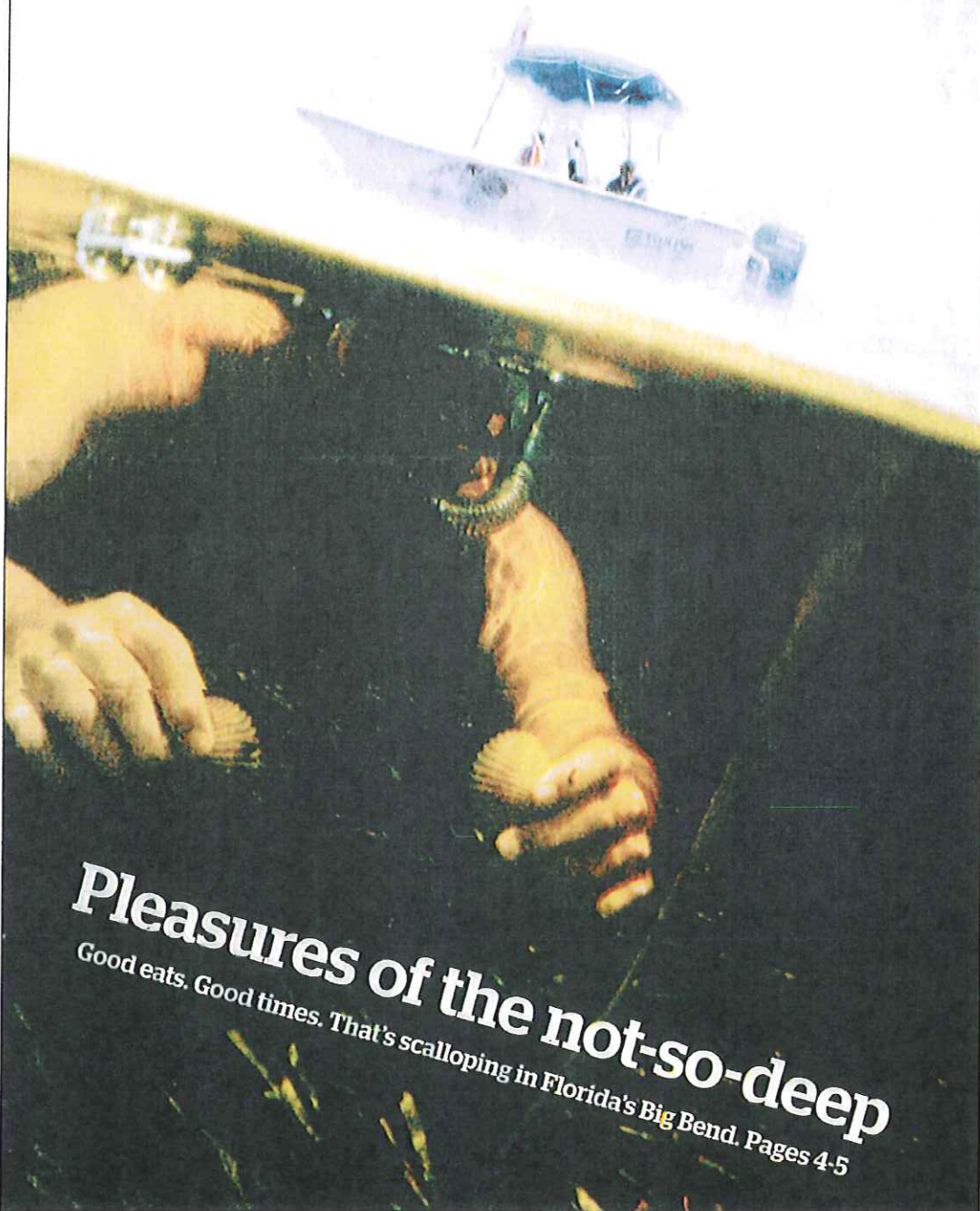


# latitudes

St. Petersburg Times Sunday, August 3, 2008 • tampabay.com • Section L



## Pleasures of the not-so-deep

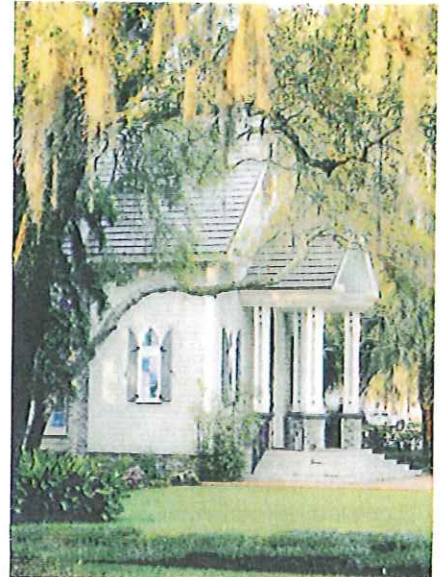
Good eats. Good times. That's scalloping in Florida's Big Bend. Pages 4-5



# The scallop hunters



The work isn't over when the scallops hit the boat. After returning to the River Haven Marina docks, divers clean their haul. For those who need help shucking, Suite Grant, center, charges \$5 per pound of meat.



