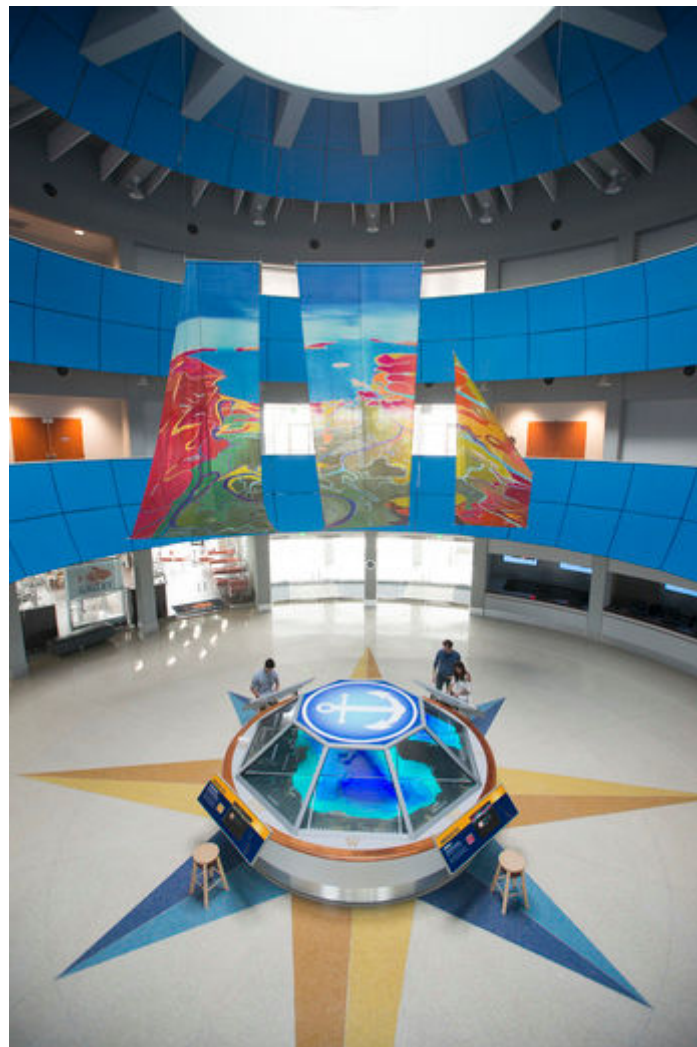


## LIFE TRAVEL

### A revived Mobile, Ala., is shipshape when it comes to things for travelling families to do

By Wayne Newton, Special to Postmedia Network  
Friday, June 10, 2016 8:20:49 EDT PM



America's Sea, the interactive map of the Gulf of Mexico that greets visitors to GulfQuest, allows hands-on exploration of topics ranging from conflicts to the environment. (Paul Johnson/GulfQuest photo)

By and large.

Clean bill of health.

Cup of joe.

They're all seagoing slang and part of the intensive and entertaining look at the shipping industry at GulfQuest, a new museum on the Gulf Mexico shore in Mobile, Ala.

Part science centre, part historical museum, GulfQuest set my sense of adventure awash in its jaw-dropping foyer, the centrepiece for which is a large, US\$200,000 interactive map where visitors can explore the features of the Gulf of Mexico before purchasing admission tickets.

Once inside, Mobile's celebration of the gulf and its vital shipping industry continues with a full-size replica of a container ship, the technology for which was invented in Mobile. It's so realistic, including gulf water slapping its hull, that visitors do a double take.

Shaped like a ship from the outside, GulfQuest's interior walkways resemble those on large ships, except these feature the nautical wordplay along the way.

"By and large" to most of us means something is generally good. But for mariners, sailing "by" means straight into the wind and "large" means at a right angle to it. A vessel sailing "by and large" will move well in most winds.

"Clean bill of health" comes from the end of a ship's quarantine after arriving in a foreign port and "cup of joe" comes from a 1914 order from U.S. Naval Secretary Josephus Daniels abolishing liquor on board. Sailors referred to coffee as a "cup of joe", the strongest drink available

Hands-on simulators recreate commercial life and the wrath of Mother Nature.

Among the most popular is a storm centre where visitors are asked to make emergency decisions on such matters as evacuations based on weather information.

