

There are days, and then there are really good days....

Recently, while my daughter, Alex and I were over in Destin, we had the chance to stop in at the Old Destin Marina. This part of the waterfront is very nearly the last remaining remnants of the Old Destin Waterfront. Not much to look at, the marina is only a small white cinder block building, the fuel dock, and a hand full of boat slips.

It is flanked on one side by what is now Dewey Destin's Seafood Restaurant, the place where, over thirty years ago we unloaded our catch, and tied up the boats, it has now become a "Little dive of great notoriety," I will bear testament to the fact that the world's best fried shrimp comes out of that little place, following the recipe of Dewey's own Mother. Serving every kind of seafood you can think of, whether it is fried, gilled, or steamed, in an atmosphere that is rarely found in this day and age. You can sit on a wood bench, on the dock, watching the boats at Crab Island, the porpoises frolicking in the channel, teasing the tourists, and have the coldest beer and the best food in town. If you don't like seafood, the best burger in Destin is served here as well. Don't feed the seagulls, they tend to flock very quickly, and the ones that don't get fed will drop a present on you. No extra charge.

The fare at Dewey's is always as fresh as it can be, every morning without fail, Dewey himself and a crew of the old fisherman, can be found in the shack at the top of the hill. Peeling the shrimp, and Dewey himself, cuts and filets every piece of fish. There is still a lot to be said for pride in what you do, the entire Destin family takes great pride in what they serve, and it shows. At any given time, you can walk in and say, "Hello, Miss Destin!" and at least one of the ladies will respond, whether it be Rebecca, (wife), Cameron (daughter), or Nina (sister), the greeting they return is always warm, and an invitation to relax and enjoy, will always be pleasantly extended. The complete Southern charm and grace of this place, belies the rough exterior, that in itself is as is a reminder of ole Buck Destin himself. They do him proud every day. It is a part of visiting Destin that is well worth the trip.

Also in this little package of Destin: you will find "Extreme H2O Watersports". Jason the owner has been around Destin a long time. Starting years ago with a couple of jet skis, he has managed to build it into the best place around to rent skis, parasail, or go on dolphin tours to see them up close. With the location of the Marina being directly across the channel from Crab Island, it is as picturesque as it is convenient. If you are a bit more, "savvy," than the average Joe, you can rent a pontoon boat that will comfortably fit the whole family.

This year Jason has added a brand new parasail boat, and it is a beauty. Seeing Alex's enthusiasm, we were invited out for a ride. Now, I have to admit, I have in the past, while loudly protesting, and near kicking and screaming, have jumped out of perfectly good airplanes. It was not really by choice, or something I consider fun, but after the initial jerk, and the gasping for air, seeing the chute inflate above me, I was okay, right up to the point that I saw how fast the ground was approaching me. The slightly ungraceful toppling that was part of being dragged across a field while being reintroduced to terra-firma, I guess was the only reference I have to anything involving a parachute, so I put on my best macho- he-man face, and signed the waiver. (Do you really think I, or to be more precise my ego, would let me be out done by my fifteen year old daughter?) Resigned to my impending doom, we boarded the boat.

Jason was very fortunate in his crew selection. Captain Scott has been running these types of trips for years, Andrew the Mate, is confident and very adept in handling the deck and gear. Both are congenial and friendly with excellent dispositions for dealing with the public. After a welcome aboard, the lines were cast off and we headed toward the Destin East Pass. Scotty went over the familiarization of the boat and the safety equipment, when he finished, he put the throttle down and the boat effortlessly came onto a plane. In the few short minutes it took us to get out of the pass, Andrew was set up and ready to soar, we were helped into the harnesses and made ready for the sail. My stomach flipping upside down, every vision and video I had ever seen, of people being dragged across the beach doing cartwheels to get airborne, was passing through my brain, I stepped onto the platform where Andrew clipped the harness to the bar. Then he told us to sit down on the deck. The chute was already inflated and flying above the deck, red, white, and blue, it resembled a tethered cloud trying its best to be let go. Scotty gave us a thumbs up and turned up the throttle. What happened next was amazing in itself, there was no jerk, not even a hard pull. Instead the harness gently took our weight, and like a very caring hand, we were slowly raised off the deck. As the winch slowly paid out the line we were elevated more smoothly than any elevator I have ever been in. Feeling much more relaxed and gaining confidence quickly, I began to take in this new viewpoint vantage. The line took us up to about five-hundred feet. As I took it all in, I was awestruck by the utterly fantastic view. The glistening water beneath us was teeming with life, a sea turtle lazily swam on the surface, a pod of dolphins played to the right, a hammerhead shark glided through the waves to the left. Ahead of the boat a flock of birds was diving on a school of bait. Later a school of Jacks passed below us, their silver sides flashing in the sun like bright strobes. Through all of this, we were enveloped in complete silence; it presented itself in an almost surreal fashion. We soared for what seemed like a long while, and without even the slightest warning became aware that we were losing altitude. Scotty was reeling us back into the waiting deck, but about seventy-five feet from the boat, he turned the boat abruptly and let us dangle a mere few feet above the surface of the water, and exercising complete control over the entire apparatus, held us at that point, allowing us to soak our feet in the water.

