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The beach by winter

by Chéré Coen

How fortunate for Acadiana residents that the beach is only a short drive away. Which means in summer, the cool waters of the Gulf can transform our sweltering lives in a matter of hours.

In the winter, however, those beautiful emerald waters and sugar-sand beaches still glisten in the sun. The only difference is a dip in temperatures and the lack of massive crowds, the latter of which can be a powerful attraction.



Photo by Chéré Coen

View from the Beach Club in Gulf Shores, Ala.

The Beach Club of Gulf Shores rises up through the coastal oak forests and sandy dunes of the narrow peninsula that stretches out beyond the hubbub of town as it heads to its conclusion at Fort Morgan and Mobile Bay. Four high-rise towers front private Gulf beaches, with a collection of “cottages” behind. And with most condo rentals, visitors have access to the multi-purpose clubhouse, special winter activities, tennis courts, golf courses, a market full of both hot food and groceries, toiletries and other supplies and the Mercantile gift shop.

Right now, the Beach Club is home to visitors escaping the snow and cold of Ohio, Wisconsin, Canada and other frigid places, plus Southerners wanting a peaceful beach visit without the smell of sunscreen and the noise of endless people.

Complimentary activities such as yoga and water exercise are offered weekly, plus there is a Sunday worship service, a cooking class held every third Wednesday and trips to local sites. The club offers a state-of-the-art fitness room, indoor and outdoor pools, whirlpool, game room for children and a full-service spa. Each high-rise tower has its own outdoor pool and whirlpools as well.

Specials exist for the snowbirds — and other visitors — who stay at the Beach Club anywhere from a weekend to three months during the winter, said Kathy Williams, director of facilities and services. Last week, the restaurant featured prime rib dinners for \$10.95 and the coffee shop-ice cream parlor offers \$2 coffees and smoothies after 2 p.m. and \$1 single-scoop ice cream cones after 1 p.m.

“We like it here because you’re away from all the traffic,” said Rod Williamson of Birmingham, who owns a Beach Club condo and visits in October and November,

then from January through March. "And you get everything you need out here. You do not have to run into town all the time."

Gulf Shores is about 20 miles down Highway 180, and the peace and quiet of being that far off the beaten path is astounding. In the early morning and at dusk, one can spot migrating birds in the surrounding wildlife refuge or the club's resident alligator in nearby marshes. Next to the Beach Club is Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge where trails are open daily until dusk and skirt the 40-acre Gator Lake before emerging on to pristine Gulf beaches. Hikers may spot the endangered Alabama beach mouse, alligators, piping plovers or the loggerhead sea turtle.

For those who want to venture into town, there are movie theaters, a vibrant community theater, lots of great restaurants (many offering winter specials) and Mardi Gras parades through the end of February.

The Beach Club is currently offering winter special rates and 35 percent off spa services, plus a Valentine's Day Getaway package. Condos and cottages range in square footage but can accommodate several people in each, plus every Beach Club tower residence has a balcony overlooking the Gulf.

If you go...

The Beach Club
(888) 260-7263
www.beachclubal.com

Gulf Shores Facts

Average temperature in winter: 62 degrees
Distance from Lafayette to Beach Club: 220 miles

Nearby places to visit

Fort Morgan is a short drive farther down Highway 180 and overlooks Mobile Bay as it enters the Gulf of Mexico. The fort was built in the 1830s, but is best known as the site for the Civil War naval confrontation The Battle of Mobile Bay. Hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily through February, until 6 p.m. March and April. Museum hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$3 per person. Information: (251) 540-7125.

Between the Beach Club and Fort Morgan lies Tacky Jack's II, a casual restaurant overlooking Mobile Bay and a great spot to enjoy a meal or cocktail while watching the sun set (if it's not too cold). Snowbird specials include dinners of grilled or fried seafood baskets with choice of salad or coleslaw, fries or garlic potatoes for \$8.99. Breakfast specials are a must. For information, visit www.tackyjacks.com.

At the end of the road, visitors can take a ferry ride across Mobile Bay to Dauphin Island. For fares and schedules, visit www.mobilebayferry.com.

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