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**NEXT WEEK  
PLACES EVERY  
TRUE TEXAN  
SHOULD VISIT**

## ALABAMA



Pristine beaches are common in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach. CONTRIBUTED BY GULF SHORES & ORANGE BEACH TOURISM

# Off the hook

Family-friendly nature activities abound on Alabama Gulf Coast.

By Cynthia J. Drake

Special to the American-Statesman

“OK, y’all, I’m about to bring out the owl,” says Kelly Reetz, a naturalist with Alabama’s Gulf State Park, pulling on a tough brown leather glove from a box marked “owl encounters.”

A group of excited kids encircles Reetz in the park’s nature center, quiet for just this moment, while she introduces them to the resident screech owl, the glassy-eyed bird now perched on her arm. Soon, its raucous flapping wings will cause commotion in the room as the naturalist tries to restore peace. “This owl can hear all of your heartbeats,” Reetz tells them.

Gulf State Park (alapark.com/gulf-state-park) is an appropriate location to begin an entrée to Alabama’s Gulf region. Situated across the freeway from the area’s famous white-sand beaches, the wide-eyed wonder of nature begins to unfold here through dozens of nature programs for campers and day visitors, a theme that continues throughout the area with dolphin cruises, a surprisingly intimate zoo and brag-worthy fish caught from the 1,500-foot pier here, among other nature-based activities.



You might make a new friend during a visit to Gulf Shores.

CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE

The focus on animals and nature makes Gulf Shores and Orange Beach an ideal family destination, especially during the spring, when throngs of spring breakers head to the more populated beaches in Florida, Mexico and elsewhere.

### Going wild

Appreciating the diverse species living in this area of Alabama – located near the Florida state

line – is heightened after the devastating 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the largest oil spill in U.S. history. In the years since, beach communities on the Gulf have bounced back with the aid of billions of dollars in settlement money.

Here in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, that money has gone toward dune restoration and beach and park enhancements, including a new beach board-

walk slated to open this spring and 27 miles of paved hiking and biking trails.

Visitors can also rent a Segway like I did (coastalsegwayadventures.com) and zip through these trails at a top speed of 12.5 miles per hour, stopping at various points of interest. On one stop, our tour group saw a wild alligator named Lefty (so named because of a missing eye and front paw due to a fight with another gator) and her new hatchlings.

Scores of volunteers through Share the Beach (alabamaseaturtles.com) work every year to ensure sea turtles during the May-October nesting season make their way back to the Gulf. And an endangered creature called the Alabama beach mouse is free to make its home among the sandy dunes.

Even the zoo here is a little different. It may be small, but the opportunities for animal encounters at Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo (alabamagulfcoastzoo.org) abound, allowing visitors to pet and hold lemurs, kangaroos and sloths.

Out on the water, the dolphins seem to follow you everywhere in April and May. One day, I bravely

**Hook** continued on **D12**

## TEXAS

# March blooms with festivals across the state

By Mauri Elbel

Special to the American-Statesman

From spring blooms and St. Patrick’s Day celebrations to rodeos and rattlesnake roundups, March bursts with fun festivals across the state. Below are 10 of the top Texas-size celebrations worthy of a road trip this month.

### Dallas

Now-April 8: Soak in the season at one of the country’s leading spring festivals – Dallas Blooms: A World of Flowers at the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Gardens. This floral festival features an explosion of color from more than 500,000 spring-blooming blossoms, thousands of azaleas

and hundreds of Japanese cherry trees. This month, don’t miss activities spanning high tea experiences in the historic DeGolyer House, Around the World Cooking Class series and Dr. Seuss Week-end (March 2-4) in the Rory Meyers Children’s Adventure Garden. More at dallasarboretum.org.

March 2-4: Grab your green and drive to Dallas’ Fair Park to celebrate all things Irish at the 36th North Texas Irish Festival. Expect live Irish music, food and dancing, Celtic myth storytellers, sheep herding, whiskey tasting and pet adoptions. More at ntif.org.

### Houston

Feb. 27-March 18: The Hous-

ton Livestock Show and Rodeo attracts more than 2.5 million visitors for its annual, family-friendly experiences spanning calf scrambles, horse shows, a carnival, rodeo competitions and nightly concerts from performers including Garth Brooks, Chris Stapleton and Keith Urban. More at rodeohouston.com.

### Acton

March 1-3: Stroll through Texas history at the Texas Independence Day Celebration of North Texas at Hood County, where kids can meet Texas heroes, partake in the Elizabeth Crockett Memorial Ceremony, enjoy period music and

**Festivals** continued on **D11**



The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo has been going strong since 1932 and maintains a commitment to Texas youths.

CONTRIBUTED BY HOUSTON LIVESTOCK SHOW AND RODEO

## TRENDS

## Pilot program allows Disney World resort guests to check in with Fido

By Jen A. Miller  
Special to The Washington Post

At sunset on a warm January evening, I walked my dog along the edge of a man-made lake at Walt Disney World's Art of Animation Resort. She sniffed the grass and marked her territory while I kept my eye out for alligators and staffers' ubiquitous golf carts hauling guests' luggage to and from their rooms.

