

Travel + Leisure

Paradise, U.S.A.



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The idealistic notion that contemporary small towns ought to be "small" and "townlike"—rather than sections of strip mall-riven suburban sprawl—took off in Florida in the 1980's and 90's with the founding of Seaside and Celebration, and continues today. On a road trip across the state, *Karrie Jacobs* goes in search of the authentic amid New Urbanist experiments in postmodern nostalgia.

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The 80-acre fan-shaped waterfront community of Seaside, on Florida's Panhandle, began 25 years ago when a small-time developer named Robert Davis decided to build a resort community on land he'd inherited from his grandfather. He and his wife, Daryl, spent two years driving through the South in their red Pontiac convertible, studying the region's architecture and looking for a way to fabricate a place that would evoke the simple beachfront communities of his childhood. Eventually, Davis joined forces with two young architects, Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, then partners at the trendy Miami firm Arquitectonica, who also researched the Southern vernacular via a series of road trips. What emerged from all this driving—and many hours at the drawing board—was a densely built little town full of whimsical, pastel-hued bungalows and wee versions of antebellum mansions. Nearly every house had at least one porch, and sometimes two. With its signature cuteness and perfectly calibrated aesthetic—made famous by the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*—Seaside became the foundation of New Urbanism, a design movement that sought to tame suburban sprawl with 100-year-old ideas about town planning and a very up-to-date knack for appropriating historic building styles. Duany and Plater-Zyberk formed their own company, DPZ, and working from their Miami headquarters became the most famous progenitors of a trend. Since Seaside, some 600 New Urbanist communities have sprung up nationwide, about 100 of them in Florida alone.

So it seems fitting that 25 years after the invention of Seaside, I, too, am on a road trip. I am driving a 1,600-mile loop around Florida, sadly not in a red convertible but rather in an acutely modest powder-blue Chevy Aveo—it's hurricane season and gas shortages loom, so I've chosen fuel efficiency over style. My goal is to visit as many of Florida's New Urbanist communities as possible: I want to see if towns based on the New Urbanists' endless codes about street width and gradations of population density, and their guidelines about the structure of porches and the order of columns, have grown up into real places. Can you visit a New

Urbanist town, with its cultivated charm, its squeaky-clean gloss on the past, and have the kind of experience you might in a place where charm has had a chance to evolve and molder, like Key West or Savannah?

If you judge by real estate values, the New Urbanist approach to making new old places has been a smashing success: local agents report Seaside houses going for \$1,300 per square foot—nearly double the price in the more ordinary Seagrove, next door. And even a modest Seaside cottage, a replica of the sort of Depression-era farmstead one sees in WPA-era photos, can cost upward of \$2 million. (Broad scientific studies of home appreciation and resale prices show consistent but less dramatic contrasts between New Urbanist enclaves and adjacent communities. The most recent, published in 2003, showed that homes in New Urbanist developments are 15.5 percent more valuable than homes in comparable neighborhoods.) The expanse of the Panhandle on either side of Seaside has become one of the most intriguing stretches of roadway in America, flanked by a half-dozen officially recognized New Urbanist communities and a slew of imitators. Although I'm resistant to the habitual New Urbanist trick of using nostalgia to sell a planning philosophy, I see Route 30A, unofficially the New Urbanist Highway, as a remarkable laboratory of lifestyle.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Before I visit New Urbanism's fertile crescent, I need to stop in at Celebration, the white-picket-fence utopia conveniently located 20 miles from the Orlando airport—a magnet for frequent flights and low fares—and within a few miles of the entrance to Walt Disney World. This is the town that Disney began building in 1994, with much fanfare. I once wrote the first couple of chapters of a murder mystery set in a town called Happiness that was based on Celebration...or at least my idea of Celebration. But until I pull in to town in my Aveo (hardly larger than the electric golf carts favored by the locals) I'd never been in the place.

One damp, overcast Florida morning I find myself enjoying one of Celebration's signature amenities, a string of public rocking chairs, while gazing at the alligators in the town lake. I'm talking on my cell phone to Andrés Duany himself. Celebration is not his doing: Duany is quite clear on that point. Hard-core New Urbanists regard Celebration with a degree of disdain, as microbrew enthusiasts might regard a beer with an oddball name made by Budweiser. Duany urges me to check out Alys Beach, DPZ's "state-of-the-art" community under construction on the Panhandle, where I'll be heading in a couple of days. He boasts that it's the summation of everything he's learned thus far. He also suggests that I visit Haile Plantation, designed by developers Robert Kramer and Matthew Kaskal, which, as it happens, is the next stop on my itinerary.

