

Southern Living

Alabama's Coastal Gem

Southern Living, Spring 2003

by Latham, Tanner C

Spend some time with us in Fairhope, one of our favorite bayside towns.

I'm overcome by an inexplicable blend of feelings. At once, I'm covered by a soothing relaxation and caught up in a fresh vitality.

These feelings seem to float in on Mobile Bay breezes, whirling through the small town of Fairhope. They definitely make this jewel on Alabama's Eastern Shore one of my favorites in the South.

Shop While You Stroll

A pedestrian's paradise, downtown Fairhope is perfect for the serious shopper because you're always a short stroll from everything. You'll have a favorite store before you leave town, but here are a few of ours.

"Some of our customers come in just to see Fern," says Rusty Peavy, owner of Terra Potta, with a smile. Although the shop offers garden accessories, this Fern lacks fronds. She's the resident cat, and as endearing as she is, you should really visit Terra Potta for the wonderful variety of, in Rusty's words, "garden-inspired items." From pots (of course) and pillows to garden art and tropical houseplants, Terra Potta is a Shangri-la for the plant lover. You might meet Fern and not want to leave.

You must, though, because you've got to stop by one of my favorite shops in all of Fairhope. Take one step into M. Rivers & Co. and you'll swear you're walking off a sloop on the other side of the world. This global import store carries cosmetics, masks, artwork, and music from exotic places such as Bali, Turkey, Africa, and the West Indies. For a real treat, head to a back room called The Hot Spot. You will get a kick just reading some of the names of the 100-plus hot sauces on display. (Angel of Death is one of the tamer choices.)

Art Is the Thing

Fairhope has, by far, one of the most thriving art communities in the state. The town is filled with galleries showcasing a gamut of art styles, from traditional to contemporary.

"The space is our most productive salesperson," says Mike Lyons, owner of Lyons Share Custom Frame & Gallery. I have to agree. The gallery is wide open all the way up to the second-story ceiling. I fell in love with Lyons Share my first time there, and it definitely had as much to do with the building as it did with the traditional paintings coloring the walls.

Walk only a few blocks, and you'll find the spectrum's other end at the Summit Gallery. "This gallery is all about discovery, change, and broad taste," says owner Marilyn Roberts. "We're constantly breaking the standard molds here." Summit takes great pride in showing contemporary works from some of the most talented artists around the region and the world. Find paintings, sculptures, photography, and assemblages (pieces that combine several mediums) here.

Downtown Dining

Trust me: When exploring Fairhope, you can work up quite an appetite. Luckily, there is a wonderful variety of cafes and restaurants to suit every taste. Here are two of my downtown choices.

The bistro-style Trattoria Il Pazzo Duetto offers an alluring and intimate atmosphere. Fresh seafood plays a significant role on the menu in this dimly lit authentic Italian restaurant. I'm partial to the Seared Scallop Salad with homemade Gorgonzola sauce (\$12), but you might want to try the Shrimp or Crawfish Cannelloni Con Gambero (\$14), a specialty of the house.

For more upscale dining, make reservations at The Fairhope Inn & Restaurant. Request a table on the patio, and enjoy their French-style cuisine that incorporates many coastal influences. Start with The Fairhope Inn Crab Cakes (\$7), and then try the lamb chop with a roasted pecan-and-mint pesto (\$24) as an entree. The desserts are sinfully delicious, particularly the Vanilla Creme Brulee (\$7).

A Bayside Slumber

Your best bet is a room at the Holiday Inn Express (rates range \$82-- \$92), located on US 98 in Fairhope. The city is renowned, though, for its bed-and-breakfasts. One of our picks is Bill and Becky Jones's Bay Breeze Guest House (rates range \$115-\$145). And remember, the famous Marriott's Grand Hotel, which has recently been remodeled, is only 3 miles from Fairhope in Point Clear (rates range \$149-\$300).

No matter where you are when your day is done, ease westward on Fairhope Avenue out to the pier, where you'll experience one of the town's most seductive assets: the sunset. You're sure to be mesmerized as well. TANNER C. LATHAM

For more information: Contact the Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce, 327 Fairhope Avenue, Fairhope, AL 36532; (251) 928-6387 or www.eschamber.com.

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