The Dancing Waters Chapel is a centerpiece at the 35-acre Steinhatzee Landing Resort.

After harvesting your own shellfish, chowing down on the tasty morsels is especially sweet.

BY JOHN FRANK • Times Staff Writer

**STEINHATZEE**  
 It's just after noon when the sky starts splitting and the dark clouds shuffle down the Gulf Coast on yr in the scallop-harvesting season beds at the mouth of the Steinhatzee River.

Capt. "Casino" Dave Jenkins tosses the anchor into the shallow, 40-or-so feet after sighting a half-dozen white spots seaward side. "This looks good," he says, doubtless to lure the boat's 60's tank.  
 Following his lead, I section my snorkel mask to my face and wiggle on my fins. Perched on the edge of the boat, Jenkins hands me a mesh bag and I work half-minute silhouettes before plunging into the water on my first scalloping adventure.  
 "Oh, they're faster than you think," Jenkins says. "And they pinch harder than you think."  
 I laugh because the 59-year-old captain is a riot. His charter service is named Fish'n Tuna in a fit. His charter service is named Fish'n Tuna in a fit. His charter service is named Fish'n Tuna in a fit.

Steinhatchee is known as the "Scallop Capital of Florida." And this year's crop is the best since 2000, according to state marine officials.

From July 1 to Sept. 10, hundreds of raucous lovers, boaters and families descend on this tiny fishing village, population 1,500, on any given weekend during scalloping season.  
 Located in the Big Bend coastal region, three hours north of Tampa, a trip to exotico Steinhatchee (pronounced Stein HATCHEE) is a peaceful refuge and summer ritual for many folks. And an exciting adventure for first timers.  
 Put me in the last category. Before this trip, I knew one thing about scalloping: Like them, scuba in water.

I had an idea what they looked like, where they lived or how to catch them. Heck, I barely thought of them as being beaching creatures.  
 Scalloping, I discover, is a "drifting sport," as one guide put it, where you mope in anywhere from 10 to 40 feet of water, using a shell-shaped float in the water.  
 The real fun, pronounced as SKAW-lope, is this close to the Georgia border just in sea grass but particularly low the mounds of red sea grass and brown moss where they can hide. They can be far as much as a year.  
 On the hammer, when a speckled, lantern-like, not much different than picking mountain blackberries. As in they aren't hard to find if you know where to look and don't mind the effort.

It doesn't take long in the water to realize the captain is right: Those underwater berries are animals. And they eat too.  
 Around the shell's rim, the mollusk leaves rows of bright blue eyes. They see you coming.



Scalloping involves snorkeling in 3 to 7 feet of water while trying to spy your prey in the sea grass beds. "Oh, they're faster than you think," Capt. "Casino" Dave Jenkins says. "And they pinch harder than you think."



Jenkins demonstrates how to pry open a freshly caught scallop, revealing the tasty reward waiting inside.

**ON THE COVER:** Freelance photographer Kate Blackman made the photo of a diver hunting scallops by shooting through a floating fish tank.

Some simply shut their shells and let the darker, muscular side of the shell camouflage them. In a foggy, water-leaking mask — bought cheaply at a big-box sporting goods store — they await a big dinner.

Then there are the ones who don't go in the bag without a fight.

The swim, they spit and they pinch. Scallops are bivalves (meaning two shells) that feed by filtering water through their gills. In the same way, they can move by clapping the shells together and quickly expelling water, which sends them shooting backward.

Many times I take a deep breath and dive to the bottom, flipping kicking up in the air, only to find the scallops swimming away.

It's frustrating to watch the small creatures. The first time I see them move I swallow a snail's pace of water and have to surface. (Needless to say, the scallop got away.)

Other times, I reach down, grab the rim of the shell and get a little pinch. It doesn't hurt so much as you'd think.

But it's not a burner. And as I realize these animals didn't want to go in my bag, I begin loving the snail who put up a good fight.

Our guide isn't amused. "You'll be wishing you had a fish for that last bite of baked potato tonight," Jenkins says as he holds his full sack of scallops.

I think about his words carefully.

And soon this "dinner" strategy changes my whole relation.  
 The next time I surface we meet our 2 1/2-pintish limit.

