

{TRAVEL}



# A NEW MISSISSIPPI

Two years ago, a three-story wall of water pounded the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but now the area is awash with hope

by Hope S. Philbrick

Images Courtesy: Mississippi Development Authority/ Tourism Division





## THIS STORY HAS BEEN TWO YEARS IN THE MAKING.

I first visited the Mississippi Gulf Coast during Mardi Gras 2005 to research an article. But before that story ran, it became obsolete: Hurricane Katrina hit on August 29, 2005, with winds of up to 175 miles per hour and a 35-foot-high storm surge. More than 65,000 buildings were lost in the storm, 600 of which were listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Hundreds of thousands more were damaged. Hundreds of lives were lost.

Recovery started almost immediately. I kept in touch with people I'd met during my visit because I worried about how they fared, and also because I wanted to file a report telling when it was feasible for vacationers to return to the area. Tourism contributes \$6.5 billion to Mississippi's economy each year, one-third of that figure earned in the Gulf Coast region alone.

To check on the progress of the recovery effort, I recently flew to the Biloxi-Gulfport area and found something unexpected: good news.

"We are open for business," says Craig Ray, director of the Mississippi Development Authority Tourism Division. "We were at 17,000 hotel rooms pre-Katrina," says Ray. "We've got 11,000 open now, and we plan to be at 30,000 by 2010." Twelve casinos are already open; six more are scheduled to open by 2010.

A drive along the coastline reveals that traces of the storm still linger. Plastic bags wave from treetops, porches sag toward empty spaces where houses used to be, steel signposts are twisted and buckled, and former palm trees are mere stumps. Whether you're a first-time visitor or returning to familiar haunts, the experience can be an emotional one. Janice Jones, manager of media relations at the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau, has advised some folks to be sure there's a box of tissues on the car seat when they roll into town. On my visit, I found that most of the trash has been hauled away, and what locals want to talk about most is construction.

"We found a silver lining in the hurricane, if there is one," says Jon Lucas, president and general manager of IP Casino Resort & Spa. "It gave us an incredible opportunity to make improvements." The efforts to rebuild and reopen not only relieved IP employees of any worry that they'd be out of jobs; it meant hiring additional workers and pumping hope into the community. Located on Biloxi's Back Bay, the IP received less damage than other hotel properties and was the first to reopen after the storm, housing FEMA employees and Katrina victims. The IP—formerly the Imperial Palace; such renaming is now common among recently reopened coastal businesses, as a public declaration of a fresh start—is better than before. The décor has been updated to reflect contemporary tastes with upgraded finishes like marble, rich woods, a warm color palate and plush fabrics. The result is an elegant yet comfortable space. There's also a palpable enthusiasm among the staff. More than a friendly commitment to customer service—though that's one element—it's a combination of pride, survival and community.

Thirty-Two, a new restaurant atop IP, is one of the superior dining options that have opened post-Katrina. The menu boasts creative preparations of fresh ingredients, with sophisticated options like charbroiled Hapu'upu'u (a Hawaiian fish) topped with lump crab, Gulf shrimp, fresh herbs and a Chardonnay beurre blanc sauce.

"We joke that a lot of recipe books washed ashore," says Jones, referring to the number of higher-caliber restaurants now open. Standouts include Olives, a Mediterranean restaurant run by celebrity chef Todd English in Beau Rivage Resort & Casino; Vrazel's Fine Food Restaurant, serving

French, Italian and Creole cuisine in Gulfport; and Mary Mahoney's Old French House Restaurant, a Biloxi tradition serving Gulf Coast seafood with a French Creole twist.

Lookout 49 was the first full-service restaurant to reopen in the area, a mere 30 days after the storm. The menu features an eclectic mix of Creole, Italian, French and fresh-grilled items. Chef/owner Rob Stinson introduced the new concept as a replacement for his Long Beach Lookout restaurant, which was destroyed by the storm. He pushed for a quick opening because "we had former employees living with us, since our house only lost its roof and was inhabitable," he says. He and his houseguests needed jobs; bills were piling up and insurance relief was uncertain. "Lookout 49 is considerably less expensive than Long Beach Lookout," says Stinson. "I decided that after the worst disaster in modern America, we should make a statement to the relief workers and residents that we are doing our share to give back to the community. We dropped our prices nearly 35 percent and have kept them there." His commitment has paid off: He's drawing crowds to warrant opening an Italian restaurant named Salute this spring and has a third concept in development.