During our chat, I keep thinking: "Here I am in Celebration, talking to Andrés Duany." Similarly, during breakfast at the Market Street Café, a Denny's in disguise, I sit reading the only available newspaper thinking, "Here I am in Celebration, reading *USA Today*." There is something about the design of the place that makes me endlessly self-conscious. The pieces are not bad: an Art Deco movie theater, a string of Floridian commercial buildings in colors like tangerine and teal, a handful of ostensibly public postmodern buildings by name-brand architects such as Robert A. M. Stern, and the cotton candy-colored Celebration Hotel (where I could only book a single midweek night because all 115 rooms are full for the weekend). But these small-town components don't quite gel into a genuine small town; instead, they form something that's clearly a simulation of small town. It's very *Truman Show*. The one thing, so far, that I've found to like about Celebration is the rich variety of tropical birds I see along the town's meandering footpaths. The birds, I'm sure, are authentic.

I subject Celebration to "the Popsicle test," a concept I find on the official New Urbanism Web site: "An eight-year-old in the neighborhood should be able to bike to a store to buy a Popsicle, without having to battle highway-size streets and freeway-speed traffic." I rent a chartreuse one-speed and pedal to outlying

neighborhoods and note that Popsicle sources are few and far between. What is for sale here is real estate. I inspect a painstaking replica of a California craftsman-style cottage that's called the Berkeley. Everyone I meet along the way tells me the same story: Disney actually has less and less to do with Celebration. In 2003 the majority on the Celebration Residential Owners' Association shifted from representatives of the Disney-owned Celebration Company to the home-owners. According to the locals, Celebration—à la Pinocchio—is on its way to becoming a real town. On the other hand, in early 2004, Disney sold the entire business district to a company called Lexin Capital. The fact that downtown Celebration can be sold in its entirety—18 acres, 16 shops, six restaurants, some office space, and a number of apartments—explains a lot about why it doesn't feel real.

Haile Village Center, outside Gainesville, has no hotel. I hear rumors of a small bed-and-breakfast, but it sounds more like a spare room than a business, so, on the advice of my friend Donna, a local photographer specializing in weddings, I opt for a couple of nights in Micanopy, a genuine small town just south of Gainesville. I book a room at the truly lovely Herlong Mansion, where, according to the brochure, "yesterday and today...are not all that different." It's an 1845 Cracker farmhouse that, in 1910, was remodeled into a "classic revival imitation of a Southern colonial design." You can think of it as a precursor to New Urbanism's faux historicism. Micanopy, supposedly the oldest inland town in Florida, is full of quirky buildings that have grown stranger over time, buildings that have character that no architect or planner could intentionally reproduce.

By contrast, the 50-acre Haile Village Center, a New Urbanist implant in the sprawling 1,700-acre cul-de-sac subdivision called Haile Plantation, is fairly predictable. It is roughly contemporary with Celebration, a product of the mid 1990's, but the look is picture-perfect 19th century, with brick sidewalks, narrow streets, and corners that are more like kinks. The architecture is loaded with Southernisms: sheet-metal roofs, second-story porches, town houses with side yards. The businesses are more interesting here than in Celebration, where the best store specializes in teddy bears. You can actually buy Marimekko clothing or a decent bottle of wine.

Best of all, there's the Third Place Pub & Grille. In its sunny dining room and at its bar—autographed by local celebrities—people who look like they live and work in town hang out, eat lunch, and hold informal meetings. The menu, before it gets around to the po'boys and the salads, features a sermonette about the restaurant's name. It comes from *The Great Good Place*, a book by Ray Oldenburg. "Oldenburg paints a picture of society before the majority owned two automobiles per household," says the menu. It goes on to explain that the first place is home, the second place is your job, and the third place is where you go to socialize, like the front stoop or the corner store. "That sense of community and support of the local economy is important to us." Oldenburgian wisdom notwithstanding, Haile Village Center isn't exactly a travel destination, but it's an interesting spot to stop for lunch.

Finally, I point the blunt nose of my Aveo toward Seaside, a long day's drive north and west on Florida's Panhandle, on state highways that noodle through small inland towns untouched by the development fever that has reshaped coastal Florida. I pass through Apalachicola, a funky waterfront town on Florida's "Forgotten Coast," cited by *A Guidebook to New Urbanism* in Florida 2005 as one of "the successful precedents for today's New Urbanism." I can picture Robert Davis gliding through in his red convertible. Today, however, Apalachicola is a bit of a ghost town, because a severe red tide has closed the oyster beds. Still, it exudes authenticity. It's exactly the sort of place I'd seek out on a less focused road trip. I'm beginning to wish that I weren't on a New Urbanist mission: it would be more fun just to stop in normal places. But that changes when I hit Seaside.

