

THE TENNESSEAN

Mobile, Alabama's Gulf coast heritage and urban vibe

Ann N. Yungmeyer, For The Tennessean 8 a.m. CDT June 12, 2016



(Photo: Tad Denson)

Mobile, Alabama, revels in its coastal heritage and multicultural roots. More than 300 years of colorful history have given the Alabama port city a savory blend of traditions and architectural styles, including Spanish and French Colonial, Victorian and Greek Revival. But recent emphasis on the area's arts, culture and ecology, along with its world-class attractions, have revitalized the city, making it one of the South's great urban destinations.

The heart of Mobile

At the forefront of the city's novel attractions is [GulfQuest](http://www.gulfquest.org/) (<http://www.gulfquest.org/>), a national maritime museum opened in fall 2015. The riverfront museum spotlights the heritage and economic importance of the Gulf of Mexico, which Mobile Bay is an inlet of. Designed to resemble a container vessel, the museum has an educational focus, with hands-on exhibits, theaters and simulators.

"Where else can you attempt the navigation techniques of early explorers, pilot a cargo vessel into Mobile's port, drive a submersible deep into the Gulf and move containers using a container crane?" said Tony Zodrow, GulfQuest's executive director.



The Great Gulf Challenge exhibit at GulfQuest in Mobile, Alabama. (Photo: Submitted)

GulfQuest's 90 interactive exhibits immerse visitors in all kinds of seafaring ventures and maritime tales. Among the favorites are *Take the Helm*, a pilot simulator identical to those used to train professional boat pilots, and *Pelican Girls*, an attic scene where the ghostly images of two French women tell their personal stories of sailing from Paris to Mobile in 1704 on the ship *Pelican* on their way to be married off to French-Canadian settlers.

The [Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center](http://www.exploreum.com/) (<http://www.exploreum.com/>) is another major draw in downtown Mobile, with interactive science exhibits and an [Imax dome theater](http://www.exploreum.com/imax-theatre/) (<http://www.exploreum.com/imax-theatre/>). Its new permanent display, [My BodyWorks](http://www.exploreum.com/exhibits/permanent/my-body-works/) (<http://www.exploreum.com/exhibits/permanent/my-body-works/>), is considered the most advanced of its kind nationwide.

As home to the first Mardi Gras celebration in the New World in 1703, Mobile remains entrenched in the festival culture. While Mardi Gras enthusiasts may want to join the revelry during Mobile's carnival season leading up to Fat Tuesday, the history of the annual event can be discovered year-round at [Mobile Carnival Museum](http://www.mobilecarnivalmuseum.com/) (<http://www.mobilecarnivalmuseum.com/>). Visitors can climb aboard a float replica and see the jeweled crowns, lavish gowns and robes worn by Mardi Gras kings and queens. And for the uninformed, exhibits explain the mystic societies, dens, beads and masks associated with the historical pageantry.



The Mobile Carnival Museum in Mobile, Alabama. (Photo: Tad Denson)

'Damn the torpedos'

Mobile's history from early colonial times is depicted at the [History Museum of Mobile](http://www.museumofmobile.com/), located in the Italianate-style Old City Hall. The area's numerous historical sites include [Fort Gaines](http://dauphinisland.org/fort-gaines/), which was at the center of the Civil War [Battle of Mobile Bay](http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/mobile-bay.html), where Admiral David G. Farragut famously said, "Damn the torpedoes — full speed ahead."

WWII history buffs won't want to miss one of the nation's finest military parks, the [USS Alabama Battleship Memorial](http://www.ussalabama.com/), which harbors the 35,000-ton "Lucky A," so named because she didn't lose a single American life to enemy fire. Her multiple decks and passageways can be explored with a self-guided tour, as can other exhibits of artillery, aircraft, and the submarine [USS Drum](http://www.drum228.org/).



