

## ALABAMA | BEACHES



**Story and photography  
by Kit Bernardi**

**I**N JUNE, A RESTORATIVE walk at dawn along the sprawling beach of Alabama's Gulf State Park marked my first trip in the 16 months since the pandemic began. Soft, white sand squeaks beneath my feet, and gentle waves trimmed in lacy foam unfurl across my toes.

Amidst this serenity on Alabama's Gulf Coast, it's difficult to imagine that not that long ago these shores in the southernmost part of the state were devastated by natural and manmade disasters and coated in black, sticky oil.

The 32 miles of beaches on the Gulf of Mexico between Pensacola, Fla., and Mobile, Ala., have fully recovered from a trio of tragedies — Hurricane Ivan in 2004, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill and Hurricane Sally in 2020 — and transformed into a sustainable travel destination.

Gulf State Park, built in 1939 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, sits



between Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, popular beach resort communities since the 1950s and home to 20,000 full-time residents. Annually, approximately 6 million visitors fill hotels and 9,100 vacation rental homes and condominiums. According to lifelong

resident Herb Malone, president of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism, the towns' lodging tax annually accounts for approximately 32 percent of Alabama's tourism income, which grew to as much as 38 percent during the pandemic.

"Catastrophic events have strength-

ened our resilient community's efforts to protect the natural environment upon which our culture and livelihoods depend, and visitors return often to enjoy," Malone says.

Many sustainable tourism experiences have been made possible through restoration projects funded by \$1.6 billion in oil spill lawsuit settlements. Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Commissioner Chris Blankenship manages project funding to be received through 2033. He says, "As bad as the oil spill was, the money gives us opportunities to replenish natural resources and conserve our unique coastal environment supporting a vast diversity of wildlife species."

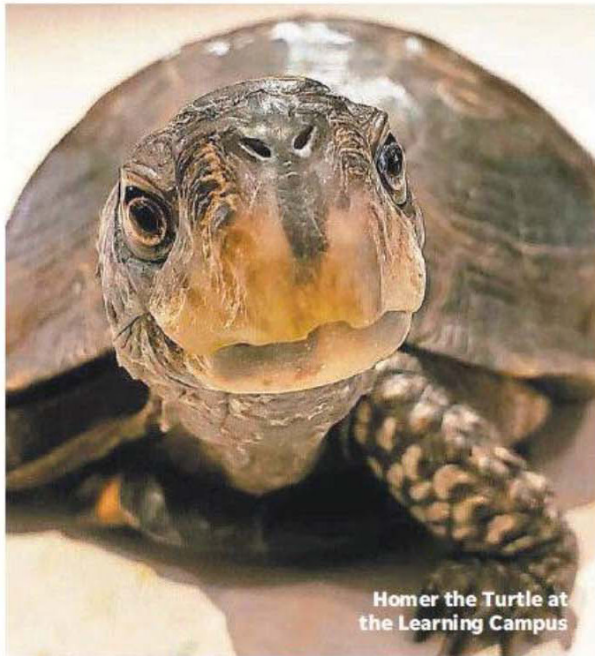
Gulf State Park, recipient of \$140 million in oil spill funds, is one of the only places on the planet where dunes, coastal maritime forest and freshwater lake ecosystems are very close together and easily accessible to the public.

The beachfront Interpretive Center

**CONTINUED »**



## ALABAMA | BEACHES



Homer the Turtle at the Learning Campus



The Lodge at Gulf State Park



Eagle Cottages on Lake Shelby

teaches visitors about the 6,150-acre park's interdependent coastal ecologies and ways to responsibly experience them. Designed to meet the world's most rigorous sustainability standards, the solar-powered building's rainwater filtration system produces potable water.

The park's Learning Campus hosts wildlife presentations. The public participates in dune restoration programs. Naturalists lead hiking and biking tours along 28 miles of paved trails and boardwalks traversing marshes where alligators and nesting bald eagles thrive. The Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail, part of the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail, travels through the park linking it to Orange Beach and Gulf Shores. Visitors stay in campgrounds, eco-friendly luxury cottages, cabins and The Lodge at Gulf State Park.

Chandra Wright, who directs the facilities' environmental and educational initiatives, says, "Although Alabama is not usually known for environmentally friendly efforts, our park showcases eco-sensitive, self-sustaining construction and programming."

The contemporary, 350-room lodge is beautiful, low-impact and energy-efficient. Alabama artists' works decorate the hotel built on pilings to withstand storm surge. Air conditioners' condensation is purified and replenishes the infinity pool. Saltwater fishing lessons and suites with bunkbeds are popular with families.

Visitors get hooked on locally sourced seafood. I dream about Perdido Key beach roadhouse Flora-Bama's shrimp tacos, Oso at Bear Point Harbor's poke bowls and James Beard Award-nomi-

nated chef Bill Briand's seared scallops from his restaurant Fisher's Upstairs at Orange Beach Marina. For fine wines, steaks, seafood and panoramic beach views, dine at Voyagers in Perdido Beach Resort. Original Oyster House's traditional Southern fare satisfies, especially the chocolate chip peanut butter pie. In their shop at The Wharf in Orange Beach, the Zirlott family serves bags containing buttery Murder Point Oysters.

On Fort Morgan peninsula, Navy Cove Oysters farm hosts tours. I stand in warm, waist-deep water near floating oyster cages with marine research scientist and co-owner John Supan. He explains sustainable aquaculture oyster-growing techniques and how Mobile Bay's environment affects their oysters' sweet, cucumberlike flavor, which visitors savor at nearby Sassy

Bass Amazin' Grill. Supan says, "When eating an oyster, you taste its 'merroir,' the essence of the sea in which it was raised."

Through Alabama Coastal Foundation's oyster shell recycling program, restaurants provide their shucked shells to help build wild oyster reefs. Oil spill reparations have supported the organization's volunteer-driven "Share the Beach" sea turtle conservation program and osprey nest platform project.

While kayaking in Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge with WildNative Tours, I spot ospreys, pelicans and bottlenose dolphins. I met paddlers Matt and Katie Dutton, newlyweds from Illinois, who originally planned to honeymoon overseas, but the pandemic prevented it. Matt says, "We're having such a good time here, we'll definitely come back."