On my first visit, in 1998, I was surprised to discover that though the town, with its colorful cottages and precious details, is famous for being cute, it is actually better than that. Seaside, with a superb beach, yards thick with native foliage, and a street plan so well thought out that it's possible to lose yourself within its 80 acres, is genuinely beautiful. On this trip, I begin to think of Seaside as Duany and Plater-Zyberk's first novel, the product of all their best ideas, a place into which they poured endless youthful enthusiasm. Seaside is the original that became a best-selling formula. Now, some eight years after that first visit, I'm astonished by the amount of development that's happened around here since, all of it triggered by Seaside.

At first I'm put off by the traffic and noise. It's Saturday night: a bar band is playing on the green in the center of town, and Ruskin Place, a narrow plaza north of the green, has been taken over by a wedding. I can't believe how many people are here. My lodging is in an apartment building called Dreamland Heights, designed in 1984 by architect Steven Holl. It's a duplex, with the bedroom on the lower level and a kitchen so chic that it's funny: stainless-steel Bosch dishwasher and mammoth Sub-Zero refrigerator, empty but for a tiny box of Arm & Hammer. On my balcony, I can watch the life of the town from first thing in the morning—when a fiftysomething man arrives at Modica Market, Seaside's destination grocery store, on a beach-cruiser bicycle with a cup holder on the handlebars—until evening, when a brilliantly pink sunset ends the day.

Determined to continue probing New Urbanism on its own terms, I rent a Schwinn and set out down the bike path that now runs the length of 30A, slowly inspecting a whole new way of life under construction. I encounter architectural curiosities such as the massive "gatehouse," a building shaped like a jumbo gable, a neo-traditional hallucination marking the entrance to a fledgling community called WaterSound. I pass by the beginning phases of Alys Beach, a cluster of brilliant white Bermuda-influenced houses marked by an Alice in Wonderland-style formal lawn. Because of Duany's enthusiasm for this project, I make a point of visiting with developer Jason Comer, who shows me how the concrete-block walls of the houses he's building will be reinforced with more concrete to make them into hurricane-proof bunkers. He also points out that these houses are, by New Urbanist standards, heretical. "A lot of people like front porches," Comer says. "We don't use them." Instead, the homes will feature private courtyards. On the day I see it, Alys Beach consists of a couple of model houses, the beachfront town green, and a diminutive white cottage housing the Fonville Press, a well-stocked newsstand (Comer's family is in magazine distribution), and coffee bar.

Eight miles out of Seaside, I hit Main Street in Rosemary Beach, another DPZ-designed development, a series of tightly spaced West Indian-style brown houses that's almost deserted. The only sign of life is construction work on Hotel Saba, a 56-room property scheduled to open this summer. I've been fantasizing the whole way about a plate of grilled fish and a beer, but the only restaurant I can find is shuttered until dinnertime. Rosemary Beach is about to fail my version of the Popsicle test, "the beer test," when, north of 30A, I discover the Summer Kitchen Café, a tiny casual restaurant with tables on a shaded porch. I order grilled salmon and a Corona. I like this place—I decide that I need to spend a night at the Pensione, the development's modest eight-room bed-and-breakfast.

But first I have to spend a night in WaterColor, a neighborhood built by Arvida, a branch of the St. Joe Company, Florida's largest private landowner. The backstreets of WaterColor are adjacent to the backstreets of Seaside, immediately south and east of it, but don't actually connect. It's a bit like East and West Berlin, but without the wall and sentries. WaterColor is 499 acres to Seaside's 80, and within Seaside there is a fear that WaterColor somehow intends to swallow its smaller neighbor. A young woman behind the counter at Sundog Books tells me there's a rumor that St. Joe is going to buy out Davis, and complains that WaterColor regards Seaside as its downtown. "We like to think of WaterColor as our suburbs," Davis responds, when I quiz him

about the rumor. "The developer of WaterColor is a friend. He refers to Seaside as WaterColor's Historic District."

The WaterColor Inn, an example of a style I think of as Panhandle Gothic, has interiors designed by David Rockwell, a New York architect known for his tasteful fantasies. Indeed, I'm in an extremely pretty hotel room, with a balcony overlooking the dunes and the Gulf, and a shower with a window at eye level that lets me enjoy the view as I bathe. Reluctantly, I leave my room for dinner at Fish Out of Water, the inn's restaurant, and take a seat at the sushi bar, where a chef who hails from Atlanta makes exquisite *maki* rolls. Down the bar is a local couple who complain to me about how overdeveloped and overpriced the Panhandle has become and how, despite all the new houses, there's still nothing to do here.

