

Sojourn to Ship Island
History, wildlife, and rare beauty convene on this
Mississippi isle
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April 23, 2025



PAUL CHRISTIANSEN

En route to Ship Island

On a cloudless day in March, we stood in line with more than a hundred other passengers waiting to board the Ship Island ferry in Gulfport, Mississippi. It was opening week for the seasonal Ship Island Excursions ferry service, which has been shuttling beachgoers to Mississippi's islands for ninety-nine years now.

Despite the chill in the early morning air, tourists were dressed for a day at the beach. Our ferry was wedged between private boats and a fleet of Coast Guard vessels, overlooking the Mississippi Aquarium and the countless fishermen lining the road to the nearby marina.

Shortly after we filed onboard and settled in seats across the spacious vessel, we set sail from the harbor into the calm, barely rippling waters of the Mississippi Sound. Right at the start, dolphins started tracking our wake along the twelve-mile path, rolling their dorsal fins above the water in a playful wave to the passengers. My husband, Paul, and youngest son spent the nearly hour-long ride roaming the boat and buying out the snack store below deck, while I gazed at the seemingly endless water spreading out all around us.

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One of five barrier islands in the Mississippi section of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, Ship Island is the only one accessible by commercial ferry. Perhaps just as important, it's also the only one offering

convenient facilities like bathrooms, picnic pavilions, and concessions serving a full lunch menu as well as selling visors, beach toys, and everything else you forgot to bring.

We docked on the island's north side by historic Fort Massachusetts, and immediately a red-winged blackbird landed on the boat and cocked his head to watch our procession down off the gangplank. While the group shuffled down the pier toward the beach, juggling folding chairs and ice chests, schools of fish and a roaming stingray passed beneath us in the shallow blue-green water. The ferry guides reminded us that "Ship Island sunburns are legendary," and we stopped to spray each other down before setting foot on the shell-lined sand before us.

Most of the passengers seemed to be familiar with their surroundings, some hiking the island's one-third mile boardwalk to the south beach, others scouting the north side for shells, and one couple setting off for a leisurely stroll around the east end. Charles, our oldest, grabbed his fishing gear and, without a backwards glance, went west towards a fly fisherman already casting his line.

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Shelling on Ship Island

After watching him go, we turned toward the D-shaped, brick fort before us. Most days, the National Park Service offers tours of Fort Massachusetts, but today it was closed due to flooding. So instead of exploring its arched corridors, we picked our way around the outside walls, peering through the openings to catch a glimpse inside. Built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between 1859 and 1866, Fort Massachusetts was strategically placed to protect the only deep-water harbor between Mobile Bay and the Mississippi River. Today, it serves as a visual reminder of Ship Island's notable role in history.

The Spanish landed here in the 1500s, and Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville followed in 1699. French explorers named the island "Ile aux

Vaisseaux,” translated to “Ship Island.” It served as a point of entry for French colonists in the 1720s, was handed over to Great Britain at the end of the Seven Years’ War, and after the American Revolution, the Spanish flag flew here. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1810, Ship Island became part of the United States. During the War of 1812, British warships anchored off its coast while preparing for the Battle of New Orleans, and during the Civil War, it served as an active small city, with a prison for Confederate prisoners of war and a base for the African American Louisiana Native Guards.

On the island’s backside, the rather protected Mississippi Sound was an important commercial shipping route between Mobile and New Orleans, but it could become dangerous during storms. So, Ship Island also became home to several lighthouses. The first, a forty-five-foot-tall brick structure, was completed in 1853 and outlasted storms and a seizure by Confederate soldiers, only to be destabilized by erosion. Abandoned in 1885, it collapsed into the surrounding waters in 1901. A second, seventy-five-foot-tall wooden lighthouse replaced it in 1886 and continued to light the way for passing ships until 1957. Unfortunately, it was accidentally burned down by campers in 1972. To pay tribute to the island’s lighthouses, a third replica light was erected in 2000 but destroyed only five years later when Hurricane Katrina roared ashore.

We continued past the fort along the boardwalk that traversed the island’s marshy interior. By now, people were mingling in the convenience store, emerging with cheeseburgers and kid-sized shovels. On the Gulf side, rows of chairs and umbrellas stood ready to rent and

bikini-clad teenagers sunbathed while children played in the sand. There were no shells here, only white quartz sand we learned had washed out of the Appalachian Mountains after the last ice age, interspersed with patches of darker sand deposited by the Mississippi River. We lingered for a bit, our younger sons burying themselves in the sand while we walked the beach. Later, we unfolded our picnic blanket and sat down to eat our PB&J sandwiches, entertained by still more dolphins diving in the Gulf waters before us.

As the sun got hotter, we made our way back to the north end, stopping for shade and a water break under the covered pavilion. A blackbird friend, perhaps the same from before, landed on our backpack and spread his wings to show off his red stripe. When he bid us adieu, we returned to the Sound and began searching the thousands upon thousands of shells lining the beach. Most were broken, but every so often, a perfect specimen emerged.

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Ship Island's beach

Realizing this side of the island had been built up with dredged sand, Paul began a closer inspection of the ground and almost immediately zeroed in on a shark's tooth. A few steps farther, he found two more. Then came the fossilized crab legs—hollow cylinders covered in tiny bumps. They looked like specialized beads for a necklace, and we gathered handfuls to bring home.

Leaving him to his search, I walked the water's edge, marveling at the upside-down, plate-shaped jellyfish washed ashore and nearly stepping on a perfectly preserved, foot-long horseshoe crab. Charles, drawn by hunger, made his way back to us and offered tales of a half dozen stingrays, elusive black drum, and even a shark trolling the waters

around his fishing bait. The shallow north beach appeared to be a treasure trove of wildlife.

The ferry cruised up to the pier with the day's second group of travelers, and another hundred-plus individuals filed onto the barrier island, anticipating a relaxing afternoon on the sand. We lingered with our toes in the cold water, soaking up every last minute of the sun's rays before our afternoon departure time. Making our way back to the ferry, we waved goodbye to several tourists who were staying for the long haul, waiting for the evening ride out.

The return trip passed quickly, the boys taking silly photos of each other and the dolphins following us home. As the sharp breeze swirled through the open boat, passengers began feeling the streaks of bright red sunburns emerging in the spots the sunscreen hadn't reached. Toddlers lay passed out on their parents' shoulders, and the morning's perky travelers now reclined on benches, looking tired, sandy, and windswept. Yet, every one of them had a smile on their face and a story to remember about their day at Ship Island.

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