

A Summer Road Trip Along Alabama's Gulf Coast

With 53 miles of pristine shoreline, the Alabama Gulf Coast boasts sparkling white sand, turquoise water, and some of the freshest seafood around. From plump gulf shrimp to the catch of the day to oysters served grilled, fried, or raw, local seafood is embraced and promoted by the numerous restaurants along the coast. We've mapped out a route of our favorite stops for anyone heading to the beach this summer. Starting in Mobile and working your way down the coast, by the bay, and along the beach, you'll find a restaurant (and a favorite dish) for every step of the way.

By Julia Sayers

Photo courtesy of R & R Seafood



Photo courtesy of the Alabama Tourism Department and Lulu's at Homeport Marina



On the Causeway

We started our road trip in Mobile on Battleship Parkway, commonly known as the Causeway. This 7-mile stretch crosses Mobile Bay and is home to some of the area's best seafood restaurants. The first stop is **R & R Seafood** (1477 Battleship Pkwy, Spanish Fort), which claims to have the best po' boys on the Causeway, and they don't disappoint. Each sandwich is loaded

with your choice of seafood, from shrimp or oysters to crawfish or soft-shell crab. For the shrimp option, you'll get gulf shrimp that are battered with a house seasoning, fried, and then piled high in the po' boy—we're talking about 30 shrimp per roll. As owner Ray Lee likes to joke, "You've got to quit eatin' it or it hurts you" (but in the best way possible). Feeling like something a little lighter? Try the steamed shrimp with their house-made R & R butter sauce, and take a bottle of it home along with some fresh crawfish from the seafood market downstairs.

Next up is **Felix's Fish Camp Grill** (1530 Battleship Pkwy, Spanish Fort). With sheets of tin adorning the building, the outside looks like an old fish camp, but inside you'll find an upscale dining experience. At Felix's there is never an unpopular item on the menu. George Panayiotou, director of culinary operations, evaluates the menu each quarter and takes off the lowest-selling items and adds new seasonal dishes featuring what's available from local seafood suppliers and farmers. Some of the most popular staples on the menu are the soups, and you can taste them all with the



Photo by Chris Helton, courtesy of the Alabama Tourism Department



Photo courtesy of Cooper Restaurants



One-One-One, which includes a demi cup of the Crab Soup, Seafood Gumbo, and Dr. Skipper's Turtle Soup. If you want to try a dish native to Mobile, order the West Indies Salad—jumbo lump gulf crabmeat marinated in vinaigrette with sweet Georgia onions. Felix's also offers hand-cut steaks, a nod to the owners' success at their Ruth's Chris Steak House in Mobile.

It wouldn't be a trip to the coast without a heaping platter of fried seafood, so head to **Ed's Seafood Shed** (3382 Battleship Pkwy, Spanish Fort) where pretty much every seafood variety can be battered in a special cornmeal mix and fried to golden perfection. You can get deep-fried crab cakes, oysters fried the "old Mobile way" (battered in cornmeal and served with the center still juicy), or all-you-can-eat fried mullet fillets on Monday evenings. If you're feeling daring, order the Yo Mama's Platter: fried fish, oysters, shrimp, scallops, and crab claws with sides of gumbo, garlic-cheese grits, and turnip greens and finished with Ed's own devil's food cake. The platter is served family

style since "Yo mama said 'Don't eat this much in one sittin'!"

If you want to get your oyster fill, stop at the **Original Oyster House** (3733 Battleship Pkwy, Spanish Fort) where this family-owned restaurant has been serving up hand-shucked oysters for the past 30 years. You can get them baked, on the half shell, or doused in garlic sauce and Parmesan cheese and fire-grilled on a 7-foot grill. You can also indulge your sweet tooth with a variety of home-made desserts, including their famous Chocolate Chip Peanut Butter Pie. They also have a location in Gulf Shores if you miss the chance to visit in Mobile.



Photo by Tad Denson



Photos courtesy of Cooper Restaurants

Photo courtesy of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources



Gulf Seafood Industry Update

April 2014 marked the four-year anniversary of the Gulf Oil Spill. Even though it was a devastating event, the seafood industry in Alabama has recovered swimmingly. With 30 million pounds of seafood caught each year, the Alabama Gulf Coast continues to provide some of the best, freshest seafood in the South.