Six months ago, this would have been impossible. Annie Oakley Tater Tot is not a service dog. She's my pet, and for the first time, my room could be her room while I visited the Magic Kingdom.

In September, Walt Disney World allowed guests evacuating inland from Hurricane Irma to bring their pets with them. That experience prompted the company, which has 28,000 rooms at its Florida location, to pilot a one-year program that designates as dog-friendly 250 rooms at four properties. Resort rooms at the Art of Animation, Port Orleans-Riverside, Fort Wilderness (in the cabins) and Yacht Club that host canine guests are given the same cleaning provided for rooms occupied by service animals, a company spokesperson said.

If anything, Disney is somewhat late on accommodating pet owners. Thirty-seven percent of them travel with their companions, up from 19 percent from a decade ago, according to the American Pet Products Association, and more than half of U.S. hotels are already pet-friendly, according to the American Hotel & Lodging Association.

"We've been around for almost 12 years, and pet travel is certainly much easier today than it was a decade ago," said Jason Halliburton, chief oper-



The author's dog, Annie Oakley Tater Tot, prepares for a snooze in a "Little Mermaid"-themed bed at Walt Disney World's Art of Animation resort in Florida.

CONTRIBUTED BY JEN A. MILLER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

ating officer of Bring Fido, a website and app that pairs dog owners with dog-friendly activities, events, parks, restaurants and hotels. His wife, Melissa Halliburton, started the website to help people find places to bring their pets while traveling. (It's a good one, too; I've driven about 10,000 miles with my dog and use it wherever we go.)

While our grandparents may have had a dog that they kept outside, he added, "Millennials have grown up with pets inside their homes, so their first pets are also going to be considered part of the family, and people want to travel with their family members."

The most dog-friendly accommodations are budget hotels, 70 percent of which

are pet friendly, the American Hotel & Lodging Association says. (That number is bolstered by chains such as La Quinta Inn and Red Roof Inn that, with few exceptions, allow pets.) But luxury hotels aren't far behind, with 43 percent of them being pet-friendly. Many now go above and beyond in offering amenities for pups.

In November, Hilton announced its new "Paws in the Neighborhood" program, which is piloted at the Canopy by Hilton location in Washington, and partners with Planet Dog to provide pet toys, treats, poop bags, a dog guide to the neighborhood, and even leashes and collars.

Hotel Nikko San Francisco has had a "canine operat-

ing officer" since 2015, and offers a \$50 pet package that includes a plush bed, a food and water bowl, and a grass run on the roof.

The Hotel Pennsylvania in Manhattan is pet friendly year round (with "pet" having a wide definition as it has, at least once, hosted a guest who brought bats) but has a doggy concierge for the Westminster Kennel Club dog show who arranges for rooms big enough to accommodate dogs, canine spa treatments and shuttle runs to and from the nearby judging locations.

Disney may not have a dog shuttle, but at check-in, I was given a "Pluto Welcome Kit," which included a new food and water bowl, a place mat, a roll of pickup bags and a scarf for Annie. None of it was

Disney-branded, though – if I wanted that, I could buy a leash, collar, bowls, or Minnie Mouse dress and ears from the Disney Tails collection, which is sold in a handful of locations around the property, including in Art of Animation's lobby and at the Emporium in the Magic Kingdom. (Because I'm a sucker, Annie now sports a Mickey Mouse collar. Cost: \$14.99.)

Disney's pilot program will run through October. There are some limits and additional costs. While Disney doesn't set weight limits for canine guests, only two dogs are allowed per room.

Dogs cannot be left unaccompanied for more than seven hours, and guests are expected to come back to their rooms if their dog is barking or otherwise being disruptive. You should be prepared to show your dog's vaccination records, too.

And you'll pay extra: \$50 more per night at Art of Animation, Port Orleans-Riverside and Fort Wilderness resorts. At Yacht Club Resort, it's \$75 more.

Annie and I experienced only one hiccup: After making my room reservation online, I called to make sure that it included the notation that I was bringing my dog. But when I checked in at Art of Animation, Annie wasn't on my reservation. Fortunately, they still had a dog room open, but I stayed on a weekday in January. If I were coming with Annie during a busier time of year, I would make sure to call before check-in to make absolutely sure she was on my reservation.

Bringing Annie along cost more than that extra Disney fee: I opted to leave her at Best Friends Pet Care while I was in the Magic Kingdom. It's a 27,000-square-foot facility on Disney property (about

an eight-minute drive from the parks) that takes care of dogs, cats and what it calls "pocket pets" – animals such as hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits and ferrets. The company has partnered with Walt Disney World for more than a decade and once was guests' only option if they traveled with pets.

For dogs, Best Friends offers overnight boarding (ranging from a 4-by-7-foot, climate-controlled space to a 16-by-9-foot VIP luxury suite with a platform bed and flat-screen TV), doggy day care and grooming. I opted for grooming and daytime boarding for Annie, which included one walk; I added an extra walk and one-on-one playtime.

