

## Postcard from Destin: Beaches make good memories, but don't leave the mountains

By David R. Altman  
Progress Books & Writers editor

*"For whatever we lose (like a you or a me), It's always our self we find in the sea"*

—e.e. cummings

*"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity"*

—John Muir

The one thing I can say about being at the beach in early July is that it is hot and crowded.

Was that actually two things? Well, both are true.

I am talking hot here. Temperatures in the mid-nineties with 100 percent humidity—that sort of salty humidity you always get around the beach that saps your strength and makes you neither hungry nor thirsty, just tired.

After a day on the beach, you feel though you have run a half-marathon when you get back to the rental unit, having carried enough chairs, towels, toys, and food to furnish a house in Big Canoe.

While the wet bulb approaches 108, you know the rest of the trip will probably be spent around the little pool in the back yard, except for perhaps night walks on the beach. Night-time beach walks are overrated. They are also fraught with the unassuming danger of sting rays which have eased up onto the beach's shallowest areas, sliding just under the sand, waiting for little night creatures to show themselves—hoping to avoid being stepped on by a big foot from New Jersey or, worse yet, a little one from Georgia.

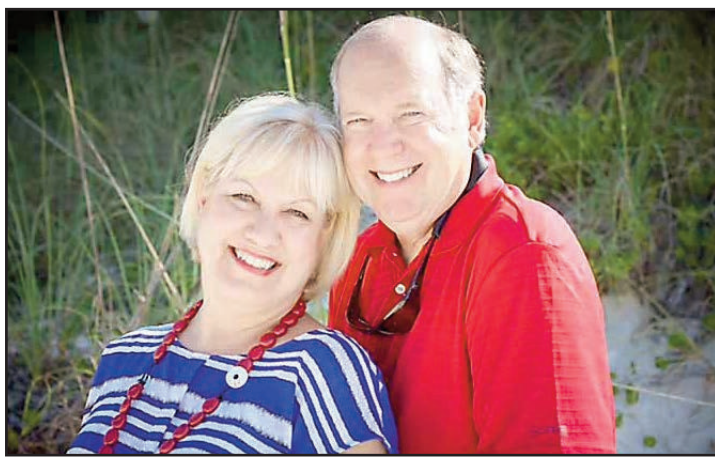
The high today in Jasper is supposed to be 81 degrees—a veritable cool-mountain morning compared the oppressive heat of Destin. Still, it is early down here, already 82 and the sun is not up. The early morning beach walkers, many of them over sixty, are walking hand-in-hand, some of them limping, some still wearing the band aids that were left by the dermatologist, some sipping coffee and all of them waiting for one more look at the surf. A walk of memories.

So why do people to go to the beach? They go because they love the ocean. They love the look of it, the sounds of it, the waves rolling in and the surf splashing. Beach sights and sounds are unique: children squealing, beach umbrellas shading, slathered legs glistening, sand-castles building, Frisbees flying and cold-drinks warming (with a touch of sand around the top --an accidental Margarita).

Many times, it's simply people watching people, sometimes voyeuristically, behind newly purchased sunglasses that will be lost before Saturday.

Beaches are full of memories. The first trip you went on, the first trip you brought your spouse on, the first trip you brought your kids on, the first trip you brought your grandchildren on. The last trip you brought your father on.

These sandy memories, like the waves, seem endless. And only until you see the ocean—touch it, suffer in it and once again play in it—will those memories come rushing back, like a summer light switch that has been turned off during the



*The author and his wife, Lisa, near Destin, Florida.*

temporary winters of your life.

Generations change but the beach does not. Worries shift from your children to your grandchildren. "Where is Luke?" someone says. "Who has Milly?" another asks. The younger adults all rise in unison as though they were standing for the National Anthem, their eyes turned anxiously toward the surf. The scene from *Jaws* flashes across the fertile imagination of young parents.

But grandparents look behind them—remembering that the children are right where they were 30 seconds ago when they last checked (there are very few texts being read by grandparents on the beach).

But, we all keep coming back to the beaches, even those of us who prefer the mountains. People who, like us, are thankful that the mountain air never feels like the beach air.

Sometimes we can't fully appreciate the mountains until we leave them (even in the fall, with the sound of out-of-state motorcycles racing up and down Burnt Mountain Road or those winter days when you sometimes you can't even get up Burnt Mountain Road).

The mountains beckon us home. Thankfully, there are fewer cars and fewer people. Trees stand in memoriam to the legacy. No beach umbrellas, only giant oaks and hickories. The Ordovician Period, when these mountains were formed, outranks the formation of the Gulf Coast by about 200 million years. Plus, we've got the world's greatest marble and they've got only sand.

There is a constant source of security in the mountains, the same security that is missing from the changing surf. It's a security born not so much from childhood memories but from the dependable strength of the mountains and their people. A count-on-me certainty; one that borders on faith.

The ocean is always moving. The mountains are not. Instead, they provide stability to the beach's indifference. Both fill us with the memories of our past—but only one will provide the foundation for our future.

*[David Altman contributes regularly to the Progress and is the Books & Writers Editor. He may be reached at daltman@pickensprogress.com.]*



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