

## Ship Island still popular, vulnerable

by Lisa Monti

Published: December 28, 2012

Tags: [Gulf Islands National Seashore](#), [Lisa Monti](#), [Ship Island](#)



Fort Massachusetts

Ship Island has long been a popular attraction for visitors who come from as far away as Europe and Canada to enjoy the sun, surf, marine life and wildlife 11 miles off the Mississippi Coast.

The island, one of five barrier islands in the Gulf Islands National Seashore, is known for its natural beauty – but it has been battered over the years. Hurricanes Camille, Katrina and Isaac have all left their mark, as did the 2010 BP oil spill.

Repairs have been made and oil cleanup is winding down on the islands that serve as the Coast's first line of defense against storm surge.

"Last season was great until Hurricane Isaac destroyed the pier and put us out of business," said Ship Island Excursions Capt. Louis Skrmetta.

His family has been ferrying island goers for three generations over 85 years. They'll resume service March 16 from Gulfport.

"We're growing every year," said Skrmetta. Up until the oil spill, passenger counts were "coming back to pre-Katrina levels," he said. "We carried about as many people by the time Isaac hit as in 2011. The island is as popular as ever."

Before Katrina in 2005, the passenger count was 65,000 and had built back up to 42,000 in 2009. The oil spill of 2010 dropped the number of passengers to 22,000. Last year the count was 48,000, and when Isaac hit in August, 44,000 passengers had been counted.

Ship Island Excursions operates the 100-foot Capt. Pete, 115-foot Gulf Islander and the 65-foot Pan American Clipper. All three are licensed and inspected by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Technically, there's been a West and East Ship since Hurricane Camille breached the island in 1969. Hurricane Katrina widened Camille Cut.

"Nature tried to re-heal that breach and was closing it in 2005 when Katrina came along and undid all that natural healing process. Now what was a relatively small space is well over three miles wide," said Dan Brown, superintendent of Gulf Islands National Seashore.



#### Ship Island

West Ship Island, where the ferries take visitors, includes Fort Massachusetts, which was completed in 1868 and is open for tours by Park Rangers. Visitors can enjoy swimming, shelling, birding or just relaxing on the island. Beach chairs and umbrellas are available for rent, and there's a snack bar on board and on the island. The trip, which takes under an hour, is a highlight in itself with dolphins racing alongside the boats.

"It's great for families," Skrmetta said. "They love the experience. It's a very clean environment and a travel bargain." Adult tickets are \$27 and children ages 3 to 10 pay \$17. Seniors and active duty military pay \$25.

"Our goal is to keep providing quality service and make it as affordable as possible," Skrmetta said.

As his family business struggled to rebound after Katrina, the oil spill presented another enormous challenge. Their six-month season was cut by two months.

Most of the oil in Mississippi waters came ashore on the barrier islands, Brown said, and cleanup is progressing.

"Most of West Ship Island is cleaned up," he said. "You can walk around and would be hard pressed to find any evidence of the oil spill. It looks beautiful."

East Ship is very different, he said. "It is low lying and gets overwashed regularly by high tide and by storm events. It has a lot of sensitive sites, culturally and environmentally, like eagle nests, that make it more challenging. It's progressing on a slow pace."

Brown described the barrier islands as very sensitive and easily impacted. "They are constantly changing in their shape, size and location. That's the nature of something made up entirely of sand," he said.

Because of the islands' role in protecting the coastal areas from storm surge, Congress funded the \$439 million Mississippi Coastal Improvement Program to help restore the islands.

Most of the money will go toward rejoining Ship Island, Brown said. It will take three years to fully replace the sand that the hurricanes took away.

"The Mississippi Coastal Improvement Program is intended to return 22 million cubic yards of sand to the Mississippi barrier island sand transport system that was removed through dredging the Gulfport and Pascagoula shipping channels," Brown said. "That dredged sand was deposited in deeper water where it was unavailable for the currents that nurture and move the islands, and as a result Ship Island and Petit Bois Island have shrunk 64 percent and 56 percent respectively since 1917."

It will be the second largest restoration in the National Park system, second only to the massive Everglades restoration project, he said. Work will begin in 2013.

**>>If you go...**

Ship Island Excursions

(228) 864-1014 or Toll Free: 1-866-466-7386

[www.msshipisland.com](http://www.msshipisland.com)