

ALL-ACCESS VACATIONS

Myrtle Beach: GRANDSTANDING FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS

BY LAUREN MONITZ

THE EARLY MORNING AIR is chilly for late March and the water even colder. It's too frigid for traditional water-sports so we're exploring the salt marshes by kayak.

"Do you see that stretch of land out there? That's Huntington Beach State Park," our guide points off in the distance. "We're sandwiched between two protected wilderness areas, but you technically can't own water so this is just for everyone to enjoy."

The water idyllically reflects the early morning beams, causing a glassy, urethral halo as it laps at the shore. Waterfowl playfully dip and dive, breaking the rhythmic ripples, completely unphased by us humans. I briefly debate whether they were doing an elaborate mating ritual or simply hunting for breakfast; likely, they're hangry like me. Either way, they are moving too fast to catch them on camera. After a few blurry snaps, I give up and put the phone down, intently watching their interaction.

The turn to get here was a little pull off

from the highway that looked like nothing more than deep woods. I had little confidence in Google, but still, I followed the instructions, driving right up to the water's edge and Black River Outdoors' van was waiting like promised.

"Is it safe to park here?" I asked.

"When you're with us," they laughed.

They strategically schedule their tours throughout the day, timed to the tides. Half the time, the water levels are so high the tiny strip of sand doesn't even exist. Anyone breezing by would be none the wiser, making this place feel that much more like a well-kept secret.

The area is called Murrells Inlet, a sleepy fishing village just 16 kilometres from the hustle and bustle of the boardwalk. "When people say Myrtle Beach, they're generally referencing the Grand Strand, but the area actually runs from the North Carolina border 35 miles south to Winyah Bay," said Anna Lovell of Brookgreen Gardens. "More often than not, they're picturing the beach, golf courses and amusement parks, but in reality, each community has its own unique set of things to do."

"Even in the middle of the summer,

it's possible to find a quiet spot for yourself, whether that's the woods or the beach as long as you know where to look," added Ann Wilson, interpretive ranger at Myrtle Beach State Park.

A haven for naturalists, Murrells Inlet boasts both saltwater and freshwater pursuits. Pack a picnic to enjoy under the Spanish moss of Wacca Wache Marina or get lost under the live twisting oaks at Brookgreen Gardens. The site is home to the largest outdoor sculpture garden in the world with a visitor's centre that's keen on telling you absolutely everything about the area's antebellum history. While I arrived in a harried state keen on capturing a few photos and heading on my way, it didn't take long to see that things move at a slower pace around here. The volunteers are so proud of their garden, it would simply break their heart if visitors were not to listen to their stories.

You can ride a pontoon boat ride across the rice fields, dance through the butterfly gardens or embrace the popular pastime of porch (bench) sitting with a sweet tea. The gardens are one of a few places in the U.S. to have earned accreditation from the American Alliance

of Museums, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, as well as being designated a National Historic Landmark and on the National Register of Historic Places.

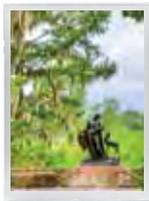
Feeling famished from the midday sun, I politely excuse myself from the history lesson and head up the road to Wicked Tuna. The restaurant is one of just a handful in the country to offer “hook-to-plate” cuisine, meaning they employ their own fishermen to reel in the day’s fresh catch. Their bounty is served a number of ways from raw sushi to grilled. Gluttonously devouring a completely overindulgent lobster lunch, I stare out at the choppy waves as a little sigh of contentment slipped out.

Yeah, I could snowbird here.

Myrtle Beach has a lot of stereotypes associated with it from spring break destination to mini golf capital of the world. But venture beyond the discount beachwear and diners and you’ll discover a world that extends well beyond the boardwalk. Life’s less complicated here, which means it’s high time to pay a visit to low country. 📍

Where to Go From Here

MURRELLS INLET: Part of a larger conglomerate of coastal Carolina cities, the Myrtle Beach area encompasses 14 cities and towns, one of the standouts being Murrells Inlet. You may opt to parasail, ride a banana boat or drive a jet ski, or perhaps you’d rather just eat your heart out here; it is now



widely known as the “Seafood Capital of South Carolina,” after all.

SOCASTEE: Socastee is home to Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge and one of the state’s 10 swing bridges, which was originally built in 1935. T.I.G.E.R.S. Myrtle Beach Safari is another popular attraction in the area – a world-renowned wildlife preserve, home to more than 130 endangered animals.

PAWLEYS ISLAND: A barrier island separated from the mainland by a salt marsh that also happens to be one of the oldest resort towns on the East Coast, Pawleys Island has a history that dates back to the 1700s. Soak in the barefoot, laid-back vibe while enjoying the beach and sand dunes, going out on

the water or, if you dare, participating in a local ghost tour.

ATLANTIC BEACH: Known as the “Black Pearl,” Atlantic Beach once a popular getaway for African-Americans pre-Jim Crowe era. It was the first (and still is) the only black-owned oceanfront town in the world.



OTHER NEARBY ESCAPES: Woods Bay State Park in

Olanta and Lee State Park in Bishopville are two lesser-known natural areas with exceptional wildlife viewing opportunities. Whether it’s a trip to the city for shopping and lunch on King Street or a jaunt along the pier, a visit to Folly Beach in Charleston is another easy 90-minute drive. You could also get to Wilmington on a scenic drive along the coast. Further afield, Columbia offers a spot of culture. Or, hightail it to Asheville if the mountains are calling. Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Savannah and Charlotte are also easy weekend trips within five-hours’ drive time.

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