The USS Alabama is docked at Battleship Park on Mobile Bay. (Photo: Submitted)

Oysters, art and azaleas

Oysters are mainstays on Mobile menus, and the oyster reefs have long provided a prosperous economy for the region and beyond. There is even an [Oyster Trail](http://www.theoystertrail.com/) (<http://www.theoystertrail.com/>), an arts and education project that helps support sustainability and harvest programs in Mobile Bay.

The urban arts scene thrives with weekly art walks, galleries and the impressive [Mobile Museum of Art](http://www.mobilemuseumofart.com/) (<http://www.mobilemuseumofart.com/>) — with sizable permanent collections of American, European, African and Asian art. The newly named [Alabama Contemporary Art Center](http://www.alabamacontemporary.com/) (<http://www.alabamacontemporary.com/>) offers a different focus, exposing modern-day art that often reflects social issues and themes of relevance to the Gulf Coast.



An exhibit featuring African-American art at Alabama Contemporary Art Center. (Photo: Submitted)

Alabama is the Azalea State, and a prime spot to view the colorful blooms is [Bellingrath Gardens and Home](http://bellingrath.org/) (<http://bellingrath.org/>), a historical 65-acre estate built in 1935. Garden enthusiasts will enjoy a variety of seasonal flowers, including tulips, poppies and roses, as well as featured areas like the estate's camellia parterre, live oak plaza and bayou boardwalk.

A tour of the beautiful riverfront home reveals the fascinating story of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bellingrath, who were philanthropists and owners of the first Coca-Cola bottling franchise in Mobile, purchased in 1903. The English renaissance-style home, featuring local brick, cast iron galleries and English flagstone, is filled with the couple's extensive collection of antiques and Coca-Cola memorabilia.

The bay area is rich in flora and fauna, resulting from the biologically diverse habitat of the [Mobile-Tensaw River Delta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile-Tensaw_River_Delta) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile-Tensaw_River_Delta) — where the Mobile, Spanish, Tensaw, Appalachian and Blakely rivers converge at Mobile Bay and flow into the Gulf of Mexico. The [Five Rivers Delta Resource Center](https://www.facebook.com/5RiversDeltaResourceCenter/) (<https://www.facebook.com/5RiversDeltaResourceCenter/>) offers access for boating and camping, as well as a launching point for the outfitter [Wild Native](http://wildnativetours.com/) (<http://wildnativetours.com/>), which leads guided kayak tours and a pontoon safari cruise highlighting the bayou ecology.



Spring blooms at Bellingrath Gardens in Mobile, Alabama. (Photo: Tad Denson)

From creole gumbo to MoonPies

Mobile's downtown and historic neighborhoods are lined with eclectic dining establishments — from Irish pubs and oyster houses to Creole cafes and upscale restaurants. For casual chic, foodies head for [Kitchen on George](http://kitchenongeorge.com/) (<http://kitchenongeorge.com/>) in the [Oakleigh Garden District](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oakleigh_Garden_Historic_District) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oakleigh_Garden_Historic_District), serving locally sourced, seasonal cuisine and creative small plates. For urban ambiance, the newly opened [Dauphin's](http://www.godauphins.com/) (<http://www.godauphins.com/>) restaurant is a standout for skyline views from the 34th floor of Trustmark Bank, and its [gumbo z'herb](https://www.facebook.com/GoDauphins/photos/pb.479740752186576.-2207520000.1460973422./556559901171327/?type=3&theater) (<https://www.facebook.com/GoDauphins/photos/pb.479740752186576.-2207520000.1460973422./556559901171327/?type=3&theater>) is possibly the best in town.

The café at GulfQuest Museum boasts the only waterfront dining in the city, but [Felix's Fish Camp](http://www.felixsfishcamp.com/) (<http://www.felixsfishcamp.com/>) on the causeway offers bayside dining where patrons often catch sight of an alligator nestled in the dunes. Felix's is the place to go for catch-of-the-day and local favorites, including West Indies salad, made with fresh lump crabmeat and vinaigrette. Another seafood icon, the historical [Wintzell's Oyster House](http://www.wintzelloysterhouse.com/) (<http://www.wintzelloysterhouse.com/>), touts the best variety of oysters — served "fried, stewed or nude."

