

Betting on Biloxi

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Biloxi, Miss. — On a sparkling, sunny day, this city is alive with optimism, its sky filled with cranes as new condos and casinos rise 3 1/2 years after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast.

There are still reminders of the struggle: some bare foundations and a scattering of what locals call "Katrina houses" — small, but sturdy frame homes for those left homeless by the hurricane. [an error occurred while processing this directive] [an error occurred while processing this directive] [an error occurred while processing this directive]

But Biloxi is once again a good bet for tourists. New attractions are popping up, the beaches are clean and broad, restaurants are opening, and a new Frank Gehry-designed art museum promises to be the architectural highlight of the Mississippi coast when it opens in 2011.

Of course, Biloxi and nearby Gulfport are best known as gambling meccas. Mississippi coast gambling revenue is down only 2 percent from last year at this time, a figure a lot of businesses would love to see.

The gaming tables and slots were filled with visitors, most of whom appeared to be retirees trying to bolster their Dow-damaged retirement accounts.

We joined, in a small-stakes way, at the Palace Casino Resort, where we were staying. My husband enjoys the odd blackjack game, and the one he joined was odd enough to swiftly deprive him of \$100. I stuck to quarter video poker and made \$20 last about an hour.

Once my Andrew Jackson was eaten, I was off to go shrimping.

For about a year now, Mike and Brandy Moore have run an attraction that's essentially a tourist sightseeing boat with a shrimping rig attached to the back. Tourists can take an hour-and-a-half trip close to the shore to learn about shrimping for only \$15.

The best part: We didn't have to do any actual shrimping ourselves. Shrimping is a difficult, smelly business.

Mike Moore warned us that our boat probably wouldn't catch much shrimp since it was a cold day early in the year. We did a 20-minute drag, then he dumped the net. In it were two little shrimp, a tiny speckled trout, a harvest fish, half a dozen jellyfish, a small squid, an anchovy and a large blue crab.

Dinner! No, not really. Except for the jellyfish, which were dumped overboard, the sea creatures were all placed by Moore in a small aquarium and eventually released back into the Gulf.

The shrimp tour is fun and a good break from gambling. Another good one is to round up some friends and charter a sail on a real schooner.

Capt. Brandon Boudreaux, who grew up in Biloxi, pilots the two tall-masters schooners that can be chartered for 2 1/2, four or eight hours. Boudreaux sometimes does \$25 walk-on cruises, but most of his business is charters, which start at \$375 for 20 people for 2 1/2 hours. He also rents out his Schooner Pier for special events.

A maritime museum, trashed by Katrina, is being rebuilt across the street from Schooner Pier and is expected to open in 2010.

Speaking of schooners, Ole Biloxi Schooner is the restaurant we chose for lunch. This is post-Katrina location in a small storefront downtown. It's a good, inexpensive lunch spot.

If you're in the mood for something fancier, try Mary Mahoney's Old French House. It's expensive, but the locals love it. Of course, there are also the casino buffets — a pretty good value if you can eat a lot.

After lunch, we drove down Beach Boulevard, also known as U.S. 90, past some dead live oak trees that were being chainsawed into the shape of roosting pelicans.

Just off Beach Boulevard stand four tall, shiny, aluminum pods that have some of the locals scratching their heads. They're the starting point for a five-building museum complex by Gehry, who designed Los Angeles' Walt Disney Concert Hall.

The complex will become the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art and will house the work of George Ohr, a 19th-century inventive potter. (O'Keefe is Jeremiah O'Keefe, who donated \$1 million to start the museum.)

The museum complex also will have a center for ceramics and an African-American art gallery.

Farther west on U.S. 90, Beauvoir, the home of Confederate States of America President Jefferson Davis, is open while restoration continues.

At the end of the day, we wanted to try our hand at gambling one more time. We stopped at Harrah's Grand Biloxi Casino, where my husband gave roulette a spin. He lost.

I went back to my video poker machines, although I had trouble finding a 25-cent one.

I parked myself at an unfamiliar video poker machine with lots of bells, whistles and fancy bonus doo-dads. I quickly pulled four of a kind, punched blindly at the bonus buttons and wound up winning \$126.

That's a big day for me in the casinos. Time to go home.