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Hidden Gems

Fairhope, Alabama

Here's a sentence you don't read every day: Alabama (home to the editorial offices of *Coastal Living*) shelters one of the country's best-kept surprises. Trust us on this one. Just veer off U.S. 98 onto Alternate 98, parallel to Mobile Bay, and follow the leafy, gently curving two-lane road into a dictionary-perfect "Smalltown, USA"—Fairhope.

Turn right onto Fairhope Avenue, pass the two-story storefronts with rockers out front, and take in this panorama: Protected green parkland saddles the waterfront bluffs to the left and right. Below their slopes, the Mobile Bay shoreline appears like a Norman Rockwell painting come to life. Fishermen deftly cast their lines from the public pier, families picnic on the sand or beneath the shade of mossy live oaks, and, some days, the local schoolteacher takes her first-graders to the shallows to learn about the sea creatures. North and south from the beach, you'll see the parade of privately owned dock pavilions. These piers with gazebo-like structures are enduring icons, signaling a way of life on Alabama's Eastern Shore.

Founded in 1894, the town claims a long history and unusual beginnings that have given it cultural cachet. It has attracted writers ranging from Upton Sinclair and Sherwood Anderson to Winston Groom and Fannie Flagg, and its legendary Page and Palette bookstore holds a lively schedule of author appearances and readings. Like Mobile across the bay, Fairhope hosts its own Mardi Gras, along with an annual arts and crafts festival.

The town's nearby attraction, Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, comprises almost 6,000 acres of land and water in and around Weeks and Mobile bays. The reserve offers spectacular birding—more than 350 species have been spotted—along with good salt- and freshwater fishing; hummingbird and butterfly gardens; and nature trails, including a boardwalk through a swamp forest where rare pitcher plants thrive.

what the locals know

Anil Vira, owner of Fairhope's Barons Inn, tells us that sometimes, when the wind blows from the east—usually when the weather is hot—thousands of fish, including flounder, eel, crab, and shrimp, head for shallow waters. "This phenomenon is known locally as 'Jubilee,'" says Anil. "In the early days, people would run through the streets, banging on pots and pans, yelling, 'jubilee!' when it happened. Now they watch the sky for hovering seagulls, then run down to the waterfront with pails to scoop up the bounty. Some restaurants will even cook up your catch."

