



Witness the beauty of Hilton Head Island up close when exploring by bike.

Embark on a Lowcountry Odyssey

Discover Hilton Head Island through outdoor, wellness and culinary experiences. BY LISA A. BEACH

THE FIRST TIME I visited Hilton Head Island, S.C., my husband and I had to abort our plans three days into the trip, thanks to Category 4 Hurricane Ian barreling toward Central Florida in 2022. We frantically drove home to prepare our house for the storm. But we vowed to go back for the full Lowcountry experience—and we finally made good on that promise last August.

Harness Hospitality on Hilton Head Island

Regularly snagging the “Best Island in the Continental U.S.” award by Travel + Leisure readers, Hilton Head Island beckons travelers seeking unspoiled beaches, natural beauty, top-notch golf courses and a smorgasbord of cultural venues, historical sites and outdoor experiences—all delivered with Southern hospitality. The South Carolina gem is less than a five-hour drive from Orlando.

Outdoor Experiences

As an environmentally conscious destination, Hilton Head Island abounds with opportunities to explore the outdoors, from nature trails to beaches to eco-tours. We spent several hours meandering through the Coastal Discovery Museum, a 68-acre campus in Honey Horn focusing on environmental preservation and education. Greet pipevine swallowtails and monarchs flying in the screened-in butterfly habitat. Get an up-close look at the “toothy” Venus flytrap. Walk the Oyster Alley Boardwalk for gorgeous salt marsh views, spotting crabs at low tide. On a hot day, escape to the air-conditioned museum for a stroll through 2,000 square feet of indoor environmental exhibits, with friendly docents ready to answer any questions.

Nature lovers will also enjoy the 50-acre Audubon Newhall Preserve at the south end of the island. With wide paths, trails, a



Whether you've come to Hilton Head Island for sporting excursions such as golf, sightseeing opportunities at the Harbour Town Lighthouse and marina, or are visiting Hilton Head Island for light, healthy cuisine along with a wellness program, there's no shortage of engaging expeditions.



boardwalk, benches and an observation deck overlooking the pond, the preserve provides plenty of opportunities for wildlife viewing and relaxation. Bring your binoculars and stop by at 8:30 a.m. on Tuesdays for a free guided tour led by a master birder, where you might see more than 140 bird species including roseate spoonbill, anhinga and osprey. Leashed dogs are welcome, too.

With 12 miles of pristine stretches of sand, Hilton Head Island beaches beg for barefoot exploration.

We chose the lovely Coligny Beach, which has free public parking accessible from Pope Avenue. This expansive beach provided the perfect place for a morning walk. While not crowded, the beach teemed with activity—pups splashing in the surf, kids building sandcastles and locals riding bikes along the shoreline.

History and Tradition

A must-see icon, Harbour Town Lighthouse beckons you to climb up the steps of this candy-cane-striped structure, promising breathtaking views at the top. Along the way, learn about the island's history through photos, exhibits, trivia and video clips. With a nominal fee of \$7 per person (kids five and under are free), this landmark serves as a beacon of culture, history and maritime lore.

The nation's first self-governed community of freed slaves established during the Civil War, Mitchellville Freedom Park offers both self-guided (free) and private (paid) tours. It's part of the Reconstruction Era National Historic Network, and the park's exhibits give you a glimpse of history from docking slave ships to the roots of the Reconstruction era.

Visit the Gullah Museum of Hilton Head Island or take the Gullah Heritage Trail Tours to learn about the enslaved West Africans and their descendants who have preserved their vibrant, distinct culture. The Gullah (aka Geechee) developed and preserved a unique language, traditional arts and rich culinary traditions that reflects their heritage.

Culinary Delights

A local staple since 1980, Skull Creek Boathouse sets you up for the perfect Lowcountry casual dining experience. This landmark waterfront restaurant—ideal for watching the sunset when you dine on the patio—serves up fresh-caught seafood, live music and friendly service. As a craft beer lover, I chose the SKB Great White ale to accompany my pecan-and-ginger-crust mahi mahi, Savannah red rice and collard greens while sharing the seafood sampler



Hilton Head Health (left) offers dozens of daily activities that help you to meet your fitness goals. You can even enjoy a sumptuous meal here at the Chef's Table demonstration (below).



(scallops, shrimp and crab cakes) with my husband.

For a special meal, make reservations for fine dining at the iconic Quarterdeck, which is tucked into The Sea Pines Resort. With a wrap-around deck and 270-degree views of Harbour Town Yacht Basin, Harbour Town Golf Links and Calibogue Sound, this seafood-focused eatery hits all the right coastal notes.

Top off your meals with a visit to one of the area's breweries. One night we stopped at Hilton Head Brewing Co.—the island's first brewery—and toasted the night with a Disraeli Beer (cream ale). Another time we sipped a Cross Island Crypto (Mexican lager) that we discovered at Side Hustle Brewing Co., located in the heart of The Bank, a bustling food hall.

Wellness Activities

With bike paths, walking trails, waterways and golf courses sprinkled throughout, Hilton Head Island bursts with outdoor wellness experiences. Take a bike ride to explore 60 miles of paved leisure pathways—including hard-packed beachfront at low tide. Paddle a kayak through the island's pristine waterways and inlets. Hop on a horse for a Western-style trail ride through the Sea Pines Forest Preserve. Take an exhilarating zipline adventure over the coastal canopy. Book a skiff tour for an up-close look at dolphins and other sea life. Tee off on more than two dozen championship courses designed by golf legends such as Jack Nicklaus and Robert Trent Jones, Sr.

A LOCAL STAPLE SINCE 1980, SKULL CREEK BOATHOUSE SETS YOU UP FOR THE PERFECT LOWCOUNTRY CASUAL DINING EXPERIENCE. ITS PATIO IS IDEAL FOR WATCHING THE SUNSET.

While Hilton Head Island offers plenty of fitness opportunities, you can take a truly holistic approach by staying at a wellness-focused resort. On our initial visit, my husband and I stayed at a massive Airbnb for a mini-family reunion with our New Jersey relatives. But this time around, we stayed in the spectacular Hilton Head Health resort (also a T+L World's Best award-winner).

Designed to meet your specific wellness goals, Hilton Head Health boasts a well-rounded staff ranging from registered dietitians and fitness instructors to life coaches and chefs. The property walks the talk, from its smoke-free and sugar-free campus to its grab-and-go portion-controlled snacks to its slew of workshops, classes and cooking demonstrations.

With dozens of activities on the daily calendar, we dove into some experiences together and some independently. I enjoyed the morning ritual stretching class, while my husband attended a workshop on upper body flexibility to help him increase mobility in his injured shoulder. We went on a bike ride together

around the resort and its neighboring community and then sat in on a workshop about developing a fitness strategy. I quieted my mind in the soothing garden meditation class, while my husband got in a cardio workout on the treadmill. I indulged in a relaxation massage at the fabulous Indigo Spa. Then together, we savored the sumptuous Chef's Table demonstration, where executive chef Thomas Carrig masterfully prepared an extravaganza of seared scallops, Mediterranean braised shrimp and calamari and seared Chilean sea bass. ☐