"Alabama's seafood industry is continuing to improve as each year passes. The Alabama Seafood Marketing Commission has worked diligently to share information with consumers about the quality of local seafood—as well as the need to ask for it at restaurants and retailers. As a result, consumer demand has driven resurgence in the 'buy local, buy fresh' concept, and many restaurants in Alabama have proudly changed their menus to offer more local Alabama gulf seafood. The prices paid to in-state fishermen have ultimately increased with demand, which is good for both them and the local economy."

—Chris Blankenship, director of Alabama Marine Resources Division and program administrator of Alabama Gulf Seafood

On the Bay

The bay area between Mobile and the beach might seem like a place to just pass through, but there are several restaurants that are worth a stop. **Big Daddy's Grill** (16542 Ferry Rd, Fairhope) is your go-to place for no-frills dining with quality food. Owner Jason Newsom uses gulf seafood exclusively, so if a type of seafood isn't available at the time, it will be left off the menu, ensuring you're getting only the freshest product. And for the landlubbers, Big Daddy's is also known for hand-shaped, half-pound hamburgers. Grab a spot at a picnic table overlooking Fish River, and dine on fried shrimp or crab claws while enjoying regular live music performances.

Another Fairhope gem, **Blue Marlin Restaurant** (8594 U.S. Hwy 98, Fairhope), has been a community staple since 1952. Originally operated as a grocery store and deli, the family-owned store served sandwiches to local fishers and farmers. In 1981, Blue Marlin opened as a full restaurant and continues to serve the community. In fact, every Friday night during football season, the folks at Blue Marlin cook dinner for the Fairhope High School football team. The restaurant is known as the "home of the whole fried flounder," but you can also get the locally caught flounder broiled and stuffed with shrimp and crabmeat, a favorite of both locals and visitors.

If you're looking for a nice dinner (and a break from fried food), visit **Jesse's Restaurant** (14770 Oak St, Magnolia Springs), located in a historic building in downtown Magnolia Springs. As you browse the menu,

you'll notice dishes such as Gulf Coast Crab Cakes, Pan-Seared Maple Leaf Farms Duck Breast, and dry-aged and wet-aged steaks—but no fish. But that doesn't mean it's not there. The chefs at Jesse's firmly believe in serving only the freshest seafood available, so instead of having regular dishes on the menu, they feature fresh fish specials from what they can get off the boats that day. Specials vary daily but have included horseradish-crusted triggerfish and grilled whole pompano.

One last stop to make before you hit the beach is **The Tin Top Restaurant & Oyster Bar** (6232 County Rd 10, Bon Secour Hwy, Bon Secour) for seafood with a Cajun flair. Owner Bob Hallmark lived in New Orleans for eight years and brings that influence to the menu. You'll find oysters cooked in a variety of ways, such as Oysters Rockefeller, Oysters Tin Top (baked with a crawfish sauce), and their specialty, Oysters Fenton (sautéed in a house-blend steak sauce with lemon, rosemary, and pepper and served with toasted French bread). You can also combine surf and turf with the Tender Fenton, a 10-ounce steak topped with Oysters Fenton, or the Seafood-Stuffed Porterhouse Pork Chop, topped with cranberry jezebel sauce. End your meal and your tour of the bay on the right note with one of three house-made bread puddings: traditional with a whiskey sauce, strawberry, or chocolate.



Photo by Wes Frazer



Photos by Major Adam Colbert

On the Beach

Roll down your windows on the last leg of the road trip, and you'll be able to hear the ocean. Gulf Shores has a number of delicious restaurants to choose from, but a must-visit spot is **Lulu's at Homeport Marina** (200 E 25th Ave, Gulf Shores), Jimmy Buffett's sister Lucy's restaurant and family entertainment destination. Lulu's serves more than 4,000 people a day during the summer, so you'll often have to wait for a table, but that doesn't mean you'll be bored. Lulu's boasts live music



every day, a three-story rope climbing attraction for kids, a sandy beach area, volleyball courts, and four bars to keep the adults occupied while the children play. And before you know it, you'll be sitting down to enjoy Lulu's Famous Seafood Gumbo, Lucy's version of Cheeseburger in Paradise, and Fresh Gulf Red Snapper, which comes with a Fish Trax code you can scan to learn where it came from as a way to connect the local fishing community to Lulu's guests.

