

Escape to Ship Island: Mississippi's beach getaway is soaked in history

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SHIP ISLAND, Miss. • The blackjack and roulette tables of Gulf Coast casinos seem far from the pristine beach on this tiny strip of sand. The sound of the surf punctuated by calls from sea birds is a welcome diversion from the incessant ding, ding, ding of slot machines. You might imagine you are basking in the sun on some isolated tropical isle—somewhere in the Caribbean, perhaps, or even the South Pacific. But turn in your lounge chair and glance back over your shoulder and there, barely poking above the horizon, stand the hotel towers of Gulfport and Biloxi, Miss. Could they be only 11 miles away?

Ship Island, part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore that stretches 160 miles from here to Florida, is actually two islands, thanks to two very nasty ladies. Hurricane Camille split the island in two in 1969 and Katrina widened the gap when she pushed a 30-foot storm surge across it in 2005. Boat captains passing through this new channel get a shock when they look at their GPS devices indicating they are cruising over dry land.

East Ship Island remains wilderness, accessible only by private boat for primitive camping, but West Ship Island is a destination for day visitors who come over on excursion boats from Gulfport. The vessels pull up to the pier on the Mississippi Sound side of the island, but the best beach is on the Gulf side reached by a boardwalk stretching a third of a mile across marsh and sand. After Katrina swept by, the national park service rebuilt basic visitor facilities: restrooms, showers and a snack bar with covered picnic benches.

What to do here? Not a whole lot, and that's the beauty of this beach getaway. You can swim in waters that might hit the mid-80s in summer, or just loll on white sand geologists say is quartz eroded from the Appalachian Mountains and washed down rivers and creeks to be carried here by Gulf currents. A vendor rents beach chairs and umbrellas. You'll need them. With no trees the island has no shade—thanks, Katrina—and even in fall the sand and the boardwalk can get hot enough to burn feet.

But you can always dance in the surf shoeless for a stroll around the island. Hunch over to look for shells or raise your gaze to the sea oats and sky in search of wildlife. Migratory birds make the island a stopover. Dolphins follow boats to and from the island and often can be seen surfacing just off the beach. Bring a pole for fishing for flounder, red drum and sheepshead. Bring a state fishing license, too.

History buffs have another reason to visit Ship Island: A 19th-century fort with stories to tell. Tours of Fort Massachusetts by National Park Service rangers and volunteers are part of the boat excursion package.

The fort was erected to protect Ship Island's strategic location in the Gulf, a position not lost on French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville. He landed here in 1699 during his search for the mouth of the Mississippi River and named the island for its ship-friendly natural deep-water harbor.

For the French colonists who followed, the island became a port of entry, earning it the nickname "Plymouth Rock of the Gulf Coast." Among the early arrivals were the "Filles a la Cassette," girls and young women sent by the government to marry French colonists and establish families on the mainland. Each was provided with a trunk containing a wedding outfit. These future brides were collected from French jails, orphanages and convents and were accompanied by Catholic nuns who had to approve each marriage.

With the Louisiana Purchase, Ship Island became part of the U.S. but was taken by the British in the War of 1812 as a staging point for the Battle of New Orleans. Though the Brits were defeated, the battle served as a wakeup call for the U.S. War Department. It lobbied Congress to build a series of forts along the Gulf Coast for defense.

Construction on Ship Island began in 1859 and was a disaster from the outset. The first superintendent died of yellow fever. Storms, isolation, lack of water and poor living conditions hindered construction.

Then came the Civil War. When Mississippi seceded from the Union, Confederates seized the fort and named it Fort Twiggs for their general, David Twiggs. In July 1861, they exchanged cannon fire with the Union vessel USS Massachusetts, driving off the Yankees. To their regret, the Confederates were forced to abandon the island a few months later.

When the Union ship returned, troops found a message tacked to the camp wall. "We have not exactly 'lived and loved together,' but we have been intimately acquainted, having exchanged cards on the 9th day of July last," it read. "That we may have another exchange of courtesies

before the war closes, and that we may meet face to face in closer quarters, is the urgent prayer of your obedient servant." It was signed H.W. Allen, Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding Ship Island.

The fort was renamed in honor of the Union ship and became a Confederate POW camp as well as a training ground for the 2nd Regiment of Louisiana Native Guards, the first African-American unit on the Gulf Coast.

On tours of Fort Massachusetts, guides point out its two colors of brick: orange in the oldest section, red brick brought from New England when construction resumed under Union forces. Surrounded by a moat eight feet deep, the fort's foundations go down nine feet, making it sturdy enough to withstand all that Camille and Katrina could throw at it.

A highlight of the tour is the fort's two 15-inch Rodman cannons, capable of hurling a 400-pound cannon ball three miles. Mounted in 1873, they were never fired. The fort closed in 1903.

For years Ship Island and the fort remained local curiosities but did not attract much attention until threatened by beach erosion. In the 1960s a "Save the Fort" campaign attempted to drum up funds to protect the fort. It eventually led to the formation of the Gulf Islands National Seashore in 1971.

Now under the umbrella of the National Park Service, Ship Island remains one of America's last undeveloped barrier islands. The only high rollers here are waves.

IF YOU GO

Gulf Islands National Seashore, Mississippi District: 1-228-230-4100, nps.gov/guis/miss.htm

Ship Island Excursions: Gulfport Yacht Harbor, 1-866-466-7386, msshshipisland.com; \$27 adults, \$25 seniors and military, \$17 kids, includes tour of Fort Massachusetts.

Visitor information: Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1-1-888-467-4853, gulfcoast.org

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