

BEST BEACH TOWN/RESORT IN THE SOUTH

Southern Living readers again praise Emerald Coast



DEVON RAVINE | Daily News

Jill Valenti of Pittsburgh, Pa., and her children, Kylee and Emmitt, walk Tuesday afternoon on a nearly deserted beach on Okaloosa Island. For the 13th year in a row, the Destin area — including Fort Walton Beach and Okaloosa Island — was selected as one of the top family vacation destinations by readers of Southern Living magazine.

The area is ranked among top family vacation destinations

By **WENDY VICTORA**

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With his gulf-front location at the foot of the Okaloosa Island Fishing Pier, Dan Empson knows that catering to families is good business.

That's why he brings in a clown and offers \$1.99 kids' meals several nights a week. On those nights, families bring in close to 50 percent of his revenue.

"Without families, we'd be up a creek," said Empson, who owns Angler's Beachside Café. "It wouldn't be any fun at all." That's not a prospect he's likely to encounter.

For the 13th year in a row, the Destin area, including Fort Walton Beach and Okaloosa Island, was selected by readers of Southern Living magazine as one of the top family vacation destinations. Readers ranked it third behind Walt Disney World Resorts and Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Readers also voted the area the No. 1 Beach Town/Resort.

Best beaches in the South

2007 Southern Living Readers' Choice Awards

Beach town/resort

1. Destin/Fort Walton Beach
2. Myrtle Beach, S.C.
3. Hilton Head, S.C.

Family vacation

1. Walt Disney World – Orlando
2. Myrtle Beach, S.C.
3. Destin/Fort Walton Beach



KEN MAINES | Daily News

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— Dan Empson
owner of Angler's Beachside Café

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“I think it’s the way we treat people down here,” said Darrel Jones, president and chief executive officer of the Emerald Coast Convention and Visitor’s Center. He said people in the lodging business decided in 1991 to cater to families.

“You can advertise and promote all you want, but you’ve got to have the good folks down here that actually handle the families and do a good job of keeping them happy,” Jones said.

He added that the area was also recognized last year for its beaches by Parents

Magazine for the eighth or ninth year in a row.

Reader-voted recognition is good for building an area’s reputation, said Melissa Neal, associate director of the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development.

“It’s voted on by the people that actually come to the area,” Neal said. “That is so much better than paid-for advertising because readers generally see the view of other readers as very valid.”

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