

Robert Harding, Michael Ventura/Alamy



Americana beauty
Left and above, the lighthouse and shrimp boats in Biloxi; right, the quirky charms of a flea-market shop in Bay St Louis; below, there are 62 miles of peaceful white-sand beaches



I am gliding along the white sand on a beach cruiser. This isn't the slick machine its name might suggest, but a fat-tyred push-bike with a big cushioned seat and no gears. The few cotton-ball clouds are moving faster than I am, driven across a light-blue sky by the fresh gulf breeze, and the only tracks are my own.

I'm in Bay St Louis, Mississippi, less than an hour from New Orleans, but a different world from the exuberant city I've left behind.

Think Mississippi and you think of the river, the blues, the cotton fields. But this most rural of Southern states has a 62-mile coastline. And after three round-the-clock days sampling the jazz bars and clubs of the Big Easy, I've decided to do what New Orleanians have done for generations: hit the beach.

In the 1920s, the Mississippi Gulf Coast became the Cape Cod of the South, as families escaped the stifling city heat to spend summers by the sea. As swanky resorts sprang up, the coast became known as the American Riviera.

Yet Bay St Louis is hardly awash with self-conscious glamour. It's more a place for building bonfires and messing about in boats. The simple clapboard cottages, painted in pastels, have white picket fences and wide front porches. Behind the old-fashioned storefronts are cafes, art galleries, antiques shops and quirky gift stores. A nostalgic slice of Americana

still exists in this quaint town, and my retro bike fits in perfectly.

I slip off my shoes and let the sand ooze between my toes. Remarkably, what

I'm standing on is manmade. These powder-white beaches were created in the 1950s by pumping sand from the gulf floor through 1,300ft tubes

back to shore. This 26-mile stretch is the longest manmade beach in the country.

A string of outlying islands offers shelter from the waves, and I can paddle out before the water hits my chin. These are gentle beaches – most of the time.

Beside the beach is an "Angel Tree". When Hurricane Katrina hit 11 years ago, the Mississippi Gulf Coast was ground zero. This century-old oak, killed by the saltwater surge, was replanted with a concrete base holding it in place,

then carved into a haunting memorial by the chainsaw artist Dayle Lewis.

Time has washed away most of Katrina's imprint here in Bay St Louis. The town used government recovery funds to build a smart, ecologically sound marina with 160 berths and a 1,100ft fishing pier. But this spruced-up waterfront hasn't overshadowed the vintage seaside feel, typified by landmarks such as the Bay St Louis Little Theatre

dazzling display of costumes from the town's annual celebrations, all shiny sequins, glittering rhinestones and plumed headdresses.

From the outdoor deck of the marina's Blind Tiger bar, I can see the St Louis Bay Bridge, curving proudly above the bay like a giant wave. On my last night here, I take an evening ride on the bike path that runs along the bridge.

It's two miles across to the neighbouring town of Pass Christian, but I get no further than the top of the 85ft arch, where I watch a spectacular sunset spread across the Gulf of Mexico.

The next day, I drive 30 miles east along the coast road to Biloxi, past the soft-hued beach houses of Pass Christian, raised on stilts, and Gulfport's new £27m harbour. I'm staying at the White House, an 1890s boarding house turned boutique hotel.

My room has vintage yellow Naugahyde chairs and looks out across a broad lawn to the white-sand beach. There are more footprints here as I amble along the shoreline on the half-mile walk to the Biloxi lighthouse, a city landmark. Quiet patches of little more than sea grass and palms

are interspersed with more boisterous stretches, with bright parasols, volleyball courts, wetbikes and fat-tyred aquacycles. But it has the same sugary sands, the same bathwater-warm shallows and the same ruby sunset as I stroll out into the Mississippi Sound on the lighthouse pier.

Over the next couple of days, I visit the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, to marvel at the eccentric ceramic works of George Ohr – the self-styled "mad potter of Biloxi" – displayed in pods designed by Frank Gehry. I gorge on fried oysters and seafood gumbo at Mary Mahoney's Old French House, a fine-dining spot with charming rooms and a courtyard, built in 1737. And I hit the casinos.

In the heyday of the American Riviera, celebrities flocked to Biloxi to gamble in its louche hotspots, and Al Capone flogged bootleg liquor from his hotel hideaway. Katrina put paid to the huge casino barges that once floated along the shore; today, the casinos are firmly anchored on land, with the likes of Harrah's, Hard Rock and Beau Rivage forming a mini Las Vegas-on-Sea along Beach Boulevard.

It's great fun and feels like a link to those halcyon days. But for me, the heart of Mississippi-on-Sea lies in the serenity further west.

● *Donna Dailey was a guest of the White House, which has gulf-view rooms from £100 a night (whitehousebiloxi.com), and the Bay Town Inn, which has suites from £103, B&B (baytowninn.com). Virgin Atlantic flies to New Orleans; from £661 (virgin-atlantic.com). Fly-drive packages to New Orleans start at £1,199pp for a week, including accommodation, with Trailfinders (trailfinders.com)*

Mississippi-on-Sea

After partying hard in the Big Easy, **Donna Dailey** chills on the American Riviera



Bay St Louis isn't glamorous, it's a place for building bonfires and messing about in boats

and the 100 Men Hall, a humble tin-roofed building that was a famed stop on the Mississippi blues circuit.

In the old Louisville & Nashville Railroad Depot, which now serves as the visitor centre, it's Mardi Gras year-round, with a