Speeding up a little we gained enough height to lift us above the boat. As we continued to draw nearer the platform, he turned into the wind, and with Andrew telling us to land in the, "Standing position", we set down on the deck with the grace of a bird landing on a telephone wire. Much more to my liking, than being dragged across a field, mowing weeds while yelling for assistance, and screaming expletives. Andrew unsnapped us and we went forward to our seats, grinning from ear to ear. We shed the harnesses and watched the next pair get strapped up and readied to go up. There were two more pairs that went up on the trip, from the moment Andrew got them up, until they touched down on deck again, he was busy snapping pictures of the whole affair, the chip was given as a keepsake of the experience.

Scotty and Andrew worked well together, offering complete professionalism throughout the trip. Upon landing the last pair, they reeled in the chute, and Scotty headed back toward the Pass, Andrew on top of the chute that looked like a deflated Portuguese Man-O-War lying on the deck. With a following sea of slight a ground swell, the boat literally surfed and glided so smoothly across the opening of the pass it was hard to imagine a smoother, more comfortable ride. As we came into the protected waters between the jetties, we received an escort all the way back to the dock by a group of dolphins. Scotty put the boat into the slip making the maneuver look effortless. We stepped on the dock carrying with us new cherished memories of the experience. Doubtless, when Alex returns to school after the spring break is over, there will be many conversations that will start out as, "Well Alex, what did you do on break?" and be continued with, "Dude, my dad and I went parasailing in Destin and.....it was so awesome!"

She will never know how completely petrified I was, I will never admit it, never, ever, ever.. But if you haven't tried this, and you're going to be anywhere near Destin in the future, you have to try this. You will, with no ifs, ands, or buts, enjoy the experience immensely. The entire crew there will do everything under the sun to insure that.

So if you are not so much into the louder, faster pace of the newer crowds, come back and visit the more relaxed part of Old Destin that offers many of the things that people come here for. The great food, fun on the water, the atmosphere, the charm, and the people, that make this a must do kind of place.

The wonderful day was made that way from all the people that work so hard to make it happen, it takes a lot of work, it takes a special attitude. To Jason and the business he has built, the crew he has assembled, my hat is off to you for a job well done.

To the Ming family that runs the marina, it is a special part of Destin, where people can stop in for the latest reports on what's biting, the tides, the latest hot jigs and lures. You can listen to stories of the old timers, ice down the coolers, and a hand is always extended gladly when needed.

Dewey's place, a jewel in itself on the emerald coast, a heart-felt thanks goes out to the entire family. For providing a place for family, where the kids can still chase crabs around the pilings, build sand castles on the shore. Where parents can relax, where lovers can watch a dazzling sunset, while sharing a glass of wine on a quiet dock. Where all of the vacation warriors can sit and talk about all the ones that got away, and the few they actually landed. Where a child can go in and still give hugs to the staff, and recount imaginary voyages around the pier. Where the food is served piping hot, succulent, dripping in melted butter, a cornerstone of memories for anyone that has ever had the pleasure of tasting anything that Miss Juliana has ever served up. You all have preserved a part of Destin's heritage and culture that few are privileged to ever see. I am unable to ever imagine a better, more stunningly beautiful, place, to allow a child to discover all the wondrous joys of this area. Through watching my children grow here, I find myself appreciating more and more what so many take for granted. I can say that, with absolute certainty, and no reservation what so ever. The goodness and grace of a simpler time, the hospitality and Southern charm, this whole family keeps alive and well.

To anyone contemplating coming to Destin for a visit, it will not be complete without a drop in to this particular locale. It is accessible by walking, driving, or you can pull your boat up to the docks. Does not matter how you come, just be sure that it has a priority on your list. I promise, you will not be disappointed. At the very least, it will be a really good day.

Paul E. Petro, "Dutch"