



Visions in White and Blue

Ultra-exclusive Alys Beach is inspired by sun-drenched climes

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

Here's a tip-off that you've entered a swanky neighborhood: A convenience store called Tom Thumb carries Dom Pérignon.

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 Highway 30-A—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 *ah* over the Dominican shellstone flooring, the interior courtyard, the red gum cabinetry in the kitchen, the "cannonball" fireplace, the driftwood floor lamps, the romantic detached master suite.

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

The Caliza pool is so large, beautiful and interesting that it is like having another beach.

Photograph courtesy of Alys Beach



1. The fabled green waters that give the Emerald Coast its name. 2. The courtyard homes of Alys Beach were inspired by the architecture of Antiqua and are designed to “bring the outdoors inside”. 3. Residents and guests can easily walk or bicycle to the beach, restaurants, parks, shops, the spectacular Caliza pool and the town’s 21-acre nature preserve. 4. All homes in Alys Beach are built to “Fortified...For Safer Living”® building standards and are also built to the Green Home Designation Standard of the Florida Green Building Coalition.

angles, curves and ziggurats; as the light changes throughout the day, the white stucco 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, we are reminded of the architecture of beach communities around the world: Sidi Bou Said in Tunisia, Miami's South Beach, sun-soaked Southern Spain, Santorini, Bermuda,

Antigua, Essaouira in Morocco, Guatemala. Heady and ambitious, executed with flourish and confidence, the design is supremely eye-pleasing, both exhilarating and tranquil, contemporary and timeless. Though construction began just three years ago, Alys Beach looks and feels like centuries-old towns of the Mediterranean and Caribbean.

Although traditional in its appeal, Alys Beach benefits from 21st-century technology. 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, but the buildings of Alys Beach are built 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 Highway 30-A with about 800 stately homes.

"Eco-friendly" has often meant foregoing 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 protected habitat; 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. From the second floor of our house, we admired, again and again, the stark whitewash of the buildings that dominate the landscape and echo the famed sugar-white beaches from street level. The Caliza pool is breathtaking, in the way of a greyhound or a supermodel. In fact, it is easy to imagine a high-end fashion shoot taking place here—several already

have—given the Italian, Greek and Moroccan influences. 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 and music lovers take note: the separate 75-foot lap pool has underwater speakers.

Locals linger over coffee at the on-site Fonville Press, which also serves meals and has a great selection of architecture books. Behind the café, kids scamper on the grassy knoll known as Fonville Hill. We borrow bicycles and pedal along the flat, wide shoulders of Highway 30-A. All 26 miles of beaches in South Walton County are certified “Blue Wave Beaches” by the Clean Beaches Council, singled out for meeting their high standards for water quality and habitat conservation; Grayton Beach State Park is consistently ranked 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. ↗

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GREAT DINING

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

- **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 meunière; 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.