

Travel:

THE "OTHER" MYRTLE BEACH

by Don Woodland

A sea of marshgrass at Pawleys Island



The Riverwalk at Conway

Myrtle Beach, S.C., is an absolute tourism phenomenon. Thirteen million tourists visit the Grand Strand annually, taking advantage of its 89,000 rooms.

What's the "Grand Strand?" Those who haven't been to the Myrtle Beach area may have never heard of it. Indeed, it's the "other" Myrtle Beach -- a 70-mile stretch along the Atlantic that includes eleven different towns and islands. They are (from north to south): Sunset Beach, Little River, Cherry Grove, North Myrtle Beach, Myrtle Beach, Conway, Socastee, Surfside Beach, Garden City, Murrells Inlet, Litchfield Beach, Pawleys Island and Georgetown. In other words, the Grand Strand goes from Sunset Beach south to Georgetown, and inland as far as the Intracoastal Waterway (the Waccama River).

You may think of "Myrtle Beach" (MB) as just a beach resort. But the "other" Myrtle Beach--the Grand Strand (GS), offers so much more.

The choice of where visitors stay when they visit the GS is predicated on whether they want to be close to MB's action, or whether they want to kick back in the quieter areas of the GS (and occasional make the drive to MB's attractions, shows, shopping or restaurants, during their stay).

The choices of where to stay are actually a bit overwhelming. Rest assured, however, that regardless where you choose, you're never more than a few minutes from the beach, great shopping, and wonderful restaurants. And the choice of where to stay is made infinitely easier by Chamber of Commerce people you can call and talk to, and tourism web pages that are very helpful. (See the end of this story.)

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Coastal Federal Field, home to the Myrtle Beach Pelicans Minor league team



The famous Sea Captains House, in Myrtle Beach

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If you haven't been to MB, it's very reminiscent of Florida, right down to the palm trees. (The Palmetto palm is the state tree in South Carolina.) What makes it different from Florida is the addition of live theaters throughout the GS, and they are a huge success. These entertainment offerings are very upbeat and family-friendly. The other difference is the area's restaurants, which are markedly better.

Restaurants

Deciding where to eat in the GS is a tough call, as there are over 1800 restaurants. The good news is that such a level of competition makes for value-driven pricing—even if you're talking "fine dining" restaurants. Some of the most popular "better" restaurants include: the Carolina Roadhouse on N. Kings Hwy. in MB, California Dreaming in Surfside Beach, Oliver's Lodge, Divine Fish House, or Drunken Jacks (www.drunkenjacks.com) in Merrill's Inlet. (But watch your speed there—35 mph is strictly enforced.) There's also Frank's Outback and Roz's Rice Mill Café in Pawleys Island, plus many others.

Our three honorable mentions for dining go to:

- **Greg Norman's Australian Grille**, in Barefoot Landing, North MB. Open since 1999, it has one of the most romantic interiors of any restaurant you'll ever see. Leather, high-backed chairs give the illusion of a sunken dining room. The color scheme is a meld of oranges, reds and browns. Or you can dine al fresco overlooking where the boats tie up in back. Try the Greek-style salad. It has wonderful flavor and surprising "molded" presentation. Also, just added to the menu is Wagyu beef—an American answer to Japan's Kobe beef.

If you want to order the regular filet



Hobcaw House--the former waterfront home of Bernard Baruch

mignon, try the pan-seared tournados instead. It comes with the same 10 oz. filet cut in half, and you get the added flavor of the madeira demi glace and onions, along with sauteed spinach and mashed potatoes.

Also, Greg Norman's dessert selection is award-winning. Try the Australian Banana Yangos!

- Myrtle Beach's **Sea Captain's**

House was built overlooking the Atlantic in 1930, and has been operating as a restaurant since 1962. It's menu is diverse but comprehensive in seafood offerings--and all of it is quite value-driven. The place is always packed, so try for off-peak hours. Try the Key Lime Pie! (843-448-8082, www.seacaptains.com)

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Touring streets lined with historic homes is part of the fun of a day trip to Georgetown, S.C.

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- Georgetown's **Rice Paddy Restaurant** is the preferred restaurant in the southern GS. Many of the entrees served in this former bank building (you can still see the vault), include the surprising use of specially-made grits as a third or fourth item on your platter. These grits are cooked for hours, and are blended with chicken stock and cream. The result is an incredibly smooth-tasting blend that seems to amplify the flavor of everything else on your plate. For example, with the Red Snapper Picatta, the grits add an unbelievable amount of flavor—in much the same way bechamel sauce ties together the flavors in Moussaka. Although the grits usually only come with their snapper and quail entrees, you can request it with anything you order. And try the heated chocolate brownie with peppermint ice cream and hot fudge sauce for dessert. Outstanding!

Shows

Wonderful, inoffensive entertainment abounds in MB, with theaters offering the best in music, dance, comedy, dinner shows and celebrity



Ripley's Aquarium is one of the delights at Boardwalk At The Beach, in Myrtle Beach

concerts. Here are some the best venues: The Alabama Theater (www.alabama-theatre.com), The Carolina Opry (www.thecarolinaopry.com), Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede (www.dixiestampede.com), House of Blues (www.HofB.com), Legends In Concert (www.legendsinconcert.com), Medieval Times Dinner and Tournament (www.medievaltimes.com), and the Palace Theatre (www.palacetheatremyrtlebeach.com)

Golf

It's no secret that the GS is a golfing mecca. There's approximately

4.13 million rounds of golf played annually. And while there were over 120 courses in the GS just a few years ago, there's closer to 100 today. Spiking land values have made many courses succumb to being sold off for residential development.

If you're wondering how much these courses cost to play, that's a little like asking how much an airline ticket costs. It depends on how much homework you've done getting the best price. In other words, what visitors to the GS have discovered is that you don't just walk to a course and pay full

price...you buy into a golf package. And almost every hotel and condo rental complex are tied into golf packages, so ask around, check web sites and also golf publications.

Baseball

Watching minor league baseball is a wonderful way to spend an afternoon in MB from April through September. The MB Pelicans play at Coastal Federal Field, rated as the #2 minor league baseball parks in aesthetics in the U.S., by *Baseball America*--a trade magazine. (www.myrtlebeachpelicans.com)

Shopping

In the GS, you can throw a rock and probably hit a shopping complex. There are 300 outlet stores alone. Most of the best shopping is along Rt. 17. Among the highlights are:

- **Broadway At The Beach**, which is a huge shopping, dining, and nightclub complex that all the locals said wouldn't make it, when it was built, but has been a rousing
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An actual slave village at Hobcaw Barony, near Georgetown

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success. It's great fun, and is very reminiscent of what you'd find in Orlando/Kissimmee, Florida. (www.broadwayatthebeach.com).

- **Barefoot Landing** in North MB has 100 specialty shops and 15 waterfront restaurants. (www.bflanding.com)
- **The Coastal Grand mall** is MB's newest. The 1.5 million square foot complex is near MB Airport. (www.coastalgrand.com)
- **Tanger Outlet** is located at the intersection of Rt. 17 & 22, with a second location on US Rt. 501. (www.tangeroutlet.com).



The Rice Paddy Restaurant, in Georgetown, S.C., is an area favorite

- **Pawleys Island Hammock Shops** is the birthplace of the original rope hammock. The plaza today offers handcrafts, jewelry, clothing and furniture. (www.thehammockshops.com).

- There's also **Colonial Mall** in North Myrtle Beach (www.colonialmall-myrtlebeach.com), and Inlet Square Mall in Murrells Inlet (www.inlet-squaremall.com)

Accommodations:

There are 460 hotels in the GS, with 47,000 hotel/motel rooms. The average length of stay is 5.5 days.

If you like staying in a house, you'll probably want to stay north or south of MB. About half of the accommodations in MB are condo-ized hotels. These are especially good for couples or extended families traveling together.

Some high-rise condo hotels are clustered together along the Atlantic, which makes for congested beaches in July and August. However, one standout in MB is **Sea Island On The Beach**, which used to be an inn, but reopened last May--having undergone a huge renovation. Now a 15-story

condo hotel, the square footage in each unit is easily 50% greater than the industry standard. You'll love the increased unit size! And this 149-unit hotel offers a Modified American Plan, plus all the amenities you need, a location right on the beach--but no beach congestion, as it's off by itself. (www.seaislandonthebeach.com, 800-854-5426)



Century-old live oaks dwarf those passing by at Brookgreen Gardens

Conway

This little gem on the Waccama River is about 20 minutes due west of MB and is well worth a half day's exploration. It has lovely restaurants, shopping, a classic downtown, attractive but not ostentatious residential areas, a delightful river walk, and two organized walking tours.

One of these walking tours features the town's "oldest citizens"--the town's towering live oak trees. And the walking tour makes them--and the Spanish moss draping from them--a star attraction.

There's also a second walking tour that features downtown stores and some very cute historic nearby residences.

When you're downtown, plan to patronize the charming little bakery on Main St. -- the **Trestle Patisserie**.

Walking tour handbooks are available free at the clearly marked Visitor Center, just off Main St., or call 843-248-1700. They also offer a free shopping and dining guide for this cute little hamlet.

When you head from MB to Conway along Rt. 501, you'll notice a sign for "Carolina Forest." This is a new series of subdivisions where

they are erecting literally thousands of homes simultaneously. You can hardly believe your eyes as you turn off onto Carolina Forest Blvd. and drive a couple of miles. We're told that this will become a new town within the next two years. Such is the continuing growth and popularity of the GS.

Merrill's Inlet

This seems to be the area favorite for its many seafood restaurants. It also has a reputation as the state's "seafood capital." (See above for restaurant suggestions.)

Equally as popular a stop, and just down the road, is **Brookgreen**, a magnificent showplace of nature, sculpture, and gardens, which has been open to the public since 1931, and is considered the finest outdoor presentation of American figurative sculpture in the world. Seeing the century-old live oaks on this 9,000-acre property (300 acres are gardens) is alone worth the price of admission. But you'll also find the juxtaposition of sculpture with horticulture to be breathtaking. (www.brookgreen.com)

Georgetown

Formerly one of the wealthiest towns in the United States, Georgetown



A taste-treat at Tressles Patisserie should be your at the end of one of the Walking Tours in Conway, S.C.

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is the third-oldest in South Carolina. The place is a popular day-trip for those staying anywhere in the GS. There's numerous historic homes, a Norman Rockwell downtown (Front St), and a boardwalk that runs between the back-side of Front Street's businesses (that on the south side of the street) and the harbor. Restaurants that line the boardwalk offer a great place to dine al fresco and take in the sights along the waterfront.

A great way to see this town of 9,600 is on one of **Miss Nell's Walking Tours**. It's a 60-90 minute guided, narrated walk that will tell you a lot about the history of the town, the his-



The oceanfront Sea Island Resort

toric homes, and the business district. (843-546-3975). Also, a pamphlet listing the town's historic homes is available at the town's Visitor Center. (www.georgetownchamber.com)

A mile north of Georgetown on Rt. 17 is the **Hobcaw Barony**, a 17,500-acre reserve where you can take a 3-hour nature, ecology and historical tour. You'll see an authentic 19th century slave village, plus the waterfront home of Bernard Baruch -- Hobcaw House

, which was built in 1931 on 17,500 acres he'd purchased in 1905 for \$3.15 an acre.

In Baruch's day, the Hobcaw House was visited by the likes of Winston Churchill, FDR, Generals Bradley and Marshall, Jack London, and HG Wells.

There's one tour of Hobcaw Barony each day, and 4 tours a week. Tours are \$15 (soon to be \$20) and are VERY popular. You have to reserve at least a week ahead. (843-546-4623, www.hobcawbarony.org)

Little River

This is one of the GS's northernmost towns. It's a cute little fishing village, and is the only place on the GS that you can take casino boats offshore to gamble. There are two such boats that offer 3-4 hour gambling excursions, the Sun Cruz and the much-preferred Diamond Girl II (877-250-LUCK, www.diamondcasinocruises.com).



The Ship's Booty Restaurant is one of many Georgetown businesses that back on to the harbor boardwalk

Tips:

- Getting around MB is a piece of cake. The roads there are laid out in a grid, so it's hard to get lost. The only possible point of confusion would be the Avenue designations in North Myrtle Beach. They don't continue on in number from Myrtle Beach; they're separate and start again from 1st Ave.
- Unlike the Cape Cod tradition, "Iced Tea" in restaurants in Myrtle

Beach is always "Sweet Tea", unless you specify unsweetened. So make sure you do... 'cause otherwise it's VERY sweet!

- Like homemade ice cream? **Painter's Ice Cream** is still going strong as an independent ice cream stand making their own ice cream in their North MB and Surfside Beach locations.
- The shoulder seasons are great in Myrtle Beach. Even in November, the water temperature at the beach is a comfortably warm 68 degree average.
- Horseback riding is available right on the beach during the off-season.
- Some of the theaters throughout the GS offer matinee performances, along with their evening shows. There are times when there are no shows, so plan your trip accordingly.
- **Ripley's Aquarium** is another great reason to head for **Broadway**

at the Beach, in MB. You walk through transparent tube tunnels and see the fish on all sides of you. It's quite spectacular for a medium size aquarium. (www.ripleysaquarium.com)

- Don't forget to take advantage of the GS's two State parks: the **MB State Park** and the **Huntington State Park**. These both have beach, hiking, camping, etc. Huntington Beach State Park is

considered to be one of the best birding spots on the East coast. (www.southcarolinaparks.com)

- Pick up a copy of "Kicks", which is a free-distribution paper published every Friday. It lists all the events, shows and concerts upcoming that week.
- MB "Visitor Centers" are located throughout the area. Although you can get information about destinations, or pick up brochures on area attractions, restaurants and accommodations, these "Visitor Centers" are franchises that make their money by selling timeshares. The real Chamber of Commerce address is listed below.

Myrtle Beach is about to go through yet another major renaissance. The old Pavillion Amusement complex downtown closed its doors for the last time this past fall, after 52 years. All the roller coaster tracks, arcades, and other rides, will be torn down and replaced with a more year-round combination of residential, commercial and entertainment offerings. The specifics haven't been announced yet, however, one can see that this will mean good things for downtown—in much the same way that Daytona Beach's downtown has become much more civilized in recent years.

For those planning their spring vacation to Myrtle Beach, call for your free "Stay and Play" booklet at 866-MYBEACH, and ask how you can save
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money by scheduling your trip now.

For more information, go to www.visitmybeach.com to help in deciding on your accommodations. Also, you can go to www.visitmyrtlebeach.com.

You can also write MB Chamber of Commerce at 1200 N. Oak St., Myrtle Beach, SC 29577.

Golfers can find golf information, including packages, at www.golfholiday.com.

And thanks for traveling!