



Southern Sanctuary



Hilton Head Island is an outdoor oasis for Ohioans seeking solace in nature

By Rose Davidson



Over the years, Ohioans have developed a love affair with the charming island of Hilton Head.

Buckeyes flock to the South Carolina hotspot each summer for some much-needed refuge from the Midwest's cruel weather and constant commotion, and today, the Lowcountry island draws more visitors from Ohio than anywhere else. Many Ohioans have made Hilton Head a frequent vacation spot, so if you've been before and don't want to stick with the same island sites, fret not – there's a wealth of hidden highlights worthy of exploration.



Photos courtesy of the Hilton Head Island Visitor & Convention Bureau.

Nature is an integral part of Hilton Head. In fact, it's such an important piece of the island's character that there's not a single building exceeding five stories, so as not to distract from the island's organic beauty. It's said that the founding fathers of Hilton Head chose this feature to avoid any disruptions in the peaceful view of the quiet night sky.

Stepping onto the island is like taking a deep breath of fresh air, and exploring its natural roots may make for a completely new experience in an already familiar place.

Tee Time

Golf is an ideal island activity, so it's no surprise that Hilton Head's courses have been designed by some of the biggest names in the sport. The list is impressive, with names such as Robert Trent Jones, George Fazio and central Ohio's own Jack Nicklaus topping the bill. The island boasts 24 courses in total, 20 of which are open to the public.



As the home of the PGA TOUR's RBC Heritage tournament, the Harbour Town Golf Links is arguably the most famous of the island's courses. The view of the island's Harbour Town Lighthouse at the famed 18th hole is particularly iconic.

Another course to offer a great golfing experience is Palmetto Dunes' Oceanfront Course. Designed by Jones, the course is one of three at Palmetto Dunes Oceanfront Resort. The highlight of the course is its 10th hole, a par 5 that comes with a direct view of the Atlantic Ocean. Karen Kozemchak, marketing director for the resort, says the course's beauty is constant, but its difficulty can fluctuate.

"It's a very playable course, (but) it depends on various conditions," says Kozemchak. "One of the things about the No. 10 hole is, if there's a strong offshore breeze, you're playing into some fierce wind."

The resort also includes a winding lagoon system measuring 11 miles long. The lagoons provide picturesque scenery unlike any other resort on the island, and also offer a range of on-site aquatic opportunities, including kayaking, canoeing and catch-and-release fishing. Kozemchak says visitors love the fishing because, without the

jostling of ocean waves, they find it to be a uniquely relaxing experience.

"Kids and families and everybody love it because it's calm," says Kozemchak.

Traverse the Preserves

Hilton Head is packed with nature preserves and plenty of ways to experience them.

At the Sea Pines Forest Preserve, visitors can take part in horseback riding around the 605-acre expanse within the Sea Pines Resort. Daily guided rides leave from the resort's Lawton Stables, lasting approximately one hour each as the horses wind through trails past moss-covered oak trees, wildflowers and various birds, among other colorful flora and fauna.

Another popular method of transportation among Hilton Head visitors is biking. Bike rentals are available in all shapes and sizes, so renters can ride alone or in large groups. And with more bike trails than any other town its size in the United States, there's no shortage of ground to cover.

"We have over 100 miles of bike trails on the island, plus you can bike on our beaches, which is unusual, because it's



hard-packed sand,” says Charlie Clark, vice president of communications for the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce.

Biking is one of the best ways to experience the natural beauty of the Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge. Located just a half-mile west of Hilton Head Island, the grounds contain a variety of threatened and endangered species. While at the refuge, visitors may even have the chance to sneak a peek of some alligators as they bask in the summer sun.



Talks and Walks for children and adults to learn more about the island’s threatened population of loggerhead sea turtles. The two-hour sessions begin with a PowerPoint presentation about

the species, then take participants out on the beach to see the turtles’ natural nests. Monday and Wednesday tours are also offered through The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort and Spa. The sessions are adaptable for each audience, says Amber Kuehn, manager for the Hilton Head Island Sea Turtle Protection Project.

“It can be as entertaining as for a first-grader and as informational as for an adult,” says Kuehn. “We just kind of adapt for what the crowd is.” **CS**

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Animal Encounters

Hilton Head’s list of observable animals doesn’t stop with those on dry land. The water surrounding the island is a natural habitat for bottlenose dolphins, and with that comes a wealth of opportunities for catching a glimpse of the majestic sea creatures.

One option is the Sunset Dinner Cruise, which is put on by Vagabond Cruise and leaves from Harbour Town Yacht Basin, one of the island’s eight marinas. Aside from dolphin sightings, diners can also see historic sites including Haig Point Lighthouse and Strahn Mansion along the way.

While the larger boats provide plenty of chances to see dolphins, Clark suggests a dolphin tour on a smaller boat.

“You can take out a six- or eight-passenger boat that specializes in dolphin tours and you’re going to really get an up-close and personal view of those dolphins,” says Clark. “And you’re going to get really knowledgeable guides.”

The Coastal Discovery Museum is another great way to experience animals up close. Every Tuesday and Thursday, June through August, the museum offers Evening Turtle

