

Gulf Coast Bucket List: A day with Ship Island Excursions



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Ship Island [View Full Gallery](#)

While I've done my fair share of exploring the Gulf Coast during the past two years since moving here from up North, it was only recently that I finally paid a visit to some of Mississippi's finest beaches -- those found on historic Ship Island.

Located about 11 miles south of Gulfport, Ship Island is one of five Mississippi barrier islands. A popular destination for tourists and locals alike, you can spend the day relaxing on the island's glistening white sands as well as get an educational experience by taking a tour of Fort Massachusetts, built to defend the Coast following the War of 1812.

Trip begins

My day trip began arriving at Gulfport Yacht Harbor with my niece Tessa Dimarzio, who was visiting on vacation. Having packed a cooler full of refreshments the night before, we made our way to the Ship Island Excursions boats, which have been ferrying visitors to the island for nearly nine decades.

There we met Capt. Louis Skrmetta, who was born in Biloxi and whose grandfather came from Croatia to start the business in 1926. Having spent every summer of his life riding in boats, he learned to sail from the experience his dad and uncles provided, culminating with getting his captain license at the age of 19 some 40 years ago.

The fleet

Skrmetta told me that Ship Island Excursions consists of two large ferries that can carry in excess of 300 passengers each, as well as his grandfather's original 65-foot wooden boat, the Pan American Clipper. All three are used at various times, carrying passengers visiting from all over the world, across the Mississippi Sound for a day of fun on the protected island.

"Making people happy and providing them with an enjoyable experience," Skrmetta said when asked what he likes most about his profession. "I like to see the families, especially the children that ride out with us. It's their first time on a boat, and they think they're going on a cruise ship."

Setting out

Setting out on the large vessel, we took a pleasurable 50-minute cruise to the island. For those who didn't bring their own refreshments, Ship Island Excursions offers a wide array of food and drinks to purchase both on the ferry and on the island.

Skrmetta said the concessions are reasonably priced, and "It's all controlled by the National Park Service."

Highlight

The highlight of the voyage to the island had to be seeing at least a dozen Atlantic bottlenose dolphins surfacing around the ship when we arrived. Having been told that they would make an appearance on the way there but not seeing any, I'd almost given up hope until nearly reaching shore, where their appearance was like a welcoming of our arrival.

Making the trek across the island to the southern side, we settled under one of the many large umbrellas with beach chairs situated along the beach that can be rented for the day. Whether you bring your own or take advantage of the rentals, make sure you are prepared for the intense summer heat. It's highly recommended that you drink plenty of fluids and apply ample amounts of sunscreen.

Island activities

The island provides plenty of activities to fill your day in the sun. The high-quality beaches are perfect for hiking, shelling, swimming, body surfing and fishing. Wanting to make a temporary mark of our stay, Tessa and I proceeded to build a makeshift sand castle, which almost immediately was visited by an adorable little crab willing to pose for a photo opportunity.

Surrounded by like-minded visitors enjoying the tranquil surroundings, we ended up making friends with some fellow island guests who were tossing a Frisbee around. Haven't done so in nearly a decade, I found playing catch on the sand and surf absolutely exhilarating.

After four hours of swimming, playing and relaxing, we decided we'd had enough sun for the day and ended up catching the second to last departure back to the mainland. While missing the opportunity to take a proper tour, we did take a quick peek inside Fort Massachusetts on our way back, where you can feel yourself literally surrounded by history.

Departure

Once boarding the ship, I asked the captain if he'd allow me to do the honors of sounding the pneumatic horn with the three short blasts required upon backing out of the dock. After he graciously allowed me to do so, I spent the 50-minute voyage back with a smile plastered on my face, delighted to learn how much fun one can have visiting Ship Island. I can't wait to go back.

The Ship Island Excursions boats depart from the Gulfport Yacht Harbor at the U.S. 90 and U.S. 49 "T" next to the U.S. Coast Guard Base near the lighthouse. Weather permitting, there are cruises scheduled until Nov. 1. For more information, call 864-1014 or visit mshipisland.com.