If you prefer a quieter, more grown-up atmosphere, walk right next door to Lucy Buffett's newest restaurant venture, **Lucy B Goode** (202 East 25th Ave, Gulf Shores). This coastal café has a rustic, fish-camp-meets-farm-to-table feel and celebrates all things local and organic. The chefs at Lucy B Goode work directly with fishermen and farmers to source their products and then create dishes that reflect culinary traditions of the entire Gulf Coast, from the Cuban cuisine



Photo courtesy of Lighthouse Bakery, LLP

Take a Day Trip

If you have time and want to venture off your road trip, it's worth it to hop the bay over to Dauphin Island for a visit to the **Lighthouse Bakery, LLP** (919 Chaumont Ave, Dauphin Island), where Mary and Daniel Scarcliff have been serving up home-made pastries for more than 15 years. Everything at the bakery is made from scratch from Mary's recipes, including cinnamon rolls, cream cheese Danishes (with homemade cream cheese), muffins, croissants, and more. Visit on a Sunday for her special crab omelets and caramel almond rolls.

While you're on the west side of the bay, head up to the **Lighthouse Restaurant** (no relation to the bakery) at 12495 Padgett Switch Road for their famous crab claws. You can get these jumbo, meat-filled claws fried, grilled, or sautéed. The restaurant has been an institution in Irvington for more than 38 years.



Photo by Wes Frazer

of the Florida Keys to Creole dishes from New Orleans to Tex-Mex from the Lone Star State's coast. It's a refined dining experience that is a fresh breath of air in Gulf Shores.

For the prettiest views of the coast, visit **Sea-n-Suds** (405 E Beach Blvd, Gulf Shores), the only restaurant actually on the beach in Gulf Shores. It's the perfect place to grab a fried shrimp or oyster basket after a morning of catching rays. Add a cup or bowl of their specialty gumbo to your meal, and relax on the deck overlooking the crashing waves.

Right next to Gulf Shores you'll find Orange Beach, the last stop along our road trip. At **Fisher's at Orange Beach Marina** (27075 Marina Rd, Orange Beach), you'll find two dining options: Fisher's Upstairs, an elegant but comfort-

able atmosphere, and Fisher's Dockside, an open-air, more casual experience. At Fisher's Upstairs, chef Bill Briand creates a seasonal menu inspired by local cuisine and his Louisiana heritage. Specialties include crab claws marinated in honey and herbs, Crispy Red Snapper, and always a fresh gulf fish of the day. Head down to Dockside, and you'll find beachy dishes such as Blackened Fish Tacos, Caribbean Jerk Snapper, and House-Smoked Tuna Dip. If you visit Fisher's this summer, you can also attend a celebrity chef dinner as part of the Southern Grace dinner series. Full details can be found at fishersobm.com/events.php. These dinners are the best way to end your road trip and celebrate all the wonderful seafood the Alabama Gulf Coast has to offer.

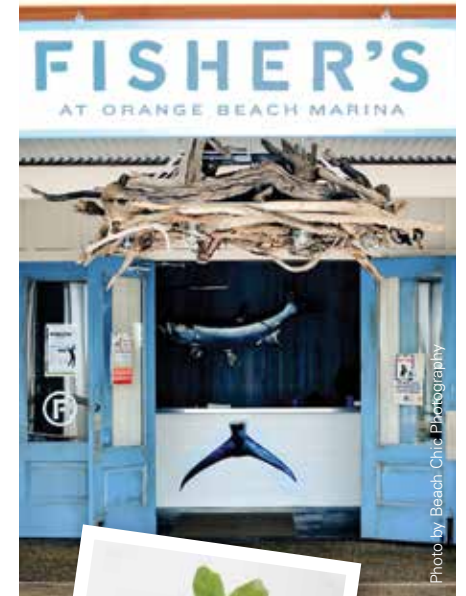


Photo by Beach Chic Photography



Photo by Courtland William Richards