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## Nature & Nurture along Alabama's Gulf Coast

June 6, 2019 | by Dave Millhouser |

**Part of the beauty of the Alabama Gulf Coast is its temperate climate, making it visit-worthy year-round. It's especially perfect in autumn when the Atlantic Ocean is still bathwater warm for wading, the soft sand that stretches along sister communities Orange Beach and Gulf Shores, Alabama, welcoming for barefoot beach walks and shell searches. Natural beauty is part of the local landscape, but so is a growing culinary scene, one known for being accommodating to bus-sized groups—and great deals.**

### Shop & dine

Lead your group to the Wharf in Orange Beach, where they'll walk amid tall palms while purchasing linens or fashion, chili pepper products and sunglasses. At The Southern Grind, shiplap and water-colored decor surround customers. The group can enjoy breakfast sandwiches and sip iced coffee while perusing beach-inspired books, candles and more.



The smaller SanRoc Cay Entertainment District flanks a boat-filled marina. Specialty shops sell swimwear to beach fashions and sterling jewelry. District restaurants serve seafood and more, primarily at dinner. Deck dining and Gulf views make meals especially memorable. Be sure to make reservations and know that large groups may dine across several rooms.

Orange Beach's spacious Brick and Spoon has been named among the nation's top 10 breakfast spots, by *Travel + Leisure*. Beignets and several French toast options satisfy any sweet tooth, while savory breakfasts include shrimp and grits and seafood Benedict with perfectly poached eggs.

Casual elegance describes Fisher's at Orange Beach Marina. Executive Chef Bill Briand is a three-time James Beard semi-finalist whose changing menus reflect seasonal bounty, from pork cheeks to blackened swordfish.

### Eats & drinks

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With a Perdido, Florida, address and a reputation as the last American roadhouse, the Flora-Bama Yacht Club straddles the Perdido-Gulf Shores state line. A fresh oyster bar, signature beignet fries and legendary Bushwackers cocktails highlight the menu. After dark, five stages showcase live country, rock, dance and beach music.

Groups will enjoy spectacular pool and Gulf views at spacious Coast Restaurant & Sushi Bar at The Beach Club (March-October). Fresh Gulf seafood and terrific sushi abound here and the restaurant also accommodates special events.

Dining at Lucy Buffett's Lulu's Gulf Shores feels like a party, from surfboard signage to bright paint and water views. Fresh margaritas, fried green tomatoes and Gulf red snapper sandwiches are just a few tasty options. After the meal, tour-goers can enjoy the arcade and the open air gift shop. And, yes, Lucy is Jimmy Buffett's sister.

At The Yard Milkshake Bar, decadence rules. Customers can create their own over-the-top shake from a long menu of ice cream, toppings and specialty toppings, and then see who can finish theirs first-if at all.

## Nature, unrivaled

Orange Beach offers several boating experiences that put guests in touch with nature. Family-owned Reel Surprise Charters hosts tours for two to 50 people; using two boats allows plenty of room for participants to fish. Or book dolphin and nature adventures with Cetacean Cruises. Boats accommodate 40-44 people with an owner certified by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Orange Beach is home to the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1980 and a great spot to view migratory birds including fall migratory favorites like brown pelicans, double-crested cormorants, numerous herons and egrets. Sturdy boardwalks cover a one-mile sightseeing loop, through a hardwood forest and near a lagoon.

A Gulf Shores highlight is Alabama State Park, where coastal views, wildlife habitat and nine ecosystems fill 6,150 acres. Whether the group prefers hiking and biking, freshwater fishing, paddle boarding or tennis, it's all here. In addition, you can schedule guided nature walks through the Nature Center, or a Segway tour.

## A restful stay

Lodging options abound in this coastal oasis. Across from Alabama Gulf State Park, The Lodge at Gulf State Park, a Hilton Hotel, opening in November (2019). This LEED Gold environmentally friendly property replaces a decades-old hotel wiped out by Hurricane Ivan in 2004. A long breezeway leading to guestrooms provides gorgeous Gulf views and soothing water sounds. Individual rooms are full of natural wood and vintage details.

Just outside of Gulf Shores, on the Fort Morgan Peninsula, The Beach Club Resort & Spa (Spectrum Resorts) rents beachfront one- to five-bedroom condos and cottages. With the feel of a village, this resort features restaurants and shopping, activities for all ages and a relaxing spa. Complimentary bike rentals and free ice cream are just a few amenities.

In Orange Beach, group members can share three- to five-bedroom luxury condominiums at Turquoise Place (Spectrum Resorts). Housed in two high-rise glass towers, condos at this amenity-rich resort feature large balconies, fully equipped kitchens and spectacular Gulf views.



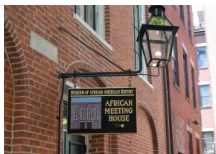
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