The restaurateurs I met consistently expressed ambitious dreams marked by a sense of responsibility. "My goal is to bring downtown Gulfport back to where it was," says David Vickers, owner of the 27th Avenue Bistro, where the menu features generous portions of Gulf Coast cuisine. Before reopening, his casual restaurant had to be "gutted from six feet down," he says; whenever possible, he salvaged materials like the brick now surrounding the bar.

"We're going to end up so much better off," says Stephen Richer, executive director of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau.



“We’ve had a phenomenal upgrade in terms of the market. This restaurant is an example of the good that came out of the bad luck of the storm,” he says, looking around Bragozzo, the Italian restaurant in The Isle of Capri Casino where we’re enjoying a delicious dinner.

While fish dominates local menus, catching them is a tourist attraction. “Before Katrina, I’d fish a lot, be gone up to twenty days at a time,” says Bobby Williams, owner/captain of Three Sons IV Quality Fishing. For 25 years, he’s taken guests on deep-sea-fishing excursions, but business dropped 60 percent last year. However, he remains optimistic. “We’re back, and the fishing’s great,” he says with a smile. “We have some of the best fishing here. We have a good time.” He moved his Sportfish 46 Bertram during the storm to save it from destruction, and he updates it each year. The vessel is in impeccable condition, with plenty of space for up to six people for half-day, full-day or overnight expeditions.

Several businesses that were forced to shut down or relocate to temporary locations are now opening in renovated original or new permanent spaces, including Shearwater Pottery, a ceramics workshop and showroom; the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art, showcasing the work of Mad Potter George E. Ohr; and the Walter Anderson Museum of Art, exhibiting the works of brothers Walter Inglis Anderson, painter; Peter Anderson, potter and founder of Shearwater Pottery; and James McConnell Anderson, painter and ceramist.

Katrina is a time stamp that locals weave into nearly every conversation. What’s surprising is how often before- and after-the-storm comparisons highlight the positive of the here and now.

“We are tickled to be back in business,” says Katherine Paige Riley, owner of Hillyer House, a store in Ocean Springs that represents more than 200 regional artists. Riley relocated after running the business from her living room for four months.

“In Ocean Springs, most businesses are back,” says Mary Alice Minor, owner of Minor’s Toy Store. “And we have a lot of new businesses, especially restaurants.”

Dozens of coastal golf courses are open for play. Fallen Oak Golf Club, designed by Tom Fazio, features rolling greens, dramatic bunkers and thousands of trees. It’s an 18-hole, par-72 course with “five sets of tees for all levels of golf, from 7,486 yards to 5,300 yards,” says John Hurt, head golf professional. “We try to make it as comfortable and slow-paced an environment as we can.” The facility also houses a driving range, a short-game range and practice chipping, putting and sand areas. The course is also available for guests of Beau Rivage.

For relaxation, I prefer a spa. The spa facility at Beau Rivage is a great place to unwind and recharge. The hot-stone massage is therapeutic and deeply soothing.

Next I tour the construction under way at Island View Casino Resort, where Emeril’s New Orleans Fish House is scheduled to open this summer. “We’ll have the biggest wine selection in the state of Mississippi,” boasts Laura Shelby, advertising and promotions manager. To hold that title, they’ll have to overcome some stiff competition from several area restaurants, including B.R. Prime at Beau Rivage, which boasts 3,500 bottles.

Before heading to the airport, I visit Palace Casino Resort. I slide a few bills into a slot machine and pull the lever. The wheels spin and settle into place; no icons align. But knowing that Katrina cost Mississippi \$1.5 billion in lost tourism in 2006 puts my loss of a few bucks into perspective. I shrug it off, knowing that my money is going into a community that really needs it.

*Hope Philbrick is an assistant editor for WINE REPORT magazine.*

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**Top:** Mississippi’s Gulf Coast is a playground for deep sea anglers

**Right:** Brown, white and pink shrimp are the state’s three commercial shrimp types. But this tiny taster knows all shrimp is pink when you cook it.

**Bottom:** Golf courses number more than 145 in Mississippi.





## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### **IP Casino Resort & Spa**

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### **The Isle of Capri Casino**

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### **Beau Rivage Resort & Casino**

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### **Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau**

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