





christmas on the water

*Biloxi's annual boat parade
offers a particularly
Mississippi kind of Christmas*

Last year, when I arrived on the Mississippi Coast on the first day in December, I remembered why winter is my favorite time of the year to be on the beach. Sure, the air was hazy—the edges of the harbor in Gulfport were disappearing into the mist—and the breeze off the water carried a brisk, cutting chill. But the beach itself, which would have been crawling with people in the summertime, was mostly empty, open for a wonderfully lonely stroll.

And it was a grand day: just warm enough for diners to cluster on the restaurant patios that overlook the sea, breezy enough for young men in wetsuits who were riding kiteboards, sunny enough for an older man to be leaned back, arms crossed behind his head, just taking in the sound of the crashing waves. As I drove on toward my destination in Biloxi, I rolled down my windows and turned up the radio. Which—as the chiming notes of Vince Guaraldi's *Peanuts* soundtrack came on—became about the only evidence that it was Christmas season at all, besides the occasional pick-up truck with a pine tree in its bed.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Parading vessels prepare for launch. As the sun sets, the crowd begins to gather and the lights come on. Groups of friends return to the event year after year. There are plenty of good vantage points along the shoreline. Santa Claus waves his greeting from a bedecked boat. At its peak, the parade included nearly 90 boats. RIGHT: The reflection of the lights over the water is a festive sight each holiday season. PREVIOUS: Late in the parade, the boats circle back on one another.



Then night fell. The coast lit up: boats drifting across the harbor sparkled in red, white, and green lights. The season, despite the balmy temperature, could not have been more clear.

I was here for a particularly Mississippian kind of Christmas performance: a parade of boats that, draped in lights and seasonal decorations, proceed across the black nighttime waters of Biloxi Bay.

The tradition started back in 1986, though plans were launched two years earlier when the late Mary Mahoney—the owner of Mary Mahoney’s Old French House Restaurant, a beloved Biloxi institution—had just been elected to lead the city’s Chamber of Commerce. As the chamber’s first female president, she was determined to make her mark. And a group of patrons at the restaurant—who just happened to be itching for a reason to pull out their boats in what is typically the offseason—struck upon a (literally) bright idea. Mahoney wound up passing away before the parade debuted, but in 1986, 28 boats floated their way through the inaugural “Christmas on the Water” parade. The sight, no doubt, would have made Mahoney proud.

The parade grew over the years and at its peak included nearly 90 boats. Then came Hurricane Katrina. In true Gulf Coast spirit, the parade went on, though only boats were included. Today, the parade is growing once more, and there are two similar parades nearby: “Christmas on the Bayou” rolls through Gulfport on Bayou Barnard, and “Christmas in the ‘Bouffa” winds its way up the Biloxi River.

Last year, as the sun began to set, the beach began to fill: families set up grills atop the sand; revelers dressed as Christmas elves and reindeer ate holiday cookies as they set up lawn chairs on the pier. One group, who told me they had been coming to this celebration for as long as they could remember, sat in their schooner with a Crockpot of chili, a nice antidote to the cold air that descended as the sky went dark. The boats themselves were draped in all manner of lights: classic dangling icicles, glittering stars, neon outlines of fish and angels. The regal lines of sailboats were edged in white and purple. As the evening deepened, one by one, the boats pulled out from their moorings and disappeared into the black.

Eventually, though, they returned. While the parade advanced in an organized line, the boats were less than orderly: some blasted jaunty Christmas tunes; one included a boisterous Santa Claus, booming his classic laugh over a PA system. On the Cap’n Pete, which typically serves as a ferry to Ship Island, guests who had bought \$45 cruise tickets enjoyed a floating party, right in the midst of the parade.

There is more than a hint of Mardi Gras to these festivities, which is, of course, appropriate to this coast. Toward the end of the parade, it seemed that one of the boats had pulled out some kind of toy cannon—which made loud booming noises and sent out cascades of smoke, though no actual cannonballs. The same noisy Santa Claus launched a merry, faux pirate attack against the rival boats as everyone drifted back into port.



