



Beaches, Birds and Boats

There's plenty of recreation along Alabama's abbreviated Gulf Coast

■ JAMES & DOROTHY RICHARDSON

Something about the Alabama Gulf Coast calls to travelers — it could be the white sandy beaches that beckon, or maybe it's all that sun. Of course, many vacationers visit this balmy destination to partake of its restaurants, golf courses and varied shopping opportunities. Certainly, RVers are allowed to enjoy all of the area's increasing number of attractions.

Bad weather often blows in off the Gulf of Mexico with little advance warning; these craft, tied up at Zeke's Marina, are typical of boats seen along the Gulf Coast that can ride out changing conditions. Alabama's coastline includes a birding trail (the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge welcomes 370 species during migratory season) and miles of white, sandy beaches.

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Alabama only serves up about 32 miles of beaches along its abbreviated Gulf Coast (excluding Dauphin Island), but activities abound along this easily accessed span. First among these is relaxing on the beach, but birding, boating, fishing, golfing and exploring also fill visitors' days.

Alabama Coastal Birding Trail

One of the latest additions to the to-do list is the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail. Signs posted along roadways throughout the area note special places to see birds and which species to look for. The trail is a series of loops describing the birding spots frequented by birders. The loops are scattered around the Gulf Coast, but it is not necessary to complete all the loops to enjoy birding.

The Gulf Shores-Orange Beach Loop, for example, starts at Perdido Pass near the Florida state line and extends close to State Highway 180, which leads to Fort Morgan. The Fort Morgan Loop, meanwhile, takes in the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge. Birders can pick up a brochure and map of the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail at one of the visitors centers in Gulf Shores or Orange Beach.

Other Attractions

Gulf State Park contains more than 6,000 acres (and more than 2½ miles of white sand beaches) and separates Gulf Shores and Orange Beach. Part of the park is located along State Highway 182; visitors also can access the campground, fishing lakes, a golf course and an 825-foot pier — the longest on the Gulf of Mexico — from State Highway 180. Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge is just a few minutes outside Gulf Shores on State Highway 180 and offers enthusiasts 6,700 acres of coastal terrain, including beach access, sand dunes and rolling woodlands of pine and oak. The name

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Bon Secour comes from the French; it means “safe harbor” and is appropriate because the native flora and fauna seem to take sanctuary at the refuge. Established by Congress in 1980, the refuge is one of the largest undeveloped land parcels on the Alabama coast; the ecosystem is visited by 370 species of birds during migratory season.

At the western terminus of State Highway 180, historic Fort Morgan overlooks Mobile Bay. Construction began after the War of 1812, when Congress realized the U.S. was vulnerable along its southern and eastern coastlines. The fort was completed in 1834, but proved obsolete during the Civil War when General Farragut led his Union fleet past the fort while losing only one ship. An upgrade of all the brick forts followed; today, self-guided tours through the fort reveal the combination of old brick and newer concrete structures. The Fort Morgan Ferry operates nearby, carrying cars and passengers to Dauphin Island, where venerable Fort Gaines stands guard across Mobile Bay.

Fishing and golfing prove to be popular diversions in this area for outdoor enthusiasts. With more than 100 boats in the Orange Beach fishing fleet, eager anglers can easily search for grouper, snapper, triggerfish and amberjack. For those with their own boats, numerous public boat launches allow for convenient fresh- or saltwater fishing. Cruises that feature shelling excursions or dolphin sightings are available; lunch

or dinner cruises also are popular.

No fewer than 18 golf courses in the Gulf Shores-Orange Beach area allow low-handicappers and duffers alike numerous opportunities to improve their games.

Of course, when not enjoying the beach, vacationers have plenty of options when it comes time to shop or eat. Due to their proximity to the gulf, many restaurants offer catch-of-the-day seafood prepared a multitude of ways. Those who prefer other cuisines, however, can certainly find their fill at a variety of fine restaurants.

The Tanger Outlet Center, just north of Gulf Shores on U.S. Highway 59 in Foley, is a major outlet mall with more than 120 stores. Bargains await shoppers looking to fill a few bags while away from the beach.

RVers can stay in a variety of campgrounds, one of the newest and nicest being Island Retreat RV Park. It has numerous amenities and is about 1½ miles west of U.S. Highway 59 on State Highway 180 (Fort Morgan Road). Other recommended campgrounds include Gulf State Park Campground, Luxury RV Resort and Doc's RV Park.

Squeezed between Mississippi and Florida's extensive panhandle, Alabama only manages to dip its big toe into the Gulf of Mexico, but along its 57 miles of shoreline are ample opportunities for leisurely pursuits. Whether setting out on a lengthy vacation or a weekend escape, RVers will find what they're looking for — and more — along Alabama's Gulf Coast. ■

For More Info

- Alabama Bureau of Tourism, (800) 252-2262, touralabama.org. *CIRCLE 243 ON READER SERVICE CARD.*
- Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau, (800) 745-SAND, gulfshores.com
- Gulf State Park, (800) ALA-PARK, dcnr.state.al.us
- Island Retreat RV Park, (866) 974-9999, islandretreatrv.com