My park ticket for the day cost \$107. (The price for that type of ticket has risen to \$109.) Annie's day at Best Friends cost \$78, which included a tip for her groomer. Best Friends is open one hour before and one hour after the last Disney park closes. When I picked Annie up at the end of my long day, she bounded out to greet me and then slept for the next 16 hours, also exhausted by her day of play.

While Best Friends is on Disney grounds, it doesn't offer any pet services at the resorts themselves, such as coming to your room to walk your dog, though it does offer discounts if you and your dog are staying with Disney.

As I walked Annie along the lake that evening, the only surprise more palpable than hers (at the resort's golf carts) was that of other visitors (at the fact that I was walking a dog on Disney property). If this policy continues after the pilot program ends, expect that to change – and for Annie and I to come back soon for another magical stay.

## Hook

continued from D10

climbed aboard a wave runner (aewatersports.com), following tentatively in the wake of my wetsuited instructor until opening the throttle wide and giggling at the rolling choppiness of the water. As I looked over to the banks, two dolphins took turns surfacing and diving gracefully, nature's true wave runners.

Another day, I went with a group on a chartered shrimp boat with John Beebee, aka Captain Skip (sailorskip.com), an interesting character whose pre-launch safety lecture turned inadvertently comical. ("If someone falls in, we need a pointer. We need someone to dive in, someone to hold a rope, someone to act as captain if the captain falls in, someone to cut someone out of the shrimp net if they get caught in the net, someone to call 911...")

First we "tickled the shrimp" with chains, and as we cast our net, dolphins were our constant companions (baiting dolphins is illegal, but they are smart enough to know to follow shrimpers and nose a few snacks). Seeing their smooth gray heads emerge so close to our vessel was a constant source of delight among the group – most of us depleted our cellphone batteries capturing videos and photos.

## Fresh off the hook

The dolphins have the right idea: the food here on the Gulf redefines freshness. Straight-off-the-boat seafood like royal red shrimp (a slightly sweeter, meatier relative of garden variety shrimp), trigger fish, snapper and oysters is widely available on menus throughout the area.

Look for a Fishtrax notation on the menu, which allows you to scan your seafood entree and look up where and when it was caught. It's all part of an effort to bring awareness to the local fishing industry. About 90 percent of the fish Americans consume is from overseas, and about half the fish we eat is farm-raised.

One of many kid-friendly restaurants that offers a taste of that Gulf-fresh seafood is Lulu's at Homeport Marina (lulubuffett.com), owned by Jimmy Buffett's sister, Lucy. In addition to waterfront seating on the marina, Lulu's



Exercise on the water along the Alabama coast. CONTRIBUTED BY GULF SHORES & ORANGE BEACH TOURISM



Catch your own meal on the Alabama coast.



Gulf Shores is brimming with wildlife.



Dine on a fresh catch on the Alabama coast.

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE

includes an on-site fountain for kids and a three-story ropes course. Grab a dessert from Matt's Homemade Alabama Ice Cream (mattshomemadeicecream.com), the only homemade ice cream shop in the area. Parents may want to par-

take in the area's famously potent Bushwhackers, a coconutty variation of a Mudslide, widely available.

What's fresher than fresh? Consider casting your line off the Gulf State Park Pier – you can purchase your license and bait and rent

your gear right here – and see what you can catch. By the way, be mindful that sharks can, and do, visit this area. Fishers are allowed to clean their fish and throw scraps off the pier, which attracts sharks. Greedy pelicans try to intercept the

food, which makes a pier walk entertaining even for people who don't fish. The state park also leads a pier walk for those interested in learning more about the fish that live here.

Several area restaurants, including Shipp's Harbor

Grill (shipprestaurant.com), Fisher's Dockside (fishersobm.com) and the Flora-Bama Yacht Club (florabamayachtclub.com), offer "hook and cook" options for preparing your prized catch.

## Where to stay

Accommodation options in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach are plentiful for a range of budgets. With all the amenities that Gulf State Park offers to visitors, snagging a site at the campground would be an ideal adventure for a family. The park offers nearly 500 campsites, primitive and full-hookup sites, with a swimming pool and other amenities – plus the daily slate of activities offered at the nature center.

Several of the beachfront resorts are condo-style rentals operated by a central management company. For example, I stayed at the Beach Club Gulf Shores managed by Spectrum Resorts (thebeachclub.com/spectrumresorts) and enjoyed a private bedroom, two bathrooms, a full kitchen, dining room and balcony. My closet was retrofitted into a hideaway bunk bed, ideal for little ones. In addition to enjoying morning walks on the beach, guests have access to several pools, hot tubs and an on-site workout facility.

Other options include Caribe Resort (caribe-resort.net), which offers lazy rivers, kayak and boat rentals on-site. Guests at Perdido Beach Resort (perdidobeachresort.com) enjoy private beach access and several on-site restaurants. A new Hilton property will open in late 2018.

Regardless of how you fill your itinerary, a spring break getaway to Gulf Shores and Orange Beach should include plenty of beach time and a toes-in-the-sand view of nature's diverse bounty.

"If we can educate kids to care for and respect nature as it is – or be fascinated by it – then nature will continue as it is," says Reetz.

It's almost a guarantee you'll come away from your trip with a sense of that fascination.

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