Three miles up the winding river, we dock at Steinhatzee Landing Resort, a stop-over for a retreat with more than 50 colorful Victorian villas and Old Florida cottages that seem a world away from the main town and surrounding coast.

pass a cottage with an antique Sinclair gas pump and Coca-Cola sign out front.

"I wanted it to have the feel of a 1930s village," explains owner Dean Fowler, the night before when we meet him for dinner at Roy's, the town's premier waterfront restaurant.

Fowler, a polite, polished and personable host, made his money in the nursing home business before selling his company and moving from Georgia to this hamlet where he fished for years. "This is paradise," he says.

He opened the 35-acre resort in 1990 with nine cottages and it continues to grow.  
 With an elegant wedding chapel, large conference center, outdoor pool, stocked general store, small petting zoo and ample dock space, it has evolved into a exclusive, yet unpretentious, getaway destination.

Like the resort, the whole town is changing, native say, with tall waterfront condos already replacing cottages and a new sewer system in the works that will likely speed development.

But inside the landing, time stands still. We stay in Gray Cottage No. 24, a honeymoon suite with one large living-sleeping-dining space, a full kitchen and en-suite bathroom. The over-sized spa tub is visible from the main room through a glass-enclosed fireplace set in a huge stone hearth.

Dinner sits in a 6-gallon bucket on the front porch.

On the boat ride back to the dock, I try my hand at cleaning a scallop but quickly prove slow and ineptible. (I manage one decent clean one and eat the rest raw — a must try. It tastes sweet, yet salty — good.)

At our captain's advice, we take the scallops to River Haven Marina and Motel, home of the renowned Suite, "she'll be sitting on the dock surrounded by coolers," I'm told. "You'll see her. She's the fastest shucker down there."

Suite Grant, 47, wears a cloth glove on her left hand and while the scallop knife like it's her natural right appendage. She typically sits here four hours a night cleaning scallops for side money (\$5 per pound of meat) after finishing her housekeeping job at the marina's modest motel. Grant is a machine with about 50 years of experience.

We admire the poor souls at the table nearby who are cleaning their catch, but they are still working when we leave for dinner at Fiddler's Restaurant. They'll cook our bounty and provide all the trimmings for \$10.

We fought hard for our scallops and don't mind letting someone else do the dirty work. After all, we're hungry.

When the waitress comes around the corner, folks at the tables nearby utter collective gasps as they eye the mounds of fried and sauced scallops on our plates.

We smile. Scalloping is different than we thought but, in the end, it tastes like candy.

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## Scalloping in Steinhatzee

How it works: The easiest way to go scalloping if you don't have a boat is to hire a guide for an all-day charter. (Book as soon as possible; the season ends Sept. 10.) Guides work the water every day and know the best places to find scallops, especially near the marina. They provide fishing licenses and some gear. Bring a snorkel, mask and fins. If you bring a boat or rent one at the marina, follow the parade of scallop-liners to the popular spots. But don't forget soft-shell fishing licenses and catch limits (2 gallons of whole scallops per day, per person).

Our guides: Hiring a captain a half the adventure. Prices for scalloping are usually \$350 for a full day, typically about six people per boat. Call early and leave a message; they are probably on the water.

Our first day we went with Capt. "Casino" Dave Jenkins of Fish'n Tuna Charters. A 10-year veteran originally from Georgia, he programs the good spots into his GPS and sells great stories on the way. Reach him at (813) 498-2458 or jenkins387@att.net.

The second day we went with Capt. Jim Herley, a full-service guide who makes the trip about his summer. His story of leaving the corporate life for Steinhatzee will make you want to do the same. Herley can be reached at (813) 498-0792 or captainjimherley@yahoo.com. His Web site is www.steinhatchee.com.

Where to stay: Nothing in the area compares with Steinhatzee Landing Resort, with infused rental cottages on the main road through town. Owner Dean Fowler docks on his guests. It feels like a retreat but features all the amenities. Summer rates begin at \$220 a night. Information: www.steinhatcheelanding.com or toll-free 1-800-584-0709.

Other activities: Kayak or canoe the Steinhatzee River. Bring or rent a kayak and put in at the Steinhatzee Falls, a rare waterfall and mild rapids area on an otherwise calm, peaceful river. It's a leisurely three-hour trip from the falls to the resort.

Fishing: For on-shore and off-shore fishing, hire a guide for a half- or full-day charter. You'll catch anything from trout and redfish to Spanish mackerel and black bass. Pickup service is available from the resort.

Relax: Enjoy reading a book at the pool or on a swing under the live oak. To see an impressive sunset, ask the locals how to get to Cow Creek Road where a dead end into the Gulf of Mexico.

John Frank

