



By Katherine Rodeghier: [Chicago Daily Herald](#)

Stretching 62 miles along the Gulf of Mexico, Mississippi's coast has long been a vacation spot, one that has repeatedly bounced back from catastrophe.

Wealthy farmers built summer homes here in the early 1800s, but after Mississippi became the second state to secede from the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War, vacations ceased. Railroads brought visitors back in the early 1900s, and by the 1960s the area was well-established as a beach resort with ma-and-pa motels, a few notable grand hotels and illicit gambling for those who knew where to find it.

Then came hurricane Camille in 1969. Winds of up to 210 mph and a storm surge of 24 feet wiped out tourism for decades. The state legalized gambling in 1992 and visitors returned to try their luck, first at floating casinos built to look like Mississippi paddle wheelers. Hotel casinos followed.

And then came Katrina. Winds were not as powerful as Camille, but a storm surge as high as 34 feet turned 90 percent of the buildings along the coast into miles of rubble. Those casinos? Gone. And with them 18,000 jobs.

Recognizing that tourism, with gambling, is the key to the local economy, casinos were among the first businesses to rebuild, many inside massive waterfront resorts. Nine years after Katrina, 12 casinos are pulling in visitors. Even the 2010 offshore oil spill, which gave the mistaken impression that the coast was closed, could not deter them.

Mississippi's Gulf Coast has become "Vegas of the South" once again.

But what if the thought of spending your day indoors in front of a slot machine turns you off? Not to worry. Those beautiful white sand beaches that attracted the first visitors are still here — with no evidence of oil. Historic sites tell the back story of the coast. And charter boats take you beyond the barrier islands for some of the best fishing in the Gulf of Mexico.

Hit the beach or bike

Twenty-six miles of white sand beaches make the Mississippi Coast a popular sun and fun destination spring into fall. While gamblers are holed up indoors playing the odds, beach bums are getting tan playing volleyball. Vendors rent Jet Skis, aqua cycles and kayaks in season. Thanks to barrier islands that tame high surf miles offshore, waves lapping onto the mainland from the Mississippi Sound are usually gentle enough for children to enjoy.

U.S. Route 90, also known as Beach Boulevard, runs along the grand sweep of sand west of Biloxi. Because most of the lodging, restaurants and other buildings are on the inland side of the highway, beachgoers find easy access with pullovers along the route. Farther west, near Pass Christian and Long Beach, the area turns residential and the beaches are quieter.

Wide concrete walks along the 26 miles of beach accommodate both joggers and bicyclists. Bike-rental company, ecoGeno, lies just two blocks off the beach near downtown Biloxi and makes a good starting place for a ride along the sound.

Before heading to the beach, bicyclists might stop by the Town Green where the Katrina Memorial is dedicated to those who lost their lives in the hurricane. The Camille Memorial, on the beachfront grounds of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Biloxi, honors the 172 dead or missing on the Mississippi Coast as a result of that epic storm.

Cruise to the island

A day at the beach can be combined with Gulf Coast history on an excursion to Ship Island, 11 miles off the mainland. Part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, it's one of the last of America's undeveloped barrier islands and is reached by excursion boats running from Gulfport, often with dolphins jumping in their wake. Remote and pristine, it has the state's best beaches with sea oats poking up from the sand and around a boardwalk stretching a third of a mile across the island. Beach chairs and umbrellas can be rented in season and there's a snack bar for those who opt not to bring their own picnic.

Camille split Ship Island in half and Katrina inundated it, but the island's treasured historic site survived them both. Fort Massachusetts, built in 1859 to secure the island's strategic location in the Gulf, once stood 500 feet from the island's west tip. Now the end of the island is a pleasant mile walk down the beach thanks to shifting sands.

French explorers who landed in 1699 named the island for its ship-friendly natural harbor. It became an important port for French Louisiana and served as the "Plymouth Rock of the Gulf Coast" as the first colonists arrived. During the War of 1812, 60 British ships rallied here for their attack on New Orleans. Union Admiral David Farragut's fleet did the same in 1862 prior to the attack on the Big Easy and Mobile.

During tours of the fort given by the National Park Service, visitors see its 8-foot-deep moat and 15-inch Rodman cannon capable of firing a 400-pound cannon ball three miles. They

hear stories about Confederate forces seizing the fort during the Civil War and how the island later became a Confederate POW camp. Many Confederate soldiers are buried there.

The Gulf of Mexico holds a bounty of fish and seafood. Need proof? Wander down to the marina in Biloxi some morning and have a look at what the shrimp boats pulled in during the night. Shrimpers, many of Vietnamese descent, sell their catch by the pound right off their boats.

But you don't have to be a commercial fisherman to get the thrill of bringing in a catch. Charter boats can be hired to fish inshore, in the bayous and back bays or way out into the Gulf itself.

Capt. Craig Gusa takes customers out into the Gulf for deep-sea fishing, navigating his 38-foot High Times Too anywhere from 3 to 12 miles offshore, depending on where the fish are biting. Fishing is good any time of the year, but May through August is peak season, followed by fall, he says. Fishing was suspended for four months during the oil spill. Business has yet to fully recover, not only from the mistaken notion that fishing continues to be off, but also from the slow recovery from the Great Recession. It's not an inexpensive sport.

The Gulf waters hold about 30 species of fish and trolling is a popular way to snag them. Multiple lines stream from the sides and back of the boat. Any cobia caught is kept for bait. The Jack Crevelle fish is a frequent catch and often a good fighter on the line but is not good eating. It's thrown back into the Gulf. King and Spanish mackerel are keepers, though, as is the prized red snapper, but its season is a short one.

See the sights

Hurricanes may have wiped out much of the coast but haven't destroyed its history or culture.

Beauvoir, the last home of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, has survived 18 hurricanes since it was completed in 1852. The single-story raised cottage with slate roof sits on 62, 8-foot-tall brick piers designed to provide the home with natural air conditioning. They also helped the building to weather storm surges. Davis wrote his memoirs here and may have reminisced about his accomplishments: graduated from West Point; served in the Black Hawk War, as did his rival Abraham Lincoln; elected U.S. senator; pushed for the building of the Transcontinental Railroad while Secretary of War.

The home is part of a 51-acre site that also includes the modern Jefferson Davis Presidential Library, Tomb of the Unknown Confederate Soldier, Varina Davis' Rose Garden, Confederate Cemetery and nature trails.

Architect Frank Gehry's signature curving steel designs stand out on the Mississippi Coast in the form of the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art. Gehry carefully positioned his steel and brick structures around live oak trees and connected them with brick walkways that float over the

roots of the trees to protect them from damage. The museum campus includes a gallery of African-American art, another with changing exhibitions of contemporary works, a ceramics studio, Mississippi Sound Welcome Center and the Pleasant Reed Interpretive Center, a reconstruction of a 19th-century shotgun-style cottage owned by a former slave.

A new gallery, consisting of a series of brushed stainless-steel pods, will house the work of George Ohr when it opens this year. The "Mad Potter of Biloxi," Ohr was an isolated and eccentric genius who is considered America's first art potter. His work around the turn of the last century is characterized by vibrant glaze colors and forms that exaggerated traditional styles of the day.

An artist ahead of his time, Ohr's work is surprising, as is the discovery that the Mississippi Coast offers more than roulette wheels and blackjack tables.