

[Travel](#)

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For 32 miles of sugar sand beach, head to the coast of Alabama



Vacationers gravitate to the 32 miles of white sand beaches on Alabama's Gulf Coast.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



The big combination platters of seafood at Gulf Shores Steamer are meant to be shared.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



A mix of hotels and condo rental properties line Alabama's Gulf Coast.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



King Neptune's Seafood Restaurant occupies an unassuming spot along the main highway in Gulf Shores, Ala. There's often a line out the door.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Turquoise Place condo resort has a lazy river, perfect for kicking back.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

Alabama? Seriously?

Yes, I tell my surprised friends. We spent our vacation in Alabama. In fact, in 40 years as a travel journalist, stepping onto all seven continents, I've had the pleasure of staying on the Gulf Coast of Alabama three times, once with my professional organization and twice on family vacations. The first time was decades ago with my kids; last year we took a grandchild.

I'd go back in a heartbeat.

The communities of Orange Beach and Gulf Shores sit on Alabama's Riviera, 32 miles of sugar sand beach, as local boosters like to say. It's unlike the rest of Alabama as its tourist office tries to convey with the slogan: "It's a whole different state."

Pull up a map of Alabama and take a look. See those "toes" sticking into the Gulf? That's a prime vacation destination. Clean and family-friendly with hotels and rental condos fronting creamy sand and boasting some of the best seafood

you'll ever salivate over. None of the glitzy casinos you find along Mississippi's coast to the west. And none of the sleazy pawnshops that litter the road to the nearest major airport in Pensacola, Florida, an hour's drive east.

My favorite time to visit? Spring and fall. Summers can be hot and humid, winters too cold for sunbathing. But time your stay wisely and you'll find plenty to keep you happy.

A few from my own experiences:

Beaches

The sand squeaks between your toes as you walk the beaches, dodging surf and sandpipers. So white it practically glows, it contains shiny grains of quartz eroded over the ages from the Appalachian Mountains up north. Spread a towel and soak up the sun or rent a beach chair with an umbrella from a vendor, cooling off now and then with a dip in the clear blue-green Gulf of Mexico. Build a sand castle with the kids; help them hunt for shells.



Parents and kids play in the sand on the beach at Gulf State Park. Alabama's Gulf Coast is family-friendly. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

For something more active, book an ocean kayak or motorized watercraft and do battle with the waves. Float above them on a parasailing adventure.

If you're not staying at a property with beach access, take a ride to Gulf State Park, alapark.com/GulfState/, with more than 3.5 miles of beaches split between the main park in Gulf Shores and access points in Orange Beach. There's a nature center with exhibits on plant and animal life in the park, an 18-hole golf course and the 15-mile Hugh Branyon Backcountry Trail for a leisurely bike ride, walk or jog. You can reserve a cabin or campground space, too.

Fishing

The state park also boasts a fishing pier extending more than a quarter mile into the Gulf. Stroll along with fishermen towing their wheeled rigs and watch them as they haul in their catch. Or rent a rod and reel and try your luck. You can buy bait and a license right on the pier. Kids fish for free with an adult.



Visitors delight in making a catch on inshore and offshore fishing charters. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

If you want to fish from a boat, you have two choices: inshore and offshore charters, aaacharters.net. The smaller vessels used for inshore, think parties of six or less, usually stick to the back bays or bayous but may venture a mile out in the Gulf if weather permits. The bigger offshore boats can be booked from four hours to two days and often go 12 miles out.

Your captain will most likely have you put your line in along the largest artificial reef program in the nation, started by the local charter fishing fleet in the 1950s with the sinking of car bodies and later including Army tanks, voting machines, Liberty ships and more. With luck you'll pull in amberjack, grouper, trigger fish, mackerel and, in season, red snapper.

The crew cleans your fish for you so you can ship your catch home, take it back to your condo to cook or bring it to one of the area's "hook and cook" restaurants. At Shipp's Harbour Grill, shipprestaurant.com/, the chef will turn your catch of the day into a gourmet meal.

Seafood

Fresh fish is all well and good, but the Alabama coast is all about seafood found in abundance at local restaurants.



Ruby red shrimp are a delicacy in seafood restaurants along Alabama's Gulf Coast. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

King Neptune's Seafood Restaurant has been around for 23 years, occupying an unassuming ma and pa place that looks like a repurposed gas station on the main highway in Gulf Shores, kingneptuneseafoodrestaurant.com/. Feast on local Bon Secour oysters, blue crab and, by all means, shrimp. The supersized, succulent royal reds make the word, shrimp, an oxymoron. Owners Al and Diane Sawyer serve up 45 chef specials, including a seafood gumbo to rave about. Weekday lunch specials start at \$4.95 and happy hour, with \$1.50 well drinks and \$2 margaritas and bloody marys, lasts from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Sawyers keep the kids happy with high chairs and crayons for coloring on place mats.

Highly rated Gulf Shores Steamer, which is actually in Orange Beach, takes a heart-healthy approach with steamed seafood, gulfshoressteamer.com/. Families love to dig into colorful combination platters while those above drinking age go for pitchers of beer and buckets of shrimp.

If oysters are your preference, head to the Alabama Gulf Coast the first weekend in November for the annual Hangout Oyster Cook-Off.

Boating

If you want to see where that seafood comes from, book a nature tour with Capt. Skip of Sailaway Charters, sailorskip.com. A state-certified nature guide, he takes families on his pontoon boat through bayous and back bays to catch and identify oysters, blue crabs and shrimp as well as the fish and birds that follow along. With luck you may spot a dolphin.

Dolphins also might show up on Sail Wild Hearts cruises on a 53-foot open catamaran equipped with life vests for little ones not even old enough to walk, sailwildhearts.com. Stretch out on netting above the waves and enjoy the view on a sunset cruise, or book fishing, snorkeling, kayaking or dolphin cruises, including some with the Navy Blue Angels flying in formation overhead. Push your visit into December and you can sail with Santa.

Alabama Gulf Coast

Getting there: The closest major airport is Pensacola International, an hour from Gulf Shores. Drive down from Chicago and you'll hit the beach in about 14 hours.

Where to stay: Choose between hotels and condo rental properties, both with resort features, including some with children's programs.

Turquoise Place: condo resort on the beach, turquoiseplace.spectrumresorts.com/

Caribe: condo resort on the bay and across from the beach, caribe-resort.net/index.html

Island House: hotel rooms with private balconies facing the Gulf and beach, islandhousehotel.com/

Tourist information: Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism, (877) 293-0849 or gulfshores.com/

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