Oddly enough, the [MoonPie](https://moonpie.com/) (<https://moonpie.com/>) has been a Mobile favorite since 1952, when the chocolate marshmallow treat made by Chattanooga Bakery became the treasured throw at Mardi Gras parades. Its popularity led to MoonPie desserts featured on Mobile menus and the city's famed New Year's Eve event, MoonPie Over Mobile. As such, a replica of a giant MoonPie suspends from a downtown high-rise — both a curiosity and an emblem of the city's vibrant spirit.

If you go

Lodging:

[Battle House Renaissance Hotel](http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/mobbr-the-battle-house-renaissance-mobile-hotel-and-spa/) (<http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/mobbr-the-battle-house-renaissance-mobile-hotel-and-spa/>)

26 North Royal St., 251-338-2000

Mobile offers a choice of hotels within easy walking distance to restaurants and cultural attractions. Among downtown four-star retreats, the landmark Battle House Renaissance Hotel dates from 1852. A member of Historic Hotels of America, it was recently restored to its original grandeur with added amenities, including a full-service, European-style spa and rooftop pool.

Museums and sightseeing:

[GulfQuest \(http://www.gulfquest.org/\)](http://www.gulfquest.org/)

155 S. Water St., 251-436-8901

[Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center \(http://www.exploreum.com/\)](http://www.exploreum.com/)

65 Government St., 251-208-6893

[Mobile Carnival Museum \(http://www.mobilecarnivalmuseum.com/\)](http://www.mobilecarnivalmuseum.com/)

355 Government St., 251-432-3324

[History Museum of Mobile \(http://www.museumofmobile.com/\)](http://www.museumofmobile.com/)

111 S. Royal St., 251-208-7652

[Mobile Museum of Art \(http://www.mobilemuseumofart.com/\)](http://www.mobilemuseumofart.com/)

4850 Museum Dr., 251-208-5200

[Fort Gaines \(http://dauphinisland.org/fort-gaines/\)](http://dauphinisland.org/fort-gaines/)

51 Bienville Blvd., Dauphin Island, Ala., 251-861-6992

[USS Alabama Battleship Memorial \(http://www.ussalabama.com/\)](http://www.ussalabama.com/)

2703 Battleship Pkwy., 251-433-2703

[Alabama Contemporary Art Center \(http://www.alabamacontemporary.com/\)](http://www.alabamacontemporary.com/)

301 Conti St., 251-208-5671

[Bellingrath Gardens and Home \(http://bellingrath.org/\)](http://bellingrath.org/)

12401 Bellingrath Gardens Rd, Theodore, Ala., 251-973-2217

[Five Rivers Delta Resource Center \(https://www.facebook.com/5RiversDeltaResourceCenter/\)](https://www.facebook.com/5RiversDeltaResourceCenter/)

30945 Five Rivers Boulevard, Spanish Fort, Ala., 251-625-0814

Dining:

[Kitchen on George \(http://kitchenongeorge.com/\)](http://kitchenongeorge.com/)

351A George St., 251-436-8890

[Dauphin's \(http://www.godauphins.com/\)](http://www.godauphins.com/)

RSA Bank Trust Building, 107 St. Francis St. #3400, 251-444-0200

[Felix's Fish Camp \(http://www.felixsfishcamp.com/\)](http://www.felixsfishcamp.com/)

1530 Battleship Pkwy., Spanish Fort, Ala., 251-626-6710

[Wintzell's Oyster House \(http://www.wintzelloysterhouse.com/\)](http://www.wintzelloysterhouse.com/) (downtown location)

605 Dauphin St., 251-432-4605

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