In the morning, the beach flag has changed from dangerous red—hurricane backwash has closed the beaches here for days—to cautious yellow. I decide to go for a swim in the Gulf. Somehow, despite my persistent cough, I don't think about the red tide as I happily jump in. Suddenly my eyes sting and my skin burns. I dash back to my room and spend a long time in my beautiful shower looking wistfully out at the water as I scrub.

Compared with the plush WaterColor Inn, my room at the Pensione in Rosemary Beach is monastic—white concrete-block walls, simple blond wood furniture—but well made; I feel as though I've teleported to Denmark. The highlight of my stay is dinner, directly downstairs at the Onano Neighborhood Café. I eat scallops with lemon risotto and fresh herbs. It's a simple dish, but the quality of the ingredients is so high, and the preparation so restrained, I'm convinced it's the best Italian food I've eaten outside Italy. My affection for Rosemary Beach grows with every bite.

And that's the strange thing. I do not want to leave the New Urbanist Highway. Despite the fact that the beautiful beaches are in a sorry state, roughed up by too many hurricanes, I don't want to go. But it isn't until I reach my next stop, a development called Longleaf in the town of New Port Richey, that I fully understand my attachment to 30A. Longleaf turns out to be one subdivision in a long string of subdivisions, and at dinnertime it feels depopulated in a way I find unsettling, like I've just wandered into an M. Night Shyamalan movie. I stand on the central green, where there is a bungalow outfitted with Doric columns and unoccupied white rocking chairs on the porch. On the wall is a sign: LONGLEAF TOWN HALL, BUILT 2001.

Longleaf is just another dull suburban place in New Urbanist drag, but it makes me realize that the developments along the Panhandle are unusually urbane. Taken individually, they might be as stilted and dull as Longleaf, but taken together, the communities along 30A feed on each other's vitality and creativity. They relate to one another and enhance one another, as do neighborhoods in a city. This cluster has grown dense enough and interesting enough to be a real place, a sort of linear Brooklyn.

With that thought in mind, I head to my final destination. I pass through Sarasota and zoom east across the Everglades to Miami. I'm eager to reach Aqua, the newly opened enclave built by Craig Robins, one of the original engineers of the South Beach revival and the inventor of Miami's Design District. I've been following the development of Aqua for years, excited that Robins is using some of the best of America's younger Modernist architects. I even visited the site, a peninsula jutting into Indian Creek a few miles north of South Beach, just after Robins started construction, and examined the scale model of streets lined with elegant Modernist town houses. It looked like something the Bauhaus might have built, except much more expensive: starting at \$799,000 and topping out at more than \$7 million. But given its location in Miami Beach and Robins's credentials as someone who understands urban places, I assume that this will be the highlight of my trip.

I want to stay in Aqua, but there is no hotel and no bed-and-breakfast, and the only way to rent is by the season. So I settle for a hotel in Miami Beach, the Astor, and make an appointment for a tour. Aqua, as it turns out, is in violation of one of the key tenets of New Urbanism: it's a gated community. If you don't live there, if you aren't an invited guest, you can't get in. It also fails the Popsicle test, although I'm assured by my tour guides, provided by Robins's development company, Dacra, that a store selling gourmet olive oil and coffee will soon open.

There are 101 condos and 46 private residences. On the façade of Chatham—named for its architect, Walter Chatham—there's a colorful "public" artwork by Richard Tuttle. The town houses we visit are generous, full of great spaces and pleasant views. It's all perfect. Perfect. But because it's private, off-limits to the public, there is no life here. Even in sleepy Longleaf, I saw the occasional child on a bicycle and guys shooting hoops in a park. But Aqua is like the antithesis of South Beach—maybe it's intended as an antidote—a retreat from the vital urban culture of Miami Beach.

In the end, after 1,600 miles of driving, despite the incomparable pleasure of swimming in Miami Beach's stretch of the Atlantic, I still want to go back to Seaside and Rosemary Beach. Even though I don't much like the idea of designing communities with a faux aesthetic—be it Cracker or West Indian—what's happened as a result of Seaside's success is that something surprisingly genuine has emerged from all the fakery. Because Robert Davis was willing to experiment with urban form, and because he proved successful, other developers similarly willing to experiment have been attracted to that one 10-mile stretch of highway, and over time a place is emerging, incrementally, that is as quirky and authentic as the towns Davis once visited in his red convertible.