masterfully constructed to withstand category 5 storms; it's the first fortified community in the world certified by the Institute for Business & Home Safety. When build-out is complete in 10 to 15 years, Alys Beach will be twice the size of nearby Seaside, flanking both sides of 30A with about 800 stately homes.

"Eco-friendly" has often meant forgoing luxury; Alys Beach marries both without sacrificing aesthetics. Architects consider sustainability, environmental impact and elements such as sun, wind and rain when choosing appropriate materials and construction methods. Most home sites use geothermal principles of heating and cooling; the masonry is durable and energy-efficient; the earth-friendly materials are the first in Northwest Florida certified green by the Florida

Green Building Coalition. Additionally, pavers encourage seepage and discourage flooding, landscaping features drought- and pest-resistant native plants and lighting is minimal, preserving views of the star-strewn night sky and minimizing disturbance to nesting sea turtles. Plans call for maximizing park and conservation space; the neighborhood design and flat terrain encourages walking and biking. The award-winning, interactive resource center details the nuances of Alys Beach's construction and habitat. Remarkably, a full-time, on-staff environmental program manager oversees all green initiatives.

As "green" as Alys Beach is, it's white that makes the biggest visual impact. We admired, again and again, the stark whitewash of the buildings that dominate the landscape and echo the famed sugar-white beaches from

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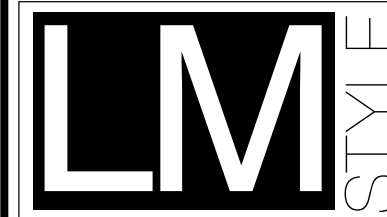
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among the nation's top beaches. The rare coastal dune lakes of the region—brackish bodies of water separated from the Gulf by the dune system—attract migrating birds and are home to a variety of marine species.

The winter sun warms our bodies as we appreciate the quiet beauty of this place. No wonder so many Atlantans find themselves returning year after year to this appealing coast. Whether you're an old-timer or a first-timer, Alys Beach is a discovery worthy of a flute of champagne. ☐

GREAT DINING

Northwest Florida is not only incredibly beautiful; it boasts a great culinary scene. Tuck into these dishes at favorite restaurants along scenic 30A.

- *The Old Florida Fish House, Seagrove Beach:* fried asparagus with jumbo lump crabmeat; grouper Pontchartrain with fried soft shell crab and crabmeat.
- *Another Broken Egg Café, Grayton Beach:* Floridian omelet with cream cheese and crabmeat; bananas foster waffle.
- *Bud & Alleys, Seaside:* smoked tuna dip with lavosh and oyster po-boy at the rooftop bar overlooking the shimmering Gulf of Mexico.
- *Café 30A, Seagrove Beach:* grilled Georgia quail with creamy grits; fried oyster salad with spinach and applewood smoked bacon; banana beignets with macadamia nut ice cream.
- *Stinky's Fish Camp, Santa Rosa Beach:* crawfish pie; catfish meuniere; bread pudding with caramel whiskey sauce.
- *Modica Market, Seaside:* family-owned gourmet grocery with top-notch provisions (like the cherry poppers) and wine; offers take-out and delivery.



street level, from the second floor of our house and from a vista overlooking the spectacular pool area. The Caliza Pool is breathtaking, in the way of a greyhound or a supermodel. In fact, it is easy to imagine a high fashion shoot taking place here—several already have—with its sexy influences including Italian, Greek and Moroccan. Lime green umbrellas ring the elliptical saltwater pool and there are private cabanas, a shaded children's pool, a restaurant and bar and spa whirlpool. Techies take note: the separate 75-foot lap pool has with underwater MP3 ports for underwater music.

We notice locals lingering over coffee at the onsite Fonville Press, which also serves meals and has a great selection of architecture books; kids scamper on the grassy knoll behind the café known as Fonville Hill. Then we borrow bicycles and pedal along the flat, wide shoulders of 30A. The Clean Beaches Council for extraordinary water quality and conservation certifies all 26 miles of beaches in South Walton County "Blue Wave Beaches"; Grayton Beach State Park is consistently ranked

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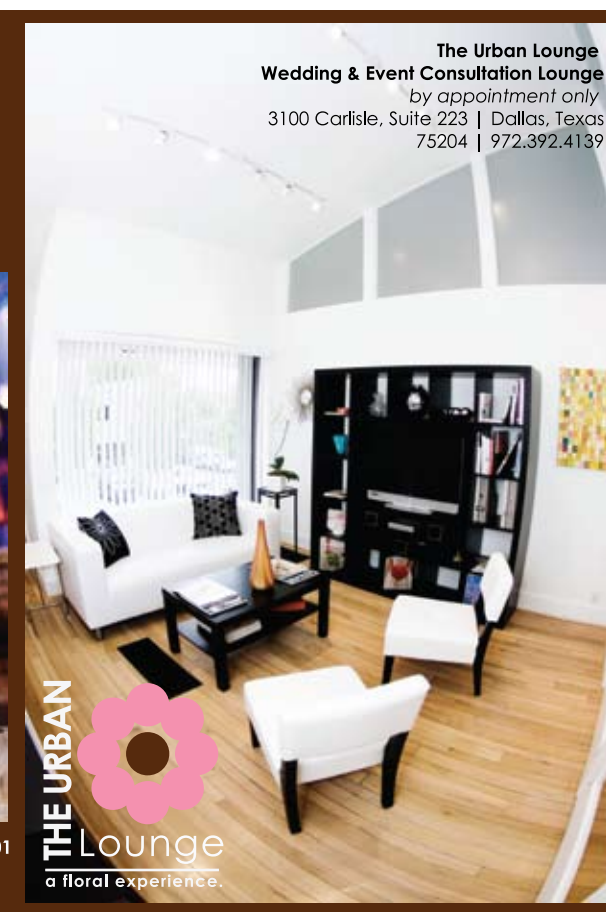
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