

# FULL CIRCLE

TEXT BY ETHAN BRADFORD

As the school year comes to a close, summertime approaches, and our minds turn to family vacations and playtime, a massive onset of travelers find their way to the beautiful Alabama coastline. The salty air of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach naturally attracts the lion's share of those looking to escape their work and study. Blessed with a nook of the Gulf Coast known as Mobile Bay, Alabama offers beachgoers a unique experience beyond the beach. Whether a day-trip or a weekend excursion, you can make this a trip that will take you full circle around Mobile Bay.

Peppered with luxurious condominiums, cottages, and homes for rent, Alabama's coastline offers a variety of accommodations from Gulf-front and Bay-front to lagoon-front and secluded bungalows that is sure to suit any preference.

Make your way west on Highway 180 through Palmetto Beach and the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge to historic Fort Morgan. Completed in

COURTESY OF GULF SHORES & ORANGE BEACH TOURISM



PHOTOGRAPH BY SJON HOPKINS



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE CITY OF BAYOU LA BATRE



1834, this notable landmark was active in four wars—the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and both World Wars. Most famous for its role in the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864, the site showcases the evolutions of seacoast fortifications and adaptations made by the U.S. Army for the defense of our country. It features an active living history program interpreting all of the military periods—great for history buffs and children alike.

From here, be sure to catch the Mobile Bay Ferry on Alabama’s only water highway, known as “The Gulf Coast’s Most Scenic Drive.” This 40-minute cruise takes you across the mouth of Mobile Bay from one historic fort to the next. The ship can carry motor homes, motorcycles, boats, and trailers in addition to standard vehicles. Landing at Fort Gaines on the eastern tip of Dauphin Island, you will see original cannons and a blacksmith shop, and experience guided tours with members in period uniforms bringing history to life with cannon firing demonstrations and blacksmithing. The fort was recently designated as one of the Eleven Most Endangered Historic Sites in America due to ongoing shoreline erosion.

With its sugar-white sand beaches, public golf, and parks beneath ancient oak trees, Dauphin Island is known as the Sunset Capital of Alabama. The Dauphin Island Sea Lab focuses on marine science research and education for all ages, year-round. The Estuarium provides an in-depth look at the four key habitats of the area—the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, Mobile Bay, the Barrier Islands, and the Gulf of Mexico. Refuel with some takeout from Miguel’s Beach’n Baja. They offer burritos and tacos as well as other standard Mexican fare, all made from ingredients from local suppliers.

From here, venture along Alabama’s western shore to Bayou La Batre, famous for the filming of the legendary



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DAUPHIN ISLAND SEA LAB

COURTESY OF BELLINGRATH GARDENS AND HOME



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Tom Hanks movie *Forrest Gump*. The shrimping industry abounds in Bayou La Batre, and with its modest population of 2,600, it is known as the Seafood Capital of Alabama. A weekend-long custom known as the Blessing of the Fleet takes place each year and can be traced back to Old World European fishing communities. God is publicly acknowledged and asked for a bountiful harvest and for the safety of the men at sea. The 67th annual event takes place this year on April 31 and May 1.

Travel 12 miles north to Theodore, home to the famed Bellingrath Gardens located on the Isle aux Oies River. Tour the 65-acre public property with its conservatory, nature walk, water features, and multiple themed gardens. Also enjoy a tour through the historic home of Walter and Bessie Bellingrath. A visit to Charles Phillips Architectural Antiques finds unique antique architectural elements, as well as antique furniture, accessories, and decor. There are six buildings with a huge, constantly revolving stock of merchandise that also includes collectibles, prints, and linens.

The city of Mobile is 15 miles east on I-10—home to the nation’s oldest Mardi Gras celebration and the infamous MoonPie Drop. This city is well known for its traditions and rich heritage. With so much to see and do, Mobile is a great place to hang your hat for a night and soak it all in. The Fort Conde Inn is housed in an 1850 landmark, surrounded by historic cottages and homes all restored to modern luxury and AAA Four-Diamond status. If the inn makes a lasting impression, that’s because it’s been centuries in the making. The newly opened GulfQuest museum is the world’s only maritime museum dedicated to the historical, cultural, and economic significance of the Gulf of Mexico.

