

Comeback Beaches

Disasters spark sustainable tourism on Alabama's Gulf Coast

BY KIT BERNARDI

This summer, 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 COVID-19 pandemic began. Soft, white sand squeaks beneath my feet, and gentle waves trimmed in lacy foam unfurl across my toes.

Amidst this serenity, 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 beach on the Gulf of Mexico between Pensacola, Fla., and Mobile, Ala., have recovered from a trio of tragedies — Hurricane Ivan in 2004, the Deep-water Horizon oil spill in 2010 and Hurricane Sally in 2020 — and transformed into a sustainable year-round 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 the hotels and approximately 9,000 vacation rental homes and condominiums nearby.

"Catastrophic events have strengthened our resilient community's efforts to protect the natural environment upon which our culture and livelihoods depend, and visitors return often to enjoy," says lifelong resident Herb Malone, president of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism.

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. "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," he says. >



Gulf State Park Pier



Lodge at Gulf State Park

HOLIDAY HAPPENINGS

If you plan a visit to Gulf Shores during the holiday season, here are some events that will have you feeling merry:

WINTER AT THE WHARF IN ORANGE BEACH

From late November through mid-January, families shop and celebrate the holidays at the festively decorated entertainment complex, which hosts free, nightly holiday laser light shows, ice skating, carriage rides, photos with Santa, and New Year's Eve fireworks and a countdown "Marlin Drop" event.

FLORA-BAMA POTLUCKS & MUSIC EVENTS

The beach bar is headquarters for the Frank Brown Songwriters Festival held at 20 music clubs across the region, showcasing more than 200 nationally acclaimed songwriters, Nov. 4-14. Flora-Bama provides turkey, ham, stuffing and

mashed potatoes, and locals bring their favorite covered side dishes and desserts to share at the free Thanksgiving and Christmas Day Potluck feasts. Santa parachutes onto the beach for the annual family holiday celebration on Dec. 11. Everyone's welcome to the New Year's Eve Polar Bear Dip in the Gulf and the free, traditional Southern-style food afterward.

COASTAL ARTS CENTER OF ORANGE BEACH

Shop for artist-made jewelry, ornaments and home décor at the gallery featuring rotating exhibits and the Light Up The Arts holiday sale, Dec. 16. The center's glass-blowing and ceramics studios also host holiday ornament-making workshops.

GRINCHMAS AT GULF STATE PARK

Gulf State Park's Learning Campus is decorated like Dr. Suess' whimsical Whoville for this free, outdoor holiday event, held Dec. 5 and 12. Families can enjoy sweet treats, storytelling sessions, craft stations and photos with the Grinch.

LULU'S GULF SHORES ANNUAL BILLY CLAUS AND THE LULUBELLES

Santa's beach-lovin' brother Billy Claus boats in for photos and family fun at the outdoor entertainment center on Dec. 11. At 5 p.m., the annual Christmas Lighted Boat Parade starts at LuLu's on the Intracoastal Waterway and ends at The Wharf in Orange Beach.



Gulf State Park boardwalk

After the holidays, local residents are encouraged to donate to the park undecorated, natural Christmas trees, which are then used as infrastructure to help catch blowing sand and rebuild dunes eroded by storms and public use. Visitors can also join local volunteer teams that plant native dune species to shore up the area.

“Our restoration work helps the beach recover and preserve natural habitats for animals living in the dunes, including the endangered Alabama Beach Mouse, nesting shore birds and sea turtles,” says Gulf State Park district naturalist Kelly Reetz.

SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD

The new Gulf State Park Pier is a popular year-round fishing spot with gear for rent. The nearby underwater reef is constructed of debris from the former pier and lodge destroyed by Hurricane Ivan. Alabama has one of the world’s largest artificial reef systems. Recently expanded using oil spill reparations funds, the system totals 1,136 square miles, creating fish habitats throughout Gulf Coast waters.

Most of the area’s restaurants are family-owned, serving locally sourced fish, oysters, shrimp and crab with a generous side of warm Southern hospitality. I dream about Perdido Key beach roadhouse Flora-Bama’s shrimp tacos, Oso at Bear Point Harbor’s poké bowls and James Beard Award-nominated chef Bill Briand’s seared scallops from his restaurant Fisher’s Upstairs at Orange Beach Marina.

My friends and I brought wine and appetizers for a relaxing sunset cruise aboard the six-passenger, electric boat *Anonyme II*, owned by Kristy Doggett and her sister, Captain DD Russo of *Anonyme Cruises*. Two-hour trips depart from Orange Beach Marina. “Guests love the quiet cruise, void of engine noise and petrol fumes, just gliding through tranquil, residential canals and bays where dolphins swim,” Russo says. ■



Bicyclists in Gulf State Park

ECO-FRIENDLY INFRASTRUCTURE

Gulf State Park’s beachfront Interpretive Center teaches visitors about the 6,150 acres filled with interdependent coastal ecologies and the 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 and dune restoration programs, and 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 can stay in campgrounds, eco-friendly luxury cottages, cabins and The Lodge at Gulf State Park. The contemporary, 350-room lodge is beautiful as well as energy-efficient.

Adjacent to the park’s campus, the new Gulf Coast Center for Ecotourism & Sustainability — supported by \$9.7 million in oil spill retribution and scheduled to open late 2022 — has partnered with ocean-advocate Jean-Michel Coustea’s Ocean Futures Society to offer environmentally focused workshops, camps and classes.

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.”