

Travel

The Impulsive Traveler: Gulf Shores, Ala., the Jersey Shore of the South?

By Bob Carden

June 15, 2012

Driving in from Pensacola Airport, we hit the beach road, passing the loud, legendary Flora-Bama Lounge as we entered Alabama. High-rise condos, framed against a glistening turquoise ocean, mixed with modest beach shacks. BMWs shared the road with rusting Ford pickups.

I was visiting my future in-laws at the Alabama beaches for the first time and thought, “This isn’t half bad.” Then we entered Gulf Shores, and the big red and white sign just jumped right out at me. “Ahead, right on Rte. 59, Discount Bible Factory Outlet.”

I turned to my fiancée and said, “I don’t think I belong here.”

The Impulsive Traveler: Details, Gulf Shores, Ala.

Now, I had nothing against Bibles, nor factory outlets, but I’d never seen them together in the same sentence. And, since I’m a lefty Democrat and a Catholic, it made me wonder whether this was the beach for me.

That was 21 years ago. This *is* the beach for me — and for lots of other people, be they families, students, beer-swilling bubbas or shiraz-sipping sophisticates. And more come all the time, despite the hurricanes and the oil spill. The scents, scenes and sounds of Gulf Shores are a tempting and lively cocktail.

Yup, those ocean scenes you saw on the news during the [2010 BP oil spill](#) are real. Take away the guys in the hazmat suits, and you were looking at some of the prettiest beaches in the country. I like Southern California as much as the next guy, but the gulf’s warmer, the sand’s whiter and you don’t have to elbow your way through baked rollerbladers to get to the ocean.

The oil spill disaster proves the adage: “The only thing worse than bad publicity is no publicity.” Gulf Shores is enjoying its busiest year ever. Locals say that the oil spill exposure made a lot of people realize that Alabama has a beach, and a big, beautiful one at that.

“Business is up 32 percent from last year,” says Marty Hoffman, co-owner with his brother Johnny of Waves Beach convenience store. “People come in here all the time and tell us they never heard of Gulf Shores till the oil spill. So they come to check it out and now they don’t want to leave.”

I once called Gulf Shores the Jersey Shore of the South, and my wife almost slung a bowl of crawfish gumbo at me. She was offended that I would compare the beaches of her youth to those of Snooki and Pauly D. But in some ways, it's true. If you're from Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi or the Midwest, this is your closest, best ocean beach. Like New Jersey, it draws from a wide area — geographically and otherwise. But comparisons probably end there.

There are no kitschy boardwalks. It's more grits and less guido. The beaches are free. Alcohol and food are permitted. And, for all that's consumed, the beaches stay pretty clean. Visitors respect the beauty of the place.

Summer is the busiest season. Spring jumps, too. As a Northerner, I find it too hot in the summer. Southerners don't. Ninety three and humid in Gulf Shores is a lot better than 93 and humid in Birmingham. April is a great month: low humidity, gentle breezes, romantic sunsets, drunk college kids hurling in the back of their F-150s. Okay, that last part isn't so great, but it's a fact of life.

If you're going down in the spring, check which colleges are on spring break. If it's LSU or Texas, watch out. Generally, they're nice kids, but real jello-shots-for-breakfast types. A group of LSU students rented right behind our place last year. They'd forgotten their calculus books, but not their Wiz Khalifa CDs. They didn't sleep much that week. Neither did we.

Generally, you can swim about eight months of the year. I've been in the water with my kids during Christmas, and it's cold. November through February is great for golf, sightseeing, football.

The area has lots to offer: hiking, history, bike trails. Nearby Mobile Bay and Fort Morgan were the site of [historic Civil War battles](#); the phrase "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" originated in Mobile Bay well before Tom Petty. Gulf Shores has a lively cultural and community center. But the best thing down here — aside from the beach — is the music.

Not the big venues, but rather the local bar-restaurants — the Flora-Bama, the Hangout (fun place right on the beach in Gulf Shores), Lulu's (Jimmy Buffet's sister's place; Jimmy grew up in Mobile and partied in Gulf Shores as a youth). You'll find terrific talent strumming guitars, spinning tales. Often we'd stumble into a nondescript place only to hear a great Jimmy Buffet wannabe. Around Washington, music this good often commands a big cover charge and a big crowd. Not here. The guitar picker at the bar singing a beautiful John Prine or Bob Dylan tune might be the same guy patching your drywall the next day. The lifestyle at the gulf attracts this type of musician. Two of the best I've heard played the lounge at a local bowling alley.

Most restaurants are adequate, some above average. Just a few are worth waiting in line for, which is often necessary in the summer. A better idea is to go to one of the many great seafood markets, such as F&S Seafood or Gulf Shores Seafood Market. They'll cook up an old-fashioned Southern shrimp boil for you, often at no extra charge. Take the shrimp home, ice the beverage, spread the newspapers across the picnic table. Peel, eat, drink. Repeat.

Gulf Shores correctly pitches itself as a family-friendly place. There's a lot for kids: amusement parks, water parks, mini-golf, all the standard beach town stuff. For rainy days, there's a huge Tanger Factory Outlet in nearby Foley. But beware: Sales tax here reaches 10 percent, negating lots of savings. The [pretty town of Fairhope on Mobile Bay](#) is a fun day trip, 45 minutes from Gulf Shores. Neighboring Orange Beach has nice beaches and great marinas; it's the go-to place to charter a fishing boat. Still, I'm not wild about its beachfront.

Nor is all perfect in Gulf Shores. That beautiful ocean gets pretty hot in August and often brings nasty, stinging jellyfish. And it's buggy. Not by the beach, but inland, during summer, the mosquitoes are out and they're hungry.

Nevertheless, more and more people are moving here, many from the North. Natives say those snowbirds are settling in just fine.

"Lots of new folks coming down," says Matt Mogan, a real estate agent with ReMax Gulf Shores. "They don't want to change things much. They like what they see."

Understandable. Gulf Shores's charms are timeless: emerald water, warm sun, cold beer. And yes, cheap Bibles.

The Impulsive Traveler: Details, Gulf Shores, Ala.

Carden is a Washington-based video producer and documentary filmmaker.

 **0 Comments**