Take a short tunnel under the waters of Mobile Bay and back up onto the causeway guiding you along the top of Mobile Bay. As you begin to cross the water, more than 42,000 tons of steel stands docked along the coastline. The *USS Alabama* runs 680 feet long and stands 194 feet high, holding some of the most powerful American naval weaponry produced during World War II. This massive battleship anchors the memorial park that also features the *USS Drum*, a World War II submarine, and an airplane hangar and airfield where some of the U.S. military’s flagship aircraft and armored vehicles have been preserved.

Spanish Fort welcomes you to the “Gateway to the Mobile Tensaw Delta” as you make landfall once again on the Eastern Shore. The Delta is a complex network of tidally influenced rivers, creeks, bays, lakes, wetlands, and bayous. Formed by the confluence of the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers, this is where the Mobile, Tensaw, Blakeley, Apalachee, and Spanish rivers converge into Mobile Bay. It is host to more than 250,000 acres of scenic waterways, woods, and wetlands. The professionally guided kayak and canoe tours offer an intimate experience with the wildlife and habitat. *USA Today* named it in its “50 State Secrets: Hidden Gems to Visit Around the U.S.A.”

From here, you may choose to forgo the car ride and make your way by foot or bicycle along the Eastern Shore Trail. It is a 32-mile, multi-purpose trail that runs through the communities of Spanish Fort, Daphne, Fairhope, and Point Clear. The Gator Alley Boardwalk is one part of the Trail where visitors may view alligators, fish, a butterfly garden, and other wildlife.

By car, head south on Highway 98, making your first stop in the city of



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PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE PLUSCHT

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH BELANGER



Daphne, known as the Jubilee City because of a rare and natural phenomenon that occurs like nowhere else in the world. At least annually, and typically taking place in the pre-dawn hours, large numbers of live crabs, flounder, shrimp, eels, stingrays, and other demersal fish wash ashore. The event has become quite the community celebration, as locals shine lights onto the summertime Bay waters in the early-morning hours and gather their bounty. If you aren't lucky enough to experience the enigma, legendary seafood po'boys are just around the corner at Mancini's Antique Club.

It is doubtful that Italian immigrant Frank Mancini could have envisioned such a mutation when he purchased an old wooden produce warehouse where he built a gasoline station in 1924. In 1947, his son took over the business and for some unknown reason, after obtaining a liquor license 20 years later, started to hang bottles and various items on the walls of the now full-fledged bar. Today the establishment holds the largest collection of Jim Beam decanters on display. Years later, his grandson took over the establishment, which now holds the title of the Bloody Mary Capital of the Eastern Shore.