Another favourite allows visitors to guide ships ranging from tugs to towering freighters through calm daytime or stormy nighttime waters.

These are just two of the 90 interactive exhibits that enthrall visiting schoolchildren and families.

The glass and concrete structure cost US\$63 million to build and is 120,000 square feet, including a cinema and waterfront restaurant.

"GulfQuest has staked its claim as the maritime museum dedicated to telling the stories of this fascinating region," said Tony Zodrow, the museum's founding executive director.

"Since the first arrival of Spanish explorers more than 500 years ago, the Gulf of Mexico has played a vital role in the maritime history of North America, Europe and the United States.

"Today, despite setbacks like Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the Gulf Coast remains a centre of cultural interest, economic activity, environmental focus, and natural beauty."

GulfQuest is also symbolic of rebirth for Mobile as a family-friendly tourist city.

It's a suitable addition to an impressive list of city and regional attractions, including the Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Centre and Imax Theatre and Bellingrath Gardens, an internationally recognized horticultural estate established by a millionaire who made his fortune bottling Coca-Cola.

Mobile does have a troubling past as a centre of conflict and as a slave market, facts acknowledged at places such as the History Museum Mobile and Fort Conde, both within short walking distance of GulfQuest.

Hometown to American icons as diverse as Hank Aaron and Jimmy Buffet, the city's downtown comes alive with America's oldest Mardi Gras, started in 1703. Those not in town in early February to take in the spectacle can catch a snippet of the celebration year-round at the Mardi Gras Museum, which features a parade float and an extensive collection of intricate costumes worn by Mardi Gras kings and queens

Downtown Mobile, while devoid of major retail, is emerging from a down period with new art galleries, excellent restaurants and the ongoing renaissance of the historic 1920s Saenger Theatre and the spectacular Battle House Renaissance Hotel, both of which were saved from demolition.

The Saenger, with its French Renaissance vibe, has been home to vaudeville and motion pictures. It's now a noted 2,000-seat live performance hall, which has featured shows by the likes of Neil Young, Willie Nelson and Bonnie Raitt. It's the permanent home of the Mobile Symphony Orchestra, which is solidly supported by this city of 200,000.

Visitors wishing to fully understand Mobile's past and its progress would do well to travel the African American Heritage Trail, portions of which can be covered through a downtown walking tour.

Stops of interest range from Hank Aaron's park to the site where the second biggest slave market in the U.S. once stood and the area where the last slave ship arrived from Africa.

On the outskirts of the city, not far from one of Elvis Presley's favourite restaurants, is the USS Alabama Battleship Memorial Park.

Its top attraction is the famous USS Alabama, which earned 12 battle stars for valour during the Second World War and was nicknamed Lucky A because it didn't lose a single American life to enemy fire during the war.

But the park also has an impressive array of aircraft, including the once-secret Blackhawk spy plane.

Buoyed economically by a new Airbus airplane manufacturing plant and its 1,000 new jobs, Mobile Mayor Sandy Stimpson is bullish on his city's future — so much so that he makes a point of meeting visiting travel writers.

Among his many pledges to grow the city as a tourist destination are new duck boat tours, which will end by plunging into the water, bicycling tours and a continued improvement of eco-tourism opportunities featuring birding and alligators.

As the mayor said, Mobile is "born to celebrate."

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## **GOOD EATS**

**Dauphin's:** 107 St. Francis St. Owned by retired Miami Dolphin star Bob Baumhower, Dauphin's is on the top, 34th floor of the RSA Trustmark Building, providing a great view of the downtown in space that used to be a members-only club. Creole and soul dishes are specialties.

**Cream and Sugar Cafe:** 351 George St. Quaint neighbourhood coffee shop where the locals gather. Famous for its cake balls with names such as Praline King Cake and Port City Peanut Butter.

**Spot of Tea:** 310 Dauphin St., Located in an 1836 building near the Roman Catholic basilica and owned by a mom and son, Spot of Tea is popular and affordable eatery known for its chicken salad.

## **LEARN MORE**

Mobile Bay Convention & Visitors Bureau: [www.mobilebay.org](http://www.mobilebay.org)

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

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

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

African American Heritage Trail: [www.maaht.org](http://www.maaht.org)