

The Dallas Morning News



A guide to Gulf Islands National Seashore

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Published: 24 July 2015 11:02 PM

Updated: 25 July 2015 12:17 AM

“Be sure to pick up a chick magnet when you go.” Not sure what to expect, I took the advice of Susan Teele, chief of resource education for the Gulf Islands National Seashore, when arriving at one of four visitor centers. Who knew this little magnet would become such an endearing souvenir of the remarkable national seashore, which stretches along miles of Mississippi and Florida?

The magnet is a marvelous reminder to slow down, for the sake of the chicks, and for our own mental and physical well-being, no doubt. Each year, shorebirds, some threatened or endangered, fly thousands of miles to nest on national seashore beaches. They frequent the roadside to feed on insects and, invariably, some get flattened by unsuspecting cars zooming by. Thus, the popular magnetic plea to “Save a Chick ... Drive 20 mph.”

There’s no better place to pause than a beach, to let time and space expand, to air out your head and let your soul catch up with your body — and to unplug the kids from electronics and busy-ness. Upward of 5 million people visit Gulf Islands National Seashore annually, but for many people it’s still a hidden gem standing ready for exploration and escape.

The seashore stretches across 160 miles in bits and pieces.

The parcels are natural and serene, with stunning turquoise waters and stark white sand, located primarily on barrier islands. A surprising two-thirds of the vast, 120,000-acre park is actually under water.

Wilderness areas like Horn and Petit Bois islands offer unparalleled solitude and primitive recreation and are accessible only by watercraft.

This national treasure begins at Cat Island, Miss., on the western side, and ends to the east in Okaloosa, near Fort Walton Beach, Fla. Twelve sections include historic forts, campgrounds, trails, picnic areas, informative visitor centers and spectacular beaches, all expertly overseen by the National Park Service, which celebrates its 100th birthday next year.

The National Seashore is not continuous, so a bit of a primer before venturing there is helpful.

Where to start

From Dallas, a good spot to begin reconnoitering is just an eight-hour drive east in Gulfport, Miss. Check out the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center and the Gulf Islands Waterpark.

Some of Mississippi’s finest beaches can be found 11 miles out to sea, on gorgeous Ship Island, an important part of GINS. The island is accessible by Ship Island Excursions’ ferry boats in Gulfport. Dolphins are likely to escort you during the fun, 50-minute ride, where dreamy beaches invite you to swim, relax, tour historic Fort Massachusetts and explore for an entire day.

Back on the mainland and just outside GINS, Biloxi is known as a playground for all ages, with the world’s longest man-made beach, casino resorts, golf courses, museums, waterfront restaurants and a host of activities for families, including the Big Play Family Fun Center, with bumper cars, kiddie bumper boats and miniature golf.

Part of the allure of GINS is that it’s mostly undeveloped, except for two campgrounds with limited water and electrical hookups for RVs and tents. To really get away from it all, primitive camping is permitted in designated areas.

If the family prefers the comforts of more modern lodging, Gulfport and Biloxi have many fine offerings, including Marriott’s Courtyard Gulfport, South Beach Biloxi Hotel or the recently renovated and more adult-focused Island View Casino Resort.

Moving on

Continue your drive eastward, between Biloxi and Pascagoula, and you’ll find the Davis Bayou area, the only mainland parcel of Mississippi’s Gulf Islands National Seashore. Visit the educational William M. Colmer Visitor Center and explore the boardwalks and trails that wind along a coastal forest and over two interesting bayous. With alligators and ospreys, this is quite different from the miles of beaches found elsewhere.

Yes, Alabama separates Mississippi and Florida, and the Gulf Islands National Seashore.

In Florida

Florida's portion of GINS is reachable by car and was recently named the No. 1 beach in the state by readers of *USA Today*. Delve in at Fort Barrancas and its visitor center, located at Pensacola Naval Air Station, which is a pretty cool experience.

Major attractions include the impressive — and free — National Naval Aviation Museum, with more than 150 aircraft and 4,000 artifacts on display, plus an Imax theater and interactive simulators. It's also home to the U.S. Navy's flight demonstration team, the Blue Angels, with practice flights most Tuesdays and Wednesdays, March through November.

Climb the 177 steps to the top of Pensacola Lighthouse, the tallest on the Gulf Coast, for an awesome view and some active family fun. Drive along Perdido Key and spend an idyllic afternoon hiking, fishing or relaxing at Johnson Beach.

For dinner, visit the Flora-Bama Yacht Club, a relaxed eatery right on the sand, where families pull their boats up for an evening's entertainment. Santa Rosa's another blissful barrier island, with lovely Opal Beach and a 7-mile section of the National Florida Scenic Trail.

Don't miss the Naval Live Oaks and Fort Pickens areas and visitor centers, and partake in a variety of excellent ranger programs, including guided walks, tours of the forts, stargazing and snorkeling adventures at several GINS locations. Kids can become Junior Rangers, a fun and free way to learn about the biology and history of the national seashore.

For great lodging, restaurant and entertainment options, head for nearby Pensacola Beach, a lively juxtaposition with the mellow GINS. Paradise Inn is a beachy blast from the past, and a perfectly casual and inexpensive place to call home base. Come evening, stick your toes in the sand and enjoy live music, good food and an energetic vibe at Paradise Bar and Grill. If you have the good fortune to meet local legend and Paradise owner Fred Simmons, you'll be treated to his humor and in-depth knowledge from a lifetime living in the area.

For upscale dining and fresh seafood, the Grand Marlin Restaurant and Oyster Bar is a must, with views of the Santa Rosa Sound and sunsets over Pensacola Bay. Other choices include H2O Hilton Pensacola Beach, especially for Sunday brunch, Red Fish Blue Fish and Peg Leg Pete's.

Get moving with parasails, kayaks, wave runners, paddleboards or bicycle rentals. Companies like Key Sailing, Dolphin Express and Condor Sailing will help you explore these waters, where the Atlantic bottlenose dolphin is the largest and most prevalent mammal.

Visit Gulf Islands National Seashore for a unique and well-rounded beach vacation, and my guess is that your vehicle, too, will be sporting a chick magnet.

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When you go

Several airlines serve areas near the Gulf Islands National Seashore, such as Gulfport, Miss., and Pensacola, Fla., but driving from Dallas makes for a fun family adventure as well. Helpful websites to plan your excursion include: