

Gulf Coast Glories

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Gulf-coast Glories

Sun, sand and seafood are always on tap in this part of Mississippi.

By Nancy Dickinson



Ship Island's white-sand beach is a perfect spot for families to enjoy the splendor of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Mississippi Gulf Coast CVB

Calling all armchair travelers: Imagine a vacation where the sun is warm, the water is cool, the food is tantalizing and the welcome is pure Southern hospitality. If this sounds good, then head to the Deep South, get an ice-cold glass of sweet tea and bury your toes in the white-sand beaches of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Composed of the larger cities of Biloxi and Gulfport, as well as several smaller towns such as Waveland and Ocean Springs, the Mississippi Gulf Coast has become a quiet community of authentic Southern and seafood restaurants, as well as a satisfying array of tourist attractions suitable to any mood. Called the Riviera of the South, the Mississippi Gulf Coast is a place visitors will remember not just in photos but also in wonderful memories.

Summer Escape

Roughly a half-hour's drive from New Orleans, the Mississippi Gulf Coast shows a heavy French-Canadian influence, but for decades it was a favorite summer getaway for people living in the larger cities of Jackson, Miss.; New Orleans; Mobile, Ala.; and Memphis, Tenn. The wealthiest of this crowd had second homes built to accommodate their family's escape from summer's heat and humidity. The most famous of its past residents was Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy's only president.

Beauvoir, Davis' retirement home, is located in Biloxi and was fully restored following Hurricane Katrina's devastation. Because of the hurricane, the Sons of Confederate Veterans' Mississippi division, Beauvoir's owners and caretakers, were able to reveal original colors on the walls and in the furniture, allowing a return in Beauvoir's appearance to when Davis, wife Varina and daughter Winnie lived there after the Civil War.

Tours of the grounds take place year-round, and battle reenactments are held biannually, with a coin being tossed to decide whether the winner is the North or the South. Until it was discovered a two-headed coin was being used, it had always been the Confederacy.



The National Park Services offers tours of Fort Massachusetts.

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On the Waterfront

Spending the day on the water is a popular pastime, of course, and the Biloxi Schooners tour, attached to the Maritime & Seafood Industry Museum, offers Gulf of Mexico excursions that range from a couple of hours to most of the day. The museum, currently located at the Edgewater Mall, is filled with artifacts related to the history of the seafaring life still prevalent in the area.

Following Katrina, the Biloxi Schooners spent weeks moored on Back Bay, waiting for a path to be cleared to the gulf. Once that was accomplished, the ships weighed anchor, unfurled their sails and made the journey to their pier, which was still standing. Unexpectedly, the shores as well as the bridges en route were lined with onlookers cheering for the first business to re-open following the hurricane.

To further a love of both history and sailing, a charter to the barrier islands, specifically Ship Island—where tours of a Civil War fort are given—awaits visitors, too. Once a prisoner-of-war site for Confederate soldiers, Ship Island was also home to the 2nd Louisiana Native Guard Volunteers, the first black combat unit to fight in the Civil War. Now operated by the National Park Service, Ship Island and Fort Massachusetts are open for tours from March through October, weather permitting.

Ferries to the island are available from Gulfport's Ship Island Excursions. And for those whose imaginations aren't captivated by the thought of touring the fort, some of the best fishing in the area can be found on the island.

Enticing on the Inside

Also on the coast are several attractions that address not just the history of the coast but the beauty around every corner. Not far from the pier of the Biloxi Schooners tour is the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, filled with the work of George Ohr, the Mad Potter of Biloxi. His works and his life are celebrated in the rebuilding of the museum, which features three pods designed by architect Frank Gehry. The museum includes the former home of Pleasant Reed, an emancipated slave and artisan who was celebrated on the coast for his exemplary carpentry skills.





The works of George Ohr, known as the Mad Potter of Biloxi, are on display at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art.

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Those traveling with children, who tend to get restless, will find a stop at Gulfport's Lynn Meadows Discovery Center, an indoor and outdoor playground for kids of all ages, can help burn off some energy. On-site are interactive displays showcasing scientific theories, history, a market and a mock television station. And kids will love the Super Colossal Climbing Sculpture.

For something a little more grown-up, parents can take a tour of the only brewery in Mississippi, the Lazy Magnolia Brewing Co. Popular statewide, Lazy Magnolia beer began in a kitchen but now lives in a 10,000-square-foot facility in Kiln, northwest of Waveland. It's complete with the largest kettles outside St. Louis.

For space exploration aficionados, the Stennis Space Center, west of Waveland, has a museum facility dedicated to its role in the history of every spaceflight initiated in the U.S. Visitors can watch videos of the engine tests performed here and experience space flight from the beginning, as well as Mississippi's role in it. A remarkable site, the Stennis Space Center should be on everyone's must-see list while visiting the coast.

And for seafood fans, it's all fresh, all the time—and inexpensive, with the most buffets found anywhere outside of Las Vegas. Visitors would be well-advised to eat dinner al fresco—the amazing sunsets shouldn't be missed.

Planning Your Trip

For more information about the Mississippi Gulf Coast, call (888) 467-4853 or visit www.gulfcoast.org. For trip-planning assistance, contact a local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

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