



Well-Designed Adventure

Steinhatchee Landing Resort combines pampering and play

by Chelle Koster Walton

After a long, hot, salty morning in the Gulf of Mexico plucking scallops out of seaweed and eel grass, I came "home" to a long bath in a jetted tub with a handheld showerhead and a rain showerhead in the ceiling. After switching on the double-sided electric fireplace and bathroom TV, I squirted mango-coconut bath oils into the tub and sank into an entirely different water experience from the morning's. All that was missing was my husband.

Alas, I was staying in a Honeymoon Cottage at Steinhatchee Landing Resort without my honey. But I managed,

nonetheless, to sweetly enjoy the nostalgically inclined design of the off-the-beaten-path resort as much as the unparalleled access to on-the-water adventure it offers.

"My concept was to re-create villages from the early 1900s," says Dean Fowler, who moved from Georgia to build his riverside Florida retreat, which opened in 1990. "After that time, homes went from Victorian to ranch houses. We tend to romanticize that Victorian era."

For one of the original cottages, Fowler showed the architect a picture of his grandmother's house in Andersonville, Georgia. For the office building, Fowler envisioned an old farmhouse, and there



Guests can grab breakfast at the Steinhatchee Landing Resort Welcome Center, which is modeled after a classic farmhouse (top); canoeing is just one of the outdoor activities in which resort guests can partake (bottom).



are even goats, roosters, donkeys, and horses on the property to further the aura Fowler remembers from childhood. More recently, the same architect built a wedding chapel based on the Gothic architecture he studied in Europe.

The latest section of the resort, which has grown from nine cottages and homes to sixty-eight, contains the Honeymoon Cottages. Many in this subsection are similar, but to give it a small-town feel, Fowler designed one guest cottage to look like an old general store, complete with an antique Dino gas pump outside, and another to emulate a country church.

The inviting interiors Fowler designed

TOP PHOTO COURTESY OF STEINHATCHEE LANDING RESORT; BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

himself, along with much of the landscaping. Homespun and luxury touches appeal to guests' cravings for comfort and aesthetics, and even Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter have felt at home here. They visited first as a couple in 1994 and two years later booked a family reunion at Steinhatchee Landing, which provides easy access to some of the state's best fishing (just what the former prez was looking for).

Tucked into what some disparagingly term "Florida's Armpit" for its lack of beaches, Northwest Florida's Steinhatchee area has a strong but rather secret reputation for fishing. Part of what is more kindly known as the Big Bend or Nature Coast, the region boasts a shallow Gulf of Mexico shoreline lined with salt marshes. The confluence of the Gulf and the fresh and pristine Steinhatchee River ensures species of fish in impressive numbers and schools of fishing aficionados who know about it. In 1995, the quiet little town's reputation got a boost when the state of Florida allowed recreational scallop fishing in the region.

"From the beginning, my idea was I could attract people here if I gave them things to do," says Fowler. "It's a pretty area, but they need things to do."

So the resort provides guests with plenty of ways to enjoy outdoor pleasures like kayaking, hiking, biking, archery, ten-



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Pineapple Plantation was one of the earliest cottages built at Steinhatchee Landing.

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OUTDOORS



nis, and swimming. But most still come to catch fish, and during the July 1 through September 10 scalloping season, Gulf waters clutter with charter boats.

Steinhatchee Landing makes arrangements for guests to be picked up from its dock on the river by a charter captain. A favorite, Captain Jim Henley regales guests with fishing stories during the slow ride downriver, past fishing lodges, a restaurant or two, and scenic river homes from plain to plain awesome. Usually Henley does fishing charters in the morning and scalloping in the afternoon, when the scallops tend to flip from their gray sides to easier-to-spot white sides as the day warms up.

