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Ship Island

## Ship Island: A coast tradition

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Think Gulf Coast family vacation and Ship Island Excursions will probably come to mind.

Since 1926, Ship Island Excursions has been a part of the Mississippi Gulf Coast experience with members of the Skrmetta family running this ferry service from the mainland to Ship Island for relaxation, recreation and history.

If you look closely, you may see dolphins playing in the boat's wake or feeding on mullet and menhaden near the island beaches. This year marks the 90th year that the Pan American Clipper has carried people to Ship Island.

Marketing Director Kevin Buckle has been with the company 20 years and says the biggest attraction for those taking the excursion is the clear Gulf water around Ship Island, unlike the brackish water of the Mississippi Sound.

"People just love it out there," he said. "Another big thing that people enjoy is seeing dolphins on the ride to the island. We see them just about every day."

Once visitors are on Ship Island, they like the high quality beaches that are ideal for sun bathing and playing in the clear water.

"People also appreciate that we try to keep prices down for families by letting them bring their own food and drinks," Buckle said.

"However, there is a snack bar on the island if that's what they want."

Ship Island is unspoiled with blue water, surf, and tranquil stretches of shore. The National Park Service provides a designated swim area with lifeguards on duty in summer. Beach chair and umbrella rentals are available.

Historic Fort Massachusetts is a special attraction and can be toured on your own or with a guided tour by a park ranger.

"Most people do the fort tour first and then park it on the beach under an umbrella or go swimming or shelling or just walking along the beach," Buckle said.

The service was established by Croatian immigrant and Biloxi fisherman Captain Pete Skrmetta. His two sons and six daughters grew up working on the ferry and the island. The maritime tradition continues in the form of a U.S. Coast Guard inspected boat company that's under contract with the National Park Service to take passengers to Ship Island.

The ferry is docked at the small craft harbor in Gulfport and offers passengers the popular half-day island visit of four and a half hours or the all-day sun-seeker visit of seven hours. For a shorter excursion option, passengers can depart on the noon boat and return from the island on the 2:30 p.m. boat. The cruise to the island takes about one hour each way.

The Biloxi mayor and city council have expressed interest in establishing a dock in Biloxi for Ship Island Excursions to give Coast visitors more boarding options. At press time an agreement had not been reached between the city and the company.