The parade ends with a fireworks show—one of many festive events along the Mississippi Coast. The season includes synchronized light shows and oversized Christmas trees and lit-up snowflakes hanging from live oaks.

These boat parades, of course, are not the only draw to this region in this time of year. The Harbor Lights Winter Festival in Gulfport debuted in 2015 and in the years since has averaged more than 55,000 annual visitors. Many drive in from Louisiana and Texas.

“We have truly become one of the players in the Christmas light festivals in the South,” Jase Payne, the marketing manager for Gulfport’s leisure services department, tells me. The show has even inspired a Lifetime movie, “Christmas in Mississippi,” in which a Gulfport woman comes home for the holidays only to find her ex-boyfriend is in charge of the grand new light show. It’s easy to see why it’s earned this attention: the festival features a light show splayed across 60-acre Jones Park, right on the edge of the Mississippi Sound. The show features more than a million lights, “dancing” trees standing 55 feet tall, a Christmas village where kids can visit Santa and enjoy a trolley ride. Visitors can watch the show for an hour and a half before any song will repeat. A complete walk around the festival covers more than a mile.

Like the Biloxi parade, Gulfport’s festival emerged from the ideas of a few festive locals. Gulfport council president Rusty Walker is well known locally for the display at his house. (“That was where a lot of my time before Christmas was spent,” Payne says, “watching the show in his front

yard.”) So in 2015, the city decided to blow that display up into a show of epic proportions.

But Gulfport is far from the only player. A winter drive here offers a series of joyful spectacles: glittering, oversized snowflakes hanging from the boughs of live oaks in Bay St. Louis and Waveland; a sparkling oversized Christmas tree in Ocean Springs; homes in nearly every town that glow in bright colors, that shift and change in sync with Christmas tunes blaring from speakers. Taken together, the towns along the coast become a road-trip string of Christmas lights—no better place to take a season’s drive.

Nor is there a better place to enjoy a cool, quiet evening along the winter water.

Back in Biloxi, as the parade participants began to disembark to resume their festivities onshore, the Christmas on the Water parade bursts into its grand finale: a series of fireworks, flaring above the laggard boats that remained out there on the water.

A young girl, three or four years old, seemed to be picking out her favorite fireworks. “That one,” she says. “That one. That one.” She repeated it again and again after each new burst of sparking lights. She was joking, of course, playing a childish game. But to me, it seemed to fit the spirit of the season, and the spirit of this place: moments of celebration tumbling ever forward. M

a very coastal christmas

Christmas activities along Mississippi's coast.
Here are a few highlights.

Ongoing Events

Nov. 27 - Dec. 31
SNOWFLAKES IN THE BAY
Downtown Bay St. Louis

Nov. 29 - Dec. 31
33 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS
*Mississippi Coast Model Railroad Museum,
Gulfport*

Nov. 29 - Dec. 30
GULFPORT HARBOR LIGHTS
Jones Park, Gulfport

Dec. 14 - Dec. 29
KING'S CHRISTMAS DISPLAY
Biloxi

Single-Day Events

Dec. 6
KIDS STREET CHRISTMAS
Lynn Meadows Discovery Center, Gulfport

Dec. 6
DOWNTOWN FOR THE HOLIDAYS
Downtown Pascagoula

Dec. 6 & 7
OCEAN SPRINGS HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE
Downtown Ocean Springs

Dec. 7
BAY ST. LOUIS CHRISTMAS PARADE
Downtown Bay St. Louis

Dec. 7
CHRISTMAS IN THE CITY
Downtown Biloxi Arts District

Dec. 7
CHRISTMAS BY THE RIVER
Moss Point Recreation Center, Moss Point

Dec. 7
CHRISTMAS ON THE WATER BOAT PARADE
Biloxi

Dec. 7
SNOWFLAKES & SUGARPLUM FESTIVAL
Depot District, Bay St. Louis

Dec. 14
CHRISTMAS ON THE BAYOU
Bayou Bernard



As dates and times are apt to change, please visit each organization's website
to confirm details prior to planning a trip.