By late August, however, the morning

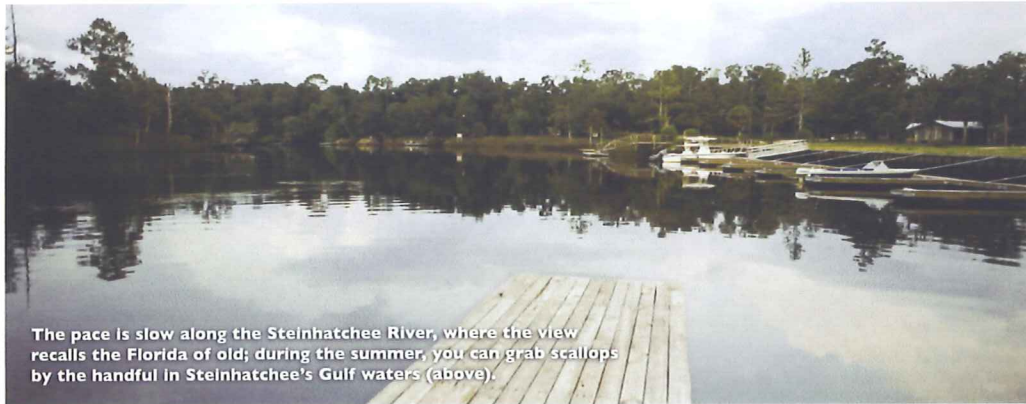
waters are already warm, and the scallops have grown larger and moved to deeper waters. Early in the season, charters look for water a couple of feet deep. In these Gulf waters, the depth remains thin for a mile or so from shore. Scallops favor spaghetti-like eel grass over fettuccine-like turtle grass. Often they congregate around what Henley calls "bomb holes," or sandy clearings.

During my trip, Henley dropped anchor first in a couple feet of water, water smooth as a drumhead that morning. He gave me lessons on grabbing the scallop "by the lips." He warned that they might try to swim away or pinch me, but "it didn't hurt," he said in his southern Georgia accent.

I saw my first scallop shortly after we dropped in, equipped with snorkel, mask, and fins. It held its shell slightly ajar but, as Henley warned, its eight eyes (others will tell you one hundred eyes) see you about the time you see it, and it snaps shut. I dove down and grabbed it without a fight. Easy pickings! Like an underwater Easter egg hunt.

We later moved to four-foot waters, which deepened to six as the tide moved in. At the second spot, I drifted with the current, and that's when I found the most scallops. Usually when you see one, you see some more. Because it now required a deeper dive, I'd sometimes try to grab two in one dive. The first time I tried that, the second one slipped from my grasp. I chased after it, but the scallop was ready for me. It grabbed my finger. I yelped, just as Henley predicted I would. I sucked down a little water in the ordeal and kicked up some seaweed muck, so then I couldn't find the bugger, whom I was now determined to add to my mesh bag. But he was gone, and I ultimately decided he deserved to live.

After a while, I took the time to get to know the mollusks I grabbed. If you hold them for awhile, they open their shells so you can look into their incredible cobalt-blue eyes. (I didn't count, but it looked like more than eight to me.) One shot up at me, snapping its shell as if to defend itself. I had to admire its pluck. After two hours of playing in their world, I would have felt guilty about ending these small lives, if not for the knowledge that they all die as soon



The pace is slow along the Steinhatchee River, where the view recalls the Florida of old; during the summer, you can grab scallops by the handful in Steinhatchee's Gulf waters (above).

PHOTO BY CHELLE HOSTER WALTON, BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY OF STEINHATCHEE LANDING RESORT



Former president Jimmy Carter and his family stayed here when they visited Steinhathee Landing Resort in 1996.

as the waters get cold in the fall.

Two gallons of in-shell scallops per person is the limit, which we reached in little bottom time. The captain opened one on board for me, and I enjoyed some scallop sushi, sweet as sugar. I was ready to end the adventure by the time we returned to the docks five hours later. Ready for that beckoning bathtub, and ready to feast on can't-get-any-fresher scallops, which I did that evening at Fiddler's Restaurant, where they sautéed them up perfectly tender.

Life is good in Steinhathee when the scallops are plentiful and the bath-water is bubbly. ☺

Chelle KosterWalton is the travel and cuisine editor for Times of the Islands and RSW Living. Her latest edition of Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay & Florida's West Coast is due out this fall.

IF YOU GO

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www.steinhatcheelanding.com

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