

Old Florida Alive in Steinhatchee



by Terry Conway

It's the kind of Old Florida town that film location spotters covet. It's hidden amid the natural and unspoiled wonder of Florida's "Big Bend", that northernmost crook of Florida's elbow. The town of Steinhatchee is in a serious time warp. Century-old fishing camps languish beneath mossy oaks. Weathered docks rock gently in the wake of fishing boats. Unpaved roads and endless trails wind through deep palmettos, towering pines and cypresses that stand sentry over sleepy bayous fingering out into the Gulf of Mexico.

It's home to a bevy of wildlife such as deer, wild pigs, roseate spoonbills, alligators, raccoons, opossums, snakes, great blue herons, egrets, turtles and countless others, including at least 19 endangered species.

The region also boasts one of the richest and most productive eco-systems in the world and a celebrated breeding ground for some of the best bay scalloping in the United States. In the waters off Steinhatchee River, scallops seem to prefer areas of bottom covered by thin, round-bladed types of sea grass. Patches of brown algae are also favorite hiding places. Once you see a few scallops lying on top of the sea grasses, drop the anchor, put up a dive flag and start collecting.

Every summer thousands of residents and visitors get in on the local scalloping, combing the waters for these tasty creatures. You just scoop them up - deftly slipping the rim of your net under an unsuspecting, wide-open scallop and flipping it in like a pancake. The creature snaps closed and lands on the pile at the net's bottom.

Scalloping is the perfect activity for a family vacation since the shallow, grassy areas where they reside provide easy targets for children. All you'll need is a mask, fins (or water shoes), a snorkel, and a mesh bag for storing the bounty. State law limits each harvester to two gallons of whole scallops

in the shell or one pint of bay scallop meat, per day.

After a full day of wading and scooping, you can rest comfortably at Steinhatchee Landing Resort. Located on the shady banks of the meandering Steinhatchee River, the resort is just three scenic miles upstream from the Gulf of Mexico. Dean



The "Welcome Center" at Steinhatchee Landing Resort located on the banks of Steinhatchee River.

Fowler had a vision back in the late 1980s while visiting the Steinhatchee area on fishing trips with friends. He wanted to create a retreat where families could enjoy the natural wonder of Steinhatchee that fishermen had grown to love.

Fowler constructed the resort to resemble a 1920s "Florida Cracker" village. A magnolia-and-oak-shaded hideaway of pastel tin-roofed Old Florida-style "cracker houses" with a Victorian accent, Steinhatchee Landing Resort has rocking chair verandas, hardwood floors and full kitchens that are perfect for preparing fresh scallops. It also boasts a vegetable and herb garden, wedding chapel, croquet lawn, horse barn and petting zoo. Many modern

amenities also dot the sprawling 35-acres of tranquil landscape including a conference center, tennis courts, fitness center, indoor swim spa and sauna, and pool and pavilion area.

Steinhatchee has always been a fisherman's paradise. The mouth of the Steinhatchee River - called Deadman's Bay since the 1830s - was the home to thousands of Native Americans. Early explorers wrote of large mounds of oyster and mussel shells along the banks of the river. Early settlers told friends and relatives in far off places about the plentiful supply of fish and wild game found in the Steinhatchee area.

For thousands of years the rivers around the "Big Bend" have deposited soils rich in minerals and foodstuffs into Apalachee Bay. These deposits have formed one of the richest and most productive eco-systems in the world. The slope of the gulf bottom is very gradual, making the water shallow for vast distances. The tidal range of approximately three feet means there is always shallow water for great fishing.

April is the best time for fishing on the flats, where an abundance of sea grass makes it a great place to drop a hook. Flat-boats, bird-dog boats, airboats and small charters share the very shallow area that gradually drops off toward the Gulf of Mexico. As the water warms on the grass flats of Deadman's Bay, fish such as spotted sea trout, redfish, bluefish, Spanish mackerel, ladyfish, and jack crevalle can be caught easily in shallow beach, inshore, brackish river, or backcountry waters. Spring also offers some superb fishing offshore - grouper, black seabass, and red and Florida snapper can be caught on the bottom in about 35 to 55 feet of water.

You'll find those fresh catches up on the whiteboard at Roy's, which overlooks the gulf. A no-frills restaurant, it also serves up those succulent scallops, tangy cheese grits and an extensive salad bar. Over at Fiddlers they have table service and a more traditional restaurant feel. Pair your grilled shrimp with one of the solid California wines available. Or, if you've been fishing, the cook will cheerfully cook your catch.

Around these parts you will find untamed rivers, eye-popping wildlife, old-fashioned hospitality and fishing as it was truly meant to be. Tourism folks promote "the 19th century is back." In Steinhatchee, it never really left.

For more information on the region call 352-498-3513 or visit www.steinhatchee.com.