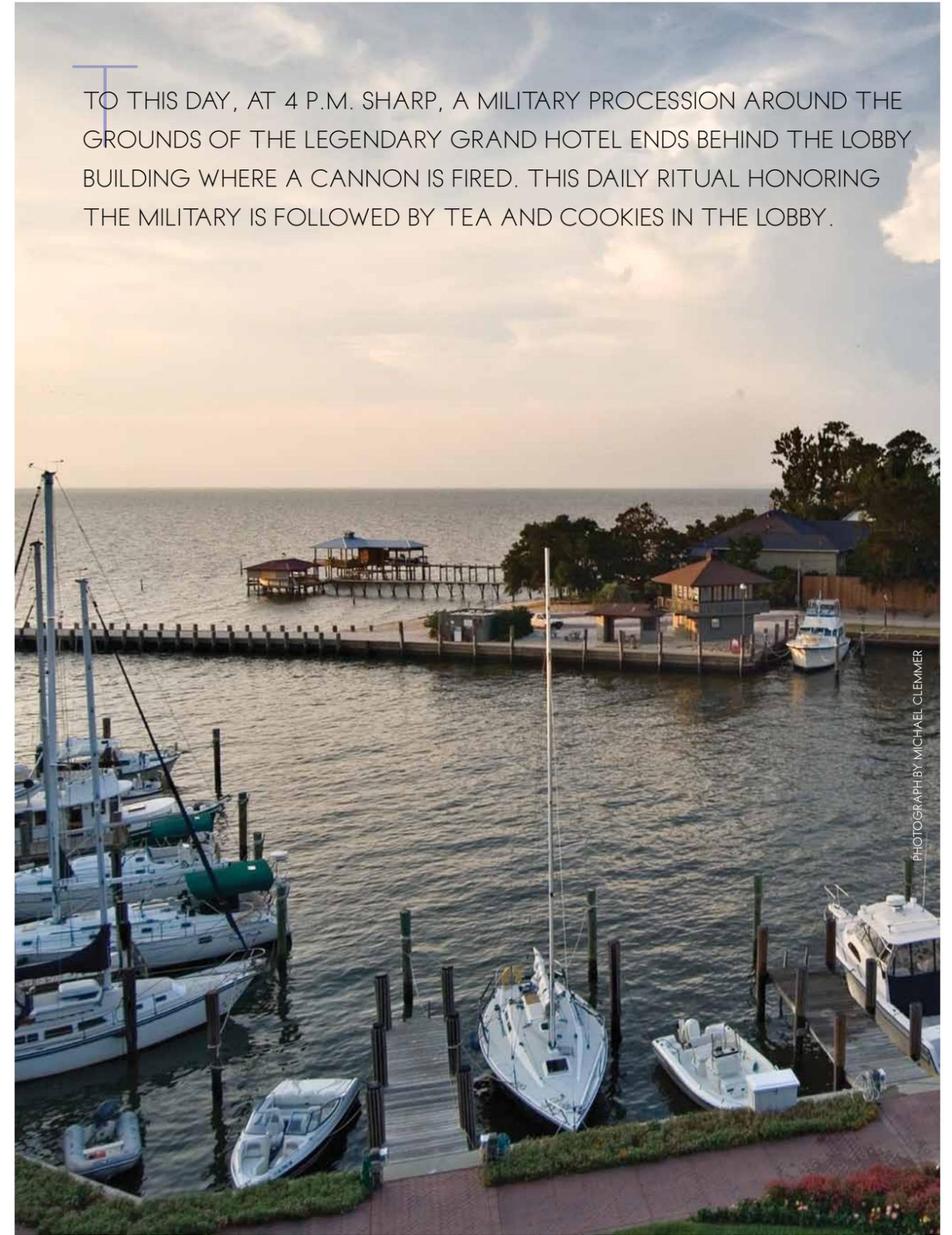
Rosie's Grill is another local favorite most noted for their Sunday brunch. The menu offers myriad variations of the traditional eggs Benedict, bananas Foster French toast, fried chicken biscuits, and Gouda grits.

With a full stomach, continue south on scenic 98. First stop is the charming city of Fairhope. Visitors instantly fall under the spell of this beguiling shore-side town. Flowers are everywhere, and ancient trees shade the streets of the historic downtown shopping district. Drove of upscale boutiques such as Villa Décor, Chapel Farm Collection,

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH BELANGER



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TO THIS DAY, AT 4 P.M. SHARP, A MILITARY PROCESSION AROUND THE GROUNDS OF THE LEGENDARY GRAND HOTEL ENDS BEHIND THE LOBBY BUILDING WHERE A CANNON IS FIRED. THIS DAILY RITUAL HONORING THE MILITARY IS FOLLOWED BY TEA AND COOKIES IN THE LOBBY.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL CLEMMER



and Wismar's Fine Jewelry circle the blocks of downtown, offering the finest in furniture, antiques, clothes, jewelry, interiors, art, and more. A quarter-mile-long pier jutting into Mobile Bay offers the perfect spot for fishing, strolling, or watching one of our beautiful Southern sunsets.

Continuing south on 98 and on your left is The Silver Market—owned and operated by a true estate silver guru—the quaint shop is chock-full of the finest silver and antique lace. Just a hop, skip, and a jump farther is Point Clear—home to the legendary Grand Hotel. This Gulf Coast resort is part of the prestigious Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail and offers a top-notch spa that is sure to please.

As we make our way back to the southern shores, we stop in Magnolia Springs to take a stroll down the famed Oak Tree Drive through a canopy of live oaks. At the end of the botanical tunnel is Jesse's Restaurant with a menu full of fine fare. Magnolia Springs is home to the last known water route where mail is delivered exclusively by boat.

Continue south on Magnolia Springs Highway and travel through the small town of Bon Secour, whose name derives from the French phrase meaning "safe harbor." This town is largely known for its fishing industry, and shrimp boats line the river running through the town. The grounded *Morning Star* is a ship worth seeing on this trip.

Closing the circle brings you back to the beautiful sandy beaches of our coast. It's time to relax and dine on some fresh Gulf seafood from favorites such as Fisher's, Cobalt, Cosmo's, and Wintzell's Oyster House. Once you've experienced your full-circle exploration of Mobile Bay's myriad delights, you're sure to come back. After all, there's always more to see and do in coastal Alabama.



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