

FLAVOR TOWNS

Suit your taste with dining, culture, and activities along Mississippi's Gulf coast

BY BETH D'ADDONO

Biloxi Lighthouse and Visitors Center

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SEAN PAVONE, SHUTTERSTOCK

Coastal Mississippi isn't one experience. For players, casinos beckon with all-you-can-eat buffets, entertainment, and the chance of winning big at slots and table games. For sun worshippers and families, there are 62 miles of sand and shallow surf that stretch along the Gulf of Mexico.

But for those in the gambling- and sun-averse camps, not to worry. Reminiscent of the way the Florida Keys deliver different experiences between Key Largo and Key West, the 12 cities that make up Coastal Mississippi offer everything from small-town charm to arts and culture and impressive fine dining. With access from Route 90, which runs between the beach and the mainland, it's easy to zigzag between towns for a weekend, with plenty to see and do within close proximity.

OCEAN SPRINGS

This sweet, walkable town is the epicenter for culture, independent shops, and eateries along the coast. Even the hotels are locally owned. Developers Ted and Roxy Condrey have a corner on this market, with a portfolio that includes **the Roost**, **the Inn at Ocean Springs**, the downtown **Hemingway**, and **the Beatnik**, which features four self-contained chalets that exude a Danish-modern meets mid-century vibe. And they're all within strolling distance of the action.

The Tatonut Donut Shop, owned by the Mohler family since 1960, fries up the best donuts on the coast. In the morning, make time for at least one. The chocolate-iced cake is a dream, but the flavor choices are vast.

Sugar rush secured, set off on the 3-mile round-trip walk to East Beach, a pristine stretch of undeveloped sand that swaps highway noise for the laughing of gulls. The residential landscape is dense with pine trees and fragrant gardenia shrubs. There's a marina along the way and views of the wide-open Gulf as a reward. For more wonderful walks, head to the **Davis Bayou Area** and **Gulf Islands National Seashore**, a pristine area for wandering, picnicking, fishing, or spying on migrating birds like pine warblers and pelicans that use the area as a stopover. Stop at the visitor center for info on guided walks and other programs.

For picnic provisions, **Lil Market Deli & Bagelry** downtown makes killer sandwiches on a bagel, biscuit, or croissant. Build your own or try the Ital-

ian, made with mortadella, genoa, and provolone, dressed with olive salad, lettuce, and tomato. The Reuben is good, too.

For lunch with a view, try **Bacchus on the Bayou**, a new outpost of this locally owned seafood provider. Sit outside on the shaded patio and tuck into a peacemaker po'boy overflowing with fried oysters and shrimp.

The Anderson family has driven the art scene in Ocean Springs since artist Annette "Mere" Anderson moved the family from New Orleans to the area in 1922. Her son, the late Peter Anderson, founded the family's still-thriving **Shearwater Pottery** business in 1928, with his artist brothers Walter and Mac joining the venture two years later. Peter grew Shearwater Pottery into a world-renowned company, with lines of collectible, functional, and whimsical ceramic art and designs replicated by family members in studios close to the shop.

Walter is best known for his watercolor renderings of the natural rhythms of the seasons, plants, flowers, and animals, especially birds, of which the pelican was his favorite. Visit the compact **Walter Anderson Museum of Art** to see the tiny studio where he worked, awash in brilliant color.

Before dinner, begin the evening with a craft cocktail at **the Wilbur**. The Roost hotel's speakeasy is inside a "secret" room behind a large portrait of Al Capone, who reportedly owned Del Castle, a local home that may have fronted the mobster's booze-running during Prohibition. There are plenty of casual eateries like **Government Street**



Clockwise from top left: Fried donuts from Tatonuts; Shearwater Pottery; steak at Vestige; Lil Market Deli & Bagelry.



Murky Waters BBQ in Gulfport.

EDDIE ROBINSON

Grocery (get the burger) and chef-driven restaurants like **Maison de Lu**, where chef Luann Ellis creates pristine food with French accents and local ingredients. For fine dining, there are not one but two James Beard Award nominees along the coast: chef Austin Sumrall's stunning **White Pillars** in Biloxi and the spectacular **Vestige** from chef-owner Alex Perry in downtown Ocean Springs.

Vestige is the spot for an intimate dining experience. Perry's five-course tasting menu combines contemporary American cuisine with Japanese influences, thanks to inspiration from Kumi Omori, his wife. Perry, an Ocean Springs native, delivers a farm-and-Gulf-to-table experience, with just-caught seafood and museum-quality composed plates of local greens and vegetables along with proteins like perfectly cooked venison tenderloin with morels. A recent foie gras tartlet with gooseberry jam and pickled rose petals was jaw-dropping, but each dish is perfection. And the tasting menu is just \$95, an experience that would easily be twice the price in a big city.

BILOXI, GULFPORT, AND LONG BEACH

Just across the bridge from Ocean Springs, Biloxi is a big casino destination. For a different perspective, head to the cast-iron **Biloxi Lighthouse** on the Mississippi Sound. Climb 57 steps and an eight-rung ladder for a 360-degree view from the light room at the top. The stalwart 65-foot tower has weathered many a storm and even survived Katrina's catastrophic hit, though just barely. It was restored and reopened for tours in 2010.

Don't miss a stop at the **Biloxi Visitors Center** across the highway. Up front there's lots of tourism info but toward the back are impressive museum-style exhibits offering insight and artifacts from the city's past. There are water marks on the visitors center showing how high the storm surge was during Katrina. Just blocks away, the **Hurricane Katrina Memorial** stands at 12 feet tall, about the height of the water when it hit the Town Green. Each of the names of the 170 victims who lost their

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lives are etched into the black granite.

Head 11 miles east on 90 to Gulfport for lunch at **Captain Al's Steak & Shrimp**, a downhome seafood spot with some of the freshest seafood around. Or plan your visit to the aquarium so you can have lunch at the nearby **Murky Waters BBQ** in downtown Gulfport, a super spot for pulled pork nachos and burnt ends with sides like collards or baked beans, all portioned for mammoth appetites. The restaurant backs up onto **Fishbone Alley**, an artsy venue for public art, live music, and eateries.

Aquariums can seem interchangeable, but the **Mississippi Aquarium** breaks that mold, showcasing critters both local and not, with most of the emphasis placed on the Gulf and its inhabitants. You'll love the indoor-outdoor feel of the place, which promises to be "the window to the waters of Mississippi, the Gulf Coast, and beyond." While most aquariums have a 180-degree tunnel on their ground levels, Mississippi Aquarium's tunnel goes directly through the primary habitat, a 360-degree plexiglass walkway that allows you to literally walk on water—and see the marine life and the humans viewing it above you from every angle. Situated across from the beach, the aquarium includes a colorful bird aviary, touch tanks for the kiddos, an otter habitat, and more.

A different kind of marine experience awaits at **Ocean Adventures Marine Park**, the family-friendly attraction that shares its campus with the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies. Kids love

the dolphin and sea lion shows and feeling the stingrays' rough skin in the touch tank. Budding marine biologists can pay extra for adventures, from posing for a fishy sea lion kiss to dolphin interaction and even snorkeling with the rays.

Take a one-hour ferry ride to West Ship Island, about 10 miles off the coast, for a day or afternoon; it's part of the Mississippi-Alabama barrier islands on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Watch for dolphins along the way. Formed when Hurricane Camille hit the area in 1969, the island is known for its fine sandy beaches and clear Gulf waters for swimming, shelling, birding, and sunbathing, and there's also a 19th-century brick fort to explore. Lounge chairs and umbrellas are available for rent. Either pack a picnic or get something from the island snack bar.

It's worth retracing your steps just 20 minutes or so to have dinner at the aforementioned White Pillars, a showstopping space restored to its original 1905 splendor after suffering significant Hurricane Katrina damage. The large antebellum-style mansion creates a beautiful backdrop for chef Austin Sumrall's unfussy mix of Cajun, creole, and new Southern cuisine. Whether he's shucking briny raw oysters that were in the water just hours ago, having fun with shrimp corn dogs, or serving just-caught grilled Gulf fish with heirloom cherry tomatoes and grilled local corn, Sumrall's eye for detail and sense of flavor is spot on.

The sleepy, bike-friendly town of Long Beach is an ideal place to kick back and do just about nothing. Have breakfast at the **Harbor View Cafe**, a bustling daytime spot a few blocks from the beach. There's also a sweet farmers market on weekend mornings, with vendors selling everything from giant bell peppers to grass-fed beef and plants for the garden.

The Inn at Long Beach, a former Holiday Inn turned independent hotel just across the road

from the shore, is a perfect spot for an overnight. Between the stellar service, convenient location, and massive hot and cold breakfast buffet that covers every possible base, including fresh-squeezed orange juice, this hotel lives up to its "Stay. Inspired" brand catchphrase.

Walk into town for drinks or nibbles at either of chef William Rester's two restaurants: **Radish** for more formal, ingredient-driven Southern fare, or the new **Kaiteki Noodle Bar** with its menu of ramen, tender housemade buns filled with mushrooms, pork or fried chicken, and sticky gochujang wings with yuzu aioli. Radish both honors and updates the Southern table. Besides namesake roasted radishes with chimichurri, small plates include crab beignets with Crystal beurre blanc and fried green tomatoes with tasso cream and shrimp. Try the pork chop with collards and grits or Maple Leaf Farms duck mole.

In the morning, connect with nature with **Wolf River Canoe & Kayak** for a guided 4.5-mile trip on the Wolf River. Famous for its white-sand beaches and winding waterways, the river is welcoming to both newbies and experienced paddlers. Just minutes from the Gulf beaches, the cool waters of the Wolf flow over adventurous clay formations and meander through peaceful woodlands.

Ready for an afternoon of chilling with some good food? Stay awhile at **Sea Level** in Pass Christian, a casual pet- and family-friendly spot with house-ground burgers, Nathan's dogs, blackened mahi tacos, and a quality selection of beer. Or dig your toes in at **Flamingo Landing** on the waterfront in Gulfport, a new spot with live music Wednesday through Sunday and a menu that ranges from seafood boils to jerk chicken and shrimp tacos. If it's the weekend, there are bottomless mimosas during brunch, a fine way to wrap up a day on the Coast—or just the reason to extend your trip for yet another day.

Clockwise from top left: Harbor View Cafe; freshly shucked oysters at White Pillars; the Inn at Ocean Springs; fried